Learning Societies Conference

Tehran, Iran

1-5 September 2007
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In the name of God

Foreword

The Learning Societies Conference in Iran has been organized and sponsored by the Center for International Scientific Studies & Collaboration (CISSC), affiliated to the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The old name for this center was ISMO, International Scientific Meetings Office, which was established in 1999 with the help of Dr. Mansoorian, from Sharif University. However, after the Ministry of Higher Education changed its name to the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology with a broader mission, this center also changed its name and scope of work.

The main elements of CISSC mission are as follows:

• Identification of the scientific and technological needs of our country
• Identification of current trends and opportunities in the world
• Developing links with the international community, taking into account political, cultural and social sensitivities
• Organizing and/or sponsoring relevant international seminars and conferences

After learning about the Learning Societies (LS) network, followed by the invitation of a few LS members to Iran last year, CISSC decided to host the sixth LS meeting in Tehran. This is for several key reasons:

1- The principles, values and the worldview of the Learning Societies network provides a fresh outlook to the current state of the world, while fundamentally challenging dominant global trends for “progress” and “development”, as propagated by dominant Western paradigms.

2- Breaking out of the East/West, Developed/Underdeveloped, Modern/Traditional dichotomies, which is at the core of the LS worldview, has many common themes with the Islamic Republic of Iran’s “neither Western, nor-Eastern” foundation principle. Iran is going through a difficult transition in its struggle for defining its own path and the diverse experiences of the LS network can open up new insights for us.

3- The modern educational system has not only been used as the backbone of colonization and Western domination, but has severely damaged our individual and community health, degraded the environment under a false perception of “development” and has robbed us of the ability for self-learning. It is very important for Iran not to blindly follow global trends, just because the majority of countries are doing so. As the need has been felt since the beginning of the revolution and emphasized by our leaders, a transformation in our educational system is required, not just from a methodological perspective, but more importantly from ontological and epistemological standpoints.
As you can see in this document, the above points are deeply elaborated to provide our readers with a new outlook to current and future trends. For CISSC, this conference was a turning point in redefining and giving new directions to our scientific, research and technological policy-making, as part of our mission. We hope that it can serve the same purpose for others as well, in all government, public and private sectors. The participants were invited from all sectors and we will try to distribute the report to relevant policy making bodies, who could not attend the conference.

At the end I would like to acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Research in the initiation and approval of the conference. I deeply appreciate the sincere efforts of Dr. Ghahremani and her colleagues, who helped us create links with the LS network and to define meaningful themes for the conference, in addition to facilitating the dialogues. I would also like to thank my colleagues at CISSC who worked whole-heartedly to organize the conference. Needless to say, we wouldn’t have a conference without our international guests accepting our invitation. I really thank them for coming to Iran, amid their busy schedules. I would also like to thank Mr. Yassemi for helping us with the coordination of the conference and also for the documentation. Finally, I’d like to acknowledge the participation of our Iranian guests who accepted our invitation.

Dr. Hossein Mohammadi Doostdar
CISSC Director
May 2008, Tehran
Learning Societies is referred to a network of thinkers, activists, organizations and communities around the globe (mostly from countries in Asia, South America and Africa) who aim to unfold what has been made invisible or suppressed due to colonization, modernization and one-dimensional economic growth. The network aims to regain the natural health, beauty and diversity existing in societies by learning and living new alternatives, while denouncing the dichotomies of traditional/modern, East/West, underdeveloped/developed, body/mind. The main concern is about distinguishing authentic from unauthentic.

The Learning Societies network has tried to hold annual meetings with the active “members” and other interested participants to share experiences and to shape the path ahead. The first two meetings were held in India (Udaipur 2002 and Bombay in Jan 2004), followed by the 3rd meeting in Jordan in late 2004, the 4th in Brazil in 2005, the 5th in Pakistan in 2006 and the meeting in Tehran was the 6th in Sep 2007.

This document, which we would like to call “Soghat-e Safar” (meaning a souvenir from our week-long journey together) is prepared with the aim of sharing some of the insights of the 6th meeting, primarily with those who could not participate in the meetings. Meanwhile, it could also serve as a reminder for those who participated in the meetings to reflect on some of the main themes, questions, pictures and memories that emerged in the journey. It is needless to emphasize that any form of “documentation” is at most an interpretation of a small group from a rich variety of experiences that will never render themselves to be “captured” and expressed in words.

This Soghat is brought to you by a few of the travelers in Iran, who gathered in a few meetings after the week-long journey to share their memories and to reflect on the selection of the parts worth highlighting as a gift for others. We were also lucky to have Munir Fasheh and his wife in Iran in March 2008, when we got a chance to share our ideas with him regarding this documentation effort. In addition to the main discussions and presentations that have been transcribed from the recordings, we have also included many articles, pieces of work and quotations from the publications and websites of the Learning Societies network. In doing so, we have fully observed the “right-to-copy”! Yet, references are mentioned in the end-notes. Excerpts from presentations, dialogues and discussions are only referenced under the names of people.
We have also tried to adhere to the principle of diversity by sharing the views of as many participants from the Learning Societies international network as possible. However, since our guests from abroad arrived at different times, not all of them were present during all sessions. Also, some groups had various publications and websites, from which we have borrowed many excerpts. As a result, it may appear that some individuals or groups are under-represented in the presentations and discussions. This is by no means intentional and we would welcome direct feedback on any form of unwanted misrepresentation. Moreover, the gathering took place in two venues in Tehran and Jajrood. This document has only attempted to reflect on the Tehran sessions. So, the presentations / discussions/ dialogues of individuals and groups in the Jajrood meetings are reflected in a separate document.

We are aware that group discussions/dialogue with local participants are under-represented. This is for two reasons. First of all, during the meetings many groups were formed and recording/ capturing all of their scattered discussions and experiences was difficult. Secondly, since the main aim of this document is to reach out to those unfamiliar with the Learning Societies principles, values, ideas and thoughts, we have tried to highlight these and to present them in a form that we thought could be better understood by someone not present to experience things first-hand. Nevertheless, we have tried to take a glimpse of the gatherings and group activities in an accompanying DVD.

We hope that you find this gift worthwhile in opening up new windows of thought for you and in inspiring you to continually search for better questions, even if you find no answers. We would appreciate if you share your feedback and comments with us through the email address below.

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of two people specifically. We owe the connection of Iran’s network to the Learning Societies global network to Dr. Suesan Ghahremani, who has for many years been a forerunner in creating alternative learning spaces in Iran, especially in the field of language learning. And, we owe the possibility of having the conference in Iran to Dr. Hossein Doostdar, Director of the Center for International Scientific Studies & Collaboration (CISSC), affiliated to the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Finally, we thank all of our guests who accepted our invitation to join us in this learning journey and we hope that our paths converge again in the near future.

Aydin Yassemi
Iran Conference Coordinator
May 2008, Tehran, Iran
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1- Setting the context: a historical perspective of trends in learning and education

Key questions:
- Where did schools come from and have they benefited us?
- Why did the Learning Societies concept come about?

What’s the story behind it?

When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly… the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water, and gifts. Columbus wrote: “They brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks’ bells. They willingly traded everything they owned. ... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features. They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. They would make fine servants. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want”.

The contrast between how Columbus saw and treated strangers and how the Arawaks did is very telling: while Columbus saw strangers as potential servants, slaves, resources, and subjects to subdue and control, the Arawaks’ behavior embodied hospitality, generosity, loving, giving, and being good… . They did not try to judge whether the new comers are superior or inferior, or ahead or behind… they were simply another people and were welcome.

The subduing aspect seems to be a common thread in European thinking and practices including how they perceive science, knowledge and learning. Francis Bacon, the “father of modern science”, for example, defined science as “subduing nature”.

That first interaction exemplifies, in my opinion, what has been happening for the past 500 years, since Columbus set foot on the land that came to be known as the Americas. Columbus’s voyage marked the beginning of systematic destruction of peoples, cultures, and civilizations, which was first carried out in the Americas and Australia, then in other continents. However, in other continents, that destruction took an additional form and invaded another domain: controlling minds.

This other form and domain was first suggested by Nabrija who went (in the same year that Columbus set out on his voyage) and presented to the same queen (Isabella) a detailed plan of another voyage: a “voyage” into the minds of people – an invasion of their thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and meanings. He told her that in order to sustain her rule over distant lands and stealing resources, she needed to control her people’s minds at home. His suggestion to control people’s minds was the seed idea of what has been known for the past 350 years as education.

Although Isabella was fair enough to throw Nabrija out of her court (because she considered his idea is criminal), his idea was picked by the French 150 years later in their attempt to build their nation state. Others followed suit and the idea was dumped on us through colonization.

The other world – the one exemplified by the Arawaks – has remained within people and communities. It never died, but was disvalued by the dominant world. The challenge we seem to face today is to regain this timeless spirit (that embodies hospitality, generosity, harmony, inspiration, wisdom, and health of people, of relations, and of nature) into our lives, our perceptions, knowledge, relations, and our learning.

Munir Fasheh (pre-conference emails)
Historical trends leading to the formation of the Learning Societies Network.

A Learning Society Retrospective

Vachel Miller, Vimut Shiksha, Apr 2001

Leisure for contemplating philosophic truths? Databases connecting us to learning partners? Upgrading ourselves for the knowledge economy? Schooling for all, for as long as we live? New opportunities for the educationally deprived to join modernity? Or learning to leave modernity behind? What is meant by “learning society”? All of the above. The term has multiple and tangled meanings at least as divergent as these questions suggest. In this section we will introduce a historical overview of several formulations of the learning society concept, highlighting a few critical themes of this conversation.

Learning While Slaves Work

The first notable book on this theme, called The Learning Society, was written by Robert Hutchins in 1968. In this book, Hutchins envisions a learning society as one in which citizens are free to cultivate their intelligence through liberal education. The ancient Greek city of Athens is his model learning society — a society characterized not by the expanse of its educational system, but by the richness of its political and cultural life. The prosperity of Athens depended on slave labor, and for Hutchins, slave labor enabled free citizens (men) to enjoy abundant leisure time for learning.

The Greek word for leisure, schole, is the origin of the English word, school. Because leisure time is his precondition for learning, Hutchins views work as merely work, an obstacle to learning.

Looking forward in time, he anticipates that new technologies — the modern substitute for slaves — would create the free time necessary for future generations to enjoy ever greater amounts of leisureful learning, as manual work vanished and universal liberal education became possible. Ironically, Hutchins’ forecast has been turned on its head by globalization: in much of today’s discourse on the knowledge economy, learning is being driven by the demands of work and the commercial imperative for innovation to expand economic production.

The learning society in Hutchins’ view will be, a “worldwide republic of learning” based on the belief that humans are everywhere similar and liberal education is a universal good. Another important theme in the learning society literature, introduced by Hutchins is the argument that education should not be confined to schooling during a limited portion of people’s lives. In light of rapid social and technological change, the future has lost its stability, and a pre-determined program of learning in childhood can no longer prepare people adequately for productive adult lives. This critique continues to serve as the primary conceptual logic for much of the discourse on learning societies.

Building the Learning Web

In his 1971 book, Deschooling Society, historian Ivan Illich argues for the liberation of learning from institutional controls that create intellectual dependency and train people for lives of uncritical consumption. The professionalization of education, for Illich, mystifies expertise and creates an artificial constraint on the learning capacity of a society.

In rethinking education, Illich discusses the importance of conviviality, mutual sharing based on learner’s self-identified interests. Convivial institutions are those people use spontaneously, without official manipulation. Illich warns that the alternative to dependence on schools should not be the use of public resources for some new device which ‘makes’ people learn; rather, it is the creation of a new style of educational relationship.” Believing that people will learn what they desire to learn if helped to come together, Illich proposes the formation of “learning webs.” Today, Illich’s vision of learning webs connecting learners inspires reflection on the use and potential of the internet as a global learning network. To what extent has the internet achieved Illich’s vision? How is the internet enabling learners to connect and share resources?
1-1. Historical trends leading to the formation of the Learning Societies Network.

**Breaking Institutional Monopolies on Education**

The touchstone of the discourse on learning societies has become *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, the 1972 report of the International Commission on the Development of Education, chaired by Edgar Faure. Learning to Be challenges the simplistic equation of education with schooling and attempts to expand the meaning of the “educational system” to include alternative institutions and community resources. The report argues that education should no longer be limited in time to a certain period of life called “school age” or be limited in space to particular authorized buildings called schools: “education must be conceived of as an existential continuum as long as life.”

The report envisions that all avenues of learning would be treated with equal respect. What should matter to society is not institutional prestige, not authorized teaching, but individuals’ learning and the freedom for people to find their own path along the way.

The Faure report also argues that the educational system should support “maximum vocational mobility.” This emphasis foreshadows recent OECD policies aimed at creating a credentialed and mobile workforce. In contrast, Learning to Be asks the educational system to be flexible according to the needs of learners. Yet those needs are likely to be shaped by economic conditions — Learning to Be, as many other visions of the learning society, fails to ask this question: how might economic conditions be shaped by learners for their own well-being, rather than learners shaping themselves to fit the demands of the economy? In short, it is not interested in advancing the question, education for what?

**Overcoming the Human Gap**

The meaning of the learning society shifted to refer to a higher level of innovative collective consciousness with *No Limits to Learning*, written in 1979 for the Club of Rome by James Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra, and Mircea Malitza.

The authors of No Limits to Learning argue that humanity has the potential for collective learning which could overcome the pressing global problems caused by human activity. This gap, the space between human-caused problems and human capacity to solve them, is labeled as the “human gap.” Moving beyond the reform-oriented Faure report, No Limits to Learning has a global scope, envisioning learning as the key to human survival and positive cultural change.

Examining learning at the level of a society as a whole, the authors of No Limits to Learning focus on the distinction between maintenance learning and innovative learning. In the past, they argue, humanity has relied largely on maintenance learning, i.e., learning needed only to maintain a comfortable status quo. Acceptance of maintenance learning, the authors point out, blocks innovation, and makes catastrophe more likely. Innovative learning, in contrast, refers to intentional change, the reformulation of problems and self-adaptation of a system in response to anticipated environmental change. The book also emphasizes participation and the importance of collaborative, dialogic processes in learning, rather than learning as the social assimilation of “expert” knowledge. The ideas of collective learning continued to be developed in the work of Peter Senge on organizational learning in the 1990s.

**Nurturing the Ecology of Learning**

One of the most recent articulations of the learning society emanates from the UNESCO Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) network and its descendant, the Learning Development Institute. LWF argues for an expansive appreciation of the multiple spaces and levels of organizational complexity in which learning occurs. It challenges old assumptions that learning is a matter of individual knowledge acquisition in isolation from a social context. Understanding that learning is fundamentally social, LWF discusses an “ecology of learning”, the interlaced network of open learning communities throughout life.
Creating a learning society, from this perspective, involves caring for the learning ecology as a whole and creating generative conditions for learning through multiple channels, at multiple social levels. The concept of the learning ecology offers the possibility of integrating the ‘soft’ concerns for relationship, care, and mutuality with the ‘hard’ concern for the generation of new knowledge.

Interestingly the group most engaged in the development of learning ecologies and other innovative approaches to collective learning has been the business community. Because learning is seen as essential to commercial success within the context of global corporate competition, business is experimenting with organizational structures that promote collaboration and creativity at a collective level. What is troubling about corporate dominance of the learning conversation is the way it champions the value of learning while limiting its meaning; learning tends to have value only in terms of corporate success.

**Shikshantar**

Several of the directions articulated by the Learning Without Frontiers network have continued to be explored by Shikshantar: The People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development in Udaipur, India. Shikshantar invites learners to remove their “school-colored glasses” (Jain 2000) to consider the harmful impact of schooling on learners and the learning ecology. Diminishing natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation, robbing students of the confidence that they can learn without state-certified experts, reinforcing social stratification, and perpetuating habits of competition and arrogance, schooling is all too often a regressive form of organization for learning. This critique problematizes the effects of schooling and its role in perpetuating unjust industrial systems. Inspired by Indian thinkers/activists such as Gandhi, Krishnamurti and Tagore, Shikshantar refuses to view ‘underdevelopment’, in techno-material terms, as a deficit or ‘globalization’ as a positive inevitability.

Following Illich, and working within a larger critique of western-oriented development, Shikshantar asks learners to imagine a ‘minus-schooling’ learning society. What new possibilities for intergenerational learning might open, were children not confined to state-run institutions during some of their most curious years? With a twist on the title of the Faure report, Shikshantar asks, what do we need to **unlearn** to be?

**Is Learning Just for Earning?**

In recent years, national governments such as New Zealand, England, Japan, Singapore and Namibia have begun to adopt the learning society concept. The list of officially-designated learning societies crosses old categories of north/south, developed/developing. The designation signals a nation’s interest in highlighting the responsive character of its workforce, revitalizing the cultural value of learning across the lifespan, and its desire to be a leader in the global knowledge economy. These policies have resulted, in part, from neo-liberal economic shifts, including the retreat of the welfare state, a focus on worker retraining, and tension about global market competition.

In order to keep pace with change and remain competitive in an aggressive global marketplace, leaders from industry and education argue that learning has become the master capacity in a knowledge economy. Education ministers and corporate leaders alike argue that a nation’s prosperity in the 21st century will depend on the capacity of its citizens to learn. National learning society policies tend to focus on the worker as the locus of adaptation to rapid technological change.

The economic imperative for learning has generated anxiety about accountability and assessment in formal education systems. The learning society, in this sense, has become the crowning conceptualization of human capital thinking: a society in which people are capable and eager to continually upgrade their skills — and the exact status of their skills is known to businesses and the state. This version of the learning society has been called the “skilled society” by McClellan (2000).
1-1- Historical trends leading to the formation of the Learning Societies Network.

Conclusion

More than thirty years after the concept of the learning society was introduced, its meaning now pivots around this question: is learning about people changing their worlds to make them more habitable, more equitable, more beautiful, or is learning about changing people to make them more suitable for the global economy?

The attractiveness of learning in corporate, university, and policy-making circles has raised critical questions about the assumptions underneath the new learning society ideas: life is inherently competitive and we only learn to dominate others; human beings must be motivated by the state or educational institutions to learn; human beings only adapt to, rather than create, pervasive economic and social conditions; learning is only an individual act of acquiring skills/knowledge, rather than a social process of community- and meaning-making.

We have come to understand learning as complex, tangled, uncontrollable, wondrous, yet very natural. We have come to be more humble about the small fraction of learning that is ever visible to us, aware that our institutions of formal education are merely tiny, and often dysfunctional, nodes in a much more powerful and profound network of human learning than we have allowed ourselves to imagine before.

Ongoing dialogue is necessary to prevent the concept of a learning society from becoming colonized to serve the ends of any particular interest. In these conversations, we must continue talking about the questions that brought us to this idea:

- Whose learning counts?
- What are we learning for?
- How is schooling getting in the way of what we value?
- How do we revive the dignity of life’s multiple pathways to being and growing?
- How can we reclaim marginalized sources of knowledge and more fulfilling modes of living, while reasserting the primacy of wisdom and compassion over the cold logic of the market?
- How do we enlarge those moments when we join together in quiet appreciation of what is and energetic building of what might be?
1. How the modern educational system has influenced us?

The pupil is thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is 'schooled' to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. (Ivan Illich)

TAKING OFF OUR SCHOOL-COLORED GLASSES (Vimukt Shiksha, Issue 7)

John Holt (1976) has described that when most people use the word 'education', they are in fact referring to some kind of Treatment – which typically involves transmitting, thought controlling, indoctrinating, social-engineering, coercing, and manipulating other human beings who are perceived either to have some sickness to be cured or some deficit to be filled.

The most common form of this Treatment takes place through Schooling (Noam Chomsky (1988) and others have argued quite persuasively about the Treatment also being administered through large State and Corporate media such as television and newspapers). So before people go to school, they and their communities are diagnosed by some outside ‘expert’ and branded with dehumanizing labels like ‘uneducated’, ‘illiterate’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘irrational’, ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘unreached’, etc.

In other words, one is not fully human, nor can one ever hope to be, without the Treatment. Without a certificate to prove that you have been professionally ‘treated’, you are not only considered a lower form of life but also a menace to society. Which is why it has now become commonplace in our social greetings to make sure to identify, within the first 30 seconds of conversation, the level of Treatment received by those in our company by asking questions like: “What are your qualifications?”

The biggest fallacy that comes with the Treatment is that some of us believe that WE not only have the right but also the moral responsibility to Treat other people for their own good.

Because we have framed the Schooling-Treatment as an ‘universal human right’ and ‘value neutral public good’, neither Schooling nor any of its ‘products’ have been subject to much serious widespread interrogation. However, a far-reaching set of crises have emerged that raise deep doubts about both the future of humanity and the future of the planet.

These global crises implore us to stop blaming the ‘poor’ and ‘marginalized’ for our problems and to start looking at more closely at the ‘crisis of the schooled’. We have not yet begun to fathom the levels of destruction (to different languages, creativities, cultures, species, etc.) that has both taken place among the ‘schooled’ and because of the ‘schooled’.

Schooling has led to severe fragmentation – fragmentation of our whole beings, of our brains, of our knowledge systems, of our communities, of our links with Nature. It has also created new more rigid and unaccountable structures of stratification, vicious competition and debilitating forms of dependency throughout the world. The vast majority of the schooled live their lives believing that they are ‘losers’, ‘failures’ or ‘drop-outs’ and that their local languages, manual labors, traditional cultures, etc. are sub-human and dirty, and deserve to be scorned (unless, of course, they can attract tourism i.e., foreign currency).
How the modern educational system has influenced us?

Both the winners and losers alike are sucked into a vicious postmodern whirlpool of mechanized consumerism, selfishness, ego, violence, and insecurity.

As Aaron Falbel (1996) describes, “Most of us have forgotten what it is like to follow our own noses, to ask our own questions, and find our own answers. Years of educational treatment have convinced us that learning is, and can only be, the result of teaching.” The great tragedy is that not only have we lost faith in our capacities to ‘do’, ‘know’, ‘live together’ and ‘be/become’ without the Treatment, but also that we have lost our love for self-learning. If one is open to also seeing and understanding these ‘realities’, then we have much reason to pause, take a deep breath and reflect before steam-rolling forward with more targets and action plans.

We cannot seriously discuss peoples’ ‘learning needs’ without some having larger vision of Life and a clearer understanding of our collective Pasts, Presents, and Futures. Today, larger questions around the meaning of Development, Globalization and Progress are being seriously debated and reconsidered by various groups around the world. It is imperative that those involved with education link to these debates as they have profound implications for the very meaning of education.

Many people would argue that we should proceed with the agenda of promoting access to and enrolment in Schooling, “After all, everyone should have a right to the Treatment. Granted, there are small gliches in the quality of the Treatment, but these can be corrected afterwards with improvements in curricular content, better teacher training, better teaching aids, etc. Such pauses only further unnecessarily delays the marginalized from developing.”

The mere existence of Schooling causes society to be re-organized in certain ways. It impacts our time-schedules, where we live, who we talk to, how we dress, etc. We get also bound into various dependency relationships with the State and Market.

We don’t realize what is behind one little government school in a village – how many interest groups, how many industries (textbook publishers, construction companies, teacher’s unions, uniform manufacturers, examination companies, etc.), how much infrastructure, how many layers of management.

Our choices and options get limited and directed as we must spend all of our time maintaining this ‘investment’. Furthermore, whatever natural strengths (wisdom, knowledge systems, relationships, people) we have that do not ‘fit’ into this model get devalued and dumped.

Thus, Access/Quality to Education vs. the Meaning of Education are essentially different kinds of questions. In the former, we are locked into a particular worldview of Development and Progress; while in the latter, we still have space to re-conceptualize and renegotiate this worldview.

Jerry Mander has suggested that, “All technologies should be assumed guilty until proven innocent.” The same test should be applied to Schooling. We must consciously examine the hidden negative values of the Treatment in a world brainwashed to see only the positive side of the story.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING SOCIETIES

When we begin thinking about and discussing learning societies, we must be very clear that we are not talking about reforming Schooling, that is, simply treating the Treatment so that it becomes easier to swallow. Rather, we seek to create more open and participatory spaces for dialoguing around the various meanings of education for the 21st century. This dialogue begins with a very basic question: “what kind of world do we really want to live in?” There is not a predetermined right answer to this question; nor, is it too late to discuss it. From this question follows many other questions such as: “what is our role – individually and collectively – in giving shape to such a world?” and “what must be the role of learning in these processes?”
Exposing the Culture of Schooling

1) **Labels, ranks and sorts human beings.** It creates a rigid social hierarchy consisting of a 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 a problem, 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. It prioritizes newspapers, textbooks, television as the only reliable sources of information. These forms of State-Market controlled media cannot be questioned by the general public.

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 Market for livelihood and identity.

This list is certainly not exhaustive. Many more aspects can be added to it, and the linkages between these different aspects need to be drawn. The list also needs to be nuanced to particular contexts and situations. One key point to note, however, is that the culture of schooling is not limited to just the institutions of schools, non-formal education centers or distance education courses. Rather, today its values have permeated into many of different facets of our lives, i.e., into our families, media, religion, community festivals, etc.
1-3- Current trends in learning and education:
UN’s campaign of “Education for All”

More than a decade has passed since the infamous “Education for All (EFA)” meeting that took place in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. There was, however, one new aspect to EFA’s World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000: there seems to be total surrender of the vision and meaning of education to the inevitability of globalization and to the ‘technical expertise’ of the World Bank. The starting point of all the discussions by national governments was how to use education to allow their country to better fit into and compete in the global economy (i.e., to beat out the competition in other countries).

Very few of the delegates were willing to engage in a deeper discussion of the ‘realities’ emerging in many communities: about the larger systems of Development and Globalization that are manufacturing genocidal forms of poverty in both the South and the North; about a system of schooling that is killing local knowledge systems, languages, creativities, social relationships, wisdoms, etc. and is creating a class of ‘educated’ parasites; about the big business of running schools; or, about the legitimacy of global institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, United Nations, etc., who impose their conditionalities on the people of the South. Nor were the delegates interested in trying to expand the meaning of education beyond primary schooling and literacy (even in the face of much research on learning) or in exploring how to strengthen the various non-school learning spaces that exist within communities.

The failures of EFA were attributed to poor planning and management, lack of political commitment, and lack of funds. Reinforcing the tradition of mechanistic planning, the recommendations basically called for tighter controls, bigger rewards/stricter punishments for compliant/non-compliant governments. Amidst the EFA conference, a group of intellectuals, researchers and NGO activists, in the Freirean tradition, issued a parallel statement called the “Latin American Statement on Education for All”, which made some noble demands for more holistic education and critical pedagogy.

But somehow, thirty years after Pedagogy of the Oppressed, these demands seemed to be very naïve – crying out for justice from insensitive and corrupt governments and donor agencies and lacking any understanding of the larger political-economy and philosophical underpinnings that drive the Development Industry. Apparently, no one told this group of dissenters that the rules of the game have changed: the players are bigger and badder and the financial stakes are obscene.

The authors of the Statement are unwilling or unable to challenge the larger Development game (as it might mean that their funding from donor agencies or governments would be cut). Thus, they remain content with issuing grand counter-manifestos of wishful thinking, filled with many ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ such as, “Decision-makers must think ethically”. The most disappointing part of the Latin American Statement was that the authors had very little faith in the intelligence and wisdom of the masses. They still felt that local communities required the ‘education treatment’, albeit from better quality schools, to be ‘conscientized’ to protect their rights from unjust and exploitative systems.

“We are forgetting the necessary personal duties that make families and communities in the first place in a rush to get out from under personal responsibility. To escape. How often do you hear the cry, ‘Let them do it! They get paid for it!’ Them can mean police or street sweepers or social workers or any of a number of other occupational titles that have come to identify our transition from a world of human beings who live together and care about each other to a world of institutions and hired hands.”

John Taylor Gatto
In September 2000, there was a Global Dialogue on “Building Learning Societies: Knowledge, Information and Human Development”, hosted by the World Bank and UNESCO. For the vast majority of participants, the idea of learning societies was not about learning. Rather, it was about the ‘miracle’ of information and communications technologies (ICTs). Their main concern was how to “bridge the digital divide” (in other words, how to sell more computers and software in the South because Northern markets are already over-saturated).

Participants were bombarded with the message that “technology was the key to leapfrogging development”; that “technology was the key to the global family and global equality”; that “technology was the key to rural empowerment and poverty alleviation.” ICTs (and free markets) would overcome the failure of schools and governments. We were presented with seductive feel-good images of the rural farmer sitting at a community cyber-café, in the middle of cornfields, and downloading the latest market prices for his crops, the latest weather information, critical health information, and course materials on agriculture from the best universities in the world. For those endlessly in search of quick fixes to the complex challenges facing our world, ICTs were the answer.

There was no space to discuss important questions like:

- Do local communities really face a shortage of information on how to live their lives?
- How do ICTs need to be developed to really enable rural and urban local communities to stand up and challenge systems of exploitation?
- What social problems emerge with the use of ICTs (i.e., mental and physical passivity, social alienation and violence, info-glut, the superficialization of human expression, etc.)?
- What learning spaces and opportunities do we lose when we prioritize technologies?
- How do ICTs contribute to increasing the concentration of wealth and power in certain institutions and to furthering their domination in the world?

Any effort to raise any of these deeper questions was instantly dismissed as attempts to deny the poor a chance to escape poverty. Besides, why waste time on questions like these – ICTs are the only hope for survival in this brave new world.

Beyond just selling computers, the seminar also helped me to understand the other agendas of the global elite, why they were pushing for learning societies. For one, they were interested in recycling/dumping outdated learning packages. It seems the distance education market is a source of great hope for cash-starved universities in the North, who are willing to sell fast-food diplomas to the degree-hungry ‘educated’ of the South. The elite were also interested in understanding how to funnel rural assets into the global economy. As one panelist (a European member of Parliament) remarked, “Local knowledge is only useful if it can be given market value.” Finally, the elite were keen on exploring how to ‘develop’ more rural consumers – people who would be willing to give away their land, animals, household savings, and futures to become part of the Pepsi generation. All of these agendas were skillfully masked under the phrases, “increasing rural participation” and “strengthening partnerships with the corporate sector.”

Although hi-tech gadgetry was used to make the dialogue more ‘global’, these toys unfortunately did little to either increase the depth of the dialogue or to expand the diversity of perspectives (although there were more voices coming from people with different skin colors, they all seemed to be saying the same thing, i.e., they were all begging the World Bank for more money).
Current trends in learning and education: Where to go from here? 5

One can draw many insights about the barriers that stand in the way of the unfolding of learning societies. It would appear that there are two major camps struggling to control the dialogue on learning societies: the pro-Status Quo group (with their reformer friends), who place all their hope in the panacea of the strong State and schools, versus the pro-Leapfrogging Development group, who believe in the promise of the Market and ICTs.

Liberating the learning societies concept from this stalemate can happen if we expose two faulty premises: (1) the State and the Market are separate forces which have visions of education that are at odds with each other; and (2) common people (the 80%+ social majorities of the world) are ‘ignorant’ and ‘stupid’ and cannot live without Big Brother or the Invisible Hand to guide them.

The State (with its duly-appointed team of bureaucrats and politicians) and Market (with its learning organizations of industrialists and financiers) have had a common vision of education since the days of colonialism. While they may disagree on the tools and techniques (e.g., schools vs. ICTs), the State and the Market both have a vested interest in propagating the ‘culture of schooling’. They both seek to fuel the global industrial-military machine (and manipulate the public to fill their respective coffers).

Rather than falling into the trap of choosing sides, those concerned with unfolding learning societies should discuss the culture of schooling, as it manifests itself through various institutions, programs and technologies, in different aspects of our daily lives.

There are many hard questions out there in the world of learning societies that need to be faced. Some of these questions include:

- How do we go about undoing/unlearning the damage already done to us by the culture of schooling?
- What kinds of specific capacities, feelings and information sources do local communities need to face external challenges such as globalized exploitation?
- What should be the role, if any, of the State, Market, International Donors, NGOs, Media, etc. in creating a generative environments for learning societies to unfold?
- What kinds of fundamental attitudinal shifts and operational changes do they need to undergo? How do we dismantle their monopoly of power?
- How do we go about re-examining and replenishing traditional knowledge systems, social relationships, media, wisdom frameworks, etc.?
- How to prevent these from being co-opted by the State-Market nexus?
- How should ‘Western’ notions of progress, democracy, science, development, and human rights be re-conceptualized in the context of learning societies?
- How do we negotiate the tensions between equality and diversity, between freedom and responsibility, between creativity and stability in the context of learning societies?

There are no universal or pre-determined answers to these questions. Creating times and spaces to discuss these questions in meaningful ways will be a big step towards unfolding learning societies.
2- Why was the Learning Societies Conference held in Iran: lessons for Iran’s transition.

Key questions:
- Should we continue the modernization process in the footsteps of the West, or can we create other alternatives?
- Is the question about East vs. West, Tradition vs. Modernity, or can we break through the dichotomy?

The good thing about the situation of Iran is that it has not fully become part of the global economy yet. Iranians are going through an important test. Because a unique culture already exists, but the temptation to lose it is strong.

Munir Fasheh

2-1- Selected quotes from LS members on their reasons for coming to Iran.

Shilpa: We are having the meeting in Iran because of the hope and possibility we see in Iran, based on the friendship we’ve had for centuries. Many people feel alone. We are here to connect, to build bridges, share alternatives.

Munir: The whole world is trying to isolate Iran as an outlaw. But, Iran is very important, because of its position in Central Asia & the Middle East. The good thing is that Iran is still not part of the global economy and has resisted doing so. However, Iranians are going through an important test. Because a unique culture already exists, but the temptation to lose it is strong. My worry is that some Iranians believe science is the answer and they are moving more and more towards measuring people.

Shammi: Too much vaccination from outside weakens the immune system. We need to have faith in the body to heal and faith in the society to learn. I am here for the feeling of closeness and similarity between India and Iran, which are separated by nation-state. We need to regain the diversity.

Yusuf: The impression people abroad have of Iran is weird. The dynamic is different in Iran.

Manish: To me there are three main reasons for being in Iran. The first reason is to rebuild the link and the flow between Iran, India, Pakistan, Malaysia and the countries and people who have always had a connection for centuries (now being broken by the dominant trend for turning towards American/European consultancy). Second, Iran is one of the few countries openly taking the stance against global bullying. We are here to show our solidarity. Finally, we need to dig around and explore while finding our roots.
Charlotte: Coming to Iran is deeply important to me, because I always feel the need to go to others that are presented to me as “others”. I want to face my fears, the fear of dichotomous thinking, i.e. East/West, body/mind, and axis of evil/rest of the world. I want to understand what kind of ways of learning and living can be there to escape this dichotomy, while learning with those we are trying to co-create with.

Nitin: My first reason to come here is partly personal, which is related to my prejudice against Islam; I want to discover for myself. Second, my current obsession is to discover my connections; what gives me meaning? How can we resist the loneliness of modern world? The journey to Iran is to discover myself and my family, because I see this as an extended family. Finally, I am here for the challenge of making new friends.

Harleen: For a while I was cynical to relate with people outside my circle. I was withdrawn. Now I want to connect more.

Jinan: I have come to Iran hoping to see a different approach. However, in the past few days I have come to realize that Iranians are trying to fight America the American way!

Suesan Ghahremani: Munir Fasheh was an inspirational, revolutionary, writer in the library journals we never imagined to meet. In 2003, when we finally found him outside Palestine, and he accepted our invitation to visit us in Iran, we were more than thrilled and happy to see how humble and hard working he is. Many people know him through his writings during the times he was in Palestine or at Harvard; but we know him as Munir, a humble friend who accepted our invitation and was our guest for two weeks in our home in spring 2005. Our journey together to Isfahan and Shiraz sparked the start of a wonderful friendship which was so strong that it attracted people from the learning society from all around the world to visit Iran and experience what we are doing with our languages in making a community history.
Talking about modernity and tradition, West and East is a dichotomy created by the modern mind. Why limit ourselves to only these two poles, when there are infinite possibilities for learning and living?

Manish Jain

We are not opposing Orientalism to Occidentalism. We are abandoning the very idea of One World.

For their Intercontinental Encounter, the Zapatistas suggested: Un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos, 'A world in which many worlds can fit' (or given the connotations of fitness in English, 'A world in which many worlds can be embraced'). Perhaps what we want is to regenerate the multiverse, liberating ourselves from the universe con-structed by the West.

Given the real conditions of the world, we need of course to concentrate a lot of effort on a radical critique of the West: modern science, Europology, etc. But a similar effort should be done to embrace our worlds, to articulate our ideas, to better formulate our alternative philosophies.

We may walk together a good part of the road: first of all, for our common critique of the West. We may follow different paths while trying to regenerate our own views, philosophies, regions. And we will join again, enjoying the experience of being together and embracing each other, thanks to our differences – not in spite of them – and thus showing to everyone that there are other ways to relate to each other, as an alternative to homogenization, Westernization.

(Gustavo Esteva, pp.10-13, Multiversity)⁶.

- **The objective should be to resist Western domination and not condemn anything Western.** The idea is not to condemn Western peoples per se but those structures and practices which have in-flicted massive violence.

- **The idea in recovering Third World histories should neither be to romanticize the past nor to assume a cultural relativist position** which allows to you to defend the most heinous social practices (gender, caste etc) in these societies.

- **The subject of international law should be mentioned because Western domination in the era of globalization is being expressed and entrenched in the language of international law.** It is displacing national legal systems in their importance. It is therefore an urgent task at hand both to rewrite the history of international law from the standpoint of Third World peoples as well as to offer a contemporary critique.

- **We need to produce alternatives to First World texts** which are taught in Third World universities.

(B.S. Chimni, p.8, Multiversity)⁶
2-2- Should we continue in the footsteps of the West or can we envision other alternatives?

We often fail to grasp the completeness of the incompleteness of the West and the present incompleteness of the completeness of the East.

I often feel that our intellectual language - particularly the diagnostic and the academic language is so completely Westernized that unless the very 'intellectual', 'systematic' so called and academic method of description and prescription is abandoned wholly, no description can link the description of malignancy of the 'Western' with the prescriptive needs for the regaining of non-Western's health. Gandhi abandoned that language alto-gether. Hence, need for a new language – a connecting one – and connecting factors are found if the universal is espoused with its specific manifestations according to the time and place. Simply put, an academic critique of the Western does not bring the truth home to a Westerner; for through critiques they have plugged the apparent holes. But when the non-academic language of plain truths of life is used for describing their life, it shakes their confidence in the strength and morality of Western modernity.

There are roughly three interpretations or ways of assertion:

One: West is different, we are different; i.e. 'We have our own culture, which is best for us, and it is different from the Western culture. It is good for us because it is ours.'

Two: West is oppressive and therefore what is required is liberation from the West. The submerged and the subjugated must be allowed to surface, the very subjugation-state then grants a tradition, a thought, validity for whatever and howsoever it is. Here the modernists become the spokes high/lower of the native/indigenous/the tradition and cause its incorporation; liberation for incorporation.

Three: West and East are only convenient dichotomies. For real universal moral and material progress guidance from the idea of dichotomous East-West duality does not help re-build us in a world where cultures and thoughts travel worldwide and cross borders in the same fashion as air does – or bad odor and fragrance do.

The running theme is the 'otherness' of the other - in the first two, as it is in the post modernist debate too. Thus, an 'anti' position vis a vis West has a possibility of falling into the post modernist pitfall.

The language 'otherness' of the 'other' is what we call political language. …To talk of the West only in terms of and in matters of science, technology, etc. can help only so far science and technology have a role in the totality of life, not beyond. And our problem is mostly about this 'beyond' area. Because that 'beyond-aspect' of Life has been erased from our intellectual mindset and we think that life is only that which is governed by modern science and technology.

In order to arrive at some mature understanding of 'us' and the 'other', I think the relationship between what is universal in both and what is specific must be understood. I think Gandhi's approach to that 'different' is this. If we can find the common ground on which even the adversary can agreeably stand, then the differences, the 'otherness' falls in place. This common ground is not of interests but of certain universal principle or truth. (Rajiv Vora, Multiversity, pp.14-17) 6

Our problem is not modern vs. traditional; our concern is about authentic vs. unauthentic.

KB Jinan
2-2- Should we continue in the footsteps of the West or can we envision other alternatives?

We ought to be careful and make sure we do not end up doing to the West what it has done to us. In other words, our purpose is not to reframe or represent the West in the ways we ourselves have been victimized, but to liberate both the non-West as well as the West.

(Ziauddin Sardar, p.7, Multiversity)^

A Monoculture in Decline: Challenges from Within
(by Jennifer Gidley, Vimukt Shiksha, 2001) 7

Underpinned by scientific positivism and materialist epistemology and, in recent decades, amplified by information technologies and the economic rationalist paradigm of commodification, the West has claimed cultural superiority since the Enlightenment. With this self-imposed authority (at first European, now American), it has sought to ‘develop’ the ‘underdeveloped world’, using the paradigms of “deficit” and “disadvantage” rather than “diversity” as its justification. Yet ironically, the ‘over-developed’ western culture has been showing signs of decay for decades.

The litany of symptoms exhibited by many young people of the ‘most developed’ nations, exemplify this fact with great poignancy. Research shows that many youth of the West are increasingly manifesting high rates of depression, eating disorders and other forms of mental illness. Increasing numbers are committing suicide and other violent crimes at an alarming rate, and are expressing a general malaise, loss of meaning and hopelessness about the future. Sohail Inayatullah refers to this as “post-industrial fatigue.”

Could it be that the lack of meaning experienced by many western youth today is related to an education that lacks imagination and other non-discursive ways of knowing?

There are several major factors inherent in the western materialist cultural paradigm, which have contributed to a failure of healthy enculturation of young people. These include the triumph of egoism over community, the manipulation of imagination, the secularization of culture and the degradation of environment.

Individualism versus Community

The current age of the ‘I’ which celebrates self-centered egoism,…has set in motion a process where rights began to dominate responsibilities. While not wanting to undermine the gains that have been made in terms of equity and human rights, I feel that, in the process of unmediated individualism, the needs of family and community have often been compromised. As a result of the ensuing breakdown of families and other social structures (linked also to the shift in male-female power relationships), we are seeing an unprecedented fragmentation of the social glue, without which young people are rudderless in their social orientation.

The Colonization of Imagination

Over roughly the same period of time, the imaginations of children and youth have changed; once nourished by oral folk and fairy tales, today they are poisoned by electronic nightmares. Since the advent of TV and video game parlors, followed by the use of computer games (originally designed to train and desensitize soldiers before sending them off to the killing fields), children and youth have been consistently and exponentially exposed to violent images. Globalization has made this ‘entertainment’ ubiquitous, thus allowing for the subsequent colonization of youth culture and imagination, globally.
2-2- Should we continue in the footsteps of the West or can we envision other alternatives?

The Secularization of Culture
The triumph of secular over spiritual values, coinciding with the widespread crisis of values reflected in postmodernism as a ‘belief’ system, has resulted in a dominant world culture which — although ostensibly Christian — is in practice amoral. Egoism that brings greed in its wake; economic rationalism stripped of principles of social justice; the secularisation of education; the death of churches as inspiring community organizations; and, ultimately, cultural fascism and religious fundamentalism that lead to ethnic cleansing, are all symptoms of societies that have lost connections with moral, ethical and spiritual values.

The Degradation of the Environment
Finally, the culture dominating the global environmental agenda, which values private and corporate profit over community and planet, has been responsible for the systematic and pervasive pollution of our earth, air and water. What message, we might wonder, has this given to our youth?

Emancipatory Potential of Globalization
Even whilst the globalization project threatens to be more damaging in its colonising and homogenising power than the original Modernity project (colonialism), it also holds the potential for emancipation. It is suggested by Bhandari that what is needed is to be able to distinguish between the hegemonic and emancipatory potential of the diverse strands of modernity. I feel several emerging opportunities can be harnessed. Some of these, paradoxically, co-exist within the western model itself:

- The inherent focus on individualism in the western paradigm, as discussed above, can be transformational if used selflessly, for the greater good. Individual human agency then becomes a powerful force to counter the homogenizing effects of a dominant monoculture.
- Anti-materialist, humanist, alternative streams within the western educational and cultural paradigm (that have developed in parallel with mainstream culture) are becoming even more active, particularly as materialist culture becomes stronger (such as the educational alternative discussed below).
- The potential of free human beings to use global networks for the common good is beginning to be harnessed. For example, it has enabled many of the above authors to publish and circulate their book on the Internet, thereby sharing their concerns about globalization globally!

It has been strongly argued by some educational futurists that the limitations of the instrumental rationality of western scientific positivism, has rendered it as being well past its ‘use-by date’23 as a viable dominant epistemology for the future. The ‘global problematique’ has become so complex that the rational paradigm, with its fragmented disciplines and specializations, is completely unable to cope with finding solutions.

What is needed is integrated education systems, at both the school and tertiary levels, which are underpinned by higher order knowledge systems and inclusive cosmologies. Such systems reclaim wisdom as the goal of learning and transformation as the goal of a learning society.

We have no business to be caught in history even if it is empirically valid. We should concentrate on open-ended constructions of the past. History as a closed, unilinear project was an invention of the European Enlightenment and perfected as a trap by western hegemony. (Ashis Nandy, Multiversity, p.19)6
2-2- Should we continue in the footsteps of the West or can we envision other alternatives?

How can I heal myself from the “West”? (Munir Fasheh, Swapathgami, pp.8-9) 8

To me, the term “West” is not an academic or intellectual term, and it is not geographic… To me, it means pain, injustice, destruction, and anger within me, and insensitivity on the part of institutions, an insensitivity that is manifested in many ways including transforming human pain into intellectual debates and discussions.

I don’t mean people (after all, I have been married to an American for almost 40 years; obviously I don’t mean to heal from her!) The West I want to heal from is the one that has been interfering and disrupting my life and destroying many aspects of my life, almost daily… It is the logic, which I believe most are victims of.

For many years, I carried that “virus” (institutionalization of all aspects of human life) and spread it through my work (mainly as a teacher of math and physics). I embodied the west in my perceptions, conceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; I internalized it in many aspects in my life: giving worth to young people by assigning numbers to them along a vertical measure; I believed that everything could eventually be understood by the mind; I believed that the western path is the path to follow if we want to get ahead; I felt that my duty was to help develop my people, community and country.

Gandhi put it very clearly in his distinction between the British and their institutions, when Nehru pressed him, “isn’t your aim to drive the British out of India?”. Gandhi said that if the British wished to stay, they were welcome; his biggest worry is if the British left but their institutions stayed.

The pain I felt made me think of the West as a disease. I felt I needed to heal from a lot of what I internalized. It took me many years; I am still struggling.

That probably explains why I never felt that fighting the west is an appropriate approach; what I felt more is to heal from it. By fighting it, one gets contaminated. The need to heal is what I see common to people who have been exposed to hazardous materials such as education, mass media, and processed foods...

It is in this sense that I use the word “West”, and in this sense that I think it is more accurate to perceive it as a disease than an enemy. This means that the challenge is to heal and protect rather than to fight and blame.

It is important to mention two other things here: first, every society has diseases of its own, but no other civilization – to my knowledge – has developed and polished universal tools to spread their diseases. Second, because of its current dominance, any dialogue that excludes westerners would be an avoidance that robs us all from understanding the contemporary world. This is another reason why I think that the image of disease is appropriate because it points out to the need that we all need to collaborate in dealing with what is threatening life on earth.

A good name for the disease would be “corruption of minds”. We continue to talk about symptoms and avoid talking about the disease. What also worries me is that such corruption does not make minds illogical; on the contrary, it corrupts in a way that makes minds sharper, and very active and logical. It is presented in a way that makes perfect sense to minds that were developed through texts and screens – remote from reality and thus unable to see it. People who accept such fallacies are often very logical. What they have lost is their senses, including sensing the suffering of others.

The world is facing the possibility of total annihilation or – at least – the inability to sustain life in the long term, and we go on doing exactly what makes that possibility more real…
Key questions:
- How can we create a space for genuine dialogue for sharing and learning from each other, without taking sides?
- Are we just talking about tolerating the ideas of others, or do we realize that we need to go deeper, to forget about the perceived “otherness” of each other?

Avoid using words that you do not have personal meaning and experience of; to encourage you to co-author the meanings of words you use. Such co-authoring is crucial if we want to avoid being consumers of terms and meanings, and if we want to protect ourselves from the bombardment of words whose meanings do not stem from our lives.

Munir Fasheh

Perspectives on the purpose and nature of the “conference” in Iran.

Yusef: We are not the enlightened ones selling the product of unlearning. Unlearning is not a thing; it’s a process. We need to find ourselves what we have unlearned? And why should I unlearn?

Munir: We should stress health, in a very broad way, as the most important value. No one talks about health (other than public health, bodily health, etc.) in its deeper and broader sense. The Arabic word for health is “Sehat”, the root meaning of which is wholesome and right. We are here to have more people “moving at the pace of slowest” to keep the health and togetherness.

We need to talk about issues in terms of our own experiences. Also, ask people for personal experiences and interrupt them when they are distracted with generalizations and abstractions by asking, “Where is the ‘I’ in your story?”

Shilpa: We need to create a space for people to release and share. Releasing is part of a healthy system. A personal story is always truthful. We need to pair up with people and ask them different questions, like “Who do you come from?”

Manish: A question is an invitation to learn about others’ stories. We need to start ourselves, with our own personal stories and invite people to share their stories with us.

Hussein Doostdar: In the U.S. for the first time I heard the statement “That’s your problem!”. From then on I thought that I could not relate with anyone except Iranians, which was proved to be wrong after meeting you people!

(excerpts from pre-conference discussions)
3-1- The purpose and nature of the “conference”: an experience for deeper dialogue and interaction.

We need to stop pretending that what happens at international meetings, or at their national level counterparts, constitutes some kind of real dialogue. Without flexibility and intimate spaces to continually interrogate our deeply held assumptions, mental models and understandings of ‘reality’, generative dialogues cannot emerge.

Tolerance vs. Hospitality

Perhaps I can better discuss what bothers me in the dialectic tolerance/hospitality (particularly the tolerance recommended after 11 September). Tolerance means to suffer with patience. The person who tolerates perceives the other as someone who has not the right color of the skin, the proper God, the correct behavior. He feels the generosity of tolerating the other, of suffering him with patience. At times, however, the one who tolerates loses his patience and is no longer able to tolerate the other. Though more gentle or discreet, tolerance is merely a different form of intolerance.

'Toleration,' Goethe observed, 'ought in reality to be merely a transitory mood. It must lead to recognition. To tolerate is to insult.'

Hospitality, on the other hand, is a recognition, an association, a coming together of an entirely different sort. In being hospitable you recognize the pluralism of reality. You host the other even when you are disagreeing with his arguments, his versions of the multiverse of the real world. To be hospitable does not mean to follow the other, to adopt his views, to affirm or negate him. Hosting the other simply means to open your arms and doors for him and to accept his existence in his own place.

Along these lines, we may think of including in the enterprise the question of the intercultural dialogue, a dialogical dialogue, a dialogue transcending the logos, the conceptual systems of the parties involved. What I am trying to say is that I prefer the mood of liberation (rather than defense or resistance) and hospitality (rather than tolerance). We can open the dialogue once we succeed to show that science and all the other Western constructions are rooted cultural expressions, particularisms. Once we reduce them to their real condition we will be able to be hospitable towards them, with the kind of hospitality that we claim for ourselves.

(Gustavo Esteva, pp.11-13, Multiversity)
The purpose and nature of the “conference” in Iran: a unique experience for deeper dialogue and interaction.

Creating **authentic dialogue** is so crucial in the world today. Such dialogue necessarily starts with what people do (rather than with rootless concepts). One way of describing the kind of dialogue I am talking about is by going to the **root of the word for discussion in Arabic: *tanaqush***. The root of the word is *naqasha*, which means to chisel. How Arabs in ancient times seem to have seen the relationship between chiseling and discussion is interesting: the purpose of both is to beautify what is facing you. In chiseling it is bringing the beauty in a stone; in discussions, the purpose is to bring the beauty in each other – and not to win or prove the other is wrong! How beautiful!

Within modern institutions, there is a lot of activities, reports etc, but not much dialogue within groups and very little (if any) across groups, whose purpose is to bring the beauty in self and in others. When and where it exists, dialogue focuses mainly on technical aspects – at best, on reforms. Hardly anywhere there is dialogue concerning fundamentals, such as perceptions, values, and the logic that underlies actions, conceptions, and relationships.

*Munir Fasheh*¹

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**Muthanna**

All my life I felt I am made up of “muthannas”. Now “muthanna” in Arabic is when two people and the relation between them becomes so important to both of them.

When I was invited to a conference on intercultural dialogue in UNESCO in Paris, somebody asked me “Ok, what’s the difference between ‘muthanna’ and a couple or two people?”

I said, “Since I’m in France, Rene Descartes said ‘I think, therefore I am’. In the logic of muthanna I would say ‘you are, therefore I am’.

There is no European language that has anything we equal or close to “muthanna” and to me this is part of why they keep talking about the “other” as a target to kill or as a target to absorb, like a consumer in the economy.

*Munir Fasheh, Tehran conference*
3-1- The purpose and nature of the “conference” in Iran: a unique experience for deeper dialogue and interaction.

The trip to Baluchistan [for the Learning Societies meeting in 2006] clarified and confirmed within me several things.

The first clarification is that the most we can do is to inspire each other, and not teach each other. Learning that stems out of inspiration happens – just like in breathing and digesting – unconsciously, naturally, and freely, in accordance with inner convictions and with one’s aliveness and attentiveness to what is happening around. It happens in an unplanned way and touches our depths.

The second clarification was the difficulty that I keep realizing in educated/developed people to learn – in the sense of allowing the self to be confronted; allowing what is there to penetrate one. Said differently: the difficulty of the educated to surrender to a new experience, like a child does when s/he is totally absorbed by something – in the sense of entering into an experience without realizing it is something new; i.e., entering it with no prior concepts and no conscious thinking. If one enters an experience with a mindset, and with ready terms and assumptions, s/he can learn a lot about people and the culture, but not from them in the sense of learning as a result of being inspired by them. They learn more about the concepts than from the experience.

A third clarification which was confirmed within me is that the main value in being in such communities is not to study and understand them (which is not possible in a week – not even in years!) but to know myself better and to be ready to confront many of my perceptions, beliefs, and practices.

I again realized that the so-called “underdeveloped peripheries” are real inspiring-learning opportunities for us, where we can confront our conditionings and unlearn a lot of what we learned in institutions. They are opportunities to understand and rule ourselves [the concept of self rule (or, swaraj) was a central concept in Gandhi’s life]. I further realized that change should not be planned; it happens naturally as a result of attentiveness, aliveness, and being true to one’s principles, and happens in accordance with self-rule and inner calling.

(Munir Fasheh, Reflections on trip to Iran and Pakistan: Studying societies vs. experiencing them)

I feel anger, but I’ve managed not to have hatred. Hatred always leads to the opposite of being able to deal with what is hated. I have been concerned with exposing the logic rather than blaming people.

Munir’s emails on “healing from the West”
3-2. The general organization of the Learning Societies Conference in Tehran, main themes and areas of focus.

The main theme was the concept of health in its broader sense, unlearning our concept of health in different forms, i.e. health of the body/mind, health of communities, health of the planet.

Unlearning “plastic words” to regain health in our language, to be able to distinguish between “fahm vs. vahm” and “authentic vs. unauthentic”, to be able to reach a new understanding of ourselves, our societies and our lives to regain the ability to learn in a healthy way.

Thereby, freeing ourselves from the dichotomies of Body/Mind, Traditional/Modern, East/West, Underdeveloped/Developed to be able to explore and imagine the infinite possibilities for learning, living and becoming.

First, without flexibility and intimate spaces to continually interrogate our deeply held assumptions, mental models and understandings of ‘reality’, generative dialogues cannot emerge. The pre-occupation with scale, manifestos, action-plans and formality/protocol in these international meetings prevents this intimacy from ever taking place (except for maybe in the corridors and bathrooms). Furthermore, generative dialogues require a great deal of self-initiative to organize themselves and grow. But most of the time, technocratic organizers and presenters ‘own’ the meeting, and most of the people are there to passively experience the sessions, not to actively create them.

Secondly, generative dialogues cannot grow in the polluting environment of negative dualities, where all relationships are framed as ‘transactions’ that take place in the larger struggle for power. To resuscitate environments of positive pluralities, we must focus on rebuilding trust — starting with our own lives. This means that we need to learn to listen to each other with greater humility, as well as to experiment with different forms of expression, in order to get past some of the plastic words and phrases. Our hearts have a greater role to play in such a process than do our ears or our mouths. We also need to make ourselves vulnerable again to a faith in the goodness of human beings and Nature and, at the same time, learn to forgive (and sometimes even appreciate) human mistakes when they occur.

Lastly, this means that we need to more deeply try to understand our collective selves — the wholeness of our beings and our connections to and shared interests in the larger web of life.

(Manish Jain, In Search of Learning Societies, pp.15-16, Vimukt Shiksha, April 2001)
4- What were the highlights, insights and learning from the meetings?

The gathering in Iran was unique in many ways. Most distinctive about it was the number of young Iranian participants, both women and men. [The only other gathering that had big youth participation was the one in Udaipur in 2002.]

Another distinctive aspect was the deep discussions that took place among the organizers in Iran prior to the meeting.

A third aspect was what came out of the gathering in the form of ideas that people want to follow up with. [Some of these ideas: a week in a forest in the western part of Iran, living in and with nature; meeting for several days with university people in Iran concerning science, knowledge, evaluation, etc; translating some children stories from Farsi into Arabic to be published and distributed in Palestinian schools; mutual visits between Iranians and people in neighboring countries, like Pakistan and India; small meetings on various topics in various places; and having a web site through which there would be ongoing posting, sharing, discussing etc among individuals/groups who form part of the current network or interested in what the various groups are doing.]

(Munir Fasheh, Istinara emails, Oct-Nov 2007)
4-1- Session 1: Why learning?

Key questions for the session dialogues:

- **What is one thing in your life which is beautiful and meaningful for you which has been made invisible and we are losing it because it’s invisible?**
- **What is one thing that is harmful for you or your community, which is being hidden and we are being blind to its destruction?**

What we really want to do is to build on what is beautiful. We can not really build on what is ugly. It’s like the body, where the healthy part heals the sick part.

*Munir Fasheh*
Learning for well-being and health.

Munir

This is my third time in Iran and I decided that the fourth time I will ask for citizenship! I love here very much; I should really say I already feel I’m a member of this society and I don’t need a document to prove it. I feel it and I sense it and I think this is something that we usually lose: our senses. When we were coming this morning to this place, one can really see and feel and breath the pollution and every city we or I have been to, the pollution is high; we all smell it we all feel it we all see the destruction in it. Again the senses that Jinan was talking about, but somehow our senses, though we smell it but as if it is an information, or there is pollution but we do not act we do not do anything to really release our senses our bodies and nature and the cities from this pollution. This blindness is really what I see we are trying to tackle in learning societies.

Many of you have heard me or read about the story or my relationship with my mother, where she was illiterate and the way she was able to work with mathematics was much nicer, much more human, much more integrated in her life than the math that I studied at universities and taught at universities. I really just want to mention this story very quickly to say how our blindness in two directions is very dangerous. First, we are blind to the beauty in people, in cultures, in communities and secondly we are blind to the destruction of the kind of knowledge that I have. To me, for seeing this blindness and for being aware of it, of course we need our senses. But in addition to our senses, we need what we might call the values that would help us navigate in this blindness and the main value that I see we have totally destroyed or we are totally destroying, even in our own lives, is what we can really call health in its broad sense, or well-being; the well-being of people, the well-being of communities, the well-being of nature.

We can not really talk about moving into the future without taking every step by asking about the well-being of ourselves and our relations with others and of nature. Sometimes, the way we deceive our minds, so that our mind becomes blind to both the beauty in people and the harm in progress (which is called knowledge, science, technology, and so on) when they are not bound with this value, the well being. We all commit the crime of giving food that is not really food to our children, we all commit the crime of trying to put our children in front of TV or whatever to get them out of our way so we can go on doing what we need to do as if health is not something we need to do!

We need to care for the health of children, the health of nature, the health and well-being of all of these communities we see everyday, where there is harm and destruction. And we still refuse to learn. Of course, to help the environment there are environmental studies, but my behavior has nothing to do with what I study. I can talk about it or find out all the wrong things, the chemicals that are going into our food, but somehow don’t put any effort to protect myself or to protect my children or to protect nature from this pollution in life and harm on living.
4-1- Learning for well-being and health.

So, here is where language and words come in. Words are the biggest distorer of the mind of understanding, if they are not accompanied by values and by actions that are in harmony with what the words mean. A month ago, when I was in Oaxaca in Mexico and Gustavo Esteva, some of you may have heard of him, was telling a story which is very interesting. He himself is partially indigenous. He said that the Aztecs (Aztecs were indigenous people in central and southern America) invented an alphabet and then after some time they saw the bad impact of the alphabet on the minds, behavior and relationships of people on themselves and on nature, so they decided consciously to stop it. They chose to go back to the language that was not alien to them, which was the language that they used in their daily interactions. Now, maybe this is an extreme thing, but the idea is that there were some people there who said very clearly that reading and having an alphabet was not a blessing by its nature, as if it's a blessing absolutely the way we use it, or the way we deal with it to create meaning.

So, we cannot just say let's teach Farsi or English or Arabic or so on, as if it's a neutral tool; a tool like all other tools. Either it becomes our master and makes us live in a world of illusion, or it becomes our servant and we then use it for our benefits. This is where it is very crucial that we keep clear in our minds what is it that we do not violate. And maybe at this moment for a while, like Jinan said for several years he did not read because what he wanted was to reconnect with nature, to reconnect with children, to reconnect with life. So he gave himself that distance for several years. I think actually it is a good idea if we all, who are educated to give ourselves at least a month, start with a month not to read anything and to do exactly what you did in the morning, to be with nature, to be with one another to learn a lot about life without the medium of language or words, and without the medium of symbols.

A very appropriate example that I can give here is the image of women in Iran in the world. The image is that these people have nothing. However, I have never been in any society where almost every woman I met has a means to express herself more than in Iran. This is just amazing, whether its music or writing or any other form you know, really one tries to express. In some societies that I consider to be really educated, take for example Boston, even when women have something it's not part of them. It's not an expression, it's a degree and a degree is not an expression; a degree doesn't measure anything other than the number of hours you sit in an institution called educational institution and the number of hours that you try to learn things that are not of interest to you. A degree, like what I wrote once about grading, is degrading. When I say I have a degree and this is my value, I'm actually telling you I have no value. If my value is the degree, if I have a PhD in child development, but I can not raise a happy child, this is exactly the meaning of knowledge in what is called the dominant world, the civilized world. We know a lot, but all the knowledge is symbolic and sometimes technical, not part of our lives.

What matters is the ability to express and to have an expression that really comes from your heart, whether it is language or music or just planting or making pottery. I mean the music that we heard yesterday, and some of you where there, the Sufi music which is hundreds of years old and still touches us very deep, rather than just a quick music and then the next week there's another music and then another. They all come and go like a piece of a sweet and that's it. Maybe you feel the sweetness a little bit but that doesn't really leave us with any nutrition. So, the images, the symbols, the words, the dominant meanings, the official meanings control our minds, control our perceptions and a good part of learning societies is to regain our understanding of the world and our making of meaning in the world.
4-1- Learning for well-being and health.

Manish

Salam, chetori? What we thought is we could also give some time to many of the friends who have come from different countries. We are also interested in hearing your experiences and some of your stories. So, what we thought we could do is to have groups of four; plus in each group one person who has come from abroad to have dialogue on one question. The question is “what is one thing in your life which is beautiful and meaningful for you which has been made invisible and we are losing it because it’s invisible?” And the second part of that question is “what is one thing that is harmful for you or your community, which is being hidden and we are being blind to its destruction?”

In the learning societies, the starting point is really our own stories. So, generalizations, abstractions, or talking about what politicians are doing, etc becomes a very general talk. It doesn’t have much meaning and doesn’t give us much power, either. So, we can start talking about our own stories, something that is beautiful and meaningful for us, which we think has been made invisible and is lost and something which is harmful for us, in our family or our community, which is being hidden. Both sides are connected and they are not separate issues – it is there and we can not see or it was once and we have lost it all. I would also ask the friends from abroad to from their own communities and share their experiences.

Munir

For example, the meaning of muthanna is something valuable that we never really thought it represented another way of living, another kind of logic of living. So this is something beautiful that has been made invisible and that we have been made blind to.

As another example, I don’t know of any school system in the world that teaches science and at the same time in addition to what science has done in terms of good things, explains on the other page the harm that science has done. Actually, the harm that science has done during the last one hundred years is much more than the good it has done, and the problems it has created are much more serious than the problems it has solved. So, we have become blind to the harm that is done by science and to the beauty in our communities, in our cultures and in ourselves.

Manish

I can give you one more example. I live with my grandmother, who is almost 90 years old. For many years I was taught in graduate studies and education that the illiterates in our country India are stupid, ignorant and not capable. They are the source of the problems we are facing. When I started living with my grandmother I started to watch what was very beautiful, how every single thing she was conserving and I think maybe your grandmothers are the same. People may think that if you want to know about environment you should go to environmental studies or get a consultant on environmental issues. But, my grandmother is the first one to say “why is that water falling without you knowing it”; it’s not something she is intellectualizing. It’s the beauty of how to live in harmony with nature and how to conserve even today.
4.1- Learning for well-being and health.

Shilpa

If we really want to talk a lot or write a lot about zero waste living, people may say, “Oh, zero waste living is some concept from an institute?” I say no. We are living it by living with our grandmother. So, that beauty is within us. Old people know how to conserve resources, how to take care of each other, how to be in harmony with nature. How can we continue to call them illiterate and stupid and think that they are the ones who have to be educated? Then I see how much when I live in a city, growing up in a city, how much waste, how much plastic we are producing. For every small thing, how much is being wasted. No attention is paid to that by educated people. So you know, we think there is no cost to that and that we can keep using plastic, throwing it in the garbage.

In learning societies how do we live? We are caring and valuing about the seeds, the important cultural seeds, without trying to romanticize things or without trying to overvalue, by losing balance. But there is something we have, which is very beautiful and valuable, and we need to see again.

Let me say one other small example with education, about two things that are very disturbing in India. There are two phrases which are used by all educationists and by teachers, which are un-questioned. The first one is what they call now the children who are going to school, whose parents did not go to school. They have given them the label “first generation learners” and this is accepted by the local and international community. When we use that phrase, it means that in the last five thousand years, nobody in our society has been learning anything and because of the school now all of a sudden they are learning! We have five thousand years of knowledge of recorded history and of experience and these phrases are not questioned and are used by everybody.

The second phrase is “human resource development”, which means that our existence is reduced to a battery fuel or an energy resource to feed the economy. Now we have a ministry for human resources in India. I think part of this is about how we keep devaluing ourselves, without thinking what it means to be a human. So, the question in the learning societies is how we can shift, without an expert always coming to us and telling us what to do. We can also start to take personal responsibility for our problems and start to find ways to heal them within ourselves. That's I think the core of the shift that we can make.

I think maybe many things are changing except one thing: measurement. Americans can't live without measurement. You know like measuring the value of a child in terms of tests, measuring the value of everything in dollars, or measuring the calories in food. What is interesting is that they don't measure the chemicals that are added in their food. This has been made invisible to them. I mean thousands of chemicals are put in American food that by law they do not have to declare. I mean most of the things that children eat like chips or cola or like that or McDonald's, there are chemicals in all of these products that make people not only love them but their body becomes addicted. Because it is beneficial to the company and of course since the governments serve the companies completely, no government official would come and say this is against children. So, I mean in subtle ways American children pay a very high price.

Now they are also discovering, which is interesting because even one of the people who wrote about this is Al Gore who is in the middle of the system. He was you know the vice president and he was into technology. On the new book that he wrote, An Assault on Reason, he says one of the biggest threats is TV. Not only because it robs you of your time and gives you wrong information, but because right now the way they make programs and how they shift sometimes from one to the other and so on, is affecting the mind.
Here is where I think we are better able to protect ourselves than Americans. Because in our life we still have some cousins who come from a town and who have a different way of living, a different life style, etc. Even when you sit in front of the TV, there are several people around you and these several people are talking. In America sometimes a child is by himself or with one mother one parent or two at the most and even if they have brother or sister each one has a separate room, each one has a separate TV, so there is no community. Again this is what has been made invisible, what makes us blind. I mean how many people can really see the thousands of chemicals that go into food and now these chemicals are coming to our homes, to our countries.

So, what do you find as something beautiful or a strength in the Iranian culture or Iranian community; something abundant in it that you can really build on? I think this is a very important question because modern thinking always talks about needs, not about strengths, not about beauty. The stress in on what is wrong with you, rather than what is beautiful. I think it is going to take us some time before we can bring out the beauty.
4-2- Session 2: Co-authoring Learning Spaces

Key questions for the session dialogues:

• Has most of our learning – what makes who we are – taken place in schools and universities?

• Are schools and universities serving the benefits of everybody in our society? What happens to the 80% of people who don’t go to university?

• How can we regain and create spaces where people learn?

The scale of the injustice facing young people is simply mind-boggling: millions must submit to the tyranny of performing well at memory tasks, so that the best of these can be chosen for further training. This leaves the majority who have been unable to get high marks as ‘failures’.  

Claude Alvarez

Sat 1 Sep 2007 – Afternoon
How session 2 evolved:  
(Timing is approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15:00-15:20</td>
<td>Shilpa: Moving while remaining connected (through a distance) to two other people. How did it feel?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15:20-16:15</td>
<td>River of life: people draw major learning stages of their life in the form of a river, followed by discussions. What were the key factors that have contributed to our learning in life?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16:15-18:15</td>
<td>People break in groups to learn about Unitiera, Multiversity, Aljamea’, Shikshantar and Jinan’s activities as alternative learning spaces.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18:15-19:30</td>
<td>Whole group discussion on learning spaces and the monopoly of schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:30-20:00</td>
<td>Closing the first day of the conference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20:00-22:30</td>
<td>Dinner and discussions on the learning of first day, plus ideas for shaping the 2nd day.</td>
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Yusef Progler

What we ask is whether schools and universities are serving the benefits of our culture, of everybody in our society? In the meantime what else is there?

That's why we had this little game (river of life) here because it wanted to make the point that most of what has made who we are, we did not acknowledge to be a particular teacher, class, school or book. We said something else, such as a friend, an accident, an experience or getting sick. All that stuff makes us who we are.

One lady said she would not be where she is in society today if she did not go to university. I agree, but that's about status; that's not about making you who you are.
The need for co-authoring/co-creating learning spaces.

Claude Alvarez (Multiversity, pp. 123-136)

It is incredible that our educators simply and uncritically adopted the colonial system. They poured money, time, and talent into it. They abused the young charges assigned to them, emptied them of content and identity, and stripped them naked, prior to filling their heads with what they felt was new knowledge, all of it imported of course, but the assumptions and contents of which themselves had rarely examined. Those very assumptions have today placed the planet and its communities at the very brink of survival.

Today, with the downward pressure of globalization and WTO regimes breathing down our backs, the education system is getting even more skewed in the direction of investing the resources of societies to produce workers for the global mega-production machine. The more young people are sucked into it, the more the prospect of challenging the present model of development or the globalization of the economy recedes. We cannot fight the globalization process, without also dismantling the education system, in which the 'global consumer' mentality is created and nurtured.

Schooling destroys creativity in fundamental ways, by constantly reinforcing the unwarranted ideas that those who do not attend it are inferior. It promotes the notion that all people are born either empty or with rudimentary ideas and must therefore go through the grind of being finished or polished or certified. Above all, it promotes the conviction that only that knowledge imparted in the school is knowledge and all else may be interesting, but is not valid.

What is more, it has the sanction of parents, ruling institutions, the State and most intellectuals and the corporate class. Eventually, it earns the sanction of the victim too. Any move to criticize schooling is then perceived as an elitist maneuver to block the mobility of the poor.

Lord Macaulay’s note to the British Parliament in 1835:

I have traveled across the length and breadth of India and have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we could ever conquer this country; unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage. Therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture, and they will become what we want them: a truly dominated nation.
Higher Education, Advanced Stultification

For the past couple of centuries, as with the school, the institution of the university too, has been replicated ad nauseam in every nook and corner of the globe. The widespread assumption of the universality of modern science and by association naturally the superiority of other aspects and products of Western culture, provided legitimacy for this action. As power defined knowledge, the process was easily facilitated.

The intellectual centers are located in the West. They create; we copy and apply. We do not challenge the underlying assumptions. Replication is safer than attempting something different.

Today, we may see it as absurd, that one culture has become the norm for all others, to the extent that diverse majorities around the globe would seek to destroy their own identities and selves in the misguided drive to imitate or replicate the main features of the dominating culture. But this belief in homogenization has remained the basis of development theory for the past five decades, and it still retains influence.

Again the content of that education was supplied in the form of printed texts wholly imported from the so-called developed countries, and rarely related to experience in our own societies. The ultimate purpose of the mind-destroying exercise was not freedom, but certification.

Scholarship has degenerated into a skill of text recognition, text replication and a display of the names of the manufacturers of key texts.

From school to university, the entire exercise appears to be single-purpose: kill the mind, generate obedient serfs, feed the market.

The crisis in the system, caused by the production of thousands of 'paper' graduates, has driven young people to seek additional certification. in order to bring down the numbers against whom they may have to compete. So one goes for an MBA or other additional courses (diplomas in computer science are also a rage), or pays extravagant sums for branded or 'quality education', to enable one to stand out of the crowd (or the mob) for the few places available as high quality employment (which, the world over, remains as insecure as low quality employment).

However, the system is now facing a cul-de-sac, as there is a gross misfit between what is being churned out of schools, colleges and universities and the requirements of prized, high quality global employment. The scale of the injustice facing young people is simply mind-boggling: millions must submit to the tyranny of performing well at memory tasks, so that the best of these can be chosen for further training. This leaves the majority who have been unable to get high marks as 'failures'. A system of education, which practically dismisses the bulk of its young people as failures, should have been banned long ago.

This circus has gone on for more than 150 years. The western educational system, far from being competent to guide the rest of the world, is itself in a profound state of crisis. It is unable to figure out the new direction in which it should go. Therefore, it is as good a time as any, to strike out in fresh directions on our own. There are no teachers available to guide us in which direction we must move. We must be our own teachers.

Claude Alvarez
(pp. 123-136, Multiversity)
What we are against is the monopoly of education over learning.

Those 10 to 20 percent of students who benefit from formal education let them; they are more than welcome to use it, we are not saying don’t use it. What we are concerned about are the 80 percent that leave school as useless people, and I’m using useless exactly because they are useless in the sense that they do not have any skills other than sitting for a test and failing. What are we going to do with this 80 percent?

All we are asking for is diversity of ways of learning; that’s all. We are not saying close all schools. All we are saying is let’s regain part of the budget that goes to schools as the only way to learn and put this 80 percent of budget to other ways of learning that students can really learn through.

I mean, even considering the basic principles in economics, if there is a factory that produces 80 percent of its products useless, it closes down the second day! The only institution that is not closed, despite of the fact that it produces the majority of its products useless, is the school! All we are saying is to stop this nonsense of monopoly of learning for the sake of students, for the sake of people in the future.

Already I’m paying taxes for the education system. Why should it only go to one way? Let us regain diversity, let us regain that life has many aspects and we should be very fair, extremely fair. The education system is not fair, it really brings people and tells them you are failures.

Munir Fasheh, Learning Societies Conference, Tehran, Session 2, ending talk

Science is not a Western category.

Western science is a category that we're worried about. How did all of these things get so homogenized that whenever we say science, immediately the assumption is that we're referring to Western science?

In Ayurveda, for example, there is no category as medicine; Well-being is the category.

Modern science cannot countenance any critiques from outside its own framework, since exponents of modern science take it as axiomatic that science is perforce modern; in other words, modern science does not allow for the notion of plurality of sciences.

Thus, advocates of allopathic medicine feel perfectly entitled to critique homeopathy, acupuncture, or Ayurveda, but they do not grant advocates of these other systems of medicine the same privilege.

(Multiversity, discussions on science, pp. 114-120)
Our worry is the student community, the future.

The world system has perfected a method of training and selection that enables it to recruit for itself, apparently, the brightest and the best, and after selection to use such recruits against the interests of the rest. Called 'quality education', it invariably involves pitting thousands and millions of aspirants in a vastly unequal race among themselves to literally fight, by means fair and foul, for the few places displayed as available for those who succeed. Success is understood as largely conformity in all respects with the requirements of modern life, or the rituals of bourgeois civil society. It involves a sacrifice, a self-deprivation of one's inherent right to question, to revolt, to dissent, to create, to be free.

The creative energy of children and youth, from the age of five till the early twenties, is first frozen by suppression, then allowed gradually to atrophy till it appears to disappear completely from their normal life. This exercise is conducted ruthlessly, in all societies in the industrialized world. It has the sanction of parents, the State, the ruling classes, whether political or intellectual. It eventually earns the sanction of the victim as well, when he decides that this is the most attractive option available to him, if he desires to have recognition and approval of the self.

The method through which conformity in ideals is achieved is not even spectacular. On the contrary, it is fairly tedious, if not revolting. For a minimum of fifteen years, during the individual's youth, when the mind is creative and the spirit wishes to soar, the victim is compelled to read, process and memorize lifeless texts on the grounds that such texts represent science, truth and correct pictures of the real world. The victim is, as a rule, forced to discount his own experience.

Every once in a while the victim is subjected to certification procedures, in the form of examinations, during which he or she is assessed for his/her ability to recognize such texts in detail or repeat them from memory.

The entire exercise is carried out without much serious examination of its content, its validity, its applicability or soundness. During the entire conduct of the certification procedure, there is really no requirement in fact to test the reality component of such 'knowledge'.

There are many questions we need to ask. Like, whose knowledge system is this? What is its purpose? If we did not create it, how can we be asked to claim it as our own? Why do we reject our own knowledge, the result of centuries of experience and valid, for such knowledge? Borrowed knowledge can only enable us to lead borrowed or inferior lives.

Thinking that does not lead to action is incomplete thinking.

Multiversity must support …the restoration of our absolute right as human beings to our own knowledge; the right to learn, not from texts, but from living and from doing and from simply being ourselves as God made us.

_Haji Mohammad Idris_ (pp.21-24, Multiversity)
Yusef Progler

The multiversity project is about opening up our eyes and having a realization that schools and universities as presently conceived are limiting, constricting and narrowing institutions that divide people and put them in the narrow path of limited inquiry.

Ok, we have these universities that are giving us degrees, some of us get jobs – maybe ten percent of the population can go to university or get jobs – but (1) it’s not serving the totality of our society, (2) it’s neglecting the knowledge and wisdom for the thousands of years of history prior to the 100 years that these institutions came into being. Not only we are lucky if it ignores that knowledge, we are lucky if the universities today don’t denigrate forcefully that knowledge and tell you that there is no good intuition for getting that backward barbaric knowledge.

People would argue to death that we shall keep all the universities open and all schools open. I say, ok we can not win that argument, but let’s just acknowledge that argument and let’s begin having open discussions about what universities do, what they don’t do and what they can not do? While we are having that discussion, let’s ask about the other totality of knowledge experiences, the 99.9% of knowledge and experience that makes us who we are, makes the cultures, makes the poetry and makes the arts? None of that stuff happened in universities.

Here is the model: you go to school for 12 years you study as hard as you can, you pass a couple of tests, you get in college and you are in college for four years. If you are lucky you might get a job or you study for more tests and you go to graduate school. That’s the model, I don’t care where you go, being in Mexico City, Isfahan; it’s the same model.

Working Principles of Multiversity

The idea of a Multiversity is based on the firm reality of diverse universes of perception, separate cosmologies, and distinct existing bodies of valid knowledge. Multiversity will structure itself to function in ways that will be the opposite of those associated with the conventional school and university. We will tolerate no bureaucratic hierarchies. Nor do we envision centralized top-to-bottom directions. Its working principles are enumerated below:

• Orienting learning once again towards life; making it open-ended and creative;
• Separating learning from job training; or distinguishing between learning through work and learning to fit into a job, like a cog in a wheel.
• Multiversity will use non-print media in a substantial manner to break the monopoly of the printed text book as the sole repository of learning resources and as the primary means for dialogue.
• Multiversity will conduct its activities largely in the local languages of various communities of the South.
• Multiversity's learning programs would involve breaking the rigid division between teachers and learners;
• It will avoid exclusive dependence on texts and memorizing of such texts;
• It will refuse to certify learning experiences;
• It will refuse to evaluate through examinations;
• By definition, funding will not be accepted from corporate groups. Financial support will be accepted only from those, by and large, sympathetic to Multiversity’s ideals …so that each one of us is in a position to make real choices and not compelled to reduce his or her life to complete and absolute bondage to an economic system or method of production.
This is an ideal time in history to be talking about education. There is a global argument going on now about education and this is an important time to interject new voices. I think that the educational system that we are all talking about is basically a Western educational system that came to us through colonization in different times and places. The uniformity of this system is astounding: from India, to the Arab world, to the United States; it is uniform but at the same time there’s an uncertainty about the future of that uniform system.

Sometimes this system is called 'factory schooling.' Factory schooling was designed to produce factory workers. It thrives on fear, boredom and obedience. People started saying that factory schools were outdated, that we need something for a 'post-industrial society.' So schools, under the rubric of being 'reformed', started adopting the ideology of consumerism and replacing fear and boredom with fun and games.

But now people have started feeling that kids aren’t learning anything with fun and games so now there’s an attempt to say, 'wait a minute, let’s' go back to the factory system, bring it back in, but this time it will be the new standards movement.' It is getting adopted in places like the USA, UK, South Africa, Australia, retrenching the factory system under a new guise called 'Outcome Based Education.'

My question is, why do we continue to follow these fads and trends when they come to us through experts, who go to the West, when those in the West are unsure of themselves in the first place? The West is trying to retrench or redefine itself and get everybody else to join in, even though they don’t know where they’re going. It’s an ideal time to take a detour, to slow down, to stop, to ask questions, to come up with something different.

Yusef Progler (Multiversity, pp.34-38)
Daniel Perera:
In Unitierra tools are provided so that people can start learning on their own, teaching each other, learning with each other in the community, in the field, in the city and actually using these tools maybe in part to make a living.

We have an **independent media center**. People learn how to work with the camera, how to do radio programs, how to video a film. So, we have the production of news, for example anyone of us can tell the story of what's happening in our neighborhood or in our city. Because, I can walk out and see that you know what they are saying is either a lie or is missing the main point and I would like to be able to have my voice there and can actually do that if I can. That was kind of a promise when this began. Enough people came together, they started producing videos and we're producing them and making them and circulating them.

This coincided with a series of events in Oaxaca and allowed the media center to flourish. A lot of people suddenly had this thirst to find out the real news from the community about what was happening, which was actually not covered by the national or state TV. The same thing happened with the radio and people were tuning in and finding out that they too can participate in the radio program. People not only started calling in to have their voices transmitted over the radio but they also started coming to the radio station and asked “how can I get my own radio program?” or “how can I have my own radio station?” They would come from kilometers away to say “I would like to let you know what’s happening in my neighborhood, because it's not being said and there are a lot of things to be said”. That's how this project became independent even of Unitiera; it kind of sprang out of it.

**Q:** What does the name mean?

**Daniel:** It's actually a play with the symbol of university. People sometimes come and think it's a university and they want to enroll; they say what majors do you have and what is the curriculum. We say that we do not have a curriculum or teacher and it's not a university but here we can give you paper like a diploma if you want. It doesn’t have any value but it's symbolic of an achievement; so it was actually a play with the symbol of university and tierra in Spanish means soil earth, so that’s also part of the name.
Another part is **Cocacita which means autonomous center for the intercultural creation of appropriating technologies.** The reason we wanted to call it “appropriating” is because it can be appropriate to one place, not to everywhere. Casita actually means house, little house. It is a center for creating alternative appropriate technologies together, between different people of different cultures. We have people coming out of indigenous communities and people coming from other places from different backgrounds. They come together, exchange ideas and try to come up with solutions to basic everyday problems that people have to solve.

For example, if people need to roast their coffee beans and they have to use fire ovens and they are deforesting the entire mountain, we help them find another heating source. This is an actual example of about 3 years ago. They thought that to roast the beans they had basically two options: manual traditional way of doing it that repeatedly ruins the environment, and an industrial way that made them dependant on the city industrial roasting. We said there has to be infinity of other alternatives in between. So, a friend came from Canada with a solar roaster that can be built in a very simple way, with all the regular materials that you find in a mechanics shop, by concentrating the rays of the sun. Eventually we took it to one of the communities in the mountains and put it into practice.

Recently we brought a man from Guatemala who makes machines with recycled bicycles. We call them bike machines. This man has worked with an organization called **Mayapedal in Guatemala.** For the past ten years he’s been making machines with bicycles that are thrown out in the US and Canada. People collect these bicycles and send them out to Guatemala. What this man does is to transform them into intermediate technologies, the one that bridges the gap between manual machines and industrial machines. He has turned them into grain grinder, corn dehusker or water pump. The bike machines are beautiful examples of taking what some people consider to be garbage and transforming it to something entirely new to solve some of the most basic problems other people face on a daily basis.

**Finally is the project of organic agriculture in the city, or urban agriculture.** As you can see in the drawing, these are car tires that have been recycled to hold a bit of earth to serve as a garden in restricted spaces in the city, where people don’t have enough space to plant in the soil or they just have cement or they have a roof top. So, they can actually produce enough vegetables and herbs for their own consumption.
What is nice about these initiatives is that people start reproducing them by themselves in the neighborhoods and in the communities. They don’t depend on the central office of Unitierra.

Q: It seems like you have the university and different colleges, the colleges of let’s say mass media, technology and agriculture. So, you have kept all those structural things of universities and made it simple because they don’t need any degree and the application is very easy. But, it’s still a kind of formal education; is it not?

Daniel: It seems that there are these colleges, but these are only three examples of many projects that we are doing right now. I want to clarify something. When we talk about free learning and leaving the formal education system, what we try to do is not doing away with the concept of education but with the concept that implies ‘process is more important than the substance’. The process of going through the factory schooling system seems to be more important in the end, which some have called “the hidden curriculum of the school”.

It seems to be more important for the mainstream system if we follow these series of rituals (namely, going to school, listening to this person who is the boss, going through the examinations and getting the paper at the end) than the actual substance of what we are learning and what we are able to do with our hands or with our mind. The primacy is the process and what we try to do is to invert that. For us, the most important thing is the substance; the form can be as diverse as there are people. So, people may like to study metaphysics not urban agriculture, or they may want to learn law, philosophy, etc. The point is not so much what the they want to learn, but that they learn in a way that is integrated with them and has meanings in their lives and in a way that they can contribute back to their community, or any other people, and make a living if possible.

Q: Why do you give a diploma or certificate?

Daniel: Because a lot of students in conventional schools confessed that the only reason they wanted to go to school is to get the diploma, which would allow them to take the next step or to get a job. Later on, when they did get the diplomas and officially recognized certificates, they couldn’t get a job and they found that it was a lie after going through this whole process. They had left their community, believing that this would be the ticket to get a job in the "real world" and it actually did not happen and they were frustrated, to say the least.

The paper or certificate we give is just a symbolic gesture to acknowledge something people have done or achieved but it is not recognized by the ministry of education and we say that from the beginning. We tell people, “if you would like to have a piece of paper, it only means to you personally as a reminder of completing this process that was developed on your own, out of your initiative. It means something because in the end you can leave with dignity, having done something you love and you can actually make a living from it”. And that’s the point for a lot of people who try to find a way to do what they love and at the same time be able to live in a dignified way.
In these clubs there were no advisors or anything like that. Students would meet with teachers if they wanted to join, but not as an authority. So, every student who came to join the club came with a question and the question was not going to be answered by others; it was going to be answered by themselves, sometimes in cooperation with other students.

So, if one student said, “I really want to know how bees make honey?” it was ok. None of us had an answer, so what she did was to find other students who were interested and they started to find the answer. That doesn’t mean they found the total answer, but actually once they really put the effort to go and talk with people in the different places that made honey and they watched, observed, wrote and compared, it meant that they were on the path of science. Science is not to find the answers, science is to search for answers. So, for them that was a very important activity and they learned a lot.

Although at the time I actually used the space of schools, but what was interesting is that after two years this became scary to the authorities who did not like the fact that students asked questions. They believed that students are not supposed to ask questions; they were supposed to answer the schools’ questions. So, an order was issued saying that no school was allowed to have the science and math club in it. That was fine, because the idea here was to really plant a seed or two and water the seeds that are in people, and then the structure could really disappear.
As educated people we didn’t use our hands or our feet. So, some of us got together in 1971; I’m talking about the West Bank in Palestine in 71. Luckily because there was no national government and there was no formal institution, we acted very spontaneously. Many of us who were working in universities and schools thought why we don’t spread the word in some schools and slowly every Friday we would meet. Whoever wanted to come there was no membership. So, we met every Friday and we walked, we walked to a village or we walked to a refugee camp. We walked to any place that said we need you to come and do this, for example pick olives or we have a road and we really need to pave it, or we have a school and the wall of the school needs to be built or you know the vegetable market is really very dirty and we want to help to clean it.

The idea was very beautiful, because actually first we walked, so we used our feet. But, by walking we discovered the landscape, the area and while we were walking — sometimes we walked for two or three hours to get there — we were singing, dancing, laughing and playing. So, this was all learning, but learning that did not come to structure and when we got there we worked with people. Sometimes, I mean our routine was that we worked for example for three hours and then we took a break. In the break, they would bring us tea and coffee and some fruits.

We talked with people and by talking with people their first question was, “why are you coming here? You are all educated, so why do you do this?” We said, “We may be educated but we are ignorant of so many things!”
Arab Education Forum and Qalb-el-Umour

Since 1978 I have been engaged with what I call the Arab Education Forum (AEF). Actually it is Arab Learning Forum, because the idea is learning, not education in its narrow sense. The idea was very simple: to invite young people to create a magazine.

We called the magazine “qalb-el-umur” which has several meanings in Arabic. One is the essence of things, the heart of things. Second, qalb means to turn around, to turn over; so, sometimes if you only look at the page from one side, but you never look at it from the other side, you can’t say you know it. It’s the same thing with life; it’s very important that you turn things around. Third, qalb is used for clawing the soil; if you don’t claw the soil, the nutrients in it do not mix and do not come out. So, the magazine has to really get into the heart of things and the heart of things is the stories of people, experiences of people.

The beauty of the idea of magazine is not the magazine. It’s not like the product has to be really shiny and colorful and presentable with no mistakes; these will come later, these are technical things. The first thing was for people to know they can produce a magazine built on their stories without having to have a budget or an editor in chief or any of that. Some said we don’t like to write. We told them all right, find another way of expression, for example movies or videos. So, five or six of them would come together to produce a video.

The main idea is that we can do a lot with what we have. We should just heal from this idea that we need an institution, we need a professional, we need a budget, we need permission, etc. Yes we need these in certain places, but we do not need them to do everything in our life.

We can manage maybe 80 percent of our life without these things, but we have forgotten how, because we are told and we have internalized that we can not learn without a teacher or a curriculum, we can not heal without medicine and a physician, we can not work with our children without a psychiatrist or a counselor or what ever. I mean we have really started to become paralyzed by repeating to ourselves that we can not do things without somebody, who usually ruins more than actually builds.

Now all that really led to the idea of Aljamea’. In Arabic Aljamea’ is the word we use for university and Aljamea’ literally means a place where people gather, like the mosque, and where everything in the community also is part of. So we thought that we don’t have to have a place to learn and that we can learn in so many different ways. So, we really started playing with the idea.

But when I started to really think about this, in 1998, as I was reading a book by Aljahez (albayan va tabyeen) for the first time, I read the statement by Imam Ali: “qimatu kullumri en ma yuhsenoh”. I told that this would be really the principle of Aljamea’ and since 1998 up till now everything I have done basically folds within this principle that says the worth of a person is what he or she yuhsen; the worth of a person is what he or she does well, what is beautiful. The other meaning of yuhsen, is what ‘s good for the community. The third meaning of yuhsen is what one gives from himself or herself and finally another meaning is respect in dialogue and discussions.

Based on this principle, the value of a person is not the degrees they hold; the value of a person is what he or she yuhsen in these different meanings. Now there are several manifestations of it. One project as a manifestation of it we called “safar”, which means travel, as in Farsi.
4-2- Co-authoring learning spaces: ALJAMEA’

Safar & Mujavara

The idea here is that after the British and the French came, they divided the Arab region into 22 countries and with Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah we are 23 already. In addition to the other negative aspects of the nation state, the funny thing is that Arabs have stopped talking with each other, because of the barriers. So, we thought one way of reconnecting Arabs with each other is to start this idea of safar, which is in turn built on a concept called mujavara.

Now “mujavara” in Arabic is like neighboring. Here it means like apprenticeship, but not exactly. In apprenticeship there is still a master and a student. In mujavara, sometimes everybody learns and everybody teaches. Now for thousands of years the main way people learned was through mujavara. If somebody wanted to learn something from somebody, let’s say in Cordoba, he would not send an application to be approved and give admission tests and all of that. He would just carry his things and walk there to look around.

There were seventy schools and seventy libraries in Cordoba a thousand years ago and next to every library there were also people who you might say were good in something. Isfahan was another place that was like that. Especially in Iran and in Andalusia there were many teachers doing things and not teaching in the sense that you know today. So, the idea of mujavara is that if a person wants to learn something, we try to find who in the Arab world can really be helpful to this person and we try to arrange for this person to go to this place and learn. They will not get a degree and all of that, but they will get whatever they really wanted to learn that is meaningful to them, because there is no other reason why they would go if it is not meaningful to them. So this is another thing we do of Aljamea’.

Another part is called “azka dunya”, which in Arabic is actually a fruit, but also means the most delicious world. What we are doing in this program is basically looking for all people in the Arab world who are producing something in the cultural field or in art or in anything but they are not able to distribute it through the market, because distributors charge a lot of money that they can’t really afford. So, what we thought we can do is to have a website where anyone who is producing something can put it on the website, in order for people to know what is available.

Another project of Aljamea’ is creating space where people get together to share whatever they are doing and whatever they learn. It’s not like everyone gets out of the meetings with a particular set of skills and knowledge. Some people might get a lot of good things, some people might get some negative things; some people might find a lot of meanings, some would not.

A learning environment is a rich environment where people enter with whatever they have, they are honest in interacting, they are free and they come out with whatever makes sense to them.

Munir Fasheh
Principles, Convictions and Values that Govern the Thinking and Work of QU:

• **My life is the object of my reflections and expressions…and my reflections and expressions are the basis of my learning.**

• Every experience is valuable. **Life is made of people’s stories and not atoms.** Life and experience are the basic elements in learning.

• People’s lives and experiences are transformed into “stories” and understanding through contemplation, reflection, expression and dialogue. **Reflection is crucial in learning, because it necessarily connects thought to action and context.**

• **Human beings are builders of meanings**, expressions, knowledge and social groups. Such building is crucial in learning.

• The building we aspire to happens at two complementary and intertwined levels:
  - building the “inner world” of the individual (reflection is fundamental), and
  - stitching the social-cultural-intellectual-economic **fabric of society** (working in small groups is fundamental).

• **Learning, like breathing, can only happen inside and outside** human beings as parts of one holistic process, i.e., learning cannot take place solely inside the person nor solely outside her/him.

• **Starting the building process with what exists and what is inspiring** (not with needs, what is negative and lacking, nor with ready answers, models or solutions).

• **Knowledge is constructed collectively**, through interaction with the natural-social-political-economic-cultural environment in which people live, and through conversation, reading and dialogue.

• **Life is one whole, society is interrelated, and knowledge is integrated.** The **diversity** in people’s experiences, expressions, and knowledge is a fundamental manifestation of this **unity**.

• **Respecting** the human body and Nature, and **acting with responsibility** towards oneself, others and Nature in the sense of protecting them all.

• **Sharing** in all aspects of the work.

• **Reclaiming our senses** in the learning process, and seeking truth, wisdom, simplicity and happiness in life, and **avoiding monopoly in opinion or interpretation**.

• **Reading is a form of hospitality:** it is inviting ideas, perspectives and experiences of others into your innermost home — yourself. At the same time, reflecting on and **expressing one’s experiences is a form of generosity:** it is giving the dearest thing you have — your innermost self.
“If Not Schooling, Then What?”: Learning Parks of Possibilities
Shikshantar Learning Activists

“If you don’t think schools and more ‘education’ are necessary, and if you believe they are part of the problem, then what do you propose? What's your solution?”

Time and again, since Shikshantar’s existence, this question has been posed to us. Either too deeply wedded to upholding (and benefiting from) the existing structure, or too mired in hopelessness and cynicism, people are not able to see any ways out. They react defensively or revert to finger-pointing, often bringing up excuses of time (“It will take too long”) or scale (“How is this going to apply to 300 million children?”) to avoid meaningful dialogue.

Though our criticisms of the System are crucial to transforming education, it is important to realize that they have not given way to cynicism. Indeed, equally crucial to Shikshantar has been our simultaneous affirmation, our hope and faith that people themselves (as individuals and as parts of various collectives) can conceptualize, articulate and actualize their learning interests and aspirations towards building a society more in sync with notions of Swaraj (rule over self).

Creating an alternative learning space: the Learning Park experience

The learning park of Fatehpura has its conceptual roots in the Udaipur as a Learning City (ULC) process-project. The underlying principles of ULC can be summarized in two broad statements: a) It seeks to critique the current, dehumanizing model of Education and Development, as it exists in Udaipur; and b) It seeks to create and/or regenerate learning spaces and opportunities that support the development of each individual’s full human potential and the city’s collective capacities for meaningful, just, and ecologically balanced transformation.

Doing real things in the real world with real people prevents the segmentation of learning and living. Such authentic situations ensure that the child goes beyond superficial memorization and rigid disciplines/subjects, and instead engages in deeper and more complex forms of understanding and nurtures a love of learning.

Nurturing Interest-Based Learning

One of the first examples of interest-based learning was the development of the park itself. The entire impetus for claiming the space and re-creating it came from the children’s own interests. The children staked out a piece of land in the midst of their neighborhood, which had been intended to be a park but was currently serving as a neighborhood dumping ground. Initially, the children said it was the government’s job to clean up the space.

After discussing the fact that it was not likely the government would come any time soon to clean it up, the children realized that they needed to take the initiative to make the space their own.

While cleaning up together, we found waste from the local hospital (bottles, syringes), waste from the nearby vegetable vendors (old vegetables, jute sacks), and waste from surrounding families (rags, papers, plastic bags). Finding so much garbage left by the educated members of the neighborhood (the hospital, their families) starkly challenged the commonly-held belief that the illiterate subziwalas (vegetable vendors) were responsible for littering the space.

After four days of intense efforts, the children then formally finalized their claim on the space. Each child wrote an essay on why s/he wanted permission to use the park.
They then compiled the main points from these essays into a single letter, which they presented in an application to a member of the municipal government, to obtain permission. Thus, throughout the entire process, the activities and motivation for ‘making the park’ grew out of the children’s own interest in solving the problem they identified (i.e., not having their own space to play). Shikshantar team members supported them in pursuing their interest and learned alongside them. In the end, they were given permission by authorities to use the space as they liked.

**Developing Intrinsic Motivation**

The children have begun to see themselves as responsible for their own learning, able to discover their own interests and find ways to address and expand them. Thus, out of interest-based learning has grown intrinsic motivation. They are neither dependent on rewards or punishments, nor are they dependent on us for leadership or initiation. For example, on days when we do not participate in the learning park, the children nevertheless play together or try different projects. When developing the park space, they decided to make a swing out of the tubes of bicycle tires on their own. They also organized festivities to celebrate holiday festivals.

It is important to note that the children have not become dependent on us for stimulation or leadership. In fact, knowing that **schooling fosters dependency by controlling the entire climate of learning — from the content of the curriculum to the arrangement of seating** — we also very consciously tried to prevent the formation of such a hierarchy or paralyzing relationship.

**Multiplicity of Learning Opportunities**

Interest-based learning requires that multiple learning opportunities be available to children. Emerging from research on human learning is the profound recognition that **no one institutional space or method can meet the diverse goals, talents, interests, and aspirations that exist within and among human beings** (Gardner 1999, Sternberg 1997). Thus far, the learning opportunities have included: creating a park, playing new and non-competitive games, drawing, modeling clay, doing embroidery, using paper mache, celebrating festivals, dancing, singing, acting, visiting local lakes, temples, mountains, historical places, gardens.

**Valuing Our Own ‘Resources’**

For developing the park children often require particular materials. At first, they thought they needed money to buy these things. We have encouraged them to think ‘out-of-box’, which has led the children to two noteworthy understandings: First, the children believe that they can make things with their own hands and, as much as possible, have tried to do so. Second, they have gained faith in the willingness of local people to contribute to their learning processes by donating and sharing their materials, time, and energy. These feelings contest the attitudes that “we cannot do anything without a lot of money” or “first we should make a lot of money and then we will do something.” Rejecting this attitude means rejecting the dominance of the Market and creating spaces for regenerating the local.
By understanding the depth of their own resources, the children have found that they are able to express themselves and pursue their interests in ways quite unlike what they find in school. They are also excited and willing to approach other people to learn from their resources and thus add new strands to their ‘learning web’. These experiences also help the children understand the importance of developing good relationships with one’s neighbors.

**New and Diverse Relationships**

Just as the children have developed new relationships with the people in their neighborhood, so have they found themselves coming together in new and diverse relationships. As the children of the vegetable vendors, the shopkeepers, government officials, etc. all play together, they are discovering that many of their preconceptions/ stereotypes about each other are unraveling. They are building new relationships with each other by learning from and with each other.

**Self-Organizing Processes**

The last — and perhaps most important — principle emerging from the learning park is that it is self-organizing. All of the activities, projects, relationships, roles, processes, etc., have grown organically from the children and the local context itself. **We did not establish any preset plans or prepare any curriculums; we did not create any Minimum Levels of Learning yardsticks or set up a framework for ‘performance-based’ results.** We wanted to get away from the mechanistic models of planning, rooted in classical behaviorism, that dominate Education and Development today. We also did not want to fall into the school/ government/ NGO trap of slating a chain of activities, one after another, and then applauding ourselves for meeting peoples’ demands and being ‘participatory’.

**The principles emerging from the learning park directly challenged three aspects of parents’ and children’s rigid mentality:**

a) that schools (or institutions) are the only places where children can learn,

b) that some expert must be ‘in charge of’ planning children’s education, and

c) that children cannot learn without trained teachers.

**Unlearning for Us**

The main challenge we face is shifting from ‘teaching’ to ‘facilitating’ to ‘co-learning’. From the outset, we knew that we did not want to be their ‘teachers’. Rather, we wanted to learn things with and from the children, their parents, and the other members of the neighborhood.

The learning park is but one story, definitely not a type of Alternative School, and certainly not a Model. Rather, it is just one example of how changing the assumptions, processes, and relationships that dominate our ideas about Education can produce fundamentally different notions of living and learning.

We hope you will use this example to generate a dialogue about the ‘learning parks’ of possibilities that are open to each of us, if we only make an effort to see them.
Teaching and learning have always been a very personal experience for me. It is hard to recall the last time I did not think of taking something new and meaningful to class; and the harder I try I still cannot remember the last time I planned for teaching the English language through a fixed text book. Even though I open every class session with verses from the Quran, the syllabus could very well change in different circumstances as daily happenings impacted my personal ways of being, and so the easy textbook way out never became an option. I normally start classes differently, but some of the opening statements are echoed in almost every class at the start of the journey.

“He who teaches you a letter binds you with a fetter of gratitude” with these words Imam Ali (as) has made me his servant, emphasizing on these words is not to over exemplify my position as the “official” teacher of the class, but to demonstrate my pledge to serve in Imam Ali (as)’s cause and to show the importance of teaching and learning from each other.

At that time and in some ways today, the stereotype for language learning in Iran is dull classrooms and American/British “wannabees” challenging everyone on who can pronounce a word better than the other; who conforms more to the “western” culture; who can say the words exactly like “they” do, and of course some believe talking parrots can beat us hands down after watching enough Hollywood movies. It is no surprise that people have skepticism when they see a group of people in the language community who try to live words instead of pronouncing them.

What should I teach? Why should I teach it? The language of war was so entangled into our culture now that it would suck in everything like a tornado.
This learning/unlearning journey started four years after the revolution and almost 2 years into the eight year war with Saddam. Eighty medical students in one class, most of them with the typical stereotype who wanted to be able to pronounce doctor correctly at a medical conference!, some of them skipping classes to go to war wanting to learn English to be top notch religious and revolutionary medical doctors, proving that you don’t have to wear a suit and tie to become a successful doctor, others were just plain scared of my authority and not knowing what the future would bring and not opening their eyes to the light at the end of the tunnel!

The university authorities said many of the teachers accredited in western universities to teach English and now teaching in Iran are not happy with the rapid changes in the Islamic Republic. They seem to be reluctant to teach in these newly defined spaces, either because they feared to misunderstand what was expected of them or they were just wanting to resist the revolutionary dialogue.

Before trying to teach the English language I had learnt in the books at Shiraz University and later in California, I was living and learning the language of war, sacrifice and martyrdom. Now I had to learn of purpose, what should I teach, why should I teach it, and it was the time when the language of war became so deeply entangled into our culture that it would suck in everything like a tornado.

After class some of the students would ride their motorbikes to our home for special classes, this was the beginning of building our community. After 25 years I sometimes hear the sound of the motorbikes stopping at our doorstep. Although none of us knew when one of Saddam’s bombs would gracefully land on our heads, we were vigorously working on language, something that would replace the rifle my special students were holding and they would have to wield it more forcefully.

Using this weapon was more dangerous, with the rifle you’re always running and looking for cover, but you’re always exposed and standing without a shield while the enemy is rapidly firing on you with its poisonous language!

I couldn’t talk about “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” the doctors were already away at war and the apples had fallen when farmers who picked them were also at the frontlines. Jane and Frank were not dancing at the club, there are no clubs, Jane and Frank are long gone! The only Americans left in the country are those held hostage. How ironic to be held hostage by the same people who were held hostage for centuries by the hostages!

I took the language that they were teaching us while I was a graduate student hostage, blindfolded it and sent it back to where it came from!

We want to learn the language our way, a new era has begun.
For the last 20 years, the people I have been meeting in schools, universities and my own cultural institute who became my students were struggling with and resisting the framed English classes and I shared with them how to challenge what they learn through teaching and experiencing their daily lives.

**We talked about how language can be all about our significant living moments and how learning something can only be expressed when it becomes personal instead of some farfetched phenomena taught in fixed texts and classrooms.**

In this journey as we experienced intense hours of community dialogues, we began to discover that our search is more or less about only one language and not about the fragmented distractions we hear in sounds and language structures. So we started looking inside and helped each other discover and respect the one meaningful language that we could really trust to learn.

**In this way we stopped expecting others to teach us a set of instructions and we stopped waiting to expect new sets of instructions to arrive.** With the strength we gained in our very diverse community, we could clearly differentiate between what language fit our purposes and the language that took us astray.

So many have joined this journey, some have left it half way, some are still with us and others have started their own. With Munir’s trip to Iran we learned of other languages with inspiring stories of their own and invited them to come live our story and be part of this new chapter. We broke down the borders and started our trade with whoever we desired.

**Thank God we don’t need a passport to exchange ideas, and we don’t need banks and institutions to approve our credits and credibility. Thank God we don’t need them YET!!!**

We never stop learning from each other and within our classes in the defined institutions of universities, schools, and private institutes, everybody is a teacher the only difference is that some get paid to be teachers and some have to pay!
4-3- Session 3: Learning, Environment & Development

Key questions for the session dialogues:

- What are our notions of “environment” and “nature? Is the environment something out there to be protected?
- What do mean by “development” or “sustainable development”?
- How does the culture of schooling and education affect our relationship to nature and our perception of progress, development, etc?

By using the word “environment” we get into this trap that we can solve the problems by making everything “green”. Nature extends not only outside us, but also inside us. So, we have to change from within in order to be able to change.  

Shammi

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Sun 2 Sep 2007 – Morning

How session 3 evolved:
(Timing is approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>09:00-</td>
<td>Moheideen: recitation of Quran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:10-</td>
<td>Aydin Yassemi: Opening of the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:10-</td>
<td>Charlotte: breathing exercise with everyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:20-</td>
<td>Shammi: emerging music exercise (an example of collective consciousness &amp; self-organization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:30-</td>
<td>Suesan Ghahremani: brief introduction of the Learning Societies network and the Malaysian friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:40-</td>
<td>Ema’s introduction on the history of Haji Mohammad Idris’ activities and the shaping of the Third World Network, Citizens International and the Consumers Association of Penang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-</td>
<td>Haji Mohammad Idris’ talk: development and neo-colonization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15-</td>
<td>Shammi: environment vs. nature and seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45-</td>
<td>Q&amp;A/ Group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45-</td>
<td>Tea Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15-</td>
<td>People break into groups for dialogue and discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15-</td>
<td>Most participants join in to watch Daniel’s presentation and video of the Myapedral project in Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:30-</td>
<td>Lunch and end of session 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shammi
In this session we can all talk about what “environment” means to us. I prefer to use the word “nature”, because we are part of nature. **When the word environment is used, it implies that it is something outside us and all the problems caused by the way we treat nature can be solved by doing something in the environment, out there.**

For example, because refrigerators are emitting CFC gases that damage the ozone layer, we are now making “green refrigerators” with a green tree sticker on them. In India this green movement has picked up a lot; all the cars and buses that are running on LPG or CNG instead of petrol, are now green cars and buses. They are even painted green.

However, we do not see how our lifestyles and our perceptions and attitudes towards nature are actually the source of problems. **By using the word “environment” we get into this trap that we can solve the problems by making everything “green”. Nature extends not only outside us, but also inside us. So, we have to change from within in order to be able to change.**

Q: with the great rate of destruction and all these problems, don’t you think we need to spread the message and do something?

Manish: I’m deeply worried about the rate of destruction, too; but if we just talk about it and spread the message, without doing something and without living the alternatives, nothing real will happen. The biggest thing is the courage. I think most people understand what’s happening, but not all have the courage to shift to oneself. So, the question is how do you spread courage?

The premise of the idea of spreading has been limited to the spreading of information. **Maybe this is not the time for spreading things; it’s the time for deepening the integrity and getting back to the honesty of things.** Otherwise, too many things are being spread.

Take for example Yoga; the way it’s spread is not the real thing at all. The whole philosophy of deepening and connecting to nature and life is not being spread, as compared to the stretching and exercises. I have a friend who drives an hour to her Yoga class, then she goes to her office, sits in her office for 6-8 hours doing something that she doesn’t like, then because she doesn’t like her job she smokes during the day, and she says that she is a Yoga teacher!

You know the word ‘guru’ in Indian language, which is wrongly translated as teacher; the root of the meaning is ‘source of inspiration’. **You spread the message by living it; you don’t have to teach anybody. When you live honestly, people will be attracted by themselves.** Because our faith is that there are still people who want to live with honesty, and we have to find each other. But, we can only find each other when we are doing it ourselves. I was working in UNESCO in Paris and I felt dishonest, because I wasn’t living the things I talked about. When I came back to India and started living what I talked, all these friends came to my life. Actually, those people get connected who are genuinely interested in that.

**Maybe not everybody understands everything, but there are many things that we understand, because our body knows; our body reacts to the chemicals in the food or the pollution in the environment, which we don’t feel good about. But how do we get the courage to act?**

**The dishonesty is in the mind that rationalizes so many things; even when we feel the harm, we rationalize by saying, for example, “it’s convenient, it looks good, etc.” The only way is to have it from within, not as something external.**

Manish Jain
In its totality, the western civilization is not bringing any quality of life and is unsustainable. You have to look at the wholesome of it; we cannot judge one aspect of it without the other. I want to emphasize that the education system has to change totally; otherwise there would be no salvation. From primary education to university, people are trained to become professors for destroying the world; this includes politicians.

We need to rethink all aspects of life. We cannot continue tinkering about what to buy or produce and so on. We need to rethink deeper issues.

Hajji Mohammad Idris

For me, the most basic characteristic of wisdom is respecting nature, respecting it in its diversity, respecting it at many levels and in many ways. Integrity of creation, refraining from doing anything that would harm physical nature or human nature or relations among people (no matter how much one would gain by doing that)... all are part of what I mean by respecting nature.

Instead of perceiving science as the “subduing of nature” we can look at it as a way of seeing the inner harmony in life, and how to spot what could violate that harmony. The scientist within this perspective is one who is like a “spiritual” guardian of human, social, and physical natures... which means that one role s/he has is how to heal those natures when one of us does harm to them!

Munir Fasheh

They say, “Oh, we teach children to put their garbage in the dust bin”. You are teaching them the absolutely wrong thing, because they are taking their garbage and throwing it at somebody else! There is no consciousness about where my waste is coming from, where it is going, on whom it is being imposed and whose life is being endangered because of my inability to live within the laws of nature.

Manish & Shilpa Jain
4-3- Our Perception of Development

Exposing ‘Sustainable Development’ Rhetoric to Make Way for Learning Societies
Charles Otieno-Hongo and Isaac Ochien’g

Exposing the Development Game
For the past five centuries, we in Africa have been repeatedly taught that we have benefited from colonization, development and (now) globalization, because our benevolent colonizers have instilled in us civilized manners, railroads, bureaucracies, English/French languages, legal system, multi-party democracies, etc. But before we declare Development a great boon, it is necessary to explore the trade-offs in more detail.

The assessment of Development can be ascertained from the responses to one question: **Who are the losers and who are the winners in the Development Game?** The ever-widening gap between rich and poor nations — and rich and poor people — gives us one of the answers. Today, about 23% of the world’s population possess 85% of the world’s material income and resources, which means that the social majorities (77% of the population) must scramble for the remaining 15%.3 The ‘bottom’ 20% of the population holds less than 2% of this wealth. In many countries, over the past fifty years, incomes for families have plummeted, while the cost of living has increased.4 But not everyone is losing. Consider that in 1993, the average CEO’s compensation (not including stock options) rose 30% to about US $1.9 million; this occurred in 23 corporations that had each laid off more than 10,000 workers over the course of three years.

**There is growing awareness to the obvious fact that Nature’s resources are not infinite, and that Development has played a major role in making them more finite and vulnerable.**

Development is Destruction
If the key to Development was greater production and consumption, then the key to faster and more efficient production was a wider and more vigorous application of certain forms of scientific and technical knowledge. Guided by this vision of Development, and aided by loans from ‘developed’ countries and the Bretton Woods institutions, the countries of the South embarked on a shameless process of industrialization, militarization and nation-building, often lumped under/hidden by the beautiful term ‘modernization’.

New and more diabolical threats to the atmosphere have further increased the complexity of the damage. Increased fossil fuel combustion by automobiles and industries and rapid rates of deforestation have led to the emission of high levels of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and chloro-fluorocarbons (CFCs). Global warming and severe damage to the ozone layer is the result. Six of the seven warmest years on record have all occurred since 1980, according to the Worldwatch Institute’s 1992 report. Changing weather patterns and rising sea levels have produced a series of floods, droughts, hurricanes, and other ‘natural’ disasters.

In 1992, Development as destruction prompted over 1600 senior scientists from around the world to come together and declare that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course... They may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.” Along with environmental devastation, one can examine Development as destruction from another angle: its annihilation of cultural diversities and social relations in an effort to forge a mono-culture. Uniformity (a.k.a. globalization) demands an annihilation of complex ways of interacting, organizing and knowing. Indeed, the race to converge upon ONE way of living has destroyed many intellectual and spiritual self-defense capacities.
Development is Dehumanization

By promoting institutional values and establishing debilitating forms of dependency on institutions, while at the same time legitimizing their dominance, Development places institutions above individuals and above humanity as a whole. Authoritarian Development institutions (such as the World Bank, WTO, and the IMF) — with their own sets of logic, laws, technologies, budgets and values — are not accountable to the social majorities, despite all of their rhetoric about democracy and decentralization.

In addition, Development seeks to impose a monolithic, spiritless worldview upon all of humanity that is guided by the following dehumanizing principles:

- True efficiency is maximum productivity for each machine, each enterprise, and each human being;
- Science can solve all problems and reveal all there is to be known about man and the world;
- Human happiness consists of having the latest, the most powerful and comfortable products, and luxurious surroundings;
- Our responsibilities end with assuring our own welfare, which happily assures that of our country, and we should let the next generation fend for itself, as ours had to do;
- In this world, it is each person for himself, with the strongest and the most resourceful people earning rightful privileges;
- The real signs of progress are bigger cities with taller buildings, more and bigger factories, larger and more mechanized farms, more and bigger highways, and a greater selection of products in larger and more luxurious shopping centers.

We are taught in schools and via the global media that these principles are to supersede all other human values, as well as all other conceptions of human existence, forms of social organization, and frameworks of the past and future.

‘Integration’ into the global economy has trapped us in a vicious cycle of producing what we can’t consume and consuming what we don’t produce.

To manifest these principles, we need to install and maintain the Development infrastructure — Western-style Democracy, Courts, Bureaucracies, Schools, Hospitals, Market Economies, etc. Of course, an entire technocracy is required to manage this infrastructure. These technocrats must be faithful to the above ‘divine’ principles at all costs. Although in the early stages of Development, these technocrats were foreign ‘experts’ called in to complete Development missions; of late, the attention has shifted to “building the capacity of locals”, who will follow and uphold these principles and maintain their operating infrastructures.

Development further degrades human beings by converting them into ‘human capital’ and their relationships into ‘social capital’. Intrinsic human talents and knowledge systems are turned into commodities to be traded on the global markets.

In the age of Globalization, the role of human beings is no longer to produce, but to consume. In order for the already saturated global economy to sustain itself, it needs increasing levels of consumption. The real agenda of Development is thus to develop voracious appetites, a deep sense of insecurity, and selfish individualism, so that people can consume with no limits and no sense of social responsibility. As Neil Postman describes, “The engine of technological progress works most efficiently when people are considered not as children of God, but as consumers — that is to say, Markets.”
4-3- Our Perception of Development

Development is Neo-Colonization

So that it can continue to extract local resources, to fill its insatiable need for fuel to drive it, Development institutions psychologically and technologically colonizes the social majorities of the world. This begins by measuring them against a global paradigm, which can be traced back to the colonial era, when non-Western cultures were viewed as ‘primitive’ and in need of ‘civilization’. Progress in the South is thus articulated as ‘catching up’ or ‘narrowing the gap’ to the North — in both the economic and the cultural sense. From this perverse vantage point, success or empowerment is achieved when one’s country and peoples have become more dependent on and manipulate-able by forces beyond their control. A whole range of new global instruments (patents, trade agreements, tariffs, conditionalities, etc.) has been unleashed on the South to further exploit, pillage, subjugate, control and colonize. In recent years, an intricate network of information and communication has enabled these instruments to work with reckless speed and efficiency.

The absurdity of Development’s zero-sum game is obvious when one reflects upon the ‘race to the bottom’ undergone by African countries. In the 1980s, Africa lost the self-sufficiency in food production that it enjoyed before development assistance was invented and, during the last few decades, has become a continent-size beggar, hopelessly dependent on the largesse of outsiders.

Sadly, many African ‘educated’ people cannot imagine life without ‘aid’ from the donors. They have lost faith in their own intellectual and moral capacities.

This kind of psychological colonization extends into socio-cultural spheres as well. By successfully and very aggressively integrating people into predominantly Western consumer lifestyles, Development ensures that people are no longer connected by their communities but by the abstract culture of products, like Pepsi and Coca-Cola, Nike and Reebok.

With such powerful thought-control in place, all exploitation of local cultures, natural resources, and belief systems can be easily rationalized as necessary in the grand march towards Progress. But despite the shift in dress, food and entertainment, most youth find themselves unable to attain the lifestyles hyped in music videos, movies and American soap operas. Neither part of the West nor part of their immediate environments, this ‘educated’ class of young men and women often seek refuge in drugs and criminal activities.

Sustainable Human Development Promises More of the Same Game

As it dawned on people that Development was primarily concerned with economic growth and had been destructive, dehumanizing and re-colonizing, the desire to redefine development from a people-centered point of view emerged in the late 1980s. Sustainable Human Development replaced Development on the center stage. At first defining it as “a process of enlarging people’s choices,” the 1990 UNDP Human Development Report went on to highlight that the most critical choices were “to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living.” Sustainable human development was, on one hand, the improvement of human capacities (health and education) and, on the other hand, the use that people make of their acquired capabilities (for work or leisure).

From 1982 to 1990, total resources flowing from the North to the South were $927 billion in loans and aid. In the same period, the poor South paid the rich North over $1345 billion in debt service alone.
A number of proxies – life expectancy, literacy, income levels – were then set to evaluate the human dimension of economic development. Thus attempting to expand the framework of conventional Development, sustainable human development viewed GNP as necessary but not sufficient. Human beings were seen as the ultimate ends (not as the means, as in conventional Development), and better distribution of resources (rather than more production) was emphasized.

Yet the beauty of the term ‘sustainable development’ is that it can be manipulated for any purpose. Sustainable Human Development, the Global Village, the IT Revolution, African Renaissance: such mythical terminology highlight an inherent inability/unwillingness to challenge the underlying assumptions of Development, much less the way of living advocated by the Development model as a whole. The assumptions of what constitutes ‘the good life’ – money and consumer products to meet basic needs; votes in representative democracies; health care vis-à-vis Western medicine; literacy/schooling to obtain jobs – remain. When the economic and political institutions still promote destruction, dehumanization and neo-colonization, albeit with a ‘human face’, then it seems these new incarnations are no different from their predecessors: slavery, imperialism, and colonialism.

**Making Way for Learning Societies**

What is missing from the discourse on sustainable development, like what is missing in efforts to reform schools, is the questioning/challenging/creating of what ‘development’ means to larger humanity. We must engage with questions such as, “What does it mean to be a human being?” and “How do Development institutions kill inherent intellectual and spiritual abilities to realistically engage with our inner essences and establish vital connections with wider humanity?”

We must open ourselves to honestly understanding the essence of human life, its purposes and aspirations. We need to find new ways to see, listen, feel and care. Not only will such processes expose the destruction, dehumanization and neo-colonization of Development, but they also open up spaces for imagination, creative experimentation, active collaboration, and knowledge (re-)construction. From this angle, learning as de-institutionalization aims to liberate the spirits of discovery and innovation inherent in each and every human being. Simultaneously, it creates organic environments that honor our unique diversities, capacities and contexts and help us to resist the onslaught of a mechanical mono-culture.

Development is forcing us to forget what the larger struggle of human life is all about. We need to re-weave the thread that connects us as human beings and re-create the tapestry of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural relationships that form the basis of our families and communities. This can only happen if we re-establish our faith in each other and the power of the collective human spirit.

**A major challenge for us will be to unlearn our institutional dependency and to cure ourselves of the beggar syndrome.**
What do we mean by development?

Manish

On what basis are we calling the people living in the cities, or in North America or Europe, “developed”? Our mental colonization has started from there. On what basis they are “developed”? Just because they have a camera and we don’t have a camera? Or because they have highways and you don’t see anyone walking on the roads any more? For me that’s the fundamental question: who are we calling developed? This is the question we are concerned about in the Learning Societies, not just various learning methodologies or tools. We may have different answers, but the question of human unfolding and the meaning of development have to be the core questions. And this question is never discussed, in places concerned with development, like in UNESCO where I used to work.

Today, the great unfolding of science is more important than the unfolding of humanity. All I remember reading about humanity is through achievements in tool making, such as the Stone Age, Iron Age, etc. We don’t know how they really lived at that time. How were their relationships? I don’t remember reading anything about their relationships! I have only read that these were the tools they used at that time, for example. I don’t remember reading about their harmony with nature. So, progress is only seen in one dimension, as the progress in technology. And we know through the wisdom of people in India, Iran and other such places that having all these things is not the source of real happiness. I imagine at least a thousand poets have written that having all this stuff is not going to give you real happiness. So, why do we equate having stuff with the way forward?

Hajji Mohammad Idris: There are three big issues affecting our health today:

1) the way animals are cultured, by receiving high doses of antibiotics, which are transferred to us, thus making the bacteria resistant to them, thereby resulting in diseases that cannot be eradicated.

2) the way pesticides are used in agriculture, is making pests resistant, so that they cannot be eradicated.

3) the amount of waste we are producing is far beyond what could be handled.

Uma: Meanwhile, companies make huge profits from that. Out of the whole bird flu scare, which governments bought into, the company producing the vaccine made huge amount of money, when the vaccines expire after only a year.

Unless leaders throughout the world, and particularly within the most powerful countries, cease to view the world as a Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ terrain, with winners and losers, there is no prospect that human development and poverty alleviation for all countries and peoples will be realized. It is increasingly clear that this must be based on the recognition of the reality that the world is a single organism, a single family, in which hurt, violence, hunger and want for any single community is a reality for all communities.

Ash Hartwell

12
4-4- Session 4: Learning and “Community”

Key questions for the session dialogues:

• What do we mean by “community”, “development”, “sustainability”? 
• What helps communities learn?
• How can we regain and create communities?

For me, community starts with friendship; that’s the beginning from which community starts to emerge. Here in Iran, in the past few days, I have met some extraordinary people, we have begun to connect and friendships have begun to form and this is going to become part of my global community.  

Charlotte

Sun 2 Sep 2007 – Afternoon
How session 4 evolved:  
(Timing is approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15:00-15:10</td>
<td>Aydin Yassemi: opening of session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claude Alvarez: video clip on “America”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:10-15:30</td>
<td>Jinan presenting his work with a village community to create art works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:30-15:40</td>
<td>Charlotte: breathing and stretching exercise for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:40-16:45</td>
<td>Daniel &amp; Charlotte: Whole group discussion on the meaning of “community” and experiences with community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:45-17:15</td>
<td>Tea break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17:15-19:30</td>
<td>Participants break into groups to build their own communities: jewelry making with Shilpa, paper basket making with Manish, a whole group of people work together with Shammi and others to prepare vegetarian dinner, while sharing experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:30-20</td>
<td>Dinner is served and ending of session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do we mean by community?

Daniel

The words “community”, “development” and “sustainability” are very high sounding words and we feel that there is a certain importance attached to each one of them. But somehow it is difficult to define what any of them are. Yet, we use them on a regular basis. We say “development” a lot, we say “economy”, we say “poverty”, we say “sustainable” and we say “community”. They are becoming increasingly popular words in many discourses, in academia, in politics, in our workplaces and on TV, we hear them a lot.

The reason I’m starting with these words is that when we were invited to come to Iran, our friends here suggested the overarching theme of the conference to be “fahm” vs. “vahm”, which were translated in English to be language for understanding vs. language for illusion, or deceitful language. Since, words are our windows to perception; I would like to start with this question: “What is community to each one of us”?

Q: I think, we cannot define community separate from the ecological, economical and social context. And my question is, how is the idea of community related to sustainable development?

Munir: The idea of sustainability is reflected in what American Indians refer to as “caring for the seventh generation”. This is their principle in living, which means asking, “How will the things I do now affect the seventh generation?” If it hurts the seventh generation, then I won’t do it. This means taking the seventh generation as part of the community, and extending the community to the seventh generation. I think this is the meaning of health and well-being for individual, for community and for the whole earth, as nature. If we applied this principle today, we would realize that most of what we are doing today is going to harm the seventh generation and may not even be sustainable up to the third or fifth generation from today. To me this is the meaning of community and sustainability.

By successfully and very aggressively integrating people into predominantly Western consumer lifestyles, “Development” ensures that people are no longer connected by their communities but by the abstract culture of products, like Pepsi and Coca-Cola, Nike and Reebok.

Otieno-Hongo & Ochien’g
Nitin:
You [as participants in the conference meetings] may have lot of questions thinking that we, coming from outside, are going to solve them. We don’t have all the answers, but what we may be able to do, is to help this group feel that sense of belonging, to feel that we can be a community. My sense of community is to relate with the people here, to build relationships by sharing experiences and making friendships. So, let's take the responsibility to discover each other.

Another thing about communities is that they create something together; so, let's create something, which is useful for our community here. You can learn from Manish how to make something useful from waste paper, learn from Shilpa how to make jewelry using waste material, or make salad with Shammi and share experiences with the other people here.
Every human being lives in and from a natural and cultural environment; i.e., from the soil of earth and the soil of culture, which s/he grew up in, lives in, and tries to make sense of. These two ‘soils’ are what sustain life and human communities, and also where real learning is embedded and takes place. After almost 40 years of working in education, it is very hard for me to talk about learning detached from these two soils. From this stems the importance and relevance of talking about learning spaces/environments/societies.

The soil of culture includes both a language/vernacular (which is usually very rich in history and meanings) as well as nonverbal modes of expression. In general, the current dominant language in education, knowledge, development, the professions, and mass media (which, unfortunately, is infiltrating even our everyday languages and lives) ignores these soils and their accompanying aspects. It is often divorced from history, life and ethics. Under claims of objectivity and universality, this dominant language often robs knowledge and understanding of the layers of experience through which people express what is human and real.

Although I did not use any of the above terms then, it was in 1971 that I started experimenting with learning as a life activity, separate and distinct from education. The expressions I used then included learning within context and how education confiscated learning, but I feel both of these expressions lacked the roots that the term “soil” has. It was the ‘discovery’ of my illiterate mother’s math and knowledge, around the year 1976, that first turned things around in my head. Her math and knowledge were so embedded in her soil of culture that it is almost impossible to teach her type of knowledge, no matter how much we improve education! Her type of math and knowledge can only be learned and acquired through life itself; through living and doing in real settings and with real people. Another significant aspect of my mother’s type of knowledge is the fact that she was able to make a living with her knowledge, in almost any setting, while my knowledge was ‘meaningful’ and earned money only in particular (mainly artificial and hegemonic) settings.

That ‘discovery’ made me realize that the problem with education is not only with what it offers but also, and more importantly, with what it conceals, marginalizes, makes invisible or renders worthless. The problem is with the values that education embodies in its assumptions and practices (which are very different from what it espouses in public).

So, we need to end the confiscation of learning by education, to regain learning into people’s lives and communities. It starts with the premise that people are builders of meaning, understanding, knowledge, cultural expressions and social groups. It is worth stressing that learning as used here embodies constructing the ‘inner world’ of persons (through reflection and expression); stitching the social-cultural-intellectual-spiritual-economic fabric of communities (mainly through small groups involved in actions, interactions, dialogue and production).

Since learning is almost synonymous to living, then the issue of learning is everybody’s business: teachers, students, parents, workers, peasants, governments, artists, business people… The issue of learning cannot be monopolized by any one group or one view or one path. It can only be dealt with as a ‘harmonious collaboration’ among all.
Today, to regain our cultural soils and spaces, we must dismantle certain myths and affirm certain realities:

- We need to dismantle the claim that learning can only take place in schools.
- We need to dismantle the practice of separating students from life for at least 12 years, but then still claiming that learning is taking place.
- We need to dismantle the myth that teachers can teach what they don’t do.
- We need to dismantle the myth that education can be improved by professionals/experts.
- We need to dismantle the hegemony of words like education, development, progress, excellence and rights, and reclaim instead words like wisdom, faith, generosity, conviviality, friendship, hope, learning, living, joy and duties.
- We need to affirm that the vast majority of people go to school not to learn but to get diplomas. We need to create diverse environments of learning.
- We need to affirm and regain the concept and practice of learning from the world, not only about the world.
- We need to affirm that people are the real solution, not the obstacle and not ignorant.

The basic topic in learning is life and people living in its midst – not outside it and not above it, but in its midst.

The basic social unit for learning is small groups engaged in actions (of their choice) in real life.

The basic act of learning at the individual level is to reflect on one’s life, express it and communicate and discuss it with others.

The difference between nations and soils of culture is worth clarifying.

The first is an abstraction that we fell into through the influence of western domination and hegemony. The second is all that real people do, their knowledges, their ways of living. The first stresses uniformity, which is false and impossible. The second is as diverse as people make sense of life. The first bolsters systems of control. The second nurtures people… The first is like a soil in which only one type of trees can grow. The second is the soil of earth we know where many and different kinds of trees and plants grow.

Munir Fasheh 9
Communities and “Development”

Once a person (or country or community or culture) accepts the label “underdeveloped” as a true description of self, s/he already had already acquired the equivalent of an HIV virus at the social perceptual intellectual level. It is such a “virus” in the sense of starting a process of destroying the inner immune systems, both at the personal and community levels. In this sense, underdevelopment is not an enemy but more like a disease. The way to deal with it, thus, is to heal and to protect. A healing approach would build on the healthy part of the person (as a person, as a community, and as a culture), on one’s strengths, what is beautiful, abundant, inspiring, and alive in her/him. This entails respecting the wisdom embedded in nature and living in harmony with it. In other words, the virus is the idea of under-development; the carriers and spreaders of this virus are education, mass media, and development programs and organizations. The seduction of these carriers lies in competition, prizes, winning, and distractions.

We cannot protect ourselves from the virus by having more intercourse with its carriers (TV, major newspapers, increasing dependence on machines) but by increasing the spaces and opportunities where we interact with one another and with nature more freely, autonomously, and responsibly.

The Israeli military occupation protected us from a worse occupation: the defeat from inside (which actually started in 1993 when the World Bank and similar carriers of the disease were allowed to enter our society). One can throw a stone at a military tank but not at the World Bank. The World Bank is incarnated in friends, family members… people that you know and see every day and who, as employees or collaborators of the Bank, help spread the virus, often without realizing it; they may even feel proud of it!

The Palestinian body got the virus in 1993 (and the disease has been deepening ever since). Prior to 1993, Palestinians had hope and were able to manage their affairs; after 1993, hope was killed, expectations took over. We became mostly complainers and demanders. The two periods that were very inspiring and healing for me were the 1970s and the first intifada (1987-91). People managed their affairs, as persons and in collaboration with each other; the word underdeveloped did not make any sense, it was useless and meaningless.

In this sense, the worst modern disease is perceiving self as underdeveloped, and the biggest challenge is to heal from such a perception. In the two periods, we had dignity, faith, hope, community, and freedom (to act without institutions). This is not a call in support of military occupations but a warning that between military occupation and feeling underdeveloped, the first is of lesser evil, because it does not get internalized. Perceiving self as underdeveloped makes the person helpless, always looking for solutions from the outside; one looses faith in one’s ability to live and to heal. If something is wrong and needs to be changed, then the motto that the Zapatistas raise is in line with healing: changing traditions in traditional ways (which means that you look for what is healthy, inspiring, beautiful, and abundant in you as a basis for healing).

Munir Fasheh

Indeed, the theory of development condemns the underdeveloped to live not their own lives, but rather to fulfill someone else’s conception of life. Development doesn’t merely assure us that the past of the native must be entirely jettisoned, but it also hijacks the native’s future. If the native’s present is the European’s past, the native’s future is the European’s present.

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4-5- Session 5: Learning and Art

Key questions for the session dialogues:

- **How come so many traditional art forms have been learned throughout history, without any need for formal education and teaching?**

- **Is the sense of beauty something to be learned, or is it part of human nature?**

The perception that knowledge can be transferred is a ‘modern’ concept. Modern education has disconnected us from self and our own experiences. So, we try to analyze whatever we see. And analysis distances us from ‘presence’. I think beauty is an intrinsic quality that can be sensed by all, if we are present.

Jinan
I was asked to give a presentation regarding the learning of art. The main theme of my talk is learning from self.

As an architect, I believe that the state of architecture in Iran is quite remote from the ancient Persian architecture and also Islamic architecture. The disconnection from our past has increased in the last 50 years, so much that we do not see any signs of Persian architecture or anything Iranian for that matter. During the last 50 years we have only had construction and even worse, we are witnessing unsustainable building construction, malpractices and piling up stuff on top of each other. During this period, many structures are built, but there is no sign of architecture, as the art of space creation.

This building, in which we are gathered now, is one of the rare buildings in Tehran that has signs of Iranian creative architecture in it. However, in most cases, the dominant rule is construction, not architecture. So, we are faced with a huge decline in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of our social space organization in Iran. There are many cultural, political and socio-economical reasons for this decline. However, I prefer to focus on the educational and cultural factors that have led to this trend.

We have not had proper architectural education in Iran. I have graduated from the Shahid Beheshti University and have worked there for many years. So, I have witnessed the state of education and learning in architecture. We have not tried to understand the meaning of architecture and Iranian architecture. I tried to find the meaning for myself and during this search I came across Iranian music.

I started learning music about 35 years ago. In our traditional system of learning music, we have some “masters” who know the Persian music references, called Radif. Radif is the encyclopedia of Persian music that has been passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. There have been no notes or texts involved. All the learning has been oral, through memory and experience. So, learning Persian music requires presence (“hozour”) and memory.

Persian architecture and music were two friends, who came along each other for 2500 years, up to 50 years ago. At present, Iranian music has survived in different forms (e.g. traditional, pop, orchestrated, etc.) and has received many international awards. However, Iranian architecture has been left behind. One of the reasons has to do with the method of learning in Iranian music, in which learning through experience and inter-generational word of mouth has played an important role. Iranian architecture needs to learn from Iranian music, and this is what I call learning from oneself.

In Iranian architecture we have special designs that could be used today, but no one is aware of them. Musical melodies are retained and used in Iranian music, but elements of space are not used the same way in architecture. For example, in Chahargah (one of the main Radifs in Iranian music) we have different melodies under various names. Each name reminds you of special melodies that signify special emotions, places, cultures. I will show you some of these melodies that have been passed on from generation to generation, using my instrument.
As many of you may know, this instrument is called Sitar. This is an old handmade Sitar, crafted by Master Kamalian. Using the base melodies, one can sense the special emotions attached to each of the names and learn the cultural diversity abundant in them. For example, we have names referring to places (such as Iraq, Kashmir, Azerbaijan, Isfahan, etc.) or we have names that signify different emotions (such as Tarab-anguiy, meaning joyous, or Hazin, meaning gloomy). So, by just referring to a name, people could play the music that it signified, while each player added his/her own personal touch or composed music from the combination of these melodies.

We have 7 main Radifs or Magham as the main core of Iranian music, namely Shour, Mahour, Nava, Segah, Chahargah and Panjgah. We have a similar idea in Iranian architecture, where we have a core space with layers of defined spaces around it. All throughout the history of Iranian architecture, Iranians were conscious of open, semi-open and closed spaces in relation to each other. In Persepolis, Pasargad and many other places, such as Kashan up to 50 years ago, Iranian people used these 3 spaces in their architecture: Otagh (rooms or closed spaces), Eivan (balcony or semi-open spaces) and Hayat (yards or open spaces). The meaning of space was created using these three core elements. Today, we have forgotten this core and the Iranian soul cannot understand why.

**Questions:**

1- Have religious traditions, like Ashoura, played any role in keeping the Iranian music alive?
What has been the mutual effect of music and traditions in socio-political movements, such as the Islamic Revolution of Iran?

2- Are the core principles that you mentioned in music and architecture static or dynamic? How do they change with socio-economic changes in Iran? With all the bombardment of media, how can we keep these cores? Do we really want to keep them, or do we need to change them?

3- Is the take-over of Iranian architecture by mal-construction limited to the large cities, like Tehran, or is it also evident in smaller towns and villages?

4- Considering the fact that western style apartment building has become a dominant trend in Tehran, how do you think the concept of Hayat, Eivan and Otagh could be used again or get integrated into the mainstream?

5- I have a comment regarding one of the reasons for the disconnection of Iranian architecture with our past, which is related to the fact that modern universities started to grow since 50 years ago. Universities gave students pre-conceived structures and designs that were not rooted in our traditions and undermined the understanding and diffusion of Iranian architecture.

For me the ultimate essence of Iranian music and architecture is to create balance between our inner self, nature and others; not as a form of art, but as a way of living.

*M. Reza Haeri*
It may not be possible to respond to all of these questions, but let me mention two points that may address some of the above.

First of all, we should not forget that the *key role of architecture and music is to help our well-being through regaining balance.* When you enter an Iranian courtyard or garden you feel good. Similarly, when you listen to traditional Iranian music, it calms you. So, in looking back to the essence of our old architecture or music, we do not intend to copy the same buildings or melodies. What we are striving to get back is the sense of balance, well-being and feeling good.

Secondly, we want to learn from Iranian music that it is alive, how to revive Iranian architecture that is lost in cement and stone? *How come our music has been living and growing through generations without any text or formal educational system, but our architecture has stopped doing so?* And to respond to question 3, I have to say that our architecture has given in to blind construction not just in Tehran and the bigger cities, but all over the country.

My key point is the idea of learning from self. This doesn’t mean that we stop learning other things. We need to learn Western style music and all orchestration methods; however, we have things that help our learning. For example, Iranian architecture created spaces for living healthy, including health of body, mind and creative capacities. Of course, these things are dynamic. But, what we are looking for is the essence of our architecture. This doesn’t mean that we don’t need the new technologies, yet we have to find ways for having both together.

For me the ultimate essence of Iranian music and architecture is to create balance between our inner self, nature and others; not as a form of art, but as a way of living.
Jinan
(Excerpts from presentation in Tehran Conf.)

One thing which I discovered when working with a potters community in a village in India was that it was me, the educated who needs help; it's not the other way! The assumption is that village people are illiterate and poor, so they need help. It became clear to me from the beginning that this is only propaganda, because their wisdom was clear from the way they treated their children, nature and other human beings.

They had a deep aesthetic sense, which became reflected in what they did. As a designer, when studying art or engineering in university, we had to draw hundreds of circles or lines, before we were able to use it in a piece of art. We had to do something and then we tried to make it beautiful. But these people produced what they lived, with absolutely no need for training. So, I realized that the sense of beauty is not something to be learned, but that it’s part of us.

I only told them that they must love what they do and I helped them sell their products in the market. But everything they did was original.

**Natural learning process**

Knowledge uncorrupted by modern ways and follow the nature’s knowledge is Natural learning. It follows the same principle as in natural farming and natural health. Just as nature farms and heals, it learns.

Modern education and its notions are anti natural, anti child and anti knowledge. It is a belief system imposed on children by the so called ‘teachers’ who are also just believers. Knowledge of non literate communities demonstrates a collaboration between people and their surroundings guided by nature’s need to preserve life. The biological element in human nature enables indigenous communities to create ‘life sustaining’ knowledge. This knowledge is evident in children also. The natural state of being is to be creative. In the creative state we are authentic and original.

To be authentic and original means to be in touch with the source knowledge, to be true to our nature, to be uncovering all the time.

Paradigm of the modern knowledge is the result of textualisation of experience far removed from senses, experience and creativity.

Boredom, alienation, fragmentation, insecurity, fear of unknown – this has become our inner reality. Consumerism provides all the escape routes to avoid facing this reality. In the last 50 years we have with our modern knowledge succeeded in destroying the ecological balance.

Modern knowledge has shifted the source of knowledge from:

- Nature to human,
- collective to individual
- heart to intellect/mind
- intuition to reason
- creativity to memory
- experience to information
- holistic to compartmental
- infinite to the limited.
Jinan

Natural feelings – love, trust, care, beauty are the guides of this journey called life.

Instinct, intuition, insight, intelligence and perception seem to be the basic antenna of knowledge.

Senses are our doors to knowledge. Being in the world is mediated by senses. Through the senses we see, we smell, we hear, we feel the heat & cold, we taste, it motivates us to do, to engage with the world. Awareness is the quality of the senses.

Instinct

Instinctual responses especially in the early periods helps the child to draw out the innate knowledge. Therefore, any help/assistance to the child is to be re-examined as it could hinder the development of originality and authenticity.

The biological child is totally honest and true to its nature. Respecting and responding to the needs of the child is crucial at this point as it is the NATURE itself that is making demands. The more we disrespect the child at this time the more it moves away from being natural.

Freedom

What the child needs is freedom to explore the world. The adults job is to make the child feel secure and safe in order to explore the world.

The problem of attention span is typical of Modernity. The child is hardly allowed to freely explore or to spend time with themselves. The parent/the school system is designed to distract the child. Childs interests are seldom developed. In rural communities the child is left alone and hence do not have this problem.
Invention
Children are very inventive. They are instinctively original and explore the world around them with rapt attention.

Aesthetic sense
Awakening of the senses is awakening of the true aesthetic sense. Children are naturally attentive to sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, movement. Senses connect us to the world through beauty. Aesthetic experience is as natural as breathing and hunger.

Care and sensitivity
The fragile toys of these children makes the children to develop the quality of care unlike the plastic toys we have in ‘modernity’.

‘Toys’
The ‘toy’ is a concept of modernity. In non-literate communities what we understand as toy is nothing but a means for children to make sense of the world around them. Unlike in modernity, it is the children and not the adults that make the ‘toys’ and it is always made from what they find in their immediate surroundings. In modernity toys are a means to keep children away and they are being trained to become good consumers in later life.

Inter-generational learning
The children in modern settings get to see the adults world only after the age of three or four as unlike in traditional cultures kitchen has gone up by three feet. Otherwise the child is constantly with the mother seeing all the activities in the kitchen.

The parent doesn’t have an undue fear in allowing the child to live freely. They learn to handle knife, fire, etc. Children also learn cycling, swimming, etc. on their own, being part of the activities of older children.
4-5- Learning Art and the Art of Learning

**Action/experience is the basis for the development of intuition and knowledge.**

I have also been documenting various toys children make with the ‘waste’ so generously generated by ‘modernity’.

**Leave children alone. Children are potential geniuses.**

Children are very good at abstraction; seeing similarities, comparison are part the things they always do.

**Natural process of awakening the number sense.** Mathematical reasoning may be the result of the need to make sense of the world.

**Memorizing is harmful.** Authentic and original capacity for experiencing is possible if parents respond sensitively to children’s needs.
Key questions for the session dialogues:

- **How can organizations support learning?**
- **How can we organize based on co-creation, emergence and self-organization?**

Institutions usually destroy what they’ve created, because they want to sustain themselves. This is the dilemma and the whole problem with today’s development model. Organization building has to be renewed, revisited, restructured and re-explored. Current organization building processes are self-serving; they serve themselves, not the communities.

_Quratol’ain Bakhtiari_

**Wed 5 Sep 2007 – Morning**

_How session 6 evolved:_

_(Timing is approximate)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00-11:00</td>
<td>Minibus left for Jajrood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-14:00</td>
<td>Discussion groups were formed with Claude, IDSP group, Jinan, Shilpa and others to share experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:00-15:00</td>
<td>Lunch and end of session 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:00-16:00</td>
<td>Some participants left for Tehran; others stayed in Jajrood and continued discussions.</td>
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Quratolain (excerpts from discussions in Jajrood):
When we started IDSP, the whole concept was not for IDSP to be set up as an organization to be successful. **We did not want to create the organization as the focal point.** We are and I am still very conscious that IDSP should only be the means, not an end. I have studied organization development processes, especially in South Asia, concluding that we create something and then consume ourselves for preserving it. This is not what IDSP is about.

IDSP is a space to be used and then to be forgotten about. Just go on and don’t even mention IDSP. We tell our learners, “Please do not mention IDSP that has only been in your life for six months. Your parents have raised you; your community has raised you. They are the ones that you should be talking about. You belong to so and so family, so and so tribe, …”. This mentality of giving credit to institutions is a wrong mentality and we are fighting it.

So, when we started, we went out to young people and we gave lot of community seminars, same as the way I am talking here. I just said to people why we are creating IDSP and then I narrated my story. They listened for two hours to my story. Somehow everybody related with the story. Then to respond to this situation, we would invite any young man or woman who could read and write, who has a dream to follow and who is able to articulate and present his/her idea or dream in public. We just have these three criteria for coming to IDSP. So, to begin with we do not consider certifications; we do not look to see who is in 5th grade, 10th grade, intern, or whatever. Small children come and show all the work they have done. PhD’s come and show all their CV’s and papers, which we do not even look at. All these certifications are brushed aside.

After this they apply so that we can see their level of comprehension and writing. Then they write how they see the world, what were their experiences in life and anything they like. Through that we can see their ideas and dreams.

The next thing is for them to present their dream; not to us – who are we, we are nothing – but to the people they live with. So, they collect people around themselves, anyone, family members, politicians, children, street hoppers, anyone. We just observe their presentation and the dialogues. On that basis, because we don’t have enough space, we select people. We select a few, because we don’t have the capacity.

Before, we select, we make it very clear that if you join this IDSP course, you will not get a job; this does not ensure a job. Spending time with us will not ensure any promotion in your current work. It does not ensure anything material related to life, so don’t come if you are coming to IDSP with these expectations. So, many people who thought that this is a course leading to a certificate or a job, will drop out.

Now the few who are selected will go through the course and we only give them a certificate to show that they have gone through these experiences. But it’s interesting that about 1200 people have graduated in the past 8 years and not a single one is unemployed, not a single one. What has happened now is that many organizations are looking for people who have done something with IDSP, without looking at their past certificates and degrees. But this was not our objective when we started. **Our objective was not to push young people into jobs.** This was not our primary aim. Our aim was to create a space for critical thinking and to resist all kinds of suppressions and all kinds of temptations and shortcuts. This was our reason for creating IDSP.
But we cannot ignore that question also, because to have a job and to earn is a fact of life. It's very easy for me to preach that “don’t look for jobs, don’t work, don’t earn, because you are supposed to live the way IDSP thinks”. That would be another kind of repression. They need to exercise their own choices. They can choose their jobs, they can create their own organizations, they can be creative and they can do anything. But 6 months or 2 years of a course has no right to divert or dictate or channelize the complete life of a person. We have no right to do that.

What we do is that they come to our longer courses inside IDSP and we take fellows. Right now we have 44 in-house fellows who come to IDSP, like Raziq, Ali and others. They are not employed by IDSP; they are all on certain amount of fellowship for certain time, to learn certain things and just work, whatever they want to do. These are the people who have done something good in their communities, something useful in their communities and we take them in.

Now the whole IDSP is like a learning space. For example, our finance section is not a very secret section where nobody can come; nobody can see the records, except for the director and the accountants. No, it’s open for all to learn finance. So, they learn finance and accounting. Because everything is processed through them and accountants teach them the way to process accounts. Similar thing happens in our infrastructure management section, where young people become associates there and learn how to manage a place.

Raziq:
We are struggling to define IDSP: what is IDSP? Because I feel that our experiences and the wisdom within those experiences are much richer than our knowledge about our own self, about our experiences. So, it will only be possible by coming and engaging in those experiences that you will understand first-hand what we are doing. Words do not convey the spirit of the experiences.

Q: you don’t have any funding from overseas or other sources?
IDSP is not funded by [donors’] projects now; we all earn ourselves and put our money in it ourselves. So we are not accountable to any funder from outside.

We have projects that are funded; like Raziq has an idea, Norin has an idea, so they are testing out; these projects are funded. But those funds are not used to conduct our courses, our core. They are used to help out in communities, to do the things we need to do in the communities. But our own peoples' scholarships are paid for. For outsiders, we have conventional market rates, if somebody wants to engage us in a project. Those are the rates that go to them. And then it comes in our name, we are supposed to get it, but we don’t and we put it in the organization. And from there everybody is paid. That’s how we protect our core. So nobody comes and directs our courses and tells us what to do. I’m a volunteer, I don’t get a single penny from IDSP, but my money goes to IDSP. And Raziq doesn’t take the whole thing that comes, it goes to IDSP. A little portion goes to him, same with Norin and others. At the same time they are building it up, but not being subject to the projects. This we have done after a lot of experimentation.

Q: All the projects have accountability?
Yes, the accountability is only for the project, not the institution. So nobody can topple our institution, they can topple the project. So, we have kept the projects outside of the institution. Because most of the projects are short-term. But now most of the projects also have very strong philosophy, slowly. And they are negotiating with the funding organizations that if you fund us with this philosophy, we’ll take the money. Otherwise, we won’t take it. Now slowly this is coming.
Leadership
I have to keep demystifying myself, so that I don't emerge as an icon for the younger people, because I have lot of weaknesses and problems.

This is another thing for leadership. I'm fighting that our young people should be free of idolizing anyone. Idolism is very destructive.

Each one of them has developed their own programs and I don't intervene in that at all. Just when they want any help, I help when needed. And now more than hundred of our people are having their own small programs, which maybe nothing to outsiders. But through these [self-initiated programs] they are very keenly learning and understanding.

Slowly they are emerging. They are coming up, they are building, they are working with the government, they are working with the power structure, they are working with the communities and most importantly they are working with their own families. They are connected very well with their own families.

So this is what IDSP is. But IDSP as an institution, at least I'm not concerned that it should grow big, it should become well established, and people should know about it or become a reference point. That is not, at least not my concern at all.

Learning & “career development”
IDSP is practicing not to make people fit in IDSP program, but IDSP studies a person who comes in and designs exclusive programs around each individual, because we acknowledge that each individual is different. So, you cannot have one way of dealing with everybody, as in a factory approach, where a factory produces one thing no matter what. So, right now we have in-house 40 people, we have 40 learning contexts with each one separate and they have their own ideas and their own way of doing things. And we have a monthly mentor-intern tutorial process and then a practice process, in which one mentor would have 5 interns.

The mentors go and live with the interns, wherever they live, and then help them practice. It's a reflective process. Suppose the intern says, “In the next 1-2 months I want to have a dialogue to change something in my community.” We'd say all right and we also go, or a mentor would go. After the dialogue they will sit together and then he himself is going to express what was his satisfaction level, what was his perception, how did it go, what does he think, what does he want more?

And then the intern's next step will be to change; he/she will be the person to decide how to change himself/herself. Then, the mentor has to again restructure the program around them for the second step. This is how we work.

Each one of us is practicing to be tolerant, to be patient, to go along, to respect, no matter how foolish someone's idea may seem to us. If this is his/her [intern's] idea, we go along with it. This will be what we spend our time on, sometimes 6-7 months, sometimes 2 years. There is a program around each person, because every person is different and every person has a different way of learning. So, if somebody asks what is your program in IDSP, I would say I have no program! IDSP does not have a program of its own. Anybody, or any one can come and start a program of his/her own.

People are used to so much structure, because, most of our people who came first were from University. But now we have the second and third group of people coming who are 5th graders, drop-outs, like Norin who was 8th grader. The first generation's terms are ending. They are going to pass out and create new spaces, whatever they want. And then there would be a time when their interns would come and learn leadership. That's how it is. So nobody stays in IDSP, yet everybody stays.
The role of institutions
Munir Fasheh (Tehran discussions)

The best description of an institution that I really liked was something I heard in Oaxaca, Mexico, where I visited the governor who came and really wanted people to share their ideas and concerns. He was asking people, “how can I help you and how can you help me?”. So, an old man, an indigenous person around 80-90 years of age, came out and told him, “As an institution you are like a tree. I come to you when I need you, when I need your shade, but don’t come and interrupt my life in all its aspects. I can live without you. When I need you, I thank you and I will come searching for your shade”.

Self-organization for possibilities
By: Shilpa Jain (Multiversity, pp.100-101)

I think that the idea of possibility, just to engage with possibility, not in the negative ‘what-we-can’t-do’, but in the positive ‘what-we-can-do’ sense, to support that kind of unlearning process, is one of the roles of the Multiversity.

The present system encourages fear. There is fear of the unknown or fear of uncertainty which emerges because of the whole system of conditioning. You are told constantly, ‘There can’t be any other way. This is the best system. There is no alternative.’ So there is a complete shutdown of possibilities, a complete shutdown of uncertainties. And this is what we must undo.

I think we have to be willing also to embrace the unknown, to embrace the organic or the self-organizing aspect of the Multiversity, to give it space and time to see how it unfolds. It means not confining ourselves to ordering and organizing Multiversity in a particular way. It means that we not only describe Multiversity’s organization, but also ensure that there is space for disorganization - for letting different pieces fall off, and letting other things grow and emerge in their place. This means opening up spaces for the Multiversity to fall apart in some ways. We can’t be too wedded or attached to certain aspects of it. We have to believe that from that fall, or from that change, new life will grow. Otherwise, the Multiversity will become a set framework, and many of the pitfalls of existing institutions will be replicated in it.

If we don’t have that openness in ourselves, then it is going to be very difficult for someone else, who wants to become involved in the Multiversity, to actually co-create and continue this process. I think that kind of co-creative process will be really important as we involve more and more people.

I think the spirit of regeneration is what has been lost through institutions and what we really need is to regain it. This is like the difference between a real flower and a plastic flower. A plastic flower can last for a million years but it can not generate one other flower; a real flower dies maybe in a month but by its dying it spreads seeds and regenerates other flowers. The free flow of ideas among people is like the spreading of seeds, but institutions limit that.

Munir Fasheh
Endnotes & References

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<td>۸۳</td>
<td>فرزانه نوراللهی</td>
<td>مدیر و پژوهشگر آموزش علوم</td>
<td><a href="mailto:farzane_nour@yahoo.com">farzane_nour@yahoo.com</a></td>
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<td>۸۴</td>
<td>فریال هرمزاتی</td>
<td>روابط عمومی و مشارکت در اجتماع اموزشی رایانه‌ای</td>
<td><a href="mailto:info@arsehconsulting.com">info@arsehconsulting.com</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>۸۵</td>
<td>علی وجدانی</td>
<td>مدیرگروه پژوهشی تربیت علوم (هیئت علمی دانشگاه شهید رجایی)</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mvesali@srttu.edu">mvesali@srttu.edu</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**فهرست اسامی کلیه شرکت‌کنندگان نشستهای هم‌اندیشی**

- A: شنبه صبح ۱۰ شهریور
- B: شنبه عصر ۱۰ شهریور
- C: یکشنبه صبح ۱۱ شهریور
- D: یکشنبه عصر ۱۱ شهریور
- E: چهارشنبه صبح ۱۲ شهریور (چهارحد)