

A Search for Meaning: Udaipur as a Learning City

Vidhi and Manav

“Looking outwards without the capacity to look inwards creates competition, aggression, exploitation of nature and people, violence and insecurity. It globalizes commerce and trade, not human consciousness. It creates exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness. A philosophy of inclusion can only emerge from a philosophy of intrinsic worth and self organization- from the individual to the community (city) to the nation to the world ... it is the foundation for building an Earth Democracy.” — Vandana Shiva, Rebuilding an Earth Democracy

WHY DO WE NEED UDAIPUR AS A LEARNING CITY?

In most cities around the world, we see phenomenal levels of violence, corruption, pollution, disease, consumerism, disparity, individualism, selfishness, aggressiveness, suicides, etc. Rural villagers, who are forced to migrate to the city or those who already inhabit urban slums, are often blamed for, or seen as the roots of, these problems in India, and so the solution most often prescribed is that these villagers need more education. There is little desire to explore how the dominant vision of Development, the overall set-up of the city, or the mind-set of the ‘well-schooled’ contribute to the growth of the above-mentioned problems. Nor is there much desire to explore how solutions can grow from their own local context, especially as our leaders are conditioned to look towards the West for all the answers.

‘Udaipur as a Learning City’ grows out of a desire to address the problems inherent in modern urban living. These problems are experienced not only by those living in the city, but also by those living in nearby villages, on which the parasitic city feeds. This process also grows out of our personal desires to live a more meaningful life and to discover and create alternatives to schooling for ourselves and our children.

Our starting point for ‘Udaipur as a Learning City’ was therefore a bit different. We decided to explore the mind-set of the middle-class people of all ages, particularly youth, living in Udaipur. Over the course of several conversations, several common statements began to emerge, which are important to analyze more deeply:

- *“Why should we think about the development of Udaipur? It is not our responsibility; we are responsible only for our families and ourselves. This is a job for the government or for NGOs.”*
- *“We have never had the opportunity to think about our capacities or about our talents in our schools.”*
- *“The TV is spoiling our children and we don’t know what to do about it.”*
- *“We need to take more resources from the villages. How else will we survive?”*
- *“We see no future in Udaipur. There is nothing here. We will have to move to Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore for real opportunities.”*
- *“Even if we wanted to get involved in improving the city, we don’t know where to go.”*

The more we spoke to people, the more we realized that if we wanted to address the problems Udaipur is facing, and if we wanted to prevent future ecological and social catastrophe, we needed to provoke and stimulate these ‘educated’ mind-sets. We also realized that there was quite a lot that people (including ourselves) did not know about the city or about the rapidly-disappearing larger region of Mewar — which we needed to understand if we were genuinely

interested in regenerating Udaipur in creativity ways. We realized that there was a need to look at the city in a more holistic way (beyond isolated interests, disciplines, and sectors) and to create spaces and media for more genuine dialogue about the city between different individuals, groups, and communities in the city. Lastly, we realized that we will have to renegotiate vital relationships between Udaipur and the surrounding villages, between Udaipur and the institutions of the nation-state, and between Udaipur and the forces of Globalization.

In this article, we will first elaborate our growing concept of Udaipur as a Learning City. We will then describe some of the interesting initiatives that are taking shape. Lastly, we will present our reflections on the overall process to-date and some of the challenges we are facing.

WHAT IS UDAIPUR AS A LEARNING CITY?

Though much has been written about Learning Cities, the movement is still in its nascent stages – both conceptually and operationally. Several experiments of Learning Cities are evolving in different parts of the world (primarily in industrialized countries). We have a lot to learn from these experiences, but we also have much to learn from our own Indian philosopher-activists. We are particularly interested in exploring how to give new shape and meaning to Gandhiji's and Tagore's concept of *Swaraj* (rule over oneself) in the urban context. In this context, we believe that it is important to highlight the following process-goals in Udaipur:

- Appreciating and nurturing the vast potentials and creativities of each human being and of different communities.
- Building new relationships between people and regenerating feelings of a caring city.
- Challenging and questioning dehumanizing, destructive and exploitative forces/institutions/systems/attitudes.
- Developing creative shared visions and actions for different kinds of development and counter-Development.

We see 'learning' as the key to re-establishing our human potential, dignity, compassion and *Swaraj*. For this to happen, *the concept of learning must be seen beyond what happens in isolated spaces like schools, training workshops, and literacy courses*. Rather, we believe that we must explore and re-value processes of reflecting, celebrating, playing, working, creating, knowledge construction, meaning-making, and sharing. These processes emerge from dynamic interactions in informal spaces, such as the family and extended families, neighborhood and peer groups, cultural and religious groups, work environments and professional associations, natural and recreational spots, media and other socio-cultural environments. It is interesting to note that Udaipur used to be known as an Education City, because it is home to many schools and colleges, which sprouted up in the 1940s and 1950s. We think that it is important that we shift from an Education City to a Learning City. (*See the table on the following page*)

EDUCATION/SCHOOLING CITY	LEARNING CITY
Based on notions of human capital and survival of the fittest mentality	Based on the faith and belief in human potential, human spirit and liberation
Education is only for degrees, jobs and money-making	Lifelong learning for meaning-making, creating, understanding and practical doing
Visions and notions of 'development', 'success' and 'progress' pre-defined by a select few	People engage in creating self and collective visions for development, while challenging and rejecting unjust notions of Development
Focuses on fitting the learner into the mainstream system	Facilitates the creation and regeneration of meaningful and just systems/communities
Teaching, transmitting and memorizing information	Learning, understanding, constructing knowledge and connecting knowledge to wisdom
Individualistic, selfish interests and competitive	Collaborative, giving, sharing and nurturing for the good of all
Disconnects learners from their local communities	Facilitates deeper connections among and between local communities
Discovers and values the potential of only a few	Discovers and develops the hidden potential of all
Reinforces and creates new hierarchies and inequalities	Challenges and breaks down hierarchies and builds more equitable relationships
Mechanistic planning and implementation	Organically evolves and is actualized by the people
Usually an imposed Government initiative in which the roles of the Government, NGOs and citizens are predefined and static	Emerges as a Citizens' Initiative which grows from the interests, intrinsic motivation and actual needs of the people. Citizens' roles evolve and keep changing with processes of continuous self-reflection/creativity/dialogue
Schools and colleges are factories and institutions of thought control	Schools and colleges are learning communities
Responsibility of defining education lies in the school's hands	Responsibility for learning lies with oneself and the community
Education is seen to only take place in schools and colleges	Learning is understood to take place everywhere and these other spaces are valued
The only teachers are in schools	Everyone is a teacher and a learner

We firmly believe 'what' and 'how' Udaipur should look like as a Learning City is for the people of Udaipur to jointly dream about and create. Thus, we see it more as a 'process-project,' which is organically unfolding, based on the interests, *parampara* (dynamic tradition), ideas, aspirations and the intrinsic motivation of local citizens of Udaipur and not by any forced and target-oriented, linear, time-bound plans.

EMERGING ACTIVITIES

For the past 7 months, we have been consulting several groups of concerned citizens of Udaipur, including teachers, artists, media persons, businessmen, city administrators, doctors, youth, children, parents and others, to get their ideas about how they see the city and how they might like to be involved in this process-project. With them, we have been trying to explore questions such as:

- *What is the historical basis for Udaipur's formation and growth?*
- *What are the main problems, inequities and challenges confronting people of the city, and what are their aspirations for the future generations?*
- *What are the attitudes of various individuals/communities about teaching and learning?*
- *What formal and informal learning spaces, institutions, knowledge systems, languages, art forms and relationships exist within the city? What learning experiments have been tried in the past?*
- *What dynamic organizations and individuals exist who believe in and are committed to support processes of societal learning? Who are the groups who might resist this process?*

Based on this, we have been able to nurture several friendships with different individuals and organizations. From these friendships, we have begun a process of individual and shared vision-building around the meaning and practice of 'Udaipur as a Learning City'. Vision-building should never be seen an end task or final state in itself, but rather should be viewed as growing from dynamic processes of action, reflection and dialogue. Also from these friendships, several activities have started to emerge. These activities have also been designed to be 'invitational,' in nature in order to attract and involve more people into the process. Some of these activities include:

- 1. Identifying and Connecting Learning Sources:** *These activities seek to re-discover, re-value and regenerate the hidden potential of local citizens and re-connect this vast potential back to the future of the city.*
 - a) *A Learning Resource Directory called 'Aaiye Udaipur Se Seekhain' is being generated to identify various knowledges, skills, and wisdoms that exist within the people of Udaipur. The directory will feature those who wish to voluntarily share their talents with other people in the city.*
 - b) *A Study of Environment and Environmental Groups in Udaipur is being carried out to highlight the environmental problems the city is facing and to identify those groups which are working on these problems. From this study, we will try to involve youth and other groups to think about environmental concerns and to get them involved with local organizations in order to do something to alleviate these problems.*
 - c) *A Study of Mewari Language Writers, Stories and Songs is to identify and appreciate the vast culture of Udaipur that is embedded in Mewari. Like most local dialects, Mewari is also on the verge of extinction, because very few 'educated' people have respect for it. There is immense potential for regenerating our creative expression if Mewari is re-valued.*
 - d) *A Study on the Spiritual Dimensions of Udaipur is to understand the various aspects of spirituality in our day-to-day life in Udaipur. In the initial stage of this process, we are identifying and having discussions with various spiritual and religious groups and individuals. We hope to bring these groups together on a common platform in order to prevent religious hatred and violence.*

2. Self-Organizing Learning Communities: *These activities seek to encourage individuals who wish to reflect on themselves, the larger contexts they live in, and issues of common concern, to come together in various dialogical spaces.*

- a) *Platform for Youth* is an informal space for local youth to share and develop their ideas, views, action plans, visions of life, inner expressions, and critical thinking power. Although thousands of youth organizations are working all around India, youth are rarely involved in the conceptualization or decision-making processes of these organizations. Platform offers youth the opportunity to make decisions, define and design projects of their interest, indulge in creative activities, and develop their visions of life and of the city.
- b) *Teachers' Action Group* is an informal group teachers and learning facilitators concerned with educational transformation. They meet to discuss new ideas and innovations from around the world and to share their experiences. This group started after several teachers in Udaipur participated in an international study, called 'Qualities of an Educated Teenager for the 21st Century'.
- c) *NGO Young Peoples' Forum* is organized by people from different backgrounds working in the voluntary sector who wish to share their experiences and reflect on different issues around local and global development. It seeks to build new kinds of collaborations among young NGO workers across organizations and across sectors.
- d) *African Forum* is initiated by several African students who are studying in Udaipur. They discuss various issues like education, poverty, media, democracy, and the implications for rethinking development in Africa. They also publish a bimonthly bulletin 21st Century Africa through which they document and share their reflections.

3. Community Reflections/Dialogues: *These activities seek to generate different public forums, media and meetings to discuss the development of the city. These spaces will facilitate critical analysis and diverse modes of expression to build confidence at individual and collective levels.*

- a) *Community Media* is intended to bring media back into the hands of people and to stimulate critical thinking, creativity and self-expression. The *Lok Bhatti Patra* (Peoples' Wall Paper) seeks to encourage individuals to share their thoughts, experiences, ideas and reflections with others in their community. The *Yuva Ahsas* (Youth Feeling) Street Theatre was initiated by a group of youth who felt the need to understand themselves and their surroundings more deeply, and to invite other youth to start thinking with them about problems facing youth. These youth have written their own street play and are performing it in schools in Udaipur.
- b) *Public Discussions*, for example, on the "Public Report on Basic Education" and "Big Dams, Big Bombs and Big Schools" have been organized to bring together people from different disciplines and backgrounds to dialogue about issues of concern for the future of the city.
- c) *Surveys* on various topics, such as *Dost Banao* (An Invitation for Friendship) with youth, 'Qualities of an Educated Teenager for the 21st Century' with teachers, and 'Violence in Schools' with various community members, have been conducted to generate dialogue and action.
- d) *Public Exhibitions*, such as on the Meaning of Creativity, have been organized in order to draw public attention to key areas for regenerating the city.

4. Unlearning/Learning Workshops and Seminars for Learning Activists: *These activities seek to generate a dynamic intergenerational groups of local learning activists*

who are interested in creating meaningful learning spaces and opportunities for themselves and in re-activating other peoples' love for learning.

- a) *Learning Workshops*, such as 'Art and Creativity Workshops' have been organized for budding young artists, ages 8 to 15, to give the children the opportunity to understand and discover their creative potential and strengthen their self-confidence. Additional workshops in puppetry, music, handicrafts are being planned with community collaboration.
- b) *Learning to Learn for the 21st Century* was organized with teacher trainers and Bachelors of Education students to challenge existing ideas about learning, education and development.
- c) A workshop on *Mindmapping* was organized for people of different ages to elaborate various techniques of creative thinking, problem solving, and brain storming on the visual elements of mind. A workshop on *Developing Facilitation Skills* was organized for youth to understand how to lead a participatory meeting, discussion or a workshop.

5. Regenerating Learning Spaces: *These activities seek to create self-evolving spaces which promote a process of rethinking education and encourage intergenerational learning around local knowledge, language, culture and wisdom.*

- a) *Learning Parks* are being envisioned and developed in different areas with the support of local communities, particularly led by young children and youth. These parks will utilize a range of traditional and modern media.

SOME OF OUR REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Through our various methods of *samvaad* (on-going processes of deep dialogue that involve sharing and trust-building), we have learned that very few school-educated people really want to engage in understanding the true meaning of 'learning'. Most find it difficult to perceive the difference between learning and schooling. They are too caught up in the transmission-based and surface-learning processes that are practiced and taught in school. Only a handful of middle class people have indicated that they want to engage in new learning experiences or do something more creative and transforming. For the same reason, they find it difficult to grasp why Udaipur should become a Learning City and not a Green City, a Cyber City or a Marble City.

Over the past few months, we have also learnt that most people, be they teachers, city planners or peoples' representatives, do not understand what is a **vision** (or *drishti*). There also seems to be a lot of confusion about why we need a vision for anything, be it for our lives or for a project. Most people (be they young or old) have been conditioned to believe that all projects come with pre-planned visions and models and that meaningful peoples' initiatives — connected with peoples' shared visions/dreams about the city — are worthless. The majority of people are comfortable simply copying activities, plans and models without daring to imagine or go off the beaten path.

It has also become very clear from our interactions that most of the people are deeply conditioned to believing that all 'good' and 'bad' in the city is due to the Government and the Politicians. Therefore, whatever needs to be done for the city will have to come from the Government, as it is its duty to think about the problems facing the city. At the same time, quite a few people were blatantly adamant in saying that the common people of Udaipur are not capable of thinking for themselves. Very few people felt that voluntary 'people-led'

initiatives could work. This throws light on the low levels of self-confidence and high levels of dependency that most educated people have, and how they rationalize their apathy and try to escape thinking about their personal responsibilities and roles. Our present self-centered and mechanical lifestyles also do not encourage people to explore and engage in the different realities or opportunities that exist in the city.

Though a large number of youth have been conditioned and compelled to be a part of the present competitive and dehumanizing rat-race — running behind endless amounts of money and glamour — nonetheless, we believe that their tremendous energy and spirit can be channeled into self-transforming and regenerative processes. **Our hope truly lies in them and with them.** In interacting with the youth and some younger children, we have seen that they really want to do new, exciting things, but they are usually bogged down with many academic and family pressures. They do not know how to overcome the problems of time shortage and of a lack of encouragement from their peers and families. Therefore, we need open up more motivating spaces for youth, by strengthening opportunities for dialogue between youth and their families, peers, and teachers.

The retired people have also indicated strong interest in doing something for the city. They feel that their involvement in this process-project could provide them with a platform and also some direction on how they could share their ideas and experiences with younger people. However, in our experiences in different seminars which included both younger and older people, we saw that the older people tended to dominate the youth and were not open to giving them space and opportunity to share their ideas and views. If we are to nurture spaces for open intergenerational learning, we need work on transforming this rigidity.

While these are our initial reflections, we have great hopes that Udaipur is on its way to becoming a Learning City. We invite you to share and learn with us, as we further engage in this process-project of regenerating *Swaraj* in Udaipur.

REFERENCES

Shiva, Vandana, “Rebuilding an Earth Democracy: A 50th Anniversary Perspective,” in Rukmini Sekhar, ed., Making a Difference: A Collection of Essays. New Delhi: SPIC-MACAY, 1998.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vidhi Jain <vidhib@yahoo.com> is working as a Learning Activist at Shikshantar. She is a trained special educator and has experience of working with different communities in Rural Rajasthan, Harayana and Delhi. Her interests include ornithology, biking and Indian classical and folk music.

Manav <Chandreshsumi@yahoo.com> is presently supporting Shikshantar as a Learning Activist. He has vast experience of working with children and youth all around India. Manav believes that every individual can be a self-teacher and a self-learner. He is in a process of de-schooling himself, and his practices-interests include experimenting with life, practicing *yoga-sadhana*, interacting with nature, and engaging in a search to know himself.