

HEALING OURSELVES FROM THE DIPLOMA DISEASE

**SHIKSHANTAR:
The Peoples' Institute for
Rethinking Education and Development**

Shikshantar, a not-for-profit movement, was founded to challenge the culture of schooling and institutions of thought-control. Today, factory-schooling and literacy are suppressing many diverse forms of human learning and expression, as well as much-needed organic processes towards just and harmonious societal regeneration. We are committed to creating spaces where individuals and communities can together engage in dialogues to: (1) generate meaningful critiques to expose and dismantle/transform existing models of Education and Development, (2) reclaim control over their own learning processes and learning ecologies, and (3) elaborate (and continually re-elaborate) their own complex shared visions and practices of *Swaraj*.

Shikshantar is based in Udaipur (Rajasthan, India). Our core team works in collaboration with local and trans-local partners through dynamic processes of participatory conceptualization. To learn more about our efforts, please contact us:

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We welcome and encourage your questions, suggestions & support.

**opening a dialogue around
why civil society organizations should
say NO! to diplomas and certificates**

December 2005

**Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for
Rethinking Education and Development**

Healing Ourselves from the Diploma Disease

Edited by Manish Jain and Shilpa Jain

Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development

Udaipur, Rajasthan, INDIA

www.swaraj.org/shikshantar

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The 'Resisting the Culture of Schooling Series' is dedicated to highlighting various ways in which people are creatively struggling against dehumanizing and exploitative Education and Development/Globalization. It will feature essays, stories, poems, dramas, art, music, etc. in a number of languages (Mewari, Hindi, English). To learn more about or to contribute to the series, please contact Shikshantar.

Artwork contributed by Sandeep Sen, a local Udaipur youth without any professional degree in art. Special thanks to Isaac Ochien'g, Ashley Albright, Rachel Schattman and Rosie Meade for their assistance in proof-reading and for their suggestions to the text.

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KEY ASPECTS OF THE CULTURE OF SCHOOLING

The Culture of Schooling...

- 1) Labels, ranks and sorts human beings. It creates a rigid social hierarchy consisting of a very small elite class of 'highly educated' and a large lower class of 'failures' and 'illiterates', based on levels of school achievement.
- 2) Imposes uniformity and standardization. It propagates the viewpoint that diversity is an obstacle, which must be removed if society is to progress.
- 3) Spreads fear, insecurity, violence and silence through its externally-imposed, military-like discipline.
- 4) Forces human beings to violently compete against each other over scarce resources in rigid win-lose situations.
- 5) Confines the motivation for learning to examinations, certificates and jobs. It suppresses all non-school motivations to learn and kills all desire to engage in critical self-evaluation. It centralizes control over the human learning process into the State-Market nexus, taking power away from individuals and communities.
- 6) Commodifies all human beings, Nature, knowledge and social relationships. They are to be extracted, exploited, bought and sold.
- 7) Fragments and compartmentalizes knowledge, human beings and the natural world. It de-links knowledge from wisdom, practical experiences and specific contexts.
- 8) Artificially separates human rationality from human emotions and the human spirit. It imposes a single view of rationality and logic on all people, while simultaneously devaluing many other knowledge systems.
- 9) Privileges literacy (in a few elite languages) over all other forms of human expression and creation. It drives people to distrust their local languages while prioritizing newspapers, textbooks, television as the only reliable sources of information.
- 10) Reduces the spaces and opportunities for 'valid' human learning by demanding that they all be funneled through a centrally-controlled institution. It creates artificial divisions between learning and home, work, play, spirituality.
- 11) Destroys the dignity of labor; devalues the learning that takes place through manual work.
- 12) Breaks intergenerational bonds of family and community and increases people's dependency on the Nation-State and Government, on Science and Technology, and on the Global Market, for their livelihoods and identities.

the invitation

Dear friend,

We both believe that another world(s) is possible and that each of us has the responsibility and the ability to help co-create it. We appreciate your strong commitment to social justice, freedom and human dignity. We write today to invite you to take yet another step on the journey towards a more honest and sane world by saying "NO!" to certification and degrees in your organizations.

Saying NO! to certification and degrees means saying no to superficial ways of evaluating a person's worth and to an unjust and inherently discriminatory system. Saying NO! to certificates and degrees means saying YES!!! to promoting more dedicated and passionate people and to valuing and respecting peoples' diverse skills, choices and life journeys. It also represents a direct step towards reducing the power of institutions over our lives. We believe that social sector groups must take the lead in this initiative. Following corporate or bureaucratic management models and criteria can not and will not lead to real social change. We hope you will join us in saying NO! to certificates and degrees and saying YES!!! to diverse possibilities for creating healthy and more vibrant learning societies.

At Shikshantar, for over seven years, we have worked with numerous volunteers and team members. At no point in the process have we ever asked anyone for their degree or formal qualifications. In fact, through our own experiences, we have learned that a degree never tells us anything about the wisdom a person possesses, the knowledge they have of local languages, the creativity they utilize when recycling waste materials, the love they have for children, the commitment they have to their own community, their interest in listening to and learning from new perspectives — in short, it does not tell us about any of the things that truly matter to us in our work. We ask volunteers to write or talk in detail about their areas of interest and burning questions, as well as to offer portfolios of

their practical experiences. Our experiences, both at Shikshantar and elsewhere, have also shown us that most of what we need to know we learn on the job, while responding to the ever-changing contexts of our work.

We invite you to:

- 1. Say "No!" to certificates and degrees! Refuse to consider them as a requirement in your hiring or promotion processes and instead value a wider range of criteria that identifies people with multiple talents and high levels of personal commitment and self-initiative.**
- 2. In your hiring process, encourage applicants to submit portfolios which highlight their diverse skills and experiences as well as indicate their own future personal learning plans.**
- 3. Share with us your own thoughts about the limitations of certificates and the alternatives you are creating in your own group or organization.**

We sent a brief note on the issue along with some initial responses (Round 1 Dialogue) to numerous people around India and the world. The stories, comments, experiences and feedback that we received over a six-month period of face-to-face and on-line conversations appear in Round 2 Dialogue. We invite you to share your thoughts and experiences, as well as commitments, to generate Round 3 of the dialogue on our website: <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>.

Best wishes,
Manish Jain
<shikshantar@yahoo.com>

background note

Why say NO to diplomas and certificates as the basis for hiring and promotion in civil society organizations?

What matters to you when thinking about who to work with? What qualities, skills, and strengths do you value? Certificates and degrees fail to reveal any information about a person's passions, commitment, and values. They even fail to demonstrate what creative expressions, practical skills and deep learnings people possess. By opening up our hiring processes to focus on the breadth and depth of peoples' real experiences, we gain new ideas about the wide range of contributions that individuals can make to our organizations and to the communities we work with. For our work, we need to look both at *what* people have done, as well as *who* they are. Therefore, saying no to certificates and degrees is not a charity or a form of reservation; it is our way of ensuring that we find the right fit on all levels. For example, many of us have been burned by elite institution graduates who just want to use our organizations as a stepping stone, in order to add a 'grassroots experience' to their resumes. When we are free from qualifications, we can connect with local people who not only have significant skills and talents, but who also care for the well-being of our local communities for the long-term.

What real learning do 'qualifications' actually measure? Degrees only privilege learning that takes place in a classroom. Yet, most learning — and all application — takes place beyond a classroom setting. Work, volunteering, travel, and self-directed projects are all part of each person's larger web of learning. These hands-on experiences contribute immeasurably to what skills and abilities we have, but are rarely identified or valued. Degrees and diplomas are in many ways discriminatory as they tend to bias a narrow range of human intelligences, capacities and cultures. They only reflect how well one is able to memorize

de-contextualized facts or perform well on tests, criteria that really mean nothing when working with communities. As Ronald Dore warns in The Diploma Disease (1976), “**More** qualification-earning is **mere** qualification-earning – ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination – in short, anti-educational.”

What kind of world are we trying to nurture? By continuing to place value on degrees, we are, in short, reinforcing the violent global political economy. We are validating the monoculture of the dominant system of education and the monopoly of institutionalized experts and professionals. We all know that the vast majority of people who gain access to these institutions are also those who tend to come from segments of society which already possess cultural and economic capital. They are already very privileged by mainstream standards, and hide behind the myth of meritocracy (that they ‘deserve’ what they have because they worked harder than others). Affirmative action programs and reservations have in reality done very little to change this situation. When they have given opportunities to marginalized communities, this has come at the cost of stripping them of their identities, local relationships and knowledge systems. Demanding certificates and degrees only serves to validate and expand the reach of this systemic injustice.

If one of our shared objectives is to bring greater equality and justice to our world, then we have to start by questioning and challenging mainstream educational institutions which act as one of the strongest pillars upholding elitism, social hierarchy, control and exploitation. This will only happen when we question the legitimacy of the degrees they issue.

The time has come to seriously face the question:

Whose agenda do certificates and diplomas really serve?

- Shreya Janssens-Sannon, Shilpa Jain, Manish Jain
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round one

"We are challenged to break the obsolete social and economic systems which divide our world between the overprivileged and the underprivileged. All of us, whether governmental leader or protester, businessman or worker, professor or student, share a common guilt. We have failed to discover how the necessary changes in our ideas and our social structures can be made. Each of us, therefore, through our ineffectiveness and our lack of responsible awareness, causes the suffering around the world.

All of us are crippled - some physically, some mentally, some emotionally. We must therefore strive cooperatively to create the new world. There is no time left for destruction, for hatred, for anger. We must build, in hope and joy and celebration. Let us meet the new era of abundance with self-chosen work and freedom to follow the drum of one's own heart."

- Ivan Illich

***Celebration of Awareness:
A Call for Institutional Revolution, 1969***

RESPONSE FROM: NITIN PARANJAPE
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Abhivyakti has been working since 1987 to strengthen the communication resources of grassroots organisations. Initially, when we were young and trying to develop our organisation, we made elaborate rules for selecting people. The major emphasis was on qualifications. Now, after gaining a wide experience in working with different 'professionals' we have decided to move away from looking at degrees/certificates as pre-requisites for entering into Abhivyakti. We have realised that degrees only promise but they don't oftentimes deliver commitment, hard work, passion, compassion and eagerness to learn from personal reflections.

Education is a means to become mobile. So have we discovered that more degrees or professional qualifications means demand for more money, and only exploring ways to move on to other more lucrative jobs. Another issue that we have encountered is that of arrogance, of thinking of oneself as 'experts', which leads to looking down on people who have no formal education. There is little openness among these individuals to listening to different perspectives.

Abhivyakti has no place for such people. We rather welcome those who are ready to learn from their own experiences, are open to look at their assumptions, share them and explore the source of their inferences. It is our emphasis to search for intrinsic motivation; we see this as abundant, not a 'scarcity', in human beings.

We have also discovered that there exists a tacit knowledge in people, in organisations which needs to be valued, brought to the surface and appreciated. This tacit knowledge doesn't come with degrees; it is what people develop from practise, from their own observations, peer behaviour and dialogue. Each human being has their own sense, understanding and expressions which we encourage and allow to flower in different spaces. A community of practice evolves on its own. A dynamic web of relationships and bonds grows, which gives meaning to peoples' existence and identity beyond monetary status.

The selection process that we follow at Abhivyakti is not standardised. We always look out for self-motivated persons. People who show interest in our work, in self-development, in learning, who come to us on their own. These things are often hard to assess in the first meeting. So we take a few sessions to know the person, his/her interests, creativities, etc. Their

attitude towards money/career is discussed at length. We generally offer a one-year apprenticeship/trainee tenure so that both parties can arrive at a mutual decision regarding continuation. So far, this system has worked well, allowing us to discover the right members for our team. We also try to create many opportunities for team members to cross boundaries and experience activities beyond their designated departments/titles.

Our internal culture of people, their stories, feelings, inter-relatedness, thoughts, sharing, and sense of belonging has made Abhivyakti a unique space, an ecology of diversity working together for a cause. This has evolved over the years, out of our deep concern for making Abhivyakti vibrant. I am certain degrees and certificates have had no role in it whatsoever.

We have been able to create a very people-friendly environment, and in our 18 years no one has commented negatively, nor has any funding organisation pressured us to follow a particular path. Not that we would have listened. We believe we are on the right course!

If there is one intrinsic institutional weakness among NGOs as a sector, it is its relationship with the mass-based movements, or popular struggles. The links between NGOs and people's movements has rapidly degenerated after the 1990s...

At a time, when the state apparatus is shedding its role and responsibilities to private institutions, people's struggles will be exacerbated. But with depoliticisation of NGOs on the rise, the people's struggles are increasingly being left to fend for themselves.

- Walter Mendoza and John D'Souza,
The Long and Winding Road, 2002

RESPONSE FROM: MUNIR FASHEH
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How can we justify not allowing storytellers to work with children just because they don't have certificates? How can we justify not allowing artists (or persons who embody cultural expressions/skills in their daily living or wise people) just because they don't have degrees? [The only time I see sense and need to have some kind of certificate is in some very specific technical matters.]

The most dehumanizing act that I realized in my 20 years of 'studying' in educational institutions and 40 years of work with education, communities, and young people, is evaluation/measuring people: comparing people along measures that claim to be objective, neutral and universal. Reducing the worth of a person to a number, letter, adjective, certificate or degree, embodies several simultaneous destructive things: (1) it kills the richness in dealing with life, by seeing the world through a narrow one-dimensional perspective, (2) it kills diversity in people and living, (3) it blinds us to the relationship between the person and her/his surroundings, (4) it robs people and communities of a fundamental responsibility: valuing relationships and how people treat one another, (5) it shatters the inner world of the person by making one's reference outside rather than inside the person (one's conscience), (6) it tears the social-spiritual fabric in communities.

I am talking about a basic conviction, namely, that people cannot be compared along a measure that claims to be neutral, objective and universal. The 'sin' is in the act of measurement itself, regardless of whether we are measuring the value of a person or of knowledge, intelligence, diversity, commitment or passion. An old Palestinian peasant once said, "Anything you can buy is cheap!" How perceptive and insightful!

Similarly, anything you can measure is insignificant. For example, we can measure a person's ability in solving problems in math but not his/her ability to see patterns, relationships, order, and logic in life. [We can measure one's inconsistencies in constructing a logical system made of symbols and concepts, but it is much harder to measure inconsistencies in a person's life and living, i.e. it is much harder to detect the basic assumptions, premises, values, in the logic that underlies and governs one's actions.]

As another example, we can measure a person's religiosity through counting how many times s/he prays or goes to a religious institution or

recites holy verses or adheres to rituals and regulations, but not possible to measure one's spirituality, goodness, or how s/he treats others. Similarly in working with children: we can measure the number of years a person 'sits on his ass' (as Gustavo Esteva puts it) studying books on children, but not one's love, care, respect and ability to attentively listen to a child without judging and evaluating.

For me, no matter how we perceive a 'better world' and how we go about building it, one thing is crucial: measuring human qualities along a path or measure that claims to be objective, neutral and universal is contrary to building a human world. Such measurement is meaningless (even harmful) in that better world. This means that we should – as much as possible – refrain from practicing such measurement. Therefore, the basic idea/ question, I believe, in the whole discussion concerning degrees, etc is: where does the worth of a person come from?

The British conquered the Palestinians (as well as others) from within, by shifting the locus of the worth of a person from the person and the community to abstract symbols such as grades, degrees, and prizes that claim to be objective and universal, and that came from outside the person and the community, and by putting it in the hands of licensed professionals supported by licensed institutions. London matriculation became the main measure of the worth of a Palestinian child. Youth and parents fell for that and today the virus has gone very deep.

This triumphant march of arbitrary symbols was accompanied and supported by two of the most 'cherished' assumptions/ pillars of Western civilization: the belief that praxis can be reduced to theory (i.e. the intellect can completely understand life/ being), and the belief in universals (universal thinking here refers to the belief in universal meanings and theories and to the belief that there is a single undifferentiated path for 'progress,' which in practice means people and nations can be put in a hierarchical order and be compared along objective universal linear measures). This led to the tearing apart of the 'inner world' in each person and of the social-cultural-spiritual fabric in the community. It is this shift in the worth of a person (rather than military power) that underlies the soullessness and hollowness of the educated, and the falling apart of most societies in the 20th century. We are witnessing the full consequences of this today. In other words, our real enemy in modern times – in learning, eating, entertainment, health, and in living and relating in general – has become what we embrace and love, and what we fight each other to get more of, and what we are ready to pay dearly for with our limited resources!

What is needed now is a shifting of the locus of the worth of a person from institutions and symbols back to the person and the community. This is the great prophetic insight that is embedded in Imam Ali's statement: "*qeematu kullimri'en ma yuhsenoh*" and what makes it extremely relevant and inspiring in the world today. The worth of a person – according to Imam Ali – is what s/he *yuhsen*. *Yuhsen*, in Arabic, has several meanings, which together constitute the worth of the person (and together embody the spirit of *aljami'ah*): the first meaning refers to how well the person does what s/he does, which requires technical knowledge and skills; the second refers to how beautiful and how pleasing what s/he does to the senses, the aesthetic dimension; the third refers to how good it is for the community, from the perspective of the community; the fourth refers to how much one gives of oneself and not what one transfers from one place to another; and the fifth meaning refers to how respectful (of people and ideas) the person is in discussions.

Thus, a person's worth is not judged by professional committees or official bodies, or by measures that claim to be objective and universal (such as certificates and degrees), but by the five meanings embedded in the word *yuhsen*. It is the community and people that the person interacts with that are the judges of the worth of a person: whether or not what the person does and how s/he treats others are beautiful, stem from oneself, good for the community, and respectful. It is only in relation to the first meaning – technical proficiency – that professionals and institutions may be needed. What is fascinating about Imam Ali's statement is that it makes the most learned minds totter and the 'simplest' minds inspired!



RESPECT (*Samman*) is readily acceptable to all and leads to mutual happiness. *Samman* comes from two words: *samyak* (appropriate/balanced) and *maan* (to evaluate). So *samman* or respect means a balanced evaluation.

The need of **I** is to be evaluated as I am, and that I should evaluate others as they are. Unfortunately, we do not do this (perhaps unintentionally), and instead engage in one of the following:

- Over-evaluation (*Adhimulyan*) - To evaluate far more than what is. For instance, you feel uncomfortable if you are flattered too much in an exaggerated manner.
- Under-evaluation (*Avmulyan*) - To evaluate far less than what is. For instance, you are not comfortable if you are unfairly criticized or condemned.
- Other-wise evaluation (*Amulya*) - To evaluate something other than what is. For instance, you feel uncomfortable if you are evaluated as something else, say a donkey, instead of as a human being.

Whenever the evaluation is not right, it is disrespect of the other. In our day-to-day relationship, we often do this. The biggest mistake is to evaluate the human being as a body. *Samman* (Respect) is right evaluation, on the basis of **I** (of a human being). The other **I** is the same as me in terms of the need for perennial happiness; of the need to understand and be in harmony at all six levels of human existence; and in terms of the activities, forces and powers of the **I**, which are perennial. The difference is only at the level of understanding.

However today among social relationships, we evaluate on a basis other than **I**, which means we differentiate on the basis of body (sex, age, body strength, race, caste and creed); and material facilities (like wealth, class, post/designation, degrees, etc.). Hence disrespect prevails, leading to resentment and protest with regard to each disparity, in a different context. If we respect people on the basis of the above categories, we are actually disrespecting them. Respect begins to flow if we understand that -

1. Everyone has good intentions; regardless of whether the other can show/ communicate it or not; or whether the other can do something about it.
2. Every **I** is like my **I**, and needs to be evaluated on the basis of **I**.

- Ganesh Bagaria, Jeevan Vidya

*RESPONSE FROM: **RAM SUBRAMANIAM,**
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I started my career as a software professional back in 1990-91 without being asked for a certificate. As a student, I was invited to become part of a software company that was managed by those who taught me. I initially prided myself on being exceptional, soon to realise that certificates really never matter in the competitive world! This may sound contradictory, but between 1991 to 1998, I must have worked with about eight organisations, most of them on a project consulting basis and others as a retainer consultant, the longest being for a period of 2½ years between 1995 to 1998. I have never been asked for a certificate to seek any of these jobs. These include software companies that were/are top ranking in the industry and projects with multi-nationals.

Within the first few years, I realised that most people like to know your confidence level and what you have produced through the technical skills you possess. I made and retained friends with most if not all companies and clients and never had to seriously hunt for an assignment.

When my wife Rama and myself started to work in the social sector through Samanvaya in 1998, certificates didn't matter and whomsoever we worked with was based on mutual understanding. We were never asked anyone for them, nor do we even know the educational background of all the people we work with. We meet and interact with many new friends in the course of our work. Through these interactions our work and association evolves. Throughout this process, there has never been a question of qualifications, certificates, degrees or diplomas.

Today, we can say with pride that we know more about the family backgrounds, native place, native culture and interests of the individuals with whom we are associated, than about which college they went to or what degree they possess. At times, knowing about these degrees provide for good laugh. Among the people with whom we work in the social sector too, I find that certificates of degrees and diplomas hardly matter as most people realise that these cannot ensure a person's work capability. When we organise programmes, we prefer giving participants gifts of books or saplings rather than useless certificates. However, we do realise and observe the changing face of the social sector in the name of 'professionalising' it, whereby increasing emphasis is placed on certificates.

Priya became our first 'employee' without any certificates. She had quit college and wanted to embark on her own path of education. She thought that working with us would provide her with the environment where she could explore such a path. She was welcome, but there was no compensation. She volunteered for our work, while using our library and our time to pursue her learning. Slowly as her understanding grew, she created her own work and today she is an asset to the organisation. Her convictions and commitment were her qualifications. When people volunteer for our work, it is because they resonate well with our ideas and share our convictions, rather than because we think they are 'qualified' or possess a certificate.

When we talk to students (often we are invited by unsuspecting faculty or parents), we ask them to enjoy their study time, pursue their interests, develop a wide knowledge of things, explore the outdoors, always question the world, and never bother about examinations, marks or certificates. The world that demands certificates perhaps exists. However, neither during my commercial career days, nor during these last seven years of work in the social sector, have I encountered it.

I never bothered to collect or retain any certificate, either educational or work-related. The only certificates that I possess are from my Boy Scout days that certify me to be good in book binding, carpentry, cooking, gardening and first-aid.

*RESPONSE FROM: SHARON CALDWELL,
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I agree 100%. I have been engaged in a (rather one-sided) debate with the South African Montessori Society on this very issue. This group is determined to ensure that all staff in Montessori schools are certified, accredited and other-wise fully documented, and is pressing to have Montessori Diplomas accredited by various government bodies which have been established for such control purposes.

The Montessori Association is pursuing this course despite the fact that Maria Montessori herself opposed such certification:

“My vision of the future is no longer of people taking exams and proceeding on that certification from the secondary school to the university, but of individuals passing from one stage of independence to a higher, by means of their own activity, through their own effort of will, which constitutes the inner evolution of the individual.”

This aspect of the philosophy is probably universally ignored. Needless to say my opinions in this regard have not been well received.

For my part, I have never been particularly interested in certificates or other credentials when hiring staff, but prefer to go by my gut reaction when I meet and talk with a person. I am more interested in a person's attitudes than in what they know or what they can do. A person who is interested in life, has enthusiasm and shows an understanding of children has far better qualifications for our learning environment. I oppose the notion that institutions such as SACE (the South African Council of Educators) should have the power to dictate who I can and cannot employ.

There is no logic in the assumption that a university degree will make someone a better teacher than someone who does not have such a degree. All the degree tells us is that someone is able to obtain a degree. You don't need to love working with children to get a degree in teaching. You don't need empathy for those who are battling to learn a skill to become certified in that skill. You don't need faith in human nature to get a teaching diploma. And yet love, empathy and faith are three things which are vital if someone is going to support another person's learning endeavors.



There is much said about the supposed 'right' to education - but what about the rights of parents to choose who will teach their children (regardless of certification and accreditation). For that matter - what about the right of a child to choose his or her teacher? Surely choosing one's own teacher or mentor is a fundamental factor in learning. When a child (or an adult) has a question, and we find someone who is patient to take the time to listen to our question, and share what they know - do we care what the person's formal qualifications are?

I have often thought of making a symbolic gesture of burning my degrees and diplomas. I know how empty they are and that most of what I know about any of the topics I have supposedly qualified in, I learnt after getting the paper. However, I must admit that I have not done this. The fact that I have these qualifications allows me to ignore the fact that the other staff at our school does not have any formal teaching qualification. The fact that my qualifications are recognized gives us some freedom we would not otherwise have.

I keep them for another reason too, simply because at some future date I may need them. Maybe I would want to work within the traditional system again (to subvert it from within?). Call it insurance if you will. Or a dark, dirty secret. Or a disguise to help me slip in. Who knows? Hopefully at some future date, we will turn them all to pulp and recycle the paper!

The Meritocratic Illusion

“‘Meritocracy’ refers to a philosophy and general perspective promoted by schools and testing which assumes that people are inherently unequal in their talents and abilities and therefore should be accorded a station in life corresponding with their differential capacities... Persons employed in upper-class occupations deserve their wealth and privileges because their contributions to society are valuable. Conversely, the poor are poor because they are lazy and/or unintelligent. They merit nothing better than bare subsistence living because they contribute little to society, and to keep alive the incentive to rise and contribute more to the community, it is absolutely necessary that their position not be substantially improved.

Schools are therefore important because, by employing intelligence and achievement tests, they separate students on the basis of ability, allowing the clever ones access to the advanced training that equips them for the high-status jobs. Dumb students, on the other hand, do poorly in school, receive less education, and as a result are consigned to low-status employment... Schools are thus not simply neutral proving grounds for individual talent and diligence but rather are agencies that work to fit children into their proper occupational roles...

The general meritocratic conclusion that social standing is an accurate index of personal merit and innate talent depends upon three highly questionable assumptions: 1) the validity of the ‘general intelligence’ concept; 2) the validity of IQ tests as a measure of that concept, and 3) the equality of opportunity for people to both do well in school and to become rich and famous and society... IQ and achievement tests provide the illusion of objectivity which, on the one hand, serve the needs of the school administrators to appear professional and scientific and, on the other hand, serve the needs of the system for a myth that would convince the lower classes that their meager station in life was part of the natural order of things... The test scores obtained in school thus became a further justification for hierarchy and inequality in society.”

- William Ewens, *Become Free: The Struggle for Human Development*, 1984

*RESPONSE FROM: OCEAN ROBBINS,
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I was born in a 1-room log cabin miles from the nearest neighbor in the middle of the woods in British Columbia, Canada. Our family grew most of our own food (well, actually my parents did – I helped to eat it), and lived on less than \$500 per year. When I turned 4, my mom and dad wanted me to have a school to go to and the possibility of a social life with peers, so we moved off the island, into a suburban neighborhood where there were other children, and I could start in at an exceptionally child-respecting public school. I enjoyed school some of the time, but often felt bored with it. I learned what I wanted to learn, when I wanted to learn it, and school sometimes seemed as much as anything to be a distraction.

When I was 10, my parents were frustrated with the school options in our neighborhood, and our family made the move to California, USA. There was a fantastic school in Santa Cruz, and my mom and dad had done enough research to feel that it would be a great place for me to thrive. I'm sure the warmer weather didn't hurt their enthusiasm for California, either. I enjoyed two wonderful months at my new school, and then the school lost its rented site and folded. Already settled in our new community, but not caring for the other school options, my parents proposed the radical option of learning without formal education, or 'home-schooling', as it was called in the U.S. They would support me, and I would be the driving force behind my learning journey. I would be free of the rules and confines of a school system – free to live my life and supported to follow my passions. I loved the idea, and was soon frequently quoting Mark Twain, "You can't let school interfere with your education."

Self-directed learning enabled me to start a natural foods bakery called "Ocean's Bakery." With door-to-door delivery throughout our neighborhood, at age 11 my entrepreneurial efforts landed my picture on the front page of the Santa Cruz Sentinel under the headline: "Boy Isn't Very Rich, But He's Got Dough". Free from school, I was also able to perform in numerous musical and theatrical productions, to become deeply involved in the citizen diplomacy movement as a children's peace ambassador to Russia, and to begin to find my calling as a social change leader.

In 1989, when I was 15, I joined with a friend to start a national speaking tour, traveling the United States inspiring high school students to make a

difference with their lives. That led to our 1990 founding of YES!, a non-profit organization I have directed ever since. (*Learn more about YES! — “Helping Outstanding Young Leaders Build A Better World” at www.yesworld.org*)

YES! has hired more than 100 staff over the last 16 years, and when we've hired people, we've always looked at someone's character, passion, and commitment to the cause our organization stands for. As time has gone on, we've also learned to look at their skills, wisdom, functionality, references, ability to add to organizational diversity, and relevant life experience. Degrees don't really enter into the picture as far as I'm concerned – except insofar as some folks have onerous student loans to pay off and need more money than we might be offering.

I haven't experienced any particular correlation between academic achievements and capacity to make a positive impact on YES! or on the work we do. I used to love working with bright and courageous youngsters who had little previous life experience or skills. Our staff was something of a training ground for many of them. As I get older (I'm almost 32 now), I feel increasingly drawn to working with competent and capable people with a high degree of maturity as well as a deep sense of passion and love for people and our world.

Coming back to my story, I never went to college. I never got a law degree, or a medical degree, an MA or even a BA. I technically dropped out of 5th grade. But I direct an organization with a half-million dollar budget, and we have spoken in person to more than 625,000 high school students, organized 90+ week-long gatherings for young leaders from more than 60 countries, and made a difference in some people's lives.

I feel like I'm still on my learning journey. It's a journey that's taken me all over the world, and taught me about the pain of racism, classism and war, about the deep illness that is gripping our world, and about love, courage, and the beauty of the human spirit. It's taught me about fundraising, organizational management, non-profit law, social change movement building, cross-cultural alliance-building, and the art and science of facilitation and leadership. In short, it's taught me about what matters to me.

Of course, now at age 31, I could have just finished with a prodigious education. Armed with a bunch of degrees, maybe I'd do something radical and entrepreneurial, like starting a bakery. If I was lucky, maybe it would land me on the front page of the local newspaper.

*RESPONSE FROM: INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND PRACTICES,
QUETTA, PAKISTAN*

SAY NO TO DEGREES BECAUSE!

Say no to degrees because it regards a few superior
... Cause it pronounces you inferior

It empowers institutions
Dis-empowers enlightened people
Because it's only for privileged people
Because it is not for poor people

It boosts up your ego and tranquility
It ensures absolute inequality
It serves the kingdom of cruelty

Say no to degree cause it dominates you
... because it dictates you
... because it belittles you
... because it confines you

It looks down upon you
It tells lies about you
It decides about you
It gives judgment about you

It steals the right to earn
It steals the right to learn

It does not guarantee your cultural strengths
Say no to degrees cause it puts you in ranks

It stops your growth, care and respect for diversity
Say no to degrees cause it says good-bye to generosity
- Naseem A. Panezai, IDSP, Pakistan

Let me share some of the things that we do at IDSP and why we do them. In our experience of working with young people from Pakistan, we observed following:

- The degrees/certifications, and all the '*jhmalla*' around it, actually prepares the incumbent to surrender their will to the dominant notions around us, therefore becoming one's own enemy.
- The process of institutionalization is so strong that, once a person qualifies, he or she gets trapped in a dependency model.
- The third, and perhaps most destructive, is that the person follows a profound greed model, distant from reality, looking always at what he/she can achieve by dehumanizing people, based on notions of cut-throat competition, etc.
- The other side of this whole story is that unschooled people are often courageous, conscious of their environment, building on what they already have.

Our experience in working with groups of youth suggests that the schooled have a lot of assumptions and baggage to deal with, whereas the unschooled have a very profound sense of reality, hardly disturbed by the mainstream media (and certainly not by education).

IDSP is an open learning space, which operates independently of conventional, dominant definitions of institutions and structures. Therefore, the actions, practices and people in it naturally and organically define IDSP. IDSP is reflective of culture, values and traditions in our area. It is sensitive to cultural, gender, religious and ethnic diversities.

The process of engagement in IDSP requires no credentials whatsoever, but rather the willingness to be cognizant of the reality of the self and a desire to explore meanings of life independent of mainstream notions.

- Ali Naqvi, IDSP, Pakistan

I remember when I used to escape from school or did not show interest in this mechanical process of rote learning, my single literate uncle used to caution me, "Do you want to be a shepherd? Your destiny will be like those wandering in the pastures with hundreds of sheep and goats. Or do you want to be like a peasant doing daily wage labor?"

Two of my elder brothers got out of school when they turned a deaf ear to the consequences of becoming peasants and workers. They escaped, and the next year they became what they were destined for. I continued with my schooling and became a position holder in MSc Physics. I spent 16 years with continuous fear:

Lest I should become a person who works manually and is not socially respected for this?

Lest I should become a person who works in the fields as a peasant and daily wager?

Lest I should become an illiterate who is ignorant, blind and socially discarded?

A rigorous process indoctrinates us with the belief that those without degrees cannot become leaders, thinkers, professionals, activist and planners, and that only degree holders have the capability of promoting the economic and cultural activities for the greater collective interest of human kind.

Here comes a very childish question in my mind, "If there remain no degree holders, what kind of difference will it make to the planet? Perhaps it will take us from the age of cybernetics to the initial industrial age. Now, on the other hand, if there remain no illiterates, non-degree holders, what would it cost the planet? Certainly, there would be no activity of agricultural production, livestock, and other dairy products." This simple analysis makes us value and appreciate the non-schooled, illiterate, and uncertified people, who know how to grow, how to create, produce, consume and conserve the overall ecology.

We at IDSP are working with the group of young literate and illiterates in order to collectively unpack the colonial and behavioral logic of, "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." We are planning a course entitled, 'Learning from the People,' which seeks to understand the logic and politics behind the efforts to disempower the most empowered people of the world. We strive to collectively work with them for challenging the worst type of classification of degree holders and non-degree holders, while regenerating sustainable and organic alternative options.

- Barkat Shah Kakar, IDSP, Pakistan

I remember once in a local community where we were discussing 'Cultural and Traditional Values vs. Modern Values'. During the discussion, one old man took his Identity Card from his pocket and said with anger and complaint, "The modern life has reduced me to this small tiny piece of hard paper. This small piece of paper is considered more valuable than me. If I do not have this ID card, Government and other institutions are not ready to acknowledge me as a resident of this land in which my forefathers are living from centuries. I may face a lot of financial problems and they may put me in jail."

In the same way, people are weighted against their degrees, disregarding their experiences, past contributions and their commitment to bringing about change. The irony is that the degrees have left no room for most of the skillful people. But IDSP seriously considers those individuals who are really interested in contributing. There are more than 700 people whom we have successfully engaged, without considering their degrees or any kind of qualification, but instead looking at their interests, skills, strengths and commitment for a better change.

IDSP believes the logic that a person's experiences are more valuable than degrees. We think that a piece of paper is not enough to tell us about a person and declare his/her identity. And one who does not have a degree, is not necessarily blank or knowledge-less. We have experienced this first hand.



In one course we hosted, there was a diversity of backgrounds of learners. One had completed and qualified his M. Phil and Master's from a renowned university of Pakistan, while the other learner was unschooled. The one who was unschooled came up with such innovative ideas that the panel had to qualify his ideas for the research. But the learner who had done his M. Phil could not qualify, for his ideas were basically not grounded and did not have logical base in practical realities. Interestingly, the panel consisted solely of professors and teachers from institutions in Pakistan. But they could not ignore the fact that the ideas of the unschooled learner were very innovative, inspiring and dynamic.

This experience, as well as many others, have given us cause to rethink our own beliefs about existing institutional control and sustaining control through degrees and diplomas, on the one side, and marginalizing locally wise people who possess real strength, on the other side.

- Naseem A. Panezai, IDSP, Pakistan

Are you a 'crop' or a 'weed'?

Who defines?

"The vocabulary used to organize Nature typically betrays the over-riding interests of its human users. In fact, utilitarian discourse replaces the term 'nature' with the term 'natural resources', focusing on those aspects of nature that can be appropriated for human use. A comparable logic extracts from a more generalized natural world those flora or fauna that are of utilitarian value (usually marketable commodities) and, in turn, reclassifies those species that compete with, prey on, or otherwise diminish the yields of the valued species. Thus, plants that are valued become 'crops', the species that compete with them are stigmatized as 'weeds', and the insects that compete with them are stigmatized as 'pests'. Thus, trees that are valued become 'timber', while species that compete with them become 'trash' trees or 'underbrush'. The same logic applies to fauna. Highly valued animals become 'game' or 'livestock', while those animals that compete with or prey upon them become 'predators' or 'varmints'. The larger ecological balance of the forest is totally negated in this process. In addition, many things fell out of the vision of the observer who was only concerned with those things that could increase state revenue. Here I have in mind foliage and its uses as fodder and thatch; fruits, as food for people and domestic animals; twigs and branches, as bedding, fencing, hop poles, and kindling; bark and roots, for making medicines and for tanning; sap for making resins; and so forth."

- James Scott,
Seeing Like a State, 2001

*RESPONSE FROM: ZAID HASSAN,
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Personally speaking, I went to university and learnt a lot. I should point out that not much of what I learnt was in the lecture halls. Instead, I spent most of my time in the computer lab learning about the then embryonic internet and in the library reading about the history and philosophy of science.

One of the years I was at university I saw an advert on the internet for someone with simple web programming skills to do freelance work. I emailed the company and they asked me to come down to their offices. A few days later I took the train down and walked into the plush offices of an advertising firm. We met in the boardroom. They showed me some printouts of what looked like a website and asked me if I could build it. I looked at them, somewhat puzzled, and said yes. They asked me how long it would take. I said a couple of days. They looked at each other and were silent. I was really puzzled. I asked them why they needed me since it looked like they had already built the site. They explained to me that they didn't know how to build it and the print-outs were just mock-ups done by a designer. They told me they'd pay me a few hundred pounds a day to build the site. I accepted, mostly amazed that someone would pay me to do this work. Of course they didn't ask for my qualifications, they simply wanted me to do the work, which I did. A year or so later I dropped out of university, with plenty of work to do.

In the years since I worked as a programmer, a project manager, I ran my own company for two years, worked as a chief "actualisation" and technology officer in a non-profit technology company and worked a few jobs that can't be described in a few words. When I started work building websites I quickly built up a portfolio of work. I printed out screenshots of all the websites I had built, mounted them nicely and whenever someone asked me for credentials I would show them the many websites I had built. I've provided samples of my work, from websites to articles, whenever needed. Throughout my time I have never been asked if I have a degree. There was one simple reason for this. The reason was that people hired me because I had a skill that they needed. The other reason no one asked for a degree is usually because there were no degrees in this stuff. It was too new.

Over the years, I've learnt that a good portfolio is one that is broad and covers a range of different kinds, styles and types of work. Ideally it needs to demonstrate both versatility and focus. The work shouldn't be so

random and broad as to have nothing tying it together and nor should it be so narrow that it implies a lack of flexibility. The point of a portfolio is that one builds it over time. This means that it really isn't something that can be put together in a rush overnight. Rather it's something that needs to be cultivated over time and can be thought of as a discipline. It encourages us to document our learning and the stages of our learning along whatever path we are following. The latest piece of work in a portfolio should reflect our learning to date.

While it may sound difficult to have a skill that is new, it isn't that hard. It's a matter of finding the edge of a field of practice. It can usually be done through research, or better yet from talking to people about their needs and their questions. It's hard to explain exactly how one locates the edge of a field. An example I can provide is reading a critique of the social sciences, by a Danish professor. This critique made me understand the things that were not working within the social sciences - and in turn helped me understand what I could bring to work in the social sphere. Taking the time to understand the detailed critiques of an issue or a subject, coupled with being creative about it - asking 'what is not working here?' as well as 'ok if I were in charge, how would I do it?' is a good way of probing the edges of a field.

Beyond having a portfolio and a field of practice, I've found that it's also important to cultivate one's own network. This can be difficult but it's best to start where you are, through talking to people you have easy access to. If you don't have access to people, then it's fine to contact people you don't know at all. A major mistake often made in contacting people to request help is not making a clear and focused enough request. If you imagine that you would like to talk to someone who is established in their field, it's obvious that such people are busy. The best request to send such people is one that doesn't require them to think too much in order to say yes. This means being careful not to make a request that's too broad and open-ended. If you think they can help you, put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself how they can best help you and then say it when you make your request. Don't assume that they have any obligation to teach you. They don't. You have a responsibility to teach yourself. Do not contact someone and ask them for information you can learn elsewhere. It may be that they eventually help you learn, but this isn't the best initial request to make of a busy person. It's particularly bad to ask for information that can easily be found through a little personal research effort.

Over the years I made a radical shift of focus, moving from the technology sector to doing more direct social work. I gained the skills to do this

through working for a non-profit, community-based organisation called Pioneers of Change (www.pioneersofchange.net). Pioneers of Change is a global learning network supporting practitioners in their mid-20s to mid-30. Pioneers are people who question underlying assumptions and move into new territory in order to create the changes we want to see in the world. Pioneers include social entrepreneurs, members of the business, government and non-profit communities, as well as artists, teachers, and free agents from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds. Joining Pioneers of Change means that you explicitly commit to yourself to embodying the following principles: Be yourself, Do what Matters, Start now, Engage with others, Never stop asking questions. This commitment, to oneself (and not to the organisation) is the essence of being a Pioneer; it is what binds us as a community. Pioneers of Change operates on the principles of self-organisation and self-selection – principles that are quite contrary to those that drive the degree system and the dominant educational paradigm.

The advantages of working with Pioneers of Change were that we worked for ourselves, made our own mistakes and had to take responsibility to learn from them. Making our own mistakes meant that my time at Pioneers was complex and difficult and fun. I look back at those two intense years and I can clearly see that I learnt a staggering amount. I learnt things that I could not have possibly learnt at any school or in any university. This is partly because when you make your own mistakes you really learn. I also learnt so much because the things we did were, in their own right, ground-breaking. We were trying to do things that were not taught in the universities.

I find the role of degrees in the social sector somewhat problematic, in that it isn't clear what their value is. It's very different from sectors where a large number of resources are needed from which to learn, such as nuclear engineering or even some forms of specialised medicine. The tools of the social sector are not technical nor resource intensive. They usually consist of capacities such as vision, imagination, persistence, attention to detail and so on. (Of course there are plenty of ways of applying skills such as film-making and website building, which are more technical in nature.) I believe that a key class of skills and capacities within the social sector are communication skills. If an individual is able to communicate, through whatever media be it dialogue or film, then they can play a useful role in doing social work. Degrees are hardly the best way of measuring capacities such as patience, the ability to dialogue or for that matter, even of writing or making a film. Those who are passionate about their field of practice will pursue it with fire. Regardless

of their qualifications, we should search for and encourage this fire. We should consider ourselves lucky when we can bring passion and commitment to work alongside us. To dismiss it or demand a degree seems to be shooting ourselves in the foot.

Somehow, I have discovered the fierce joy and satisfaction of being able to draw my own paths of learning. Last year, while working with Generon Consulting (www.generonconsulting.com), I learnt a tremendous amount about the global food system and issues of malnutrition. This year I am continuing to learn about public healthcare, as well as learning about the challenges facing aboriginal communities. I'm also on a constant learning curve around systemic change and how best to build group capacities for creating change. I honestly believe that the work around systemic change that my peers and I are involved in unfolds much more than university learning (and research) spluttering in the dirt when it comes to practical applications in the world. I am having so much fun learning and practicing outside of the constraints of formal learning that I cannot ever imagine going back to it.



**Degreed Minds for Hire:
Depoliticized Professionals**

“Professionalism – in particular the notion that experts should confine themselves to their ‘legitimate professional concerns’ and not ‘politicize’ their work – helps keep individualized professionals in line, by encouraging them to see their narrow technical orientation as a virtue, a sign of objectivity rather than subordination. ... Politically timid professionals fear that their organization will look like part of a social movement, and so they try to limit their organization’s actions to those of a narrow special-interest group. As part of their very identity, professionals subordinate themselves to power on ideological matters. Thus, professionals can’t take a stand on an unsanitized issue without going through a genuine identity crisis. Indeed, they respond with great fear and trembling whenever anyone proposes that they take such a stand. Even on life-and-death issues, professional associations can rarely muster the courage to take a position that they think might displease employers. Professionals don’t want anyone to think that their own views might affect their work, because that would be insubordinate and therefore unprofessional. So even off the job (in professional associations and elsewhere), independence of thought feels out of line. As a result, the typical professional doesn’t stand for anything.”

- Jeff Schmidt,
*Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals
and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Them*, 2000

*RESPONSE FROM: MARGARET WHEATLEY,
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Let me begin by saying that I do have an advanced degree, a doctorate in education. There is no doubt in my mind that having this degree has helped me gain access to places and people that I wanted to have access to — corporations, organizations, powerful people. And because I have been in so many of the halls of power over the years, I have seen clearly how inhibiting and destructive is the pursuit of credentials. There are a few things I'd like to comment on:

1. Starting in 1975, I worked for years with many activists trying to pierce the glass ceiling for women in American workplaces. One of the familiar refrains was: "We'll hire women as soon as they have their MBAs. They just need the right degrees." Thirty years later, women are more than half the students in MBA programs, they have flooded the corporate job market, and still they have not achieved positions of power and influence in proportion to their numbers or to their male counterparts.

I think these thirty years of minimal progress for women clearly indicate that degrees are often used as a ruse or decoy to take attention away from the real problems of inclusion and difference. If we don't want to open the doors of privilege and access, we keep them shut by just putting up the sign "Qualified applicants welcome." People see the sign, think that everything is fine (it appears to be a meritocracy after all!) and never peer behind the door to notice that nothing has changed, that no new people are being admitted to the old boy's club. This illusion of meritocracy and fairness is easily discerned in most hiring practices in large organizations. They may 'post' the job announcement and solicit all applicants, but most times the boss already has someone in mind and hires that person. These practices are well-known to workers. Few people expect to enter a level playing field, even when a job is posted. Similarly, some of the students who get into elite universities are there because of who they know — either their parents or influential friends went to that school, or have donated considerable money to the institution.

2. Degrees and certificate programs don't teach the skills that we most need, such as knowing how to learn, to stay aware, to change, to communicate, to relate. They focus people in the wrong direction and blind us to the real needs and skills that make for good work and good relationships at work.

Degrees and certificates change everyone's expectations of what they need to know and be in order to do a good job, or to lead a meaningful life. Life becomes reduced to a narrow set of marginally useful techniques and skills. Focused only on learning these in order to get ahead, people shrink. They become parrots or robots rather than curious, intellectually awake people. In this way, we dumb down society and produce technicians, not human beings. This is increasingly evident in how students approach schooling. They focus on the narrow technical programs and take those classes that are job-related, rather than expanding through their education to become curious, open, and interested in the world.

Those in power have triumphed in naming the terms of success: 'successful' people are those who excel as compliant, non-thinking technicians. They can rest assured that no confrontations will be sparked from these obedient people docilely marching into classrooms, 'picking up' their certificate or degree.

Many years ago, Ivan Illich described one of the central phenomenon of this age, the institutionalization of everything. Once an institution, such as hospitals, claims to be the source of healing, people abandon traditional practices and rely only on 'experts'. Or we rely only on teachers to educate us. Organizations have similarly defined what success in life is. It is an extremely minimalist definition, focused only on getting ahead within organizations — getting a job, progressing up a career ladder, making lots of money, playing the game. This definition of success never factors in other qualities of a successful life — meaningful relationships, inner peace, wisdom, healthy families, etc.

How will the world change if we accept this role, if we keep forgetting, or never know, that we're capable of so much more?

One of the consequences of focusing on technical degrees, such as MBAs, is that these qualifications do not prepare anyone for effective leadership. People learn to lead by numbers, ratios, formulas. They are taught that organizations and people can be understood mechanistically and motivated by monetary rewards. As this type of leadership takes root (which is not leadership at all), organizations become increasingly machinelike. People lose their motivation because there is no opportunity to learn and to contribute — two key motivators for most people.

And as specializations take hold, where we only expect people to contribute from a very narrow specialty, organizations become



characterized by strong walls, a fortress mentality, and fierce competition. This descent into specialties severely impacts an organization's ability to function, because in this densely interconnected systems' world, no one specialization can see enough of what's going on. What results are financial people competing with strategists who are competing with engineers who are competing with sales, and on and on. So much time is spent in organizations today in this type of internal warfare. Yet the need is to make sense of a complex world and how we each can contribute our particular specialized lens to developing a robust picture of the whole.

At the deepest level, we need to ask ourselves is this current system working? Does it work to elicit our creativity? Do we feel inspired in our studies and our work? Do we feel curious and engaged? For me, these are the key questions to ask ourselves, the factors that keep us growing and learning as we mature. The current system of specialties and degrees does not result in people feeling curious, vital or creative. It deadens us and therefore works well in only one regard—it makes us easier to control us. Those in power are well-served by this current system of degrees, but people are not. We forfeit our lifelong ability to grow and create in exchange for some letters at the end of our name.

round two

"Democratising of knowledge becomes a central precondition for human liberation because the contemporary knowledge system excludes the humane by its very structure. Such a process of democratization would involve a redefining of knowledge such that the local and diverse become legitimate as knowledge, and they are viewed as indispensable knowledge because concreteness is the reality. Globalization and universalism are more mere abstractions which have violated the concrete and hence the real. Such a shift from the globalizing to the local knowledge is important to the project of human freedom because it frees knowledge from the dependency on established regimes of thought, making it simultaneously more autonomous and more authentic."

- Vandana Shiva
Monocultures of the Mind, 1992

RESPONSE FROM: **ANURADHA AND KRISHNA,**
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We are involved with a small learning center for tribal children. For us, this whole issue of formal degrees and diplomas as society's way of labeling a person as 'useful' or 'useless' is a very crucial issue. Whole communities in rural areas are getting destroyed due to this labeling. The crucial aspect is that the certification process is designed to weed out 'failures' more than to identify capabilities. Yet how many persons in the real world would offer a job to a person purely on the basis of one's possession of a certificate without an interview? However, most would not consider employing someone because s/he failed a particular degree.

Even more importantly the school exam certification leaves such a deep scar of 'incapability' that most people carry a lifelong feeling of low self-esteem. Our most important task here in our centre is to attempt to keep the children's self-esteem intact. Our long-term goal is to wean away the children [and, more importantly, the parents] from laying too much importance on the exam result.

We believe that it is possible for us to show the joy of learning and to make children, as well as adults, realize that learning can be a lifelong enriching process that will help in living with dignity. Eventually, our center should become a space for both children and adults, where adults can access information and dialogue at community-level to help them make informed choices. The biggest damage our schools do is to reduce people to passive receivers of packaged knowledge. Perhaps this is what schools are meant to do and they are very good at it!

We both graduated with a degree in architecture and got thoroughly disgusted with the profession as we saw it: completely dehumanizing, excessively materialistic, urban-biased and without any relevance to the needs of the vast majority of the people.

So we moved to a rural area with the idea that we wanted to work with communities. We wanted to find useful things to do (preferably avoiding architecture!). We got an opportunity at Gandhigram, near Madurai, to understand how houses are built by villagers using local materials. We started learning with villagers how natural materials, such as mud, are used and we started to make improvisations. We also made use of the opportunities to build as a place to learn for ourselves and, more importantly, for the villagers to upgrade their building skills.

Somehow, slowly people came to know what we were up to and, from all over south India, many came to us asking us to build for them using local materials. Soon we were doing small projects in many rural areas, training small groups in different locations. All our major projects just happened, without us having to go and ask for work. We even got a corporate client with whom we had a long innings of very unconventional work! And of course, nobody ever asked us to show our degrees! In every case, we were asked to do a job because of what we had already done and the skills that we picked up as we kept working.

Looking back, we feel we have accumulated a unique set of experiences: working with rural communities, with so called ‘unskilled’ people, training, designing, building using local materials, etc. None of this is unique in itself, but the combination comes useful in many unconventional situations (post-disaster, for example). But we also feel this would not have happened had we been tied down by the narrow definitions of our profession, taught to us in our formal education. We have come to the point of refusing to think of ourselves as ‘professionals’ and ‘architects’.

Looking around, we find that most people in our country learn useful skills through apprenticeship. It is very obvious in the informal sector, but actually if one thinks carefully, we all learn very many crucial skills in our first job — even after a formal degree, not to mention acquiring of new skills as things in the field change.

Actually, architecture used to be taught through apprenticeship until the mid-20th century. Even when we were in college 20 years back, there used to be apprentices who would come for evening classes. This has changed dramatically. In the informal sector, there is much exploitation of apprentices and no culture of pride in teaching/learning skills — mainly due to the formal sector’s dominance in our consciousness. Ideally, we should break this deep divide between learning at ‘work’ and learning in institutions (They have their plus points in giving wider exposure, and feeling of belonging to and learning from peers.)

Our experience taught us another valuable lesson: refusing to accept the narrow confines of what we ought to do in life for a living. ‘Super-specialization’ is the curse of modernity! We freed our minds and opened enormous possibilities of what one could do. When our children were born, we got fascinated with their learning. We saw how much damage schools do to children’s learning abilities and their ‘self-image’. So for the past four years, we have started working with tribal children in a remote village (almost full-time), and we are enjoying this new role we have taken on.

We feel that ‘good work’, meaningful and satisfying work, is a basic human need, and also work has lot more meaning than just eeking out a living. Our most satisfying work has been work we have done as a gift for our close friends. The word ‘work’ itself has got corrupted to mean something that ‘has to be done’, and so without any fun or happiness associated with it. If every work situation can be seen as a learning experience, then so much more fun can be derived, and the learning itself becomes a reward.

The challenge in a sense is to delink ‘work’ from ‘jobs’. We feel in our country, we really have a big advantage, as it is possible to live a materially simple way, yet comfortably. For example, we can build a thatch and mud house, such as ours, very inexpensively, something we are told is impossible to do in so-called developed countries, as the insurance costs would be prohibitive and the authorities won’t just let you put up one without permissions. This simplicity frees us from the need to look for jobs! Unfortunately, we are getting ‘developed’ now and are jumping onto the bandwagon of high-stress 12-14 hour work days, just to live ‘decent’, ‘developed’ lifestyles!

In the past 25 years, we have worked with people who are mostly school dropouts; there is no question of degrees here. We have worked with people with ‘professional’ skills, who all believe that modern skills such as ‘nursing’, ‘designing buildings’, ‘teaching children’, ‘documentation’, ‘accounting’, can all be taught on the job to people who hold no degrees. In our experience, we actually prefer unschooled minds as they are much more open to learning and are better at acquiring skills! In that sense, degrees are important — they are ‘danger signs’ in our work!

I really appreciate the no to degrees campaign. I spoke to a few people about it. It has been neat to get that conversation going about the link between \$ and degrees and the perpetuation of the widening gap between the \$-poor and \$-rich. It is crazy how we begin to operate without even questioning - like the pursuit of degrees. At first everyone in Marin pushed us (high school students at Terra Linda) to go to a university or private college in order to get good jobs. Then part way into college they start the pressure to go to grad school, because everyone has an undergraduate degree, and you will only get the good jobs with a masters. Now after a masters, folks are in pursuit of a PhD. For some it is the joy of learning, others do it for what lies at the end of that tunnel: \$, the dream job... While I decided for me that a masters doesn't fit for what I want to do in life, especially just for the goal of having a masters, it takes a deeper level of thinking to understand that this momentum in certain class brackets towards the 'glory' of degrees is really, well, capitalism, I suppose. Capitalism grips us again and sucks us into its system, unquestioning, accomplice to an oppression that we grow farther and farther from acknowledging.

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RESPONSE FROM: **ROSIE R. MEADE**,
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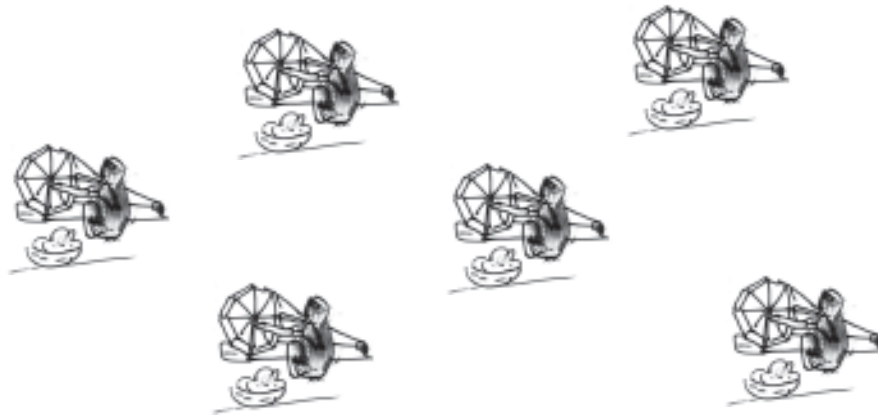
'Professionalism' and the Politics of Irish Community Development

As a teacher in the area of community development I struggle with the tensions generated by the 'professionalisation' and the accreditation through degrees of grassroots activism. Through the years, my dialogues with students have highlighted our mutual concerns regarding the invisibility of practice at the community level, their desire for respect from other professional bodies or workers, the often inferior quality of community sector pay and working conditions, and their desire that years of study or voluntary commitment be validated. However, we have also reflected on the colonizing aspects of development work, the potential for state manipulation of community organizations and the contradictions associated with being answerable to both community groups and statutory funders. A recurring conclusion of those discussions has been the tentative but optimistic suggestion that it is possible to build a progressive professional practice - a practice that privileges good quality process over hierarchical interventionist relations. Increasingly though I find myself arguing, pessimistically it must be said, that 'progressive professionalism' is an oxymoron.

In Ireland of the 1990s, the extension of corporatist models of governance to the local level and the associated upsurge in funding for the voluntary and community sector, ensured that grassroots organizations had an unprecedented level of access to and communication with the state. The granting of public monies also necessitated the introduction of new organizational structures, systems of accountability and procedural measures (a de facto process of institution building) to guarantee projects' trustworthiness and competence. The institutionalization and bureaucratization of community activism generated a self-perpetuating need for paid 'professionals' who could account for project spending and sustain the momentum of the fundraising process. The overall impact of professionalisation on the community sector has been to shift attention from a concern with the broader imperative of social change to a narrowing pre-occupation with institutional self-preservation. Irish corporatism is not designed to and not supposed to welcome in dissidents or amateurs. Instead, by creating partnership structures dense and numerous enough to sublimate critique and by designating an elite or professional class of community' spokespeople with whom it can converse, the state has ensured that the majority of the poor remain adrift from the policy making process.

In my view the *ideology* of ‘professionalism’ bolsters the project of social engineering and facilitates the smoother administration of social inequality. Professionalism, contrary to the optimism of some of its champions, offers practitioners a coherent identity, a privileged discursive power and a set of institutional tools and practices, which implicitly devalue the communicative power and political impact of oppressed social groups. The emergence of a host of self-asserting and state accredited social professions in Ireland during the 20th Century coincided with a new depth and rigour of intervention in the lives of the poor. From the mid-1970s community development was recast as an anti-poverty intervention as opposed to an organic social movement. The Irish state thus allocated paid professionals responsibility for diagnosing, labelling and prescribing solutions for the disadvantaged communities with which they worked. Armed with educationally derived credentials and the whiff of altruism, professionals could bring to these interventions a promise of ‘informed helpfulness’ – the basis of their expertise. As credible insiders in the state system, professionals offer clients a legitimated access route to strategic gains and improvements in their daily circumstances. The success of the social professional’s power has been to insinuate her/himself as indispensable and even-handed conciliator; on the state’s behalf classifying, appeasing and managing the ever swelling ranks of the deviant classes; on the client’s behalf guiding her through the bureaucratic maze of the welfare system. The community development professional thus becomes the buffer – between state and client – who ensures that potentially opposing forces do not square up to each other in an overtly conflictual way.

To argue that the concept of ‘professionalism’ is embedded with and within prevailing social hierarchies, is not to argue that individual community development professionals act in bad faith or that they cannot consciously strive towards egalitarian goals. Instead I suggest that ‘professionalism’, the ideology, the identity and the practice, has a political import that extends beyond the actions of individual practitioners. The professional persona is premised upon an expert status, notions of objectivity and rationality that are reflective of dominant class, cultural and gender relations. A simultaneous discrediting of alternative identities, forms of knowledge and action have accompanied professional accreditation through the university system. When occupational groups secure the professional mantle, success is founded not upon some objective measure of their utility to the public good or the level of skill and insight they bring to their work. For example are mechanics or firemen lesser in this regard than either social workers or journalists? Instead, success in the contest for professional status reflects the ability of occupational groups to ingratiate themselves with state and academic institutions and to prove their efficiency as conduits for their power.



A persistent myth pits Irish community and statutory organizations as polar opposites – the community sector smugly occupying the high moral ground of democratic practice and the state sector languishing in the Kafkaesque zone of the bureaucratic. In reality, it is now extremely difficult to differentiate the sectors. If state agencies increasingly initiate and experiment with community development strategies, community organizations all too frequently the financial security that professionalism offers. The appointment within civil society organizations of policy analysts, public relations experts, full-time fundraisers and CEOs provide tangible evidence of the sector's conformism and formalization. Ironically, this is the very moment when civil society is promoted in the the media, among the masses and through the state, as the democratic, grounded and visionary alternative to traditional formations of power. Herein lies the source of my frustration.

Civil society does have the (ever diminishing?) potential to challenge the dominant hegemony of neo-liberalism, consumerism and even, professionalism. Community groups and social movement organisations can and should experiment with structurelessness. Although it is a costly and risky strategy, they might question the long-term value of state funding and defiantly cut the strings attached to it. Most impressively of all, grassroots organisations could practise the 'great refusal', by resisting both the temptations of corporatist talking shops and the guilty obligation to mop up social problems not of their making. The mundane and unrelenting experience of oppression in our homes, workplaces and communities, provides a bottomless reservoir of evidence from which critique can be generated. More than ever, the world needs politically engaged and imaginative critical commentators. If the pursuit of degrees and professional credentials limits that critical project, it must be actively resisted.

The Consequences of Professionalizing Development

To speak of development as a historical construct requires an analysis of the mechanisms through which it becomes an active, real force. These mechanisms are structured by forms of knowledge and power and can be studied in terms of processes of institutionalization and professionalization. The concept of professionalization refers mainly to the process that brings the Third World into the politics of expert knowledge and Western science in general. This is accomplished through a set of techniques, strategies, and disciplinary practices that organize the generation, validation, and diffusion of development knowledge, including the academic disciplines, methods of research and teaching, criteria of expertise, and manifold professional practices. In other words, those mechanisms through which certain forms of knowledge are given the status of truth...

The professionalization of development also made it possible to remove all problems from the political and cultural realms and to recast them in terms of the apparently more neutral realm of science. It resulted in the establishment of development studies programs in most major universities in the developed world and conditioned the creation or restructuring of Third World universities to suit the needs of development... An unprecedented will to know everything about the Third World flourished unhindered, growing like a virus. Like the landing of the Allies in Normandy, the Third World witnessed a massive landing of experts, each in charge of investigating, measuring, and theorizing about this or that little aspect of Third World societies. The policies and programs that originated from this vast field of knowledge inevitably carried with them strong normalizing components. At stake was a politics of knowledge that allowed experts to classify problems and formulate policies, to pass judgment on entire social groups and forecast their future — to produce, in short, a regime of truth and norms about them. The consequences for these groups and countries cannot be emphasized enough.

Another important consequence of the professionalization of development was the inevitable translation of Third World people and their interests into research data within the Western capitalist paradigms. There is a further paradox in this situation. As an African scholar put it, "Our own history, culture and practices, good or bad, are discovered and translated in the journals of the North and come back to us re-conceptualized, couched in languages and paradigms which make it all sound new and novel" (Namuddu 1989).

- Arturo Escobar,
Encountering Development, 1995

RESPONSE FROM: **KISHORE SAINT,**
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I'd like to address this matter in the light of UVM's experience in engaging staff to support a voluntary association of rural community based workers engaged in the protection and regeneration of their degraded natural resources and livelihoods based on these. In the early stages responsibility for various activities like motivation, mobilisation, building consensus, making claims, accessing information, making decisions and carrying out construction and plantation work, was undertaken by community based workers, with some technical guidance from other agencies. The need for support staff arose with the acceptance of government funds and the attendant requirements of keeping accounts, preparing reports and setting up supervision arrangements. The staff engaged at this stage with local origins and experience in community work were successful in establishing a relationship of mutual confidence and understanding with community-based workers.

Later the more qualified and professional staff had little to offer as expertise. They came to gain some NGO and field exposure and quickly moved on to more lucrative opportunities in large organisations. Another difficulty was their ignorance about and disdain for people's knowledge, unwillingness to learn and establish a partnership with community based workers. This was a reflection of the cultural distancing that had taken place in the process of their formal education for degrees and certificates. Even the generous hospitality and richness of knowledge revealed by detailed case study work done by some of them failed to evoke a sense of shared predicament or lead to a deeper commitment to these communities and their habitats. This persistent gap between the institution based staff and community based workers and volunteers led to repeated crises when the work had to be stopped and staff asked to leave.

Based on these experiences and lessons learnt, we have now decided to make the community based workers the main force in our activities, with peer selection, allocation of responsibility, mutual support and accountability and open and collective reviews augmented with administrative and technical support for capacity building as and when needed.

Postscript: This call is reminiscent of Ivan Illich's 1960s proposal for 'disestablishment of education' by a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting or admission to centres of learning, based on previous attendance at some curriculum. This was part of his well-focused critique and campaign for de-

institutionalising society through radical changes in the systems of education, health care, governance and religious ministry and mission. For Illich, certification was a remote and centralised instrument of established ruling elite to maintain privilege and standardise and regulate social functioning in a preordained manner. Doing away with these instruments was a key element in Illich's agenda of cultural and institutional revolution. It is a moot point whether the highly institutionalised and professionalized social sector of our times, with heavy dependence on state and foreign agencies for funding and agenda setting, can heed the call to do away with degrees and diplomas as the primary criteria for hiring and promotion.



This is exciting, and I wanted to let you know my support for it. Native Movement Collective, our organization, knows nothing of degrees when it comes to our organizers and partners. What we are interested in is peoples' passion and willingness to grow as individuals and collectively as a community. We function as a collective of projects and campaigns that are led by youth. We support one another both on the personal and professional levels. We focus on peace, sustainability, leadership development, healing, and community building. Native Movement Collective collaborates whenever possible with organizations that promote similar values and vision as we carry out our work. Most of our organizers are volunteers, although we have around five paid core organizers. The way we develop our work and staffing is based on the vision, passion, and dedication of the individuals as they become part of the Collective. Each organizer is responsible for developing their own projects and budgets with the support of the core organizers. They then have the responsibility to carry out the projects goals and objectives. We share accountability to and with one another. We are growing rapidly as an organization and it is the core organizers that make decisions to bring on new organizers and projects. We do not consider degrees or formal education in accepting new organizers; several of our organizers are still in high school. What we consider is their commitment to their own path, alignment with the values and vision of the Collective, and willingness to learn and grow within a community of diverse organizers.

- **Evon Peter, Native Movement Collective, USA**
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RESPONSE FROM: **RUKMINI**, MUMBAI, INDIA

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Some time ago, I helped facilitate a retreat for field staff of a non-government organisation. The organisation has been engaged, for over 35 years, in integrated rural development activities in a large number of rural and tribal villages. Village groups are supported to organise and access resources for community-based, self-managed activities through resource support and skill-training.

The field level staff that participated in the retreat works directly with village communities. Till recently, they have all typically been drawn from the local region and come from modest education backgrounds, often not beyond the tenth standard. They understand the context of the village people with whom they work, often being from similar contexts themselves. Over the years, they have learnt the organisation's techniques of development intervention, supported by members of other strata of the organisation which comprise a mix – professionally trained rural management, social work graduates, engineers, doctors, etc. and people like the field staff who have grown in the organisation and over the years have assumed technical- and strategic-support, and management positions.

At the retreat, some of the field staff expressed concern at a recent recruitment trend in the organisation – masters' graduates from various schools of social work are being recruited to work as field staff. Although, this has not resulted in the retrenchment or replacement of any of the existing field staff, the concern of its possibility is intense. It was encapsulated well by one of the members. She said that due to its commitment to integrated rural development, the organisation's agenda is to create opportunities for the rural disadvantaged - in terms of resources, opportunities and Rights. How does it propose to accommodate the education disadvantage of its own field staff?

For me, the question is significant and warrants further examination. The critical question here, in my opinion, is: what does an organisation such as this one expect its field level staff to achieve? I would suppose that the field staff forms a crucial link between the organisation and village groups with which it works. It is this stratum of staff which must understand the concerns and possibilities of village communities, and communicate them to the technical and strategic management teams of the organisation. Simultaneously, it must understand the philosophy and ability of the organisation, and translate them into activities at the village level, supporting and facilitating their implementation. Thus, they assume a crucial role and are, truly, the backbone of the organisation.

The work of the field staff requires both, sensitivity and understanding of the realities of people, as well as an ability to help address them. It is, perhaps, for the latter that the organisation feels the need to recruit professionally trained social workers, believing that they come with certain basic level of skills required for this work. The moot issue here is whether degrees of social work (or any other related fields) guarantee skills required to work with rural and tribal communities and facilitate their engagement in community development.

Mainstream institutional curricula of social work and rural development training programmes do open up its students' minds to the socio-eco-political contexts of the marginalised and equips them with skills of development work (participatory rural appraisal technique being one of them). I, too, have been trained at such an institution considered one of the best in the country. My background is positively urban and until I was required to (as part of my curriculum during training) I had little exposure to rural life, and close to none of rural poverty. My course did open my eyes to the reality of this majority of the country's population and infused some degree of realistic sensitivity in me about it. However, did it equip me to work with rural communities on ensuring their Rights, or on enhancement of their livelihoods? I am not so sure.

This is not to charge all such trained professionals of being unable to help address concerns of rural populations. However, their ability to do so definitely needs to be examined against evidence. Further, if we do agree that professional training intends to infuse requisite skills, the more noteworthy concern is how organisations assess the presence of such skills at the time of recruitment, which usually comprises interviews and discussions with potential candidates.

In my opinion, working in the position of the field staff like those mentioned above requires not specific skills, but a certain value base which gives centrality to human dignity, an ability to interpret human realities, a commitment to help fill the gaps that may exist in people's ability to enhance their conditions, and an unquestionable integrity. Once these basics can be assured in an organisation's staff, they can fulfil critical roles and functions, provided the organisation bestows and communicates its faith and trust in them. This proposal implies a large amount of responsibility on such organisations that need to create and maintain a climate for such staff members to be inducted, to grow and to contribute meaningfully. Are organisations willing to stand up to the challenge and play this critical role?

"The journey of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

*RESPONSE FROM: GUSTAVO ESTEVA,
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I can very well understand your intentions and fully share them.

In more senses than one, diplomas have been a serious problem in my life.

I abandoned my profession when I was 21 years old, without a diploma. I thus learned with friends and in practice, without any kind of formal certification. In 1978, I got the National Award of Economics, for my contributions to the theory of inflation. When the economists in their National Association, which gave me the award, discovered that I was not an economist they were very angry and regretted their decision. Something similar happened in 1980, when the Fifth World Rural Sociology Congress was held in Mexico City, and they elected me as President of the Congress. When the sociologists of the association discovered that I was not a sociologist, they reacted as the economists. And the story goes on and on...

Of course, for the last 30 years, we have hired many people in our independent organization. We never considered the possibility of asking anyone for a certification of studies.

I can fully share the concern and the intention: the idea to courageously resist what is imposed through the diplomas, the disqualification of the majority, the reduction of those tested to a damaging standard, etc.

The current diplomas are a form of social recognition that implies a reduction of all human beings and are used for discrimination. Please include me in your campaign.

I would also like to share with you an alternative experience I shared in a recent meeting with friends of Iván Illich:

Twenty years ago, joining up with several friends, I launched a public campaign asking for a legislation that would punish with ten years of prison any person producing any diploma or asking another person any kind of certification of studies, to apply for a job or for whatever. I had no hope of getting my legislation, but I wanted public debate and I got it. Most people said: If we get your stupid legislation, 99% of the children will abandon the school, whatever grade they are in. That revealed what I wanted to make evident. In Mexico at least, people go to school, or parents send their children, only to get the diploma. Everybody knows

that the school is not an appropriate place to learn. It is a place to get an institutional certification, a kind of visa, which allows you to circulate in modern society.

Years later I attempted the other extreme: to give our Unitierra diplomas to everyone, thereby attempting to play with the symbols of the system and misuse them.

At one point, on our local TV station in Oaxaca, we were talking about the horrendous damage produced by sewage and how the flush toilet was spoiling our lives. In discussing the politics of shit, we were examining the advantages of an ecological dry toilet, designed by a friend. It was fantastic, not only because it helped you to dispose responsibly of your own shit, radically canceling out a very dirty shitwork, but also disconnected your stomach from any public or private centralized bureaucracy. Because of the extended requests for dry toilets, we organized intensive five-day courses through which all kinds of people learned everything about that trade. At the end of every course, we gave to every participant a magnificent diploma, with golden letters, recognizing them as ‘experts in alternative sanitation, with specialization in dry toilets’. This approach helped implement the construction of 100,000 dry toilets in Oaxaca, Mexico. Knowing about these courses, the TV station asked us if they could be present for the last day of one of them, to interview some of the participants. We saw later, on TV, a conversation between two of them:

“I don’t understand this world... I am an architect. I have been unable to find a job since I graduated, three years ago, after 20 years of studies. And now, after only five days of enjoying myself in this fascinating workshop, I have three very good job proposals, in a very dignified position, and my family is telling me: ‘You finally learned something really useful!’”

I can very well imagine that a Gandhi may organize today a massive and public burning of those diplomas, as Gandhi himself did with British clothes. I can imagine the impact of such massive mobilization, how much the social fabric would change with that simple act. But we don’t have a Gandhi. Furthermore, the majority of the people with diplomas treasure them in such a way, usually in the comfort of their social class and their consumerism, that the people ready to bury their diplomas will be those assumed to have some ‘low quality’.

We still have political campaigns, for example against compulsory education. But we are not using too much time or resources in such campaigns. We are, rather, dedicated to implementing our own initiatives.

RESPONSE FROM: **VIVEK BHANDARI,**
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The conferring of degrees by universities and colleges is an act of institutional consolidation. In the eyes of those receiving the degree, it signifies empowerment and a rise in stature, but most fundamentally, membership in a club marked by privilege and power. The purpose of academic learning is to consolidate a particular sense of order, structure, and discipline in the ways that we, as inhabitants of a chaotic and capricious world, engage with it. Degrees, when viewed this way, mark their recipients as members of an elite who possess a distinct sensibility because they have gone through the rites of passage (such as classes, exams, training, etc.) necessary for membership in the upper echelons of this world. This is because degrees are stamps of approval, markers of distinction, seals of exclusivity.

As a faculty member at a college whose sole purpose is to graduate people, i.e., equip them with a qualification so that they may enter the institutionalized workforce of modern society, I have devoted my life to the accumulation of degrees. And this, I believe, has come at a major price for my peers and myself. Because of my university education, I have found that my intellect has been molded to think in a particular way, and that I am far more closed-minded than I would like to be. My use of 'reason' is rigorous in an academic sense, but limited and disengaged in many others. Over the past few years, I have become conscious, more than ever before, of how much of my academic training I must un-learn if I wish to wrestle meaningfully with the forces swirling around me. This is not because I de-value what I studied, but because I find that my education has made me narrow-minded and insensitive to those standpoints at odds with mine. And this is also true for many of us at Hampshire College (an 'alternative' liberal arts college in the US), where the act of learning collaboratively, through dialogue, is taken very seriously. The biggest stumbling block that we encounter at Hampshire is the result of a profound, deeply troubling, contradiction at the heart of the institutional space we inhabit: Hampshire finds that on most questions of pedagogy and learning, it's position is fundamentally at odds with its priorities as a profit-generating, degree-granting institution committed to producing citizens willing to serve God and nation.

What is the reason for this contradiction, and why is the inherent potential for human understanding and cultural openness that lies at the heart of a meaningful college education substantially undermined? The explanation, I think, stems from two interrelated forces.

The first derives from the function of the university as the institutional repository of learning in modern society. As a quick glance backwards at the history of the university and its ties to cultures of imperialism, rapacious capitalism, and class privilege demonstrates, the packaging of knowledge along disciplines and departments is based on a simplistic conceit: that the university must produce degree-holders who are able to make a smooth entry into the professions and enterprises sustained by institutions of the modern state and private capital. Simply put, one has had to get a degree in particular subjects (which are based on a pre-conceived way of seeing order in the world) to be able to make it in one's guild, profession and government. Even though universities have been cradles of some valuable research, their most lasting social contribution has been to mould the minds of young men and women to conform to societal norms, and by implication, to accept political authority.

The 19th century emergence of European nation-states, structured as modern societies nurtured by the engines of industrial capitalism and/or colonialism, owes an invaluable debt to universities that churned out the elites necessary for sustaining the twin enterprises of empire and nation (and indeed 'nation-building' in the colonies where 'nations' had not yet been imagined). The disciplines and departments that we take for granted today, such as medicine, engineering, the arts, business, those connected with social and natural science research, and even those courses associated with a polytechnic education — emerged out of this history, and are fundamentally geared towards sustaining a particular view of the world, in which the Enlightenment truths of alienated production, bureaucratic rationality, secular progress, and the associated practices of science, technology, humanism, development, and management, are held to be sacrosanct. As in the past, social visions at odds with this image of progress continue to be marginalized or attacked by this worldview.

The problem, of course, is that historically, communities for whom the forces of imperialism and nationalism are unacceptable have resisted the reordering of their world. For many, the conferring of degrees in fields tainted with hubris of 'colonial forms of knowledge' is simply not acceptable because the exploitative practices associated with them continue unabated, and if anything, are proliferating in the age of 'globalization'.

The second reason for why universities fail to provide a space for meaningful human understanding of the kind that transforms society for the better derives from its inherent elitism, shaped largely by the co-optation of academia by both the state and profit-driven capitalism. Whichever way we look at them, college

and university educations are considered desirable because they are stepping-stones to monetary success, professional stability, political empowerment, or a combination of all three. This has meant that today's universities have become gatekeepers of corporate and state power in the most flagrant sense. As granters of degrees, universities act as sieves, filtering out those incapable of conforming to the prevailing expectations of 'hard work' and 'achievement' laid down by corporate and governmental diktat. For places like Hampshire, this makes things particularly difficult because while it tries to sustain a culture of open learning unfettered by disciplines and exams or grades, it eventually has to remain a 'degree-granting institution' and play by the rules of the 'higher education industry'. Degrees are markers of privilege, and for Hampshire to be taken seriously, it must conform by accepting uncritically the standardizing, disciplining mechanisms of the academic community at large.

I entered academia with the sanguine belief that universities are places where people learn and create collaboratively to enhance what they know about the world, so that they are able to bequeath a better world to future generations. I felt, quite deeply, that as one acquires a deeper understanding of the world by studying at a university with all of its resources, one became better equipped to take on the challenges facing the earth. As I see things now, I am convinced that the institutional expectations and practices that characterize the modern, 'industrial' university have done little to tap its emancipatory potential. Indeed, as one looks closer at the role of the university as a degree-granting institution (and therefore, status-quo-ist defender of the power structures that locate us in the world and seek to emasculate creativity, originality, and dissent), one can't but help conjuring-up ghosts of its colonial past. More pertinently for those of us in India, I feel strongly that the stress, in development debates and NGO circles about equipping people with educational degrees in order to empower them is enormously short-sighted, mainly because such an emphasis does little to alter the larger governmental and corporate apparatus that is weighed heavily in favor of those already in positions of authority. Hampshire College, located in the heartland of global capitalism and militarism, doesn't award grades or conduct exams; I would lose no sleep if it stopped granting degrees in favor of creating more open learning spaces.

Suppose we begin by simply asking: What does a woman know? Traditional courses do not begin there. They begin not with the student's knowledge but with the teacher's knowledge. The courses are about the culture's questions, questions fished out of the 'mainstream' of the disciplines. If the student is female, her questions may differ from the culture's questions, since women, paddling in the bywaters of the culture, have had little to do with positing the questions or designing the agendas of the disciplines. Indeed, although 19th and 20th century feminists have sought access to education as a means of liberation, "this access to a male dominated culture may equally be felt to bring with it alienation, repression, division — a silencing of the 'feminine', a loss of women's inheritance" (Jacobus, 1979). Most women students do not expect colleges to honor their concerns...

The women we interviewed nearly always named out-of-school experiences as their most powerful learning experiences. The mothers usually named childbearing or child rearing. The kind of knowledge that is used in child rearing is typical of the kind of knowledge women value and schools do not. Much of it comes not from words but from action and observation, and much of it has never been translated into words, only into actions. As a single parent of nine children said, "There are things I have up here [taps her temple] that I can't put down on paper. I know I use a lot of it in my daily life, like in trying to help my children."

This kind of knowledge does not necessary lead to general propositions. Good mothering requires an adaptive responding to constantly changing phenomena; it is tuned to the concrete and particular. A response that works with a particular child at a particular moment may not work with a different child or with the same child at a different moment. Mothers expect change, and "change requires a kind of learning in which what one learns cannot be applied exactly, and often not even by analogy, to a new situation" (Ruddick 1980). In this sense, 'maternal thinking' differs from scientific thinking, which considers an experimental result to be real — a fact — only if it can be replicated... Many of the women we interviewed — mothers or not —remarked upon the discrepancy between the kind of thinking required in school and the kind required in dealing with people.

- M. F. Belenky, et al.,
Women's Ways of Knowing, 1997 ed.

RESPONSE FROM: **WISIT WANGWINYOO,**
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My life is the starting point of saying no! I refused education degrees when I was nineteen years old. That time, I refused both the school system and my family.

Trusting in Your Heart

One sentence can have an effect on you forever. For me, that sentence came from John Holt: "Do things that you like, you will end up doing more of it. Do things that you do not like, and you will end up doing more and more things that you do not like." The words might not be exact, but the meaning is just like this sentence I wrote here. I also remember Thich Nhat Hanh said that he used to be a lazy novice sleeping under the Buddha statue. These sorts of catch words were continuously shaping my life.

What is the meaning of these experiences? I interpret them as working with your lower brain, working with your willing level or life-force level. The basic brain or reptilian brain is the brain of will or inspiration. If you have inspiration, you will have the power to accomplish what you desire to do. My life was nearly always caught up with something great, inspiring and meaningful. So I always put the whole of myself into it with total charge of energy. For me, that is the best way to really learn something.

Some academics would think that because I never was educated by any institutions, I would be without discipline. I think that, in some way, I have developed real discipline, which is more rigorous than any discipline any universities could provide. I started to believe in the strength of my basic brain. That I will learn through doing something repeatedly, mindfully and by really observing for a long time. This is the discipline of Goethe's science and Buddhist practice. When you are working on something and enjoying the process of doing it more than expecting results; then you will be happy. Living more in alpha wave of your brain, you are not caught up in the negative power of conflicting emotions. Your life becomes more fruitful. You move away from the unbalanced life of this century, that people tend to work with their head more than heart and body.

Why did I refuse degrees? It all depends on how you see knowledge. The old paradigm science will see knowledge as rigid body of information, while the new paradigm will see it as a changing flow of information. The information is always changing,

and the flow always changing. When each paradigm sees knowledge differently, the way to use knowledge and the relationship between us and knowledge will also be different. In the old paradigm, 'to know' means to accumulate, because knowledge is concrete things that can be accumulated. In the new paradigm, knowledge is soft, flowing and changing; so 'to know' is to be always open to learning. You need not accumulate knowledge in the new paradigm. You need to learn how to learn, you need to learn how to acquire new and ever-changing information in the world of change.

The human being is the most efficient machine to learn and relearn all the time. If you have inspiration, and the strength of habit to learn, and peaceful relationships towards other human beings, and flexibility and creativity in your thought or thinking system, then that is all that is needed to be a superb learning machine. But actually, the human being is far more advanced than any machines or computers on earth!

Apart from searching individually for the ideal life, I also searched for the ideal way of community. Trying to match principles with real life is a real education. The dances between ideas and realities, I really have had to go through them all. Then I dove deeper and deeper into the layers of realities, where the connections between things are hidden; that is where real understanding comes. My thoughts became more flexible, creative and co-creative.

These searches were not done in a vacuum. I have always lived my life in communities, always sharing things: home, time, effort, visions and other things. Always working through the conflicting desires of many people, trying to resolve, or combining diverse ideas, so as to please everyone. And I would learn a lot through that process. This is how I developed the tool of dialogue — not only by reading a lot of books on this subject matter. But by really putting my life into it for a long time — a real investment. This is not just science or dry knowledge, but a living knowledge and also an art. It involves all tacit knowledge to engage my body and heart as much as my head, and maybe my own soul. So this is the journey of my spirit.

Our Community Is Living Together Beyond Degrees

We see Kwan Muang Institute as a community for promoting a network of this brave new world called an 'evolving society'. People come and stay with us. We are not rich, but we care for people and we help provide any resources as much as possible to help them stand on their feet. One of our core values emphasizes self-organization. So our institute expands in a chaotic way.

We do not see education degrees as important. We are interested in the real capabilities or assets of that person. I, myself, do not remember who finished from what. I do not even ask them when we first meet. Sometimes, I may be interested in that kind of reference, because sometimes it helps me to understand their background or sub-culture. But apart from that, I do not care.

It's very important to see people freshly each time you meet them, even though you may have known them for some years. The way our perception works is that what we see tends to be what we remember we saw. We are very much caught up with the past interpretations of past experiences. It was not objective reality and it could never be objective reality. Those past interpretations will determine or prescribe what we see and how we see the world. So those past interpretations will become our world.

If we see the world freshly, every day, every moment, we will open up the chance to see the world differently, to see people differently. You know people are changing all the time, our world or worlds are changing all the time. Why are we caught up in one narrow world of the interpretations of the past?

If you believe in community, equality, and non-violence, then you need dialogue as a tool to go for it.

How Does Knowledge from Dialogues Compare with Degree Knowledge?
Thoughts, when frozen, are limited and usually will cause a lot of problems. Degree knowledge is a kind of frozen thought.

In a book in which world famous scientists have a dialogue with the Dalai Lama, one of the neuroscientists said that half of the knowledge she presented in that dialogue, in three years time will be proven wrong. The wonderful thing is that she did not know which half. What does this story mean? Real knowledge is living, so it is changing, transforming, and connecting to new things all the time.

The way we study in university has been limited mostly to this kind of frozen knowledge. And the scientists who dialogued with the Dalai Lama said that most of the knowledge that people study in university has been outdated for about 20-30 years. So, by the time one finishes schooling, his/her knowledge is useless.

The knowledge from dialogue, on the other hand, is not caught up in any institutions. It is living knowledge from life, from experiences here and now, so it will be appropriate for the time of use.



Another attraction of dialogue: When you co-create a circle where people listen to one another without judgment, they really absorb deeply what others have been saying. They create together a container for a diversity of living thoughts. That great mixer will help co-create collective intelligence, which is a higher level than any individual can create. This is the evolution of the human mind — spiritual development, in the true sense of the word.

This kind of knowledge will be living knowledge (in the present time, not out-of-date) and contextual knowledge (appropriate for the place and culture of people who participate). Lastly, it will be knowledge in evolution, which will help humankind to fulfill the task of noble spiritual evolution.

Portfolios as Alternative Assessments

"Any evaluation strategies that try to rank or rate people's effort will be met with resistance. I believe this is human nature. People are not inclined to accept the accurateness, reliability, validity or credibility of such strategies. People commit to learning and personal improvement based on their successful experiences, not an awareness of their degree of failure. Success breeds success. Traditional thinking used to construct standards-based evaluation systems, which focus their strategies on degrees of failure against prescribed levels of success. Learners are ranked and rated on scales that denote their degree of not measuring up. Entire school systems are compared in the same fashion. This type of evaluation focuses on the extent of losers in the system.

Alternatively, assessment strategies need to build on the experiences and abilities of learners... A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of a student's personal self and a student's achievement or growth characterized by strong vision of content, skills and processes addressed, built on student selection of work going in and referenced to criteria. Portfolios may demonstrate a wide range of student work. Learners should control the selection of portfolio content and material. Unlike standardized tests, portfolios are direct indicators of a student's learning experiences. Portfolios allow teachers and parents to share real displays of a student's performance without interpretation of test scores. Portfolios provide a natural medium for teacher-pupil discussions and the customization of individual learning experiences and goals.

The materials found in a portfolio may be wide and varied according to the purpose of, and audience for the portfolio. Items may be static information and archives, speech, career development illustrations, QuickTime media, essays, surveys, outlines, notes, recognition, masks, collections, self-evaluations, certificates, debates, reports, research, maps, photos, letters, tests, books, paintings, drama, news, statistics, murals, pamphlets, mock activities, travel, interviews, short and long-term goals, novels, presentations, seminars, games, journal entries, scales, budgets, electronic media, experiments, profiles, improvement studies, internships, work experience, simulations, slide shows, personal and professional philosophies, psychological profiles, resumes, drawings, opinion, poetry, matrices, reflective summaries, songs,

improvement tools and techniques, self-assessment profiles, rubrics, formative and summative assessments, and more.

I have often said that a portfolio is at the heart of a learner's demonstration, documentation and defense of their learning and **ability**; however, the portfolio is/can be much more. The portfolio, for the life long learner, can be used for personal visioning and philosophies, for taking inventory of personal /career assets, for personal/career goal setting, for demonstrating growth and learning, for career planning, for employment applications, for employment growth conferences, for employment tenure and advancement, for job transfer or promotion, for peer review or collaboration, for self-assessments, for project management, for defining capacities and responsibilities, and for career initiatives...

I would suggest developing several varieties of a personal portfolio, modifying and presenting a portfolio according to the particular need(s). My portfolio of consulting capacities and work is uniquely different than my professional teaching portfolio. Students will develop particular aspects of their portfolios based on what is important to them, their unique knowledge and their unique skills...

There have been some generalities from my experiences working with high school age youth. These learners often choose to display components in their portfolios that are associated with family history and personal demographics, cultural background, home community, school community, personal values and beliefs, career aspirations, academic demonstrations, experiences, projects, community service and volunteer organization work, employment or work experiences, travel experience, demonstration of intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal (Howard Gardner), leadership and teamwork experience, academic records, recommendations, personal accomplishments, recognition, awards, certificates, honors, leisure activities, hobbies, interests, wellness, athletics abilities and more.

- Todd Bergman,
"Global Networking for the Self-Directed Learner in the Digital Age,"
<toddb@mehs.us>

RESPONSE FROM: **YULIYA FILIPPOVSKA**, UKRAINE

<julfil@mail.ru>

I've been thinking a lot and I say that I will 100% join the group, which says NO! to people who value certificates and degrees more than a person him/herself, rather than NO! to all the certificates or degrees. It all depends on how people use them, what value they attribute to them vs. to people(!)

There is a culture in Ukraine to put all the certificates and diplomas on the wall, so that everybody can see, appreciate and respect the person. It's awful indeed to see when people boast with the certificates. They are for lazy people who prefer the papers telling more about the person than the person him/herself.

My colleagues don't understand me when I lock the certificates from the trainings in the closet. I don't understand myself why I still keep them in the closet and don't throw them away. This is kind of a backup and, thus, it's dangerous, for it limits the person and even indicate weakness in a way.

As I mentioned, there is a tradition in the company to put certificates on the wall, and most of the employees do it. But I refused to play this game in the first days of my work. I remember I entered a room where marketing people worked and approached a young lady to talk about some issues at hand. She was sitting at the table in the corner near the window and every space of the 3.5-meter long wall was filled with certificates. This woman was actually lost against a colorful background of these certificates. And immediately, I felt myself to be very small.

I remember a story about Hitler. His door handle was at a height of two meters. The idea was that every person entering the room should right away feel smaller than even a door handle of Hitler, let alone the leader himself.

I'm not drawing a parallel between the lady and Hitler, I draw the parallel between my feelings and the feelings of the people entering Hitler's room. It was disgusting, and I said to myself that I would never ever put any paper on the wall. What's important for me is that other people look at my eyes, talk to me, share some thoughts, be open and sincere. That's the best certificate for me.

I wanted to share this interesting data from research by Mr. Eichinger, Mr. Lombardo and David Ulrich (from Lominger Ltd. company):

100 things HR managers should know

Statement: What is the best selection variable for predicting the future long-term success of campus hires?

- A. All grades.
- B. Grades in major.
- C. Grades in all job-related courses.
- D. Extracurricular activities like sports participation, clubs, sorority/ fraternity participation, leadership positions.
- E. Scores on school entrance exams plus all grades.

Research-based [solid] answer: D. Extracurricular activities like sports participation, clubs, sorority/fraternity participation, leadership positions.

Discussion: Research that explored five different aspects of college life that might relate to later business success - level of education, grades, the quality of the undergraduate institution, major field of study, and extracurricular activities - revealed: Grades related specifically to intellectual ability and motivation to do quality work; the better-quality schools seemed to produce nonconformity, which often translates into leadership abilities; humanities and social science majors had the best overall performance, with particularly good interpersonal skills, and engineers and math and science majors lacked many important managerial skills. But most studies point to a variety of extracurricular studies as being the most predictive of success.

Major takeaways:

1. When evaluating campus candidates, grades are just the starting point. Given two students with equal grades and the same courses, select the one who has had the most variety of out-of-the-classroom experiences along the way.
2. Look for patterns of extracurricular activity: Did the candidate do things that required stretch learning and new skills? Did the candidate take personal initiative in some of the extracurricular activities? What roles did the candidate play in the extracurricular activities? What relationships did the candidate engender in the activities? What did the candidate learn from the activities?

RESPONSE FROM: **CHITTARANJAN KAUL, INDIA**

<chittaranjan.kaul@gmail.com>

Throughout my adult life (though not, regrettably, my student days), I have heard people complain about how worthless diplomas are as a hiring-decision aid. I have also seen the same people then use the diplomas as their sole, or major, recruiting criterion. In this dialogue, a number of people have outlined their journey away from that straitjacket, but they are undoubtedly a small minority.

As a philosopher I once admired said, “Contradictions don’t exist.” If you find them, it is time to check your assumptions. Several, often unexamined, underlie the widespread reliance on diplomas:

Assumption 1. I know clearly what the reason for the existence of my organization is. Therefore, I know what my team needs to do. Therefore, I know what skills I am looking for in a new hire.

Assumption 2. These skills can be quantified, measured and compared to produce a ranking.

Assumption 3. A ranking made today will not change in the future, in response to events either external or internal to the human being.

Assumption 4. There exist diplomas which quantify and measure the skills I am looking for.

Assumption 5. I have no time to develop other means to ensure I am hiring the right person. As long as assumption 4 works, it makes sense for me to focus my efforts elsewhere.

Assumption 6. Diploma-granting institutions, especially the ones I hire from, are world-renowned (at least in my town). Institutions don’t gain widespread respect unless they produce something that is valued by people at large.

Assumption 7. As a hirer, and possibly a manager, my primary concern is whether the person hired can do the job assigned to him. What happens to his connections with himself and the rest of the world as he works here is of little importance to me. Therefore, I do not care if the diploma tests and certifies a relatively narrow range of skills (as identified in assumptions 1 and 2).

If these assumptions are true, then using a diploma as the filter for hiring is not only sensible, it is the best possible practice. Unfortunately, most fail to be valid in the large majority of cases.

Assumption 1. I know clearly what the reason for the existence of my organization is. Therefore, I know what my team needs to do. Therefore, I know what skills I am looking for in a new hire. Most real people (as opposed to the mythical corporate citizen) working in organizations have never considered or, at best, have forgotten, why the organization exists. In a ten-person, socially driven organization there is still some connection with the founding vision, as it is in a ten-person commercially driven organization, but as the size grows, the mental fog about purpose deepens.

If I can only describe my goals as reaching a certain ROA or a certain size, it is hard for me to identify the skills that the organization will demand of its people.

I have been amazed how often managers have found it difficult to sharply identify even the skills they look for in their existing employees, much less new ones. Gobbledegook like ‘aggressive’, or ‘communication skills’, or ‘analytical’, or ‘sensitive’ are no substitute for a clear understanding of what specific things an employee needs to do well in their particular environment. Diploma-granting institutions, equally, most often certify the gobbledegook skills, not those which might lead to a genuine understanding of the work-context. Immediately, you see one reason why diplomas are so popular. They help managers out of having to define their circumstance with clarity.

Assumption 2. These skills can be quantified, measured and compared to produce a ranking. A moment’s reflection will show that the really important work skills are often difficult to measure, though people try. The problem with this is not only that you may make poor or unwarranted decisions about the effectiveness of a person for your organization. Perhaps the worse result is that people systematically ignore consideration of those skills that they find difficult to measure. And those are the important ones.

Assumption 3. A ranking made today will not change in the future, in response to events either external or internal to the human being.

Intellectually, most people will accept the possibility of change. Yet the assumption that current rankings will not really change is pervasive in the way we actually make our decisions. I suspect this is because all of us, perhaps to varying degrees, are afraid of changing, even though we know that, when confronted by the right (wrong) set of circumstances, we find it in ourselves to change, perhaps dramatically.

The effect of this assumption is perverse. We take the current rankings and make our hiring decisions. In the process, we neglect to ask who might respond to

change better, and thereby change the rankings, in the future. Not only may the rankings be meaningless, because of the assumption 1 discussion above, but we may also invite into the organization people who have a deep interest in ensuring that it does not respond to change flexibly. No wonder the great majority of organizations do not last long. They have an in-built mechanism to generate sclerosis.

Assumption 4. There exist diplomas which quantify and measure the skills I am looking for.

While few institutions exist that deliver a diploma that might certify real skills needed in a job, many people believe that it is not a necessity. I have met a lot of organizational leaders who believe that they want their hires to have a diploma, but that the skills required will be developed on-the-job.

Why, then, the desire for the diploma? These managers seem to believe that the diploma-granting institutions do a good job of filtering, and that the fact that a new hire comes with the diploma testifies to his learning skills. It thus saves the organization a lot of trawling, and enables them to work only with the best.

In practice, of course, hardly any diploma testifies to the candidate's learning skills. They measure different things, depending on the kind of institution, but few of them are correlated to being effective in the world. What we have is a highly inefficient process, where students learn the things they don't need and employers hire the people they don't know and both hope that they will bridge the gap without too much heartbreak.

Would I support a diploma that did deliver learning skills? Is it possible to design one which hasn't had creativity squeezed out of it by the imperative of standardization? Can it foster a greater degree of understanding between the organization and the learner? Can it avoid the pitfalls of assumptions 2 and 3?

I believe it can be done. Not as completely as a purist would demand, but enough that it would reduce the chances of heartbreak. I would support such a diploma.

Assumption 5. I have no time to develop other means to ensure I am hiring the right person. As long as assumption 4 works, it makes sense for me to focus my efforts elsewhere.

Even if the first four assumptions were valid, changes in the environment could change that very quickly. A leader who doesn't have the time to continually track what kind of a person is joining the organization, is soon likely to find that whatever it is that occupies his attention has ceased to be critical.

Organisational leaders need to understand that tracking the quality of their hiring is not only about validating their hiring process. It is about ensuring that the hiring process evolves to remain aligned with the strategic direction of the organization. Therefore, if the diplomas are being used to reduce the amount of attention a leader pays to this aspect, that is probably a good enough reason on its own to outlaw diplomas.

Assumption 6. Diploma-granting institutions, especially the ones I hire from, are world-renowned (at least in my town). Institutions don't gain widespread respect unless they produce something that is valued by people at large.

It may well be that the institution produces what people at large want. Does it also produce what I want?

We wouldn't hire a heart surgeon from the world's best management school. And many of the world's best known institutions have objectives narrowly enough defined that their products are useful only in very limited circumstances. The ability to calculate rapidly, for instance, may mean the difference between getting into a prestigious professional school or not. And once you get in, a diploma is more or less assured in the best institutions. This may be excellent for a book-keeping job. Is that the ability I am looking for in my new hire?

Assumption 7. As a hirer, and possibly a manager, my primary concern is whether the person hired can do the job assigned to him. What happens to his connections with himself and the rest of the world as he works here is of little importance to me. Therefore, I do not care if the diploma tests and certifies a relatively narrow range of skills (as identified in assumptions 1 and 2).

There is practically no diploma around today which certifies the emotional, social and spiritual endowments of a candidate.

Yet organizations are composed of real human beings and they interact with real human beings outside of themselves. They require their members to have the ability to relate to others, to introspect, to continuously discover the nature of their being and relate it to their purpose in the organization. When that does not happen, or is not encouraged, alienation of the individual from the purpose of the organization is inevitable. We know that this is a common occurrence today.

If diplomas do not point up candidates who possess these skills, critical for the individual to succeed in the organization and the organization to succeed as a result of his efforts, they must have limited value. Clearly, the organization needs to

work with the candidate to foster these skills. If so, why bother with the diploma in the first place?

Overall, I feel that there are significant parts of the hiring process that need to be so specific to the organization that no standardized diploma can hope to fill in. There are other aspects that a sensibly designed diploma might attest to but, unfortunately, very few such exist.

Over nearly a quarter of a century, I have worked in a multinational with an intense and short term bottom line orientation, as well as with family-owned firms, not-for-profit organisations, and several Indian corporations as an advisor. Everywhere, my effort has been to understand the ways in which organizations and human beings learn and the obstacles that prevent learning from taking place. I have also run a residential school in an effort to better understand the learning dynamics among children.

My work suggests to me that there are few degrees anywhere which address the true learning needs of human beings. These include developing a sense of connectedness with and respect for the world around oneself, an ability to inquire deeply and to the end of a question, and the skills of critical thinking and effective communication. We seem to be stuck in an academic world which has abdicated the responsibility to address these issues. I hope that this dialogue will point a way to our snapping out of this mental fog.



I agree that degrees and certificates are not a measure of a person's worth. Sometimes they over-estimate, and sometimes they under-estimate. I think what really qualifies a person is his/her learn-ability: the ability of a person to respond to changes in their environment in the most productive fashion. By productive, I include the ability of the person to make necessary shifts in their knowledge, skills and attitudes that harmonize with a global reality.

Having been trained does not mean that there has been an end to learning. Training is indicative of your capacity at that time, but in no way indicates that you are geared to handle what happens in the future. To be able to deal with new things (both material and spiritual) a person will need to have the ability to process information, to recognize and let go of what is redundant, to lend his/her personal interpretation and to check its general application, to renew themselves continuously to keep up with their present. If this does not exist, no amount of degrees can assure performance. The output of a person is his inclination to express who he is and what he knows/thinks. With the same old knowledge, I have seen people effectively move, and some stay stuck. Training is no predictor of this. It is the essential thinking and exposure of the person that determines their approach to their task. Learn-ability is higher with people who are sensitive, have courage, have integrity, and who use reason. Training does not address these areas at all. Teaching in itself needs to be a subversive activity, if it has to lead change and growth. Knowledge can be acquired, skills can be learned, but a person's attitude, and passion for their job are inherent, and therefore most valuable.

Degrees, diplomas, certificates, none of them hold any assurance of quality of performance or contribution, and are basically redundant. Consequently, I feel that laws related to hiring by qualifications should be extinguished from the system, and free hiring policies should be advocated. Employers should have the freedom to plan their recruitments autonomously; after all, their customers will be the measure of their effectiveness.

- **Upasana, Bombay Cambridge Gurukul**, Mumbai, India
<hrd@bcgschools.org>

What kinds of learners are you looking for in your work or organization?

Lifelong learners -

Listen: They take heed of those who can extend their knowledge and skills and of their own inner voice which says develop your potential.

Evolve: They climb the learning ladder which leads from ignorance to knowledge and eventually to understanding and wisdom.

Adapt: They modify their thinking, their behavior and their mindset to cope easily with the changing world in which they live.

Reciprocate: They recognize their own creative power to change their world through learning and participation in the community in which they live.

Network: They look outwards to the world and gather strength by sharing their learning and its results with others in the wider international community.

Enjoy: They enliven their own learning and that of others through their enthusiasm and their determination to make learning fun.

Reflect: They learn from the past, make sense of the present and contemplate the future through learning.

Support: They stimulate others and act as empathetic mentors and guides in their voyage of self-discovery through learning.

- Norman Longworth,
Making Lifelong Learning Work, 1999

I personally agree with your credential position below but bet it will be a tough nut to crack. I always thought we should possess passports (or something like that) as opposed to credentials that share our experiences, learning and identify interests. The notion of a lifelong personal learning journey is something I don't think we give enough thought to. It's one of our values and I'm trying to explore what this looks like for me and others.

- **Tracy Boyer, Envision Halifax, Canada**
<info@envisionhalifax.ca>



Are you aware of the fact that the European Curriculum Vitae (www.cedefop.org) and the European Language Pass are constructed around this very open notion of work, learning and achievements? You may have a closer look.

- **Christine M. Merkel, UNESCO, Germany**
<merkel@unesco.de>

*RESPONSE FROM: **ROBIN BECK,**
DRUG POLICY ALLIANCE, USA*

<rbeck@drugpolicy.org>

I agree that there needs to be a drastic shift from the current hiring/promotion practice of privileging degrees and certificates over other kinds of experience. I do think that we need to challenge an unjust system.

The concern I have is centered around the idea that we should actually ignore degrees and certificates in hiring and promotion. To me, not asking for a degree as a qualification is very different from refusing to consider one. I would wholeheartedly support a commitment to stop asking for or requiring degrees for hiring and promotions. I think that the core of the injustices we see around degrees and certificates comes from people holding them above other qualifications. If we stopped asking for degrees, and committed ourselves not to privilege them over other experiences, I think that would be a pretty remarkable shift away from the status quo.

In the current dominant system, a degree or certificate is usually thought of by an employer as more than one of many experiences which can shape a person's ability to do a particular job. They are usually taken to be something more like prerequisites. There is no good reason for this and I believe that the problems we see in how degrees and certificates are considered in the hiring and promotion process stem from people thinking of them as somehow more important than other kinds of experience.

In committing not to privilege, rather than to completely ignore the experience of getting a degree or certificate, we would eliminate what I see as the basis for the injustices in our current system. Further, and importantly, we would do away with the very notion that some experiences are inherently and in all cases more important than others. I believe that we need to honor as big a range of experience as possible and we can do a lot to remove injustice without limiting this range. I think that a better option than committing to a blanket rule is to commit to consider every aspect of person's experience, including but not privileging any degrees or certificates, when making decisions about hiring and promotion.

I don't think the Drug Policy Alliance should require or even ask for degrees or certificates in the hiring process. I do, however, think that someone's experience getting a degree or certificate could be relevant in the hiring process. A very

important issue in every job interview at DPA is to learn about why the candidate wants to work for us. Working for DPA means doing a lot of things that our dominant culture asks us to reject (making less money than one could, working long hours, devoting one's heart to the work, enduring ridicule for supporting politically unpopular ideas, doing menial tasks, helping others in the organization in addition to doing one's 'own job,' etc.). Each person who wants to do all of these things must have some sort of passion for the work. In an interview, we try to learn where this passion comes from, why that person feels so strongly, why compassion and justice are so important to them.

For some people, like me, explaining this passion will need to include discussing the experience of getting a degree or certificate.

I went to college because I was in love with scholarship. I wanted to devote my life to it. I loved the classroom, I loved science, I loved reading, I loved mathematics. I thought that the pursuit of truth through study was the greatest life a person could lead. My journey through the academic world transformed my life and, in the end, convinced me that I did not want to be a scholar and that the path that fit me best was one of activism and doing all that I could to help others. It was through the academic experience, however, that I came to understand this about myself. In studying the sciences, and in reading philosophy, I came to see the violence inherent in the authority and privilege we give to 'experts' and to scientific 'laws'. I came to realize that I wanted to change this, that I wanted to live a different life.

So, though I have a degree from one of those elite universities where far too many people are obsessed with artificial 'qualifications' in the form of degrees and certificates, I also very much agree with the sentiments being expressed about how thinking of these degrees as somehow representative of a person's abilities is misguided and about the importance of taking a more holistic approach to understanding a person's learning process, skills, and experience.

But what scares me about the proposal to say no to certification and degrees is that I don't know that anyone could get a good picture of who I am and where I am coming from without understanding and hearing about my experience in scholarship and the academic world. I do not think that my degree makes me more qualified for a job or deserving of a promotion, but I do think that the experience of getting it is a part of who I am. I worry that in ignoring it, one would be ignoring one of the most formative and transformative experiences in my life.

I am not suggesting that we continue to use degrees as a qualification in their own right, but rather that we simply treat them as something worth discussing with person in question. What is the harm in asking a candidate for a job questions like: “Tell me about your experience getting this degree. What was it like? How has it changed you? How do you feel about degrees as qualifications? Why did you want a degree? How does it relate to rest of your life?” and so on. It seems like the conversations that could come out of these questions could be very illuminating, but only if we are willing to consider degrees in hiring.

Some people do have profound and amazing experiences in the process of getting a degree and we shouldn't rush to discount the wonderful and transformative things that can and do happen in classrooms. While we typically overvalue these things in our process, we should make sure not to completely ignore them. I suspect that the concern driving this discussion is that we all recognize that there isn't one path that is best for everyone. I certainly believe this. In recognizing this, however, I hope that we don't lose sight of the importance and meaning that academic pursuits can have for some people. We even need to acknowledge that for some people it very well may be the path that fits them best.

Finally, I think we should notice that ‘Degrees and Certificates’ is a pretty broad category. Do you want people to refuse to consider all degrees and certificates or just a certain type? I ask because I feel like the discussion thus far is lacking any attention to the diversity of programs, groups, and institutions that confer such things. Does this include theological certifications? What about a degree conferred by home-schooling parents upon their own children? Does it include the degrees and certificates in holistic health practices that are issued by a lot of alternative institutions in the area where I grew up? Are we ignoring titles and certificates in non-academic practices like certifications by guilds or trade associations for mastery of a particular skill or practice?

Again, I'm not trying to say that any of these things, on their own, should serve as a qualification, but rather that we should not shy away from recognizing them and using them as the starting point of a conversation. I bring up these examples because I think that there are a lot of different ways that people earn recognition for their efforts, and that there are many degrees and certificates that do not fit the mainstream academic mold.

APPRECIATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Human systems grow towards what they persistently ask questions about.

- David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

Appreciative Interview questions are positive questions around affirmative topics. In asking and answering them, we focus together on what has life, meaning and value — for us personally and for our organization/work.

Unlike certificates and degrees, which don't tell us really anything much about a person, an appreciative interview elicits stories, experiences and feelings. We ask open questions, through which we hope to learn something surprising and wonderful about the person we are interviewing. The interview is grounded in positive assumptions and a relationship is built from this foundation. We get the opportunity to listen deeply to a person, to understand their perspectives and get a sense of who they are. The focus is on positive questions, because these bring out what matters to us in our organization or work: energy, commitment, skills, imagination, creativity, etc.

Below are some sample interview questions that you might begin to use in your interviews:

- Can you share with me one of your most meaningful learning experiences so far?
- What do you like best about yourself?
- Can you share a story about a time when you worked well in a team to accomplish something that mattered to you?
- What have been some of your best experiences with volunteering, community service and/or activism?
- How have you connected with diverse communities? What has been your understanding of them?
- How have you tried to practice _____ (*a major value of your organization, such as peace-making, ecological mindfulness, compassion, creativity, etc.*) in your daily life?
- Can you tell me about a relationship that is important to you?
- What excites you most about this work opportunity? Why do you feel it is right for you at this point in your life?
- What kind of work can you do with your own hands?
- What else can you offer our group?
- What new things are you hoping to learn by working with us?

RESPONSE FROM: **JAN VISSER**,
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In Search of Passion

I am sad because of what we lost in the corruption of life in the academy. I am not opposed to degrees and diplomas *per se* – in fact, I hold a couple myself, which I picked up in passing and about which I have no special feelings, nor am I against the practice of certification when there is good reason for it. Such is the case, I believe, when we want someone to carry out a task and want to be certain that it will be performed up to an agreed standard. Thus, certification gives me comfort when I know that medical personnel assigned to looking after my health; pilots flying aircraft on which I am a passenger; or engineers designing bridges that I will cross, have gone through a process that ascertained that they are competent for the tasks they perform. It also made sense when, at the age of 12, I acquired my first swimming diplomas, giving assurances to my parents that they could let me swim without supervision, or when, years later, I graduated as a physicist. At that stage, much more important than having the degree was obviously the evidence, expressed in publications and letters of reference by senior colleagues, of my accomplishments. That's why I said I picked up degrees in passing. They were not all that important for any practical purpose and hardly ever has any sensible person asked me to show the pieces of paper that testify to my competence.

However, by making the above statement I am not saying that there is only a limited number of ways in which certification can take place or that those ways are beyond discussion. Nor am I endorsing the apparently unassailable monopolies held by some institutions to dictate to the world at large the systems of standards that divide people into hierarchically layered classes, some people being valued more highly than others, based on the mere possession of a piece of paper, the attribution of some grade, or the right to hold a degree. More specifically, I am not claiming that medical personnel certified according to the standards of “western” (I'm using the term for lack of a better one) style medicine is necessarily superior to those serving the wholeness of members of their community in accordance with the knowledge systems and initiation practices of other cultures. I'm also perfectly prepared to walk over wooden bridges across rapid and dangerous streams in rural Africa designed and constructed by local craftspeople whose competence became recognized through community-embedded processes of competency building and certification, based on an apprenticeship model. In fact, when in France, where I now spend part of my life, I inhabit a house whose structural integrity has been maintained over centuries up to this very date through

the ingenuity of locally trained and locally recognized competent, i.e. certified, craftsmen, who hold no paper diplomas to prove it.

What I am against is the *culture* of diplomas, the *culture* of degrees, and the *culture* of certification. By this I mean that I find it a dangerous and abject tendency in our world that the majority of young – and often also older – people subject themselves to the rituals of institutionalized education for the sole or principal reason that they want to acquire a token, in the form of a piece of paper or a couple of letters they can put before or after their name, which they have been told will open doors for them. In the first place, what they have been told is often not true. Those doors don't open that easily or automatically, and when they open people may find themselves doing things that have little connection with what they learnt in order to acquire their particular token. In the second, and more important, place, if it were true that those doors would open, the referred tendency reveals and perpetuates an attitude of servitude. Those motivated by the prospect of acquiring a token to open a door make themselves dependent on existing conditions without contributing, or even attempting to contribute, to changing those conditions. They aspire to entering the doors constructed by others instead of living a life that refuses to recognize such doors, seeking to build a world without doors.

Certificates, diplomas and degrees are frequently seen as the end result of a finite learning process. They are not. Learning is not finite and anything that creates that impression takes away from the beauty and greatness of what it means to be learning. Those who think they learn because they have put themselves on the road to acquiring a particular token are misguided. They may still learn, though, if, at the same time, they are willing to listen to themselves. Then, if indeed they learn, it will be because of other reasons. Those reasons will have to do with passion, not with certificates or degrees. Passion is what drives people forward. It comes from the inside. Passion is what used to propel people to seek the companionship of others in whose presence they could learn. That process, in days long gone by, led to the establishment of schools and academies, gathering places for those eager to build a better world by becoming better themselves in each other's company. Those same gathering places are now at risk of becoming places of misery. They thrive because their survival is based on little more than their capacity to trade education – as a commodity expressed in degrees and diplomas – against money. Students and faculty suffer in equal amounts but in different ways under such circumstances.

Saying no to degrees, certificates and diplomas is as such an insufficient response to what is happening. At stake is no less than the rediscovery of passion and the resurrection of spaces that cherish it.

I would like to respond to the argument that “degrees and certificates are necessary in some very specific technical matters.” I think the argument – even for certification in exceptional circumstances – unravels under scrutiny.

At one time I felt certain that I would rather be operated on by a surgeon who had kept up his certifications rather than one who had let his/hers lapse. And yet, in reality I have never bothered to check the credentials of any of the ‘professional’ people I work with. Rather, I work with people (surgeons, engineers, mechanics, gardeners, farmers, childcare providers and others) on the basis of what impression they make on me during the first few times we meet. I trust my judgment first on this level, and usually that is all I require. I believe most whole people rely on their judgment and commonsense, rather than some authoritarian script.

Furthermore, since this question has interested me for some time, I have talked to many doctors, pilots, and other certified professionals about their work and the process of re-certification which so many of them are under obligation to complete. What they say is rather astonishing. By and large, the professionals that I respect are aware – even contemptuous – of how re-certification processes generate great profits for the huge corporate industry that promotes adult education/institutionalization. “But don’t you learn anything at these conferences?” I’ve asked. The answer: “Nothing more –and far less – than I would have learned if I had had that time for myself and my work.”

Ultimately – and I think rather dangerously – we tend to confuse the possession of a certification with competence.

- **Camy Matthay, Two Degrees Coffeehouse, USA**
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RESPONSE FROM: **PATRICK FARENGA,**
GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING, USA

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1. Many people view the world as a mean place and the quicker we toughen our young to this ‘reality’ the better off they’ll be. That’s why school should be hard: because the world is hard. Most people want to keep schools the way they are; that’s why school systems are so successfully resistant to change. Given all the great writers, research, and humane teaching that have advocated change in school for more than a hundred years across many cultures (India’s Gijubhai Badheka, America’s John Dewey, Britain’s A.S. Neil...) I can only conclude that most people don’t like these ideas, which is why conventional schooling remains mired in its assumptions and empty rituals.

2. Many people view learning as a scarce resource. This resource must be administered by trained professionals, doled out to those who show the most promise for successful treatment, and managed by bureaucrats to assure that only the deserving get rewards for completing school. I assume that most of those people reading this booklet, like me, view learning as an abundant resource. This view entitles us to presume there will be second chances, if not more, to learn whatever it is we need or want to learn whenever we need to do so.

3. Many more eloquent than I have written about the hidden curriculum of schooling, I simply want to note what my mentor, John Holt, often noted about school: most think schools should be about the business of teaching ‘the three R’s: Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic.’ Holt noted there is a fourth R – The Rat Race – that they teach all too well. Three quotes from Holt’s *The Underachieving School* (1968) on this point:

“Instead of developing the intellect, character, and potential of the students in their care, they are using them for their own purposes in a contest inspired by vanity and aimed at winning money and prestige. It is only in theory, today, that educational institutions serve the student; in fact, the real job of a student at any ambitious institution is, by his performance, to enhance the reputation of that institution...”

“I do not think it is in any way an exaggeration to say that many students, particularly the ablest ones, are being as mercilessly exploited by ambitious schools as they are by business and commerce, which use them as consumers and subject them to heavy and destructive psychological pressures... In such



schools, children from the age of 12 or 13 on are very likely to have, after a long day at school, two, three or more hours of homework a night – with more over the weekend. Long before they reach college, many children are putting in a 70-hour week – or more. Children have not worked such long hours since the early and brutal days of the Industrial Revolution.

...School and colleges claim in defense that they are compelled to put heavy pressure on students because of society's need for ever more highly trained men and women, etc., etc. The excuse is, for the most part, untrue and dishonest.

The blunt fact is that educator's chief concern is to be able to say, to college-hunting parents on the one hand, and to employee-hunting executives on the other, that their college is harder to get into, and therefore better, than other colleges, and therefore the one to which the best students should be sent and from which the best employees and graduate students can be drawn.”

Saying no to degrees is something John Holt actively did, by the way. It was not just a theory, but a practice for him. As his business manager, I was under strict orders not to mention where John went to school, what he majored in, etc. Even though he is no longer with us, I try to respect that wish to this day. John would often say something like this about his educational background when an interviewer pressed him: “Everything I learned as an educator, and that I continue to use in my adult life, I learned outside of school.”

FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

<http://www.fairtest.org/>

America's public schools administer more than 100 million standardized exams each year, including IQ, achievement, screening, and readiness tests.

Much of the time and money devoted to testing is misspent. Too many tests are poorly constructed, unreliable, and unevenly administered. Multiple-choice questions cannot measure thinking skills, creativity, the ability to solve real problems, or the social skills we want our children to have. Moreover, many exams are biased racially, culturally, linguistically, and by class and gender.

Unfortunately, use of these flawed tests leads to inaccurate and inappropriate decisions about children's education. Minorities and low-income children are too often excluded from 'gifted and talented' programs and placed in special education or 'mentally retarded' classes, where they do not get a good education. Results of tests given to young children are particularly erroneous.

Not only are individual children harmed, but so is the entire educational system. Tests cores provide little useful information to help improve instruction and students' learning. In pursuit of higher test scores, the curriculum has been narrowed and 'dumbed down' to match the tests. Children learn less.

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students, teachers and schools is fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial. FairTest urges changes in the use of tests. First, mass testing of young children for readiness, placement and promotion must stop. Second, no decision about any child should ever be made primarily on the basis of test scores. Third, tests must be no more than one small part of assessing both students and educational programs. Fourth, valid, comprehensive, unbiased alternatives must be developed. FairTest urges political and educational leaders to support the use of assessment methods that will help improve learning and instruction in our nation's schools.

Personally, I don't make much noise about this, but I do have little use for my degrees and certificates. I have not used my past certificates or degrees as a way to get employed or get other favours from society. 'USA-return' is a certificate that precedes me wherever I go in India. I share a joke among friends that I left America five years ago, but America is not going to leave me for life.

Organisationally, I'm a trustee of Kuvempu Trust, a small rural development organisation in Karnataka. All of our teachers were chosen without considering if they have paper qualifications. Some of them do have certificates, but this was not considered while choosing the teachers. We used our own method of interview, writing, peer group and on-work evaluation to choose our teachers. We would not have been able to build a dedicated team if degrees were a dominant criteria.

- **Shanmuga, Kuvempu Trust**, Karnataka, India
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*RESPONSE FROM: RAVI GULATI,
MANZIL, NEW DELHI, INDIA*

<gulatir@vsnl.net>

Manzil didn't begin as an organization. It was just a logical extension of the life my family desired. And it all happened organically. Two young boys came because they were finding difficulties with their school maths. When they found us helpful, they brought over other friends. Before we knew it, there was a vibrant community of young people treating our home as their home. There was no question of hiring anyone, that is, to pay anyone to be a part of this community. We were never faced with the question of qualifications or no qualifications.

As the community has grown over the last eight years, to about a hundred children and youth, we have been forced to organize some things here as if we were an organization. From the beginning, we encouraged our young friends to share responsibilities, just like in a family, and in return there was no monetary compensation. Anyone interested was welcome, and children would share whatever knowledge or skills they had with each other. We also began to draw volunteers without any effort on our part. They offered their services to 'teach' children, and it was surprising for us when some of them took pains to emphasize how their qualifications made them well-suited for this. For me, the fact that they were taking the trouble to join our 'family' was qualification enough.

Over the years, we have had many volunteers. When we look back, we can clearly see that the most useful amongst them have been people who have cared about what they are doing, and not necessarily those who came equipped for their role here in terms of formal qualifications. We still don't hire any external staff, although we have begun to pay honoraria to young students of ours who have grown with us and have taken on larger roles within the community that preclude them from working elsewhere. Of course, we know these young people much better through themselves than through any qualifications. As it is, the people that we work with are usually quite short of formal qualifications, although they are good learners if they get a chance to experience directly whatever they are learning about. Indeed, most of our maths, English and computer classes are still run by older children with a keen interest in the subject, but without any formal degrees in it.

It goes without saying that we are open to anybody with an ethic that matches ours, whether or not they have any 'qualifications that certify this'. In fact, if there *is* any certificate that vouches for someone's life philosophy, then I surely don't know of it.

*RESPONSE FROM: GURVEEN KAUR,
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This has been a debate that I've been engaged with for long in my life. It started about twenty five years back with my sister and I realizing the worthlessness of degrees that could be bought and did not reflect competence. But while my sister decided not to take her degree – though she did the courses extremely well – I decided to continue studies within the formal system. I studied subjects I liked, worked really hard and with people I thought worth studying under. I was not working for a degree but have no quarrels with it. I have not used my certificates for earning a living. I rarely use my degree but have learnt not to be ashamed of it or apologetic about it.

When we started Centre for Learning - the not-for-profit, voluntary organization in quest of quality education - we initially took trained teachers but it proved to be a disaster. They thought they knew all there was to know – they were trained! – and they wanted the children to fit into theories they had learnt! Most of these teachers had never enjoyed learning, none would pick up a book unless compelled or given some incentive and they were not enthusiastic learners, how then could they communicate the thrill of learning to anyone?! So we stopped looking for trained teachers.

Now we take people based upon an informal chat/interview, which gives us some idea of whether the person will jell with us or not. The clincher is the two-day to weeklong trial. This has worked well for us. It is also true that we've not excluded people who had degrees but did not use it as our screening or selection criteria. We look for people who are open to learning, likely to say let's-do/try-it, let's-see-how-we-can-make-it-possible and not those whose favourite words are "can't, don't, must not, shouldn't" and the people should be passionate about some things in life. We look for people who can love and understand and accept people. For people who are interested in the kind of work we do and share our values. It helps a lot if they also have the skills we are looking for and can communicate well in at least two languages (English and Hindi or Telugu).

Centre for Learning (CFL) itself has no formal recognition. We did try to get recognition a couple of times, since parents of the children feel insecure without it, but because the formal system required us to bribe and change our way of working, we did not pursue it. Despite the fact that all children love the place and most have done well academically, including some of them who had learning

difficulties, we still find parents withdrawing their children because there are no tests, exams and recognized certificates.

In CFL we've tried several experiments. One, we do not use tests and exams as the only or main basis of evaluation. We tried no evaluation but found that even those parents who brought children with learning problems held us accountable to their wish list, without even taking on the responsibility of sending children to us regularly. The children too drifted and did not settle down to pursuing any interest seriously. Then we tried to use a 'report' format and make it more convivial, so evaluation would be less judgmental. In our 'report', we do the following:

1. We assess the student's growth towards independence and competence in learning – not assess what is learnt.
2. We attempt to do a diagnostic report not a judgmental evaluation
3. We try a convivial report that shows how much the student has progressed not how much s/he has failed to achieve.
4. There is a self-evaluation by children above 9 years that is an important part of the report, where they say what they enjoyed the most, found most valuable/interesting or did not like during the period. Which subjects they felt they have progressed or not made progress and why. Also if they felt they have worked as well as they could or could have done more.

One concern I have is that we also need to find better ways to protect ourselves against corruption, distortion or misuse, which is rampant in our system. Certificates, however daft, do put a spoke in the wheels of those who try to use favouritism and/or partiality in selecting people for jobs. Maybe they make cheating a little more difficult.

The only justification for certification is accountability, but the funny thing is that where the student and teacher are sincere, there is no need of certification. If they are not sincere, the diploma or degree has no worth, for they will find a way around it. We need to acknowledge that this is another area that we haven't quite come up with an appropriate solution.

The point is not to give degrees or certification too much importance – and this point has been made by others too – that we should neither study for degrees/diplomas or let them be the measure of one. Neither the brilliant score nor the terrible marks! Also, an honest and critical self-evaluation must be treated as superior to any external exam/degree.

The Danger of Certificates and other Rewards/Praise

'Do this and you'll get that' turns out to be bad news whether our goal is to change behavior or to improve performance, whether we are dealing with children or adults, and regardless of whether the reward is a grade, a dollar, a gold star, a candy bar, or any of the other bribes on which we routinely rely. Even assuming we have no ethical reservations about manipulating other people's behavior to get them to do what we want, the plain truth is that this strategy is likely to backfire. As one psychologist read of the available research, people who are offered rewards tend to choose easier tasks, are less efficient in using the information available to solve novel problems, and tend to be answer-oriented and more illogical in their problem-solving strategies. They seem to work harder and produce more activity, but the activity is of a lower quality, contains more errors, and is more stereotyped and less creative than the work of comparable non-rewarded subjects working on the same problems.

* * *

I join a number of educators in urging that positive comments be offered in private. I do so despite the fact that public praise, sometimes involving elaborate competitive ceremonies and awards, is often justified on the grounds that we are 'recognizing excellence'. Few of us stop to ask what that phrase really means and what our motives really are. *Why* is it important that excellence be recognized?

- If the idea is to let someone know that she has done good work (which presumes that she is unaware of the fact), such feedback can be offered without the trappings of behaviorism.

- If the idea is to convince the person being recognized to keep up the good work, we need to ask, first, whether this is really necessary (did he get this far out of a quest for recognition?) and second, whether offering a reward might actually undermine his motivation.

- If the idea is that other people will be motivated by watching one of their peers get rewarded, there is ample evidence that extrinsic motivators are more likely to demotivate and that losing in a competition (which is what selective 'recognition' often feels like) is even worse.

- If the idea is to clarify and communicate to a wider audience what excellence consists of, this can be done without a lot of hoopla.

Moreover, it ought to be done in a format that is more like a conversation than an announcement.

- If the idea is simply that it would be nice to show someone who did a good job that this has been noticed, there is no need to do so in a way that may stir up others' resentment and possibly even embarrass the person being publicly praised. Private comments, offered so as to promote self-determination and intrinsic motivation, are enough to let people know their work is appreciated. There is no reason to offer these comments from a stage or to weight them down with trophies or certificates.

Consider a situation where a large number of people attending a school, working in an organization, or participating in an event are grateful to someone who has worked hard for the benefit of everyone. If thanking that person in public does not seem particularly objectionable, this may be partly because the process of doing so is democratic. By contrast, in the typical ceremony for 'recognizing excellence', the people in charge have unilaterally selected, at their own discretion and based on their own criteria, some people to recognize over, and in front of, others. It is their power to do so that is ultimately being recognized.

- Alfie Kohn,
*Punished by Rewards:
The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans,
A's, Praise, and Other Bribes, 1993*

This dialogue is wonderful. It inspired me to push this philosophy through City Government. Though it is my own practice in this branch of Government, it is not uniformly practiced.

- **Yiota Ahladas,**
The Center for Community and Neighborhoods, USA
<www.CEDOBurlington.org>

RESPONSE FROM: **HARLEEN KOHLI,**
CENTRE FOR EDUCATION AND VOLUNTARY ACTION (CEVA),
CHANDIGARH, INDIA

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At CEVA, we are nurturing an informal space that some adult and child learners use for fulfilling their learning needs. We have a library, art materials, science equipment (science toys, spirit lamps, thermometers test tubes, lenses, compasses prisms, etc.), craft stuff, waste paper, board games, language, math and science puzzles, etc. Of course, if the thought of certificates comes in, it is only for the children who come everyday and do not go to any other school. The others are women mostly.

I feel women are always grateful for the learning time they can steal away from their day. And that the mindset that values degrees and certificates works against the health and joy of women. The women who have to tear themselves away from CEVA's learning spaces (the market place, residential colonies, parks and *melas*) are those that finally succumb to the pressure from their homes. There, they are told, "What will you **gain** from going to CEVA? They will not give you a certificate that will help you. Maybe it would be better if you could spend time doing a 'course', but you can't because there is no money for that."

Women find that their family will be willing to accommodate and help them at home, so that they can spare the time to go and do a 'course', because there might be promise of more money. Otherwise, they may not help them to 'steal' the time out. There have been many women who have kindled their learning desire and have had to leave very disappointed. Those that stay have to wage a continuing battle. It is tough for us.

Children have to cut short their own little learning projects and DO THEIR HOMEWORK, study for their exams, think about their future. All their time is taken up with this task – tuitions, tests, exams and so on...there is no time to learn!

The world has moved on. We do not need the learning that lies on the pathways to the 'degrees and certificates'. That teaches us many things which are more to do with manipulating one's way through life. Many of us know that we do not need that. But... It is still so difficult for most Indians to get a certificate or degree that the 'struggle' has been seen as somehow 'holy' or important. This obliterates common sense thinking about what we want to do with our lives. We are shut in a mental prison and when we come out of it, for many of us, it seems that the promises were false. There is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I'd like to point out that there are still many practical options that weigh far more than the traditional degree or diploma approach. Opportunities abound at a workshop or farmland, a stones throw from your house or maybe even a few kilometers out of town...

I have recently encountered two such qualified people. One is a dentist, who gave his degree papers to his parents for their satisfaction of him being a medical graduate and then went on to do what was his real passion: 3D modeling environments for gaming. The other did a masters in GeoPhysics and now is a senior copy supervisor in an advertising company. He did the degree to satisfy his parents' wish to have a traditionally qualified son, and then went on to do what he really wanted to do. What a waste of time and money, don't you think?

Shouldn't we be looking for more opportunities, regardless of whether or not we get a degree/diploma, but just because we are passionate about them?

I'd rather look at having re-education workshops for the traditional parent who still believes that that a degree is the only way to make a decent living – even though we have other choices and environments where we can make a decent living. Of course, it goes without saying that we have to expand this free-option environment, so that all parents and school leavers and employers can have an alternate look at job opportunities.

The reason why we fall back on degrees and diplomas is because the psyche of parents in society and of the end-user environments both have to drastically change. So as the catalysts of change, we have to think of approaches that are multi-pronged to bring about this change in attitude.

- **Ranjan De, BridgingGaps**, Chennai, India
<bridginggaps03@yahoo.com>

What we are trying to do in Unitierra (the group I work in) is to open a space of learning for those that don't fit or don't want to fit in 'regular' schools or educational systems. If school and degrees are falling down or not, it is not something that matters at all. The important thing for us, is to have adequate spaces for those that decide to walk away from the 'common' way of learning. At the end, the most important recognition of what you do is at the social level, with your neighbors and the people you serve, their conviction that you know what you're doing and you are good at it. In some ways, it doesn't even matter if a degree is needed to get a job! The people who understand that a piece of paper can never 'guarantee' a skill or knowledge, will not be interested in having a job that considers degrees too important! At least for me, this is the way to build the world we want. As the Zapatistas say, "A world that could fit a lot of worlds."

- **Sergio Beltran, Universidad de la Tierra, Mexico**
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Much as I think it is vital what you're promoting in our stupid society, I cannot see how I can contribute with a story — simply because we've never considered degrees as important. Instead we have always chosen people on individual terms and our gut feeling around them! We find ourselves interested in sensitive, open, questioning, wondering about the world, kind of people — especially in terms of working together. We don't ask for specific skills, because we ourselves have come from unskilled backgrounds. Basically, we don't want educational qualifications, and people don't even need prior experience, just a willingness, curiosity.... Of course, money-oriented, ambitious, aggressive, 'mainstream' types would have a harder time fitting in!

Of the whole crew here, I am the only one with a formal degree. and such a useless one that I never mention it anywhere! Now we have four new additions here, and three happen to have degrees, but that's not why they were chosen! I've never been interested in degrees and formal education myself, and have no profound thoughts on the matter. It's like another universe.

- **Suprabaha Seshan, Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, Kerala, India**
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RESPONSE FROM: **GURPREET SIDHU,**
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The People Tree Story

In the early 1990s, when liberalisation was just a debate and NGOs were not BINGO or TINGO (Big and Travel NGOs), there began an experiment to bring art to the street. People Tree was conceived as a space where creative people and socially sensitive and/or activists would intersect and create art on T-shirts or 'walking posters'. The idea being that authentic art would try and share the pains and passions of the real world at prices which would not be 'gallery-fied'.

Orijit Sen — a walkout from the National Institute of Design (NID) — and Gurpreet Sidhu — a believer in the truism that creativity needs no degree or certificate — started People Tree in 1990. A small shop front, very narrow (not even ten feet wide), lying unused for decades, which housed a medical diagnostic lab in the 1950s and 1960s, was cleaned and hand-painted T-shirts were sold. Also sold were the few pamphlets printed by measly-funded NGOs and activist groups. The issues were always similar: human and woman rights, environment, toxic wastes, public health and decentralization.

Orijit and Gurpreet were joined by a variety of people, ranging from fresh college walkouts to artists, animators and graphic designers feeling claustrophobic in the commercial art worlds. People Tree generated relationships between trained specialists who are disenchanted with how creativity is mis-used and young people who had a feeling and passion for design. This led to the development of new forms of craft and art reproduction on fabrics. A wide range of activities was undertaken, from costume jewelry to stage design, from poster campaigns to design workshops in schools and with street children. From working with local Manipuri budding artists to create comic books for HIV/AIDS issues in Manipur to screen-printing creative, humorous T-shirts to express solidarity with every conceivable cause.

The list of long-term partners is endless (who later went to create harmonious lifestyles using art and craft or working for NGOs and creative design shops). Animation designer Nicky Thomas creates prints on contemporary India; he lives with Simran, a college walkout who makes jewelry out of leather thread. Kavita works with the Center for Science and the Environment, while her husband, Datta, creates cutting-edge exhibitions. Arpana, a walkout from a fancy Lufthansa job,

trained herself in natural dyeing techniques, did workshops with weavers and NGOs all over India. Shahid, a school walkout, developed a range of bags, jewelry, tie-dyed T-shirts, photo-art, and now designs lifestyle products and does professional photography. Sutanu walked out from ZICA (Zee Institute of Computer Animation) and handles the People Tree store, illustrates books and magazines for NGOs, creates block and screen designs, does batik on clothing, teaches and does kite paper work installations.

Sunny, a walkout from IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), and Meeta have been long term partners of People Tree. They work with artisans and utilize People Tree graphic skills to innovate on traditional block printing, to produce a combination of art and craft on fabrics and T-shirts. They also work as catalysts between artisans and designers to create new designs and products from metal, wood, paper and in thread jewelry. Karm Marg, an NGO of street-children, has been associated with us since their beginning. They supply us with paper bags and later have used the waste fabric from People Tree to create a stunning array of bags and other accessories for sale.

People Tree's whole story has been like that of a tree, which, under its shade, encourages and nurtures people from any class, any background. We have a huge family of people trained in one field but practicing another, or not trained at all. We believe that one needs passion and a desire to learn. A lot of the people who have worked at/ helped out at/ participated with People Tree are 'untrained' young people whose natural innate creativity is encouraged and nurtured. They are constantly looking for 'alternative' ways of earning a living.



*RESPONSE FROM: YORIT AND AVIRAM ROZIN,
SADHANA FOREST, AUROVILLE, INDIA*

<sadhanaforest@suroville.org.in>

Sadhana Forest is a vegan, natural learning, forest community. We started our ecological revival and sustainable living work on December 2003. The dream is to ecologically transform 70 acres of severely eroded land in Auroville. We invest all of the community's energy and resources into making this land a vibrant Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF). TDEF is the indigenous forest to our area. The main action areas are planting the forest and erecting earthen dams and bunds for water conservation.

Sadhana Forest has created a natural living environment incorporating ecological practices like veganism, homeschooling, the use of composting toilets, solar power generation, and building from local natural materials.

Since the beginning of Sadhana Forest two years ago, more than 10,300 TDEF trees (of more than 100 different species) have been planted. As part of the water conservation effort, eight earth dams were built, and more than two kilometers of bunding were dug. Altogether, these structures store more than 15,000 cubic meters of rain water on the land. Soil water percolation has increased dramatically and the underground water level has risen from 21 feet in November 2003 (before the beginning of water conservation effort) to 3 feet in November 2005. Children from three local villages regularly visit Sadhana Forest and are well integrated into the community and its collective effort.

More than 200 volunteers from India and the world have lived and worked at Sadhana Forest during the past two years. Accommodation for volunteers is in exchange for work. Other free facilities for volunteers include a small swimming pool, daily yoga class, and the use of several bicycles, and a small book collection.

Volunteers in Sadhana Forest do not need to have any academic degrees, certificates or other specific background. Our experience shows that in an active, natural, non-violent (vegan) environment, with positive and supportive emotional attitudes, each and everyone of us can increase her/his consciousness and knowledge, and effectively contribute to the project. You are all most welcome to stay and work with us!

"Too many teachers, like too many students, too many workers at too many war manufacturing plants, too many writers, too many politicians, too many people who could be human beings but who have been trained by their schooling and by their work and by their pursuit of money and their pursuit of acceptance and by their very real fear of being who they are, step away from this responsibility, and in so doing lead themselves and those around them ever farther from their hearts, and lead us all ever closer to the personal and planetary annihilation that is the looming end point of industrial civilization.

If one of the most unforgivable sins is to lead people away from themselves, we must not forgive the processes of industrial education.

There is, however, an alternative. Or rather, there are as many alternatives as there are people, and most especially as there are people engaged in active, thoughtful relationships with their communities, which includes their living landbases, the land where they live, the land that supports and nourishes them.

I've heard it said that within our deathly culture, the most revolutionary thing anyone can do is follow one's heart. I would add that once you've begun to do that – to follow your own heart – the most moral and revolutionary thing you can do is help others find their hearts, to find themselves. It's much easier than it seems.

Time is short. It's short for our planet – the planet that is our home – that is being killed while we stand by. And it is even shorter for all those students whose lives are slipping away from them with every awful tick of the clock on the classroom wall.

There is much work to be done. What are you waiting for? It's time to begin."

- Derrick Jensen,
Walking on Water: Reading, Writing and Revolution, 2004

Let me say that your text regarding (what Pierre Bourdieu would call) the ‘symbolic violence’ of certification, degrees etc. concerns one of the matters closest to my heart! Your use of the term ‘walkouts’ instead of ‘dropouts’ is extremely significant!

I’m sure you are familiar with the work of Bourdieu, who spent most of his life unveiling academic certification (degrees) as one of the crucial forms of violence in modern society. On googling ‘Bourdieu, cultural capital, college degrees’, etc., you will find hundreds of links online. Indeed, even the Wikipedia entry on Bourdieu (and links within the texts like ‘cultural capital’) will lead to interesting theoretical readings. His earlier book in the 1970s, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, was already a classic on this question.

I hope you could participate in some way in Ahimsa day <www.ahimsaonline.org> in January, questioning especially the often-unsuspected *himsa* (violence) that degrees and institutional certification constitutes. This might go a long way in getting other participants to think seriously about the matter.

- **Akshay Bakaya, Ahimsa Online**, Paris, France
<akshay.bakaya@wanadoo.fr>

I am against all the certification from any institutions, including the institution of marriages too. The institution of a family too, institution of society too. Because somehow these certificates all are given by someone. No one has a right on another’s life — no families, no spouses. How can you bind a person for a whole life on the basis of a piece of paper? This is ugly, isn’t it? No one is the property of someone.

I believe in a complete revolution, not a half one. Freedom for me is of ultimate value. Freedom to be as I am, as I want to see, as I want to know, as I want to learn, and the way I want to live, without interfering in other life and not allowing the other to interfere in my life. If you talk about revolution against something, then my revolution is also against all existing religions, because they label you. I don’t like followers, because I don’t like to follow. I don’t have a belief system, because I experiment and try to know the truth.

I am against any kind of organized revolution, because organization brings politics, a forced implementation on others to change and to control. If sin exists, then for me, it is ‘to control others’. And if virtue exists, then for me it is ‘not to interfere and not to control’.

- **Prem Vartan**, India
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RESPONSE FROM: **SANKRANT**, USA

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The certificate is embedded in the notion of authority: the authority of the institution and that of the state (that certifies the institution). This is not how traditional societies have operated, nor has India operated in this manner. The idea of centralizing and certifying knowledge and ‘academic’ authority by a ‘seal of approval’ itself emanates from models of hierarchical religious institutions, that were deeply embedded with higher education in Europe.

In more recent times, non-certificate-holding traditional healers and health practitioners were outlawed in different ways during colonial rule — a trend that continues today in India. As the pharmaceutical companies gain greater leverage over the Indian medical establishment (already many prominent doctors get lots of ‘freebees’ from the pharma companies, including all-expense-paid foreign trips), it would not be surprising if the laws start being enforced in a more draconian way preventing local rural healers from working, ostensibly in the name of ‘science’, but ultimately to privilege institutional certification and corporate interests.

I write all this simply to make you aware that there is a bigger dimension to the certification issue and I am glad that you are taking that up. Even today children are needlessly subjected to the flawed idea that 15 years of education (for a B.A.) actually prepares them for something. In reality, it prepares them for very little other than obtaining a certificate that can then be used to get a ‘job’. For rural children, the English Class System in India (<http://www.sulekha.com/column.asp?cid=305803>) still relegates them to urban *chapprassi-hood* despite getting the degree — a class system woefully under-researched in Indian academics and its colonially mandated obsession with caste.

Luckily, even in the corporate world, some parts are changing. When I hired people at Microsoft, I never ever looked at their certificates. This is the Microsoft culture; Bill Gates himself never finished college. Employment is based on passing a full-day interview – though unfortunately degrees do get looked at in resume screening. Hopefully, Indian software companies will follow suit, though prejudice based on English-speaking (and even ‘accent’) remains a huge barrier to entry. (Which is even more surprising, since I used to hire programmers in the US after flying them for interviews from Russia — when they barely spoke a word of English.) Best wishes on your campaign!

RESPONSE FROM: **MADAN MEENA,**
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Artless Art Diplomas and Degrees

Recently I had completed my Ph.D. thesis based on the diverse art heritage of the Meena tribe of Rajasthan. It mainly focuses on the artistic tradition of the Meena women who have no degree or diploma to reason the standards of their creation and geniuses of their talent. While surveying their art, I had personally felt my education in Fine Arts to be of less value in comparison to their aesthetic faculties and inherent art tradition running through generations, from mother to daughter, most naturally without imposition of any preconceived curriculum. There is no examination pattern to qualify for any degree or diploma; art is necessarily a part of their life functions.

It is surprising to note that these women artists, like many such others, have matured their art qualifying every standards and principles of art without studying the 'abc' of it. To examine such art, one needs to unlearn the westernized principles of art taught in high art institutions. Moreover, I feel that one needs to dive into their cultural backwaters and become part of them to better understand the alphabets of their art. Their art encompasses every nook and corner of their living surroundings, reflected in many of their articles of daily use. Actually, art is functional to them, rather than just decorative pieces.

The true value of Indian culture and its arts has been preserved by these degree/diploma-less women artists for generations in contrast to the highly glamorized Page-3 artists imposing themselves through manipulated price sales of their works in the international market. The high urban artists are engrossed in self-appreciation, self-publicity and self-promotions using various tactics; unlike the non-literate rural artists for whom art means a medium of meditation, sufficing the socio-religious needs – irrespective of any competition, irrespective of the grading superiority of the individual. These illiterate artists are highly educated in their visual language. Its vocabulary bears in itself reflections of timeless generations.

The sad situation is discrimination of such arts of the illiterate mass by the self imposing intellectual contemporary art world, marking them as mere craft objects or decorative pieces of low value. Moreover, these are bargained by the urban buyers at low indecent prices, in contrast to the rising auction sales of high contemporary art works. The force of the privileged class subjugates such arts, in

order to boast themselves as practitioners of high art. The Colleges of Arts are producing *degreedhari* (degree-holders) hybrid artists whose artistic instincts are not organically linked to their lives and life-functions. This is a fatal situation in the present education system.

While analyzing the problems of extinction of the art of the Meena tribe, it came to my notice that the *degreedhari*-employed Meenas are the most responsible for it. They are deliberately injecting a 'synthetic' urban culture into their villages which is not required. They take it as their own right to change the whole cultural structure to their taste, which is fashioned to the urban life style. Ironically, such people stand as the elite in the community. With the rise in their monetary income, they were the first to build modern concrete architectural houses in their villages, to show off their status. Such modern structures do not fit the village environment and rather pollute it. The walls of such houses are decorated with commercial street calendars and posters. In the process, they forget to appreciate their own art, the art of the Meena women.

When we started our bookstore about 20 years ago in Kolkata, we did so partly to stay out of the soul-killing institutional 'traps' of academics/ job/career/business. We felt that these compartmentalised our lives, while ignoring our core aspirations.

We do not believe degrees are any sane reflection of a person's abilities, character, talent, motivation. When practically all our institutions are riddled with deep, fundamental contradictions, 'walk-outs' indeed deserve respect for their integrity.

Certainly, we are happy to work with/take on people without degrees. One of our friends, Anando, a passionate guitarist, who worked for several years with us when we started, was a 'walk-out' (his father was then a vice-chancellor of a university!)

I feel all of us need to have a lot more 'hands-on' experiences at doing different tasks, and at trying to tie together the threads of our life into a meaningful whole.

- **Bharat Mansata, Earthcare Books**, Kolkata and Mumbai, India
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*RESPONSE FROM: CLAUDE ALVARES,
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This is not a world organized according to common sense but according to 'science' and 'markets'. We will therefore find stupidities galore. Our problem is that stupidities can be a source of great oppression. We are finding them to be particularly offensive in the case of organic farming.

Farming today (following 'science' and 'markets') is based on the use of feeding growing crops with a range of synthetic (artificial) nutrients called chemical fertilizers. Since this is an unhealthy way to grow plants, they are prone to disease and pest attacks from the day they sprout from seed. Plant protection is a huge industry that generates millions of tons of extremely toxic chemicals. These are sprayed on plants to protect them from funguses, insects and other predators. Naturally, these toxins remain on the crop and eventually affect human beings as well, since the cell structures of insects and humans are not very different.

Organic farming is the growing of plants without the assistance of synthetic nutrients or toxic chemicals. That's the way plants and trees grow in nature anyway and it's therefore not a very great discovery.

Because organically-grown food is safe for health, it has a great demand in terms of the market and the prices it can fetch, particularly in the export trade. This has generated a lucrative 'certification' industry that promises 'assurances of guarantee'; in other words, guarantees that the food indeed has been grown without chemicals.

Now comes the interesting part: those growing food with chemicals and poisons do not need to get their crops certified even though the food they grow is naturally unhealthy. It has no guarantee that it is safe from lethal pesticides. However, those who grow food naturally, without poisons, must procure a certificate that their food is grown naturally!

Now that's not too serious a problem in any case. But the question is who will certify that food is naturally grown?

For the past several years now, an elaborate certification system has emerged fundamentally controlled by groups of 'certifiers' from the advanced countries. They travel to countries in Asia, visit farms and 'certify' food as organically grown.

Of course, their costs are debited to the farmers! One estimate of costs of certifying food as 'organic' indicates that a farmer (big or small) will have to pay Rs.22,000 for a organic certificate: (travel and inspection/12,000/day; report preparation/5000; certificate/5000).

Most of the farm certifiers come from conventional farming systems. The Indian government, for example, has set up a certification system based on several government organizations like the Spices Board, which have done nothing but encourage farming with chemicals for the past several decades. Their main activity even today is the same. So people who know nothing about organic farming are at the forefront of the efforts to 'certify' farmers who say they grow food without chemicals!

Another major issue is the bureaucracy installed for the purpose. Farmers who wish to be certified have to maintain mountains of records and fill out a number of forms. Many farmers, particularly small peasants and tribals that are illiterate, are simply thrust out of the system.

The Organic Farming Association of India (OFAI) – a fairly recent organisation whose membership includes largely practising organic farmers – decided to break away from this practice of imported, urban-based certification experts and set up its own 'quality assurance system'.

In OFAI's scheme, only organic farmers are approved and authorized to visit organic farms and audit them. The farm visit reports are written in the local language, so that both farmers and visitors speak the same language. (In contrast, the certification systems controlled by European agencies, or their Indian branches, are largely in English.) The reports of these farm auditors are then submitted to a certification committee headed by organic farmers.

The costs of the OFAI audit programme are therefore extremely small compared to those in the convention system. No air fares are involved, only travel by bus or train. The farmer is not treated as a client to be 'mined' for income, but as a colleague. Hence small farms can afford the costs. The focus of certification is not to meet technical requirements only for declaring the farm as organic, but to assist the farmer to install an organic growing system that will eventually improve the vitality of the farm and its living assets.

For tribal communities, a more economical system of organic food certification has been proposed: community certification. An entire tribal hamlet will get its



surplus food marketed as 'organic' and the community will itself maintain the standard. These activities can be conducted by the community on a no-profit, no-loss basis. Here, too, instead of placing undue attention on only meeting the technical requirements of organic farming accreditation agencies, they can spend more time on ensuring that the organic farming regime is used to encourage farmers to resume a more caring approach to the soil and its organisms.

The unique selling point of the OFAI programme is that it is based on practising organic farmers who have a great deal of experience themselves in these methods of raising food. These farmers have learnt organic farming all by themselves, because neither the universities nor the corporations nor the agriculture departments nor the banks and insurance companies could teach them about this manner of growing food. Having learnt the hard way, after painstaking efforts over several years as fresh learners, they are now the best persons available to underwrite with their knowledge the system of guaranteeing organic produce. Once they emerge in strength, the exploitative system that got itself installed will hopefully wither away, to the benefit of all.

Instead of Certification: Building Trust Networks

“Welcome to the Green Counter”

The products arrayed on these shelves are the result of a business initiative that attempt to bridge the physical as well as emotional distance between the sensitive farmer/producer and the conscious consumer.

The food items on these shelves are grown organically — without chemical fertilizers/pesticides and processed without artificial additives. The non-food items reflect the emerging eco-friendly aesthetics.

Care has been taken to ensure that these products conform to stringent environmental standards. One among the following criteria has been used by elements in deciding upon the farmers from whom we source our products:

- i. An acknowledged body of organic farmers vouchsafes for the farmer.
- ii. The farm/farming practice finds a mention in the *Organic Farming Source Book* (Claude Alvares, ed., The Other India Press, Mapusa, Goa).
- iii. Credible social institutions of the locality refer the farmer.

The above criteria has been adopted keeping in mind the reality that certification of organic products has yet to acclimatize itself to the economic conditions of the Third World farmer. It is, in effect, an attempt to re-invoke the spirit of trading based on the culture of trust.

You will also notice that much of the items lined on the Green Counter are homestead products that are produced in limited quantities. The packaging of these items are therefore are matter of fact and at times amateur. We seek your understanding in distinguishing between content and packaging glitter.

Your feedback is valuable. Do write with comments and suggestions.

- **Tomy and Seepja Mathew, Elements**, Kozhikode, India
<element@eth.net>

frequently asked questions

We received several questions/ comments about the dialogue, as different people from around the world came to bear about it. What follows are some we felt were important to respond to in order to further our understandings and deepen the conversations:

Q: It is easy to disregard your certificate after you have it. As elites, we know that degrees and certificates have taken us a long way. We wouldn't have gotten so far in life had we not had those qualifications. Why do we want to deny the poor something that we all have and have used?

First, we should again clarify: this dialogue is not about telling individual people they should not get a degree. That is, ultimately, each person's personal choice.

This dialogue is directed at civil society organizations. It is about confronting our own hypocrisies and the dishonesty and injustice embedded within our own lives and work. Our hope is that by doing so we can challenge the cynicism and lethargy that has permeated into the voluntary sector and bring new energy and perspectives into the social arena. We also believe that social sector organizations should not actively discriminate against those who don't feel degrees or certificates are useful. Other paths of learning and knowledge should be recognized and appreciated. This is essential if we want to create another world of justice and dignity for all.

Even if we have benefited from the elite nature of the degree system, why should we continue to perpetuate it and its principles of inequality? To challenge one's status as an 'elite' is part of the motivation for this conversation. This hierarchy can be contested, in part, when elites recognize their positions of privilege as unjust constructions and become willing to raise questions about how they came to be there (and what all is required to keep their privileged status in tact). This dialogue is a call to level the playing field beyond token efforts towards marginalized groups.

Q: For poor children, especially in cities, a degree is necessary. If being successful within the system helps them to overcome their fatalism and poverty, what is wrong with that?

Handing our more and more certificates and degrees do not address the root causes of poverty, oppression, violence or exploitation. A few token individuals may overcome their difficult situation but the structures and institutions that are deepening injustice and exploitation in their communities remain in place. A culture of degrees only serves to reinforce the legitimacy of these centralized structures

and institutions. It does not encourage people to challenge the underlying (often hidden) foundations of decision-making and control.

We also need to explore more closely what ‘being successful’ means in the mainstream system. Today, ‘success’ is experienced as beating the other, escaping your community, overconsuming — it is grounded in principles of fear, insecurity, scarcity and isolationism. Under the guise of a ‘fair chance to all’, the education system retains the authority to select/reject people, again justifying the rejection of the majority by pointing to this so-called success of a few. How can this on-going, uncontested process of ‘manufacturing failures’ end poverty in the long-term?

What is needed instead, in communities especially, is a rebuilding of relationships, imagination and wisdom that can honestly offer healthier, more confident, balanced lives for all. Such webs of mutual security can only emerge when we let go of those ritualistic practices that label and divide us, and instead begin to name what is valuable to us and integrate these values as practices and priorities in our lives.

Q: But people are demanding certificates! What if our organization gives them to participants in our workshops? Is there anything wrong with that?

We need to ask ourselves why we feel this is necessary. If it is to attract people to participate in the workshop, then we are playing into the hands of the ‘culture of degrees’ and the authoritarianism and consumerism it emerges from. We should have faith that if the workshop is meaningful, it will attract interested participants. It becomes ridiculous when people value a piece of paper over the experience itself. Is such an attitude healthy for the social sector? One thing we might focus on is creating more compelling ‘invitations’ to motivate people about the value of the workshop for them personally as well as their work. After all, the best workshops occur when people genuinely want to attend and bring their passion with them.

If we are offering certificates as some sort of verification that people have attended the workshop, then we should recognize that this practice only reinforces a dehumanizing culture of mistrust. We should question why organizations don’t trust their employees to avail of learning opportunities responsibly. And instead think about evolving practices that build greater trust and respect between people.

If we are handing out certificates to make participants feel good, then we should think about whether we are being patronizing — particularly when we know that the piece of paper does not have any real value. We are actually perpetuating a system of debilitating dependency whereby external institutions control the power to legitimize what is valuable (and what is not valuable). Our own intrinsic capacities

to value our experiences and sense of happiness are weakened. This is a potentially disempowering proposition for civil society because those who hold the power to measure/label/grant entry control the rules of the game.

Finally, rather than giving certificates at the end of the workshop in order to offer credibility to the participants as they look for future work, perhaps we can consider other ways of demonstrating what they have learned and why it is useful. You might encourage them to make a portfolio of their learning, conduct peer assessments, display their work in a public forum, or some other way that demonstrates their learning. Ultimately, the proof is and should be in the *doing*.

Q: We need a system to filter through an applicant pool. We can't rely purely on recommendations. What if the person had disagreements with or been harassed at their last work place? What if the applicant is corrupt and presents themselves dishonestly? So then how can we tell whether s/he is a good worker and suitable for a said post?

We are not calling for the elimination of a selection process. Rather, we hope to raise the standard of the selection mechanisms that are currently in use. For this, we need to question why we measure, what we measure and how we measure, as well as understand what cannot be measured.

What we are trying to explore through this dialogue is not one system to replace the current one, but the many possible ways to understand what a person has experienced and what they have to offer. Recommendations are one source; they can come from former employers, co-workers or also from friends, neighbors, or others who know the candidate in a meaningful way. Other possible ways to get to know if someone is right for you are through portfolios, by doing appreciative interviews, by relying on gut instincts, by taking them on for a trial period. Many people in this dialogue have shared their stories about hiring without degrees, and through this publication, we hope to generate more ideas as well. Ultimately, we rely on our best judgement and realize that we always are taking chances in new relationships — but the risk may well be worth it.

Q: Won't the quality of work in the social sector deteriorate if we let go of the professional standards set by degrees?

First, we need to challenge the myth that a degree equals quality. If we are honest about the current educational practices in the vast majority of colleges and universities (not only in India but in the world), we will recall the superficial and corrupt learning (copying, cramming, de-contextualization, etc.) that surrounds them. Second, diversity is good for the social sector. Diversity of people and

cultures will lead to diversity of perspectives, tools, forms and solutions. It will lead to greater innovation and sustained efforts. Third, by removing the barrier of degrees, we will be inviting more people to reconnect to the spirit of volunteerism. We will be able to expand the pool of people involved with real social change as well as the range of initiatives and spaces connected to social change.

There are many ways to maintain and deepen quality. The first is to be more specific and clear about the skills-set and attitudes that we are looking for and to be explicit about these. Let's reclaim control over the terms of defining what 'quality' means. Organizations can also think of investing in more lifelong learning opportunities for their staff. So-called 'technical' skills of computer use, proposal-writing, accounting, participatory tools, etc. can all be easily acquired. Prioritizing more in-service learning opportunities will not only ensure that a larger culture of reflective-action is built in civil society but also will keep staff motivation levels high. A call for quality should start with a stronger commitment to active learning.

Q: What if my organization does not allow me to say NO! to the degree requirement?

At the very least, if you are in support of this dialogue, then add a clause next to your degree requirement that you are willing to accept equivalent portfolios in lieu of a degree. It can read something like this:

“Requirement: Masters degree *or equivalent portfolio of experience.*”

It is also important to explore why your organization is holding on to the degree requirement. Who is demanding it and why? Who wins and who loses? Whether it be the funding community, the social work colleges or even in some rare cases, the community, we need to engage them in a critical dialogue as to their reasoning behind wanting a degree. This must be part of our commitment to social justice.

Q: Maybe if I am part of a family who does agriculture or art and craft, then refusing degrees would be easy. But if I don't, where can I go?

Check out the list of contacts at the end of this booklet! They are all interested in and open to people without degrees and certificates. Or better yet, begin exploring your region with new eyes. Ask local people if you can co-learn with them, either formally or informally. Maybe they will be willing to take you on as an apprentice, or they simply won't mind if you hang around and pick up the skill/activity they are engaged in. Be prepared to be surprised! People are more open to sharing than you might have guessed. By taking the time to form relationships — instead of depending on the disempowering shortcut of degrees — you will find many 'families' of learning to be a part of.

contact list

We are committed to including people without certificates and degrees in our work. Please contact us directly if you are interested in knowing more.

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**"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now."
- W.H. Murray**