

Background paper for the Futures of Education initiative

Rethinking mass higher education: towards community integrated learning centres

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Abstract

At a time of the multiple failures of hegemonic economic and administrative systems and the destruction of ecologies, there is an urgent need to recognise that common global problems require diverse local solutions. Similarly, questioning the limitations of mass higher education, especially intermediate education (post-school), that has rendered vast masses of youth into conditions of unemployability and precarity, must compel us to possibilities of instituting alternative, decentralised learning spaces. Engaging and integrating UNESCO's call for new imaginaries for ecological sustainability, knowledge production, citizenship participation, and work security, this paper will highlight the possibilities of democratic, decentralised, and diverse learning spaces that bridge the divides between industry versus agriculture, urban versus rural, and which can be foundations on which new economies and societies can be built. Such learning centres/institutes can be located in specific ecological/ regional zones and can be tailored to meet local ecological, agricultural and artisanal, manufacturing, and processing needs and cater to the linguistic and cultural abilities of the region. Crafting new pedagogies for such courses will provide youth complementary skills for self-realisation, new livelihoods, collective citizenship responsibility and social capital building.

Introduction: a critique of mass higher education

In what is a summative and stinging critique of poor quality mass education, Perumal Murugan, the noted Tamil writer, has recently labelled higher education sites as 'curated cemeteries' for youth and society. His critique encapsulates mass higher education's multiple failures: of not enabling youth to be grounded, socially sensitive beings; engaged citizens in their communities and nations; or endowing youth with thinking and reflexive action capabilities, and gainful employment. Many of these conditions have been registered and noted across the developing world and also in zones where marginalised and disadvantaged communities live in advanced, capitalist countries. The blind expansion of post-school, higher education across countries (including the rash of new correspondence/online/distance education facilities) has consolidated into an 'enormous machine' (Morin 1999) which at its best combines primarily science, technology, and bureaucracy and which in the context of democracy's regression, the rise of technocratic specialists, the 'depoliticization of politics', and the mediatisation of society renders many 'unlearned' to their own realities. In addition, mass higher education systems have become an apparatus that disseminates imitative and mostly outdated information to a subjected youth population.

Limitations of international education policyscapes and their platitudes

Assessed in terms of the negative fallouts that mass higher education has had on disadvantaged youth and societies, it is imperative that we critically interrogate the platitudes that international advisory, governance, and funding bodies disseminate. Far from the conventional assessments of international aid agencies that see inadequate access (or those left behind) to higher education as a problem, it is the impact and imprint of poorly

conceptualised, irrelevant and undemocratically delivered higher education among those who have been recipients of such education that has fomented problems and challenges in many societies. Slogans such as 'Education for All' and 'Focus on those Left Behind' have attempted to envelop vast bodies of varied populations into the formal education apparatus without paying attention to the integral philosophy, context, pedagogy, and impact of education. Education policyscapes, formulated at the high tables of international agencies and consultation bodies, have also fed into these myopic and stilted prescriptions for higher education. Calls for enabling education so that the 'global village' and the 'connected society' can be realised, or promoting 'education as a public good'—without attendant and relevant structural support to realise this— make a mockery of conditions where there is extant destruction of local dwelling places, villages and societies. In a context where the expansion and legitimisation of capital in all spheres and the subsequent disembedding of societies have become all too common, it is erroneous of international agencies to overlook such trends while making pithy statements about the importance of 'shared public institutions'.

What most education policies have overlooked is the fact that the global population consists of an over-privileged transnational class versus a large mass of disempowered populations. Prescribing education that imagines the integration and absorption of the masses into the dominant economic apparatus overlooks the multiple ways in which in-built institutional, economic, and cultural exclusions work to keep the masses in conditions of subordination and submission, even when endowing them with formal 'education'.

Attempts to link education to employment have also resulted in the production of 'vocational' and 'life-skills education' that focuses on integrating working class youth into the dominant industries such as low-end service sectors and which offer no long-term employment security or assured social mobility. Such programs also act as conduits for the imposition of elite preferences and as sources of social distancing of youth from their communities (Maithreyi 2019) and enable the reproduction of the larger social system and its attendant forms of hierarchy and disadvantages. Mass higher education that entitles one to be 'educated' has, then, become for many only a label which is often bereft of any positive identity and worth, and it is not unusual in many countries to regard contemporary youth as a 'useless class'. Within this, the youth are now subjected to processes of alienation, humiliation, and violence that render them either into invisibilised and disenfranchised citizens or into violent anti-state and anti-social actors. The onset of mental illness among youth, now rampant across several countries, is only one other factor that education policyscapes overlook.

Reports from Africa and South Asia (UNICEF 2020; Jefwa 2015) highlight how vast masses of youth now crowd into ever-expanding cities but whose formal education assures them no appropriate employment and who now form a large restive population. India's youth who subscribe to right-wing and religious fundamentalisms, Nigeria's extremist and violent outfit that has come to be labelled as 'Boko-Haram' ('anti-western education'), and the large number of armed youth militia groups in various parts of the world bear testimony to the compounded failure of the political economies of several countries and their mass higher education. Latin America's record as housing the most violent countries with explicit links between youth and multiple forms of violence (Chioda 2016) highlights the failure of increasing levels of education to stem personal and collective violence. In the Middle East, for Iran, there is now what the economist Nader Habibi (2015) identifies as the problem of 'over education' where the number of graduates and their qualifications exceed the abilities of the economy to absorb them. In seeing the rise of criminality, corruption, and violence among even those burdened with the tag of being the 'educated unemployed', we need to recognise that youth are exhibiting what Mendoza (2020) elaborates as survival strategies that the disadvantaged resort to that further erode their capabilities to tide over poverty, thereby reproducing disadvantage over generations and time.

It is the results of such negative impact that has compelled some critics to label mass education as 'edu-factories' (Edu-factory Collective 2009) that produce certified persons tailored to meet the dominant economy's

objectives but who are also susceptible to becoming redundant. As precariats in the global economies that have been unravelling over the past decade, youth now bear the biggest burden of failed economic, social, and political agendas. All of this is capped by the spread of ‘epistemicide’ or the death of epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos 2016), which remains the hidden and unregistered reason for the widespread disorientation and disarray that one sees among the ‘educated youth’ of marginalised and disenfranchised communities. The onset of a collective amnesia of languages and cultures and the subsequent dysglossia (Devy 2017) of several long-evolved cultures and life-worlds must also be laid at the door of mass, formal education. Is it any wonder that negative impacts such as these have meant that far from societies and nations reaping the benefits of ‘the demographic dividends’ of having a young population, it is the deep social scars and harms that mass education has deployed that mark the youth in many regions as a ‘wasted class’ or a ‘nowhere generation’ (Jeffrey 2014)?

The summative results of intense and prolonged disembedding of youth from their original provenances, life-worlds, and organic inter-subjectivities are to be seen in the extent to which members of disadvantaged societies are now marked by deep ‘erosions’ (Vasavi 2018). Such erosions include the loss of local knowledge and skills, the sense of belonging to specific communities and locales, the resilience and rejuvenation abilities to tide over catastrophes, and the social capabilities to discern and choose between long-term and short-term goals and values. As targets of the expanding capitalist market, youth have been rendered more consumers than citizens and a submissive and pliant audience to mass media than active agents of their own destinies.

Alternative learning

If all these issues must be addressed and if the worth of education as learning and enabling must be revived and implicated, it is imperative that we deploy imaginaries that challenge many of our accepted and institutionalised criteria and yardsticks. Located as we are in a global predicament of intense and multiple emergencies, now manifested explicitly by the Covid-19 crisis, and with the imminent collapse of ecological and economic systems that global climate change forebode, we must accept that new economic-ecological-social-political systems are now inevitable. In consonance with this, it is important for us to recognise that education philosophies, systems, practices, institutions, and agents must also be tuned in to address these serious challenges that face humanity. To initiate this, we must see youth as new catalysts that have the potential to bear and realise the goals of new imaginaries and entities in which some of the depredations of our current global predicament can be addressed. The search for new pathways to facilitate this and to enable the large body of the world’s youth to emerge as a force field for positive change would be to initiate grounding principles that challenge the existing monolithic idea of post-school education.

Pathways to alternative higher education

Instead of neo-liberal education’s guiding norms of fitting society into the dominant employment apparatus, new terms and yardsticks will be required to initiate integrated learning centres at regional and community levels. If education, as formal endeavour, must become a ‘socio-political practice’ (Allen 2014), then the key ideas of democracy, decentralisation, and diversity must be the foundations on which education in general and community integrated learning centres in particular can be established.

Democratising intermediate/post-school education

Shifting from the excessively bureaucratic format and process in which mass post-school education is promoted, it is imperative that the bedrock of alternative learning be built on the foundations of democratic norms. The premises of recognising individual needs and collective orientation, that John Dewey stipulated, to the more recent stress that education and planning forge links so that there is ‘democracy in education’ and ‘education in democracy’ (Guttmann in Sardoc 2018), must guide the norms by which these community integrated learning centres can be established. In addition, the principle of democracy has to be applied in the domains of financial allocation, administrative appointments, and location of Integrated Learning Centres. Hence such learning centres should be located in regions that are marginalised and should receive adequate funding and administrative support. Norms of governance and appointments should also strictly follow the principles of democracy. This is central as only democratically functioning institutions can disseminate a culture and ethos of democracy to its residents or participants. Learners will imbibe and then become carriers of this culture and ethos of democracy so that received and internalised ideas and practices of hierarchy and discrimination can be eliminated from their frame of reference.

As a learning space that enables individual and collective empowerment, especially among marginalised populations, the challenge is “how to bridge boundaries of social difference—into relationships that bring mutual benefit” (Allen 2014: 4). Selection of youth learners must be made on the basis of community representation, ensuring that marginalised groups and girls are adequately represented. In complex situations of wide diversity and histories of hostility between groups, criteria and committees to select youth from different groups should be very sensitive and representative. As new learning spaces whose worth may not be understood in the initial phases, it is important that they receive government/state funding. The rhetoric of privatisation of education or enabling market mechanisms to govern such institutions will not lead to their realisation. In regions and societies where economic disadvantages are severe and time spent on education is seen as an opportunity cost, it is imperative for states to not only fund the centres but to also provide bursaries or supporting funds to the selected youth so that they are enabled to attend such courses or learning programs. Only if youth are supported to realise their varied potential can a society or nation be assured of having citizens who will act as nurturing and responsive persons. It is in the “flourishing of youth learners” (Allen 2014: 6) that multiple talents can emerge to enable society to break out of social systems that reproduce disadvantage and discrimination.

Decentralisation

The principles of decentralisation are to be applied in the selection of sites for the Community Integrated Learning Centre so that regional characteristics, social background (class, race, ethnicity, religion), and the political economy of different areas are factored in while locating the learning centre. Instead of typical bureaucratic formats of rigid control from centres of power, it is important that institutional autonomy in functioning, backed by adequate democratic accountability measures, be assured to such institutions. Such autonomy is to facilitate the institution to select locally relevant knowledge and skills, identify local needs and requirements, and facilitate new learning modules that integrate formal training with practical and local application. Decentralisation that emphasises localism is key as the recent trends of de-globalisation and de-growth economies indicate the need for a revival and renaissance of local knowledge, skills, abilities, and viable economies and societies. Enabling the learning centres to have schedules and calendars that suit the specificity of their regions will enable them to engage in the rhythm and life of the region. Projects and learning assignments should also be linked to the seasonal-work-social calendars of different regions so that there is an alignment between the immediate ecological, economic and social environment and the learning programs.

Diversity

The principles of diversity are to be extended to the world of knowledge and hence the curricula of the learning centres must draw on a diversity of knowledges. Universal knowledge forms of academic content must be fused with the knowledge systems and skills of different sources and epistemologies. These learning centres can be the sites for recognising and validating a diversity of locally-evolved knowledge systems and skills. It must also be possible to recognise and integrate knowledgeable persons (without 'certified' status) as professional resource persons.

Linked to recognising multi-diversities of peoples, ideas, and practices there is need for 'tolerance of differences' and 'tolerance of tolerance' (Feinberg 2016: 73) so that public discourse and personal acceptance and co-living are facilitated. This is particularly pertinent in regions or contexts where youth from disadvantaged backgrounds and histories of violence/war/tensions are recruited. It is not out of place for such centres to also act as 'peace and reconciliation' sites so that the graduates from these centres become carriers of peace and the philosophy and practice of seeking justice through non-violent strategies.

Community integrated learning centres

If regional specificity, decentralisation and democracy mark the learning centres' location and functioning, then the key orientation of an 'integrated learning' centre should be the bases of disseminating and engaging in knowledge that goes beyond conventional academic divisions of 'Science' versus 'Literature'/Arts, 'Vocational' versus 'Cognitive', 'Theory' versus Practice', etc. Instead, as integrated learning the objective and subjective dimensions of knowledge and learning are to be fused so that learning and implementation become interconnected. As integrated learning, the subjects will also draw on interdisciplinarity instead of being limited by disciplinary boundaries. For example, exercises in assessing crop growth can also be an exercise in maths; a lesson in language learning can be a lesson on history and culture; a lesson in history and culture can be a part of knowing the ecological history of a place; identifying specific species of flora or fauna can also be a way of learning to write, etc. In emphasising a 'web of knowledge' approach, an Integrated Learning curriculum can also enhance the emotive, intellectual, and social learning levels of youth.

In some cases, 'traditional' and local knowledge and skills can be reviewed and incorporated into teaching modules. In addition, new knowledge and skills can be integrated into the courses. Issues such as the loss of bio-diversity, local, ecologically viable agricultural practices, and erosion of sophisticated, long-evolved, and viable knowledge systems, languages, and socially cohesive practices (e.g., community grain banks, seed sharing, collective environmental care, group socialisation, etc.) can be made central to the syllabus. As Integrated Learning Centres at the community level, these centres can endow youth with skills for ecological and agricultural-horticultural conservation, restoration, rejuvenation, artisanal skills for local crafts, new skills for appropriate technologies, and citizenship responsibilities which include community-building of common resources and institutions. Combining such skills and knowledge with the integration of new technologies (IT/BT, etc.) and methods will provide youth complementary skills for new livelihoods and social capital building. Such learning and knowledge capacity building will buttress regional economies and make them viable entities and liveable arenas.

Areas that may benefit from such decentralised community Integrated Learning Centres are the vast hinterlands of Africa, Asia and Latin America, especially in those regions where extractive economies (especially mining and

natural resource extraction sites) and extant ecological degradation have combined to destroy livelihoods and life-worlds. There are also sites in post-communist regions where once thriving agricultural communities are now shadow communities, in the war-torn regions of the Middle East and other countries, and in the post-industrial rust belts and the ghetto-prison complexes of the United States of America that would benefit from such learning centres. Such places, rendered marginal and often treated as 'badlands', need to be reclaimed through re-asserting the value of place-based knowledge systems, a sense of belonging, and by forging new ecological and economic linkages.

Pedagogies for integrated community learning

Alternative learning spaces with new curricula and syllabi will also require innovative, creative, and sensitive pedagogies. Bearing in mind that transformational learning for youth in such regions is to address the 'crisis of disconnection' (Olalla 2004) that was initiated through hegemonic and misaligned education policies, the pedagogies should facilitate learners "to be able to embrace the mystery of life, aware of the power and limits of conceptual learning, and capable of foreseeing new actions and producing unprecedented results, while caring equally for personal and collective concerns" (Olalla 2004: 4). Recognising that learners, especially those from violent and difficult backgrounds and histories require both social and emotional scaffolding, the pedagogies and teacher/resource person-learner relationships should address the social and emotional scarring that socio-economic disadvantage imprints on youth. One of the key approaches or methodologies for Community Integrated Learning Centres can be the 'Social Transformative Learning' theory and methods.

Towards Social Transformative Learning

Social Transformative Learning is a theory of deep learning that goes beyond just content knowledge acquisition, or learning equations, memorizing tax codes or learning historical facts and data. It is a desirable process for adults to learn to think for themselves, through true emancipation from sometimes mindless or unquestioning acceptance of what we have to come to know through our life experience, especially those things that our culture, religions, and personalities may predispose us towards, without our active engagement and questioning of how we know what we know. (Mazirow 2000: 20)

Focusing on this key orientation of STL, the Community Integrated Learning Centres can emphasise pedagogies that facilitate contextual understanding, critical reflection on received assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons. These are to enable adults to not only critically review their own roles but also to develop 'self-authorship' not only for their own lives but to be able to contribute to their societies.

Such pedagogies will effect a change in the learners' 'frame of reference' thereby allowing learning processes to be critical, reflexive, and relational. Providing cases/examples/samples that are context specific and meaningful is to also interrogate the dominant systems so that the myriad existing problems of hierarchy and inequity are addressed and the pressing need to make learning a pathway to a new worldview and to a new world is emphasized. The emphasis should be on making self-transformation the cornerstone of STL so that social or macro changes can be initiated via the individual. Given the cultures of discrimination and exploitation that many youth from disadvantaged communities would have experienced, there must be an emphasis on self-recognition and enabling. As with the Freirian methods of conscientisation, for 'Social Transformative Learning' (STL) to take place the pedagogies of questioning, dialogue, critical thinking need to be central to the dissemination of integrated knowledge and practice. To facilitate this, some foundational pedagogical perspectives need to be elaborated and built into the curricula, and these could be the following:

Reflexive/Reflexivity: Here reflexivity is defined as the ability to re-think or question issues. It includes critically re-thinking inherited cultures and traditions and taken-for-granted frames of reference. Instead of a formal analytical overview can everyday structures of hierarchy (race, caste, ethnicity, gender) and their sites (at home, at school, at work, in public and private lives) be unpackaged? Can learners be made aware of the impact of hierarchical thinking on their lives? How can received ideas and practices be challenged in their own lives? Similar forms of reflexivity can be extended to understanding both macro and micro issues by linking the impact of objective structures to subjective experiences. Eg, if hunger is experienced by specific types of households, then tracing the factors behind this should enable learners to comprehend the political economy of food.

Relational/Relationality: Can the relationships between persons and groups and between disciplines and themes, between objects/nature and persons, between worlds, and between ideas be explicated? Can the relationships between past and present, present and future be laid out? Can implications between different domains (physical, social, and economic worlds) be made explicit? For example: Can the relationship between low pay and the lack of bargaining power be made explicit? Can the impact of consumerism on the environment be made recognizable? Can individual indifference to public institutions be linked to dysfunctional public services?

Empathetic/Empathy: Can a sense of sensitivity towards others (persons, animals, worlds, groups) be made central? How can a person place herself/himself in the shoes of another? What worlds do those who are subordinated or disadvantaged occupy? For example, can a male learner be made to act and follow all the restrictions that a typical woman of his age would be forced to subscribe to?

Engaged/Engagement: Can the learning sessions provide for all learners skills and abilities to engage in the everyday world that they inhabit? Engagement should include abilities to interact with and interrogate structures, processes and agencies/agents of power and disempowerment. For example: What are the ways in which learners can improve their own environment (not only physical but also social)? What key social issue can they engage in as part of their everyday civic work or in contexts of pressing issues that need addressal? What changes or differences can they initiate in their everyday lives?

The key objectives of STL should be to evolve perspectives, methodologies, pedagogies and texts which can go beyond the standard and mainstream approaches of knowledge transfer and facilitate the questioning of dominant society and its cultures. Going beyond the established transactions of classroom-based teaching and examinations, a new portfolio of standards and processes must be implemented. These can include not only site/place-based projects but also the conduct of studies which build on new pedagogies and teaching-learning transactions that emphasize reflexive, relational, empathetic, and engaged learning.

Learning modules

In the two-year Community Integrated Learning program we can envisage four key modules, each of which is interlinked to the philosophy and pedagogies of the course. These are: (1) Personal Growth and Self-Realisation (theatre, debates, governance participation, etc.); (2) Region-Specific Courses, e.g. Ecology and Agriculture (forestry, agro-forestry; forest-horticulture; fisheries; animal husbandry); artisanal skills (varieties of smithy, weaving, pottery, etc.); range of knowledge and skills evolved in specific regions; (3) Active Citizenship: Engagement; Democracy, Local Decentralised Structures; Rights and Responsibilities (4) General Skills in languages (local, national), computers, and accounts.

Recruitment of youth learners

An alternative learning space for youth will have to draw on new norms for selecting learners. Rather than place emphasis on academic performance in high school exams, learners can be selected on the basis of their aptitude for the knowledge and skills that each Community Integrated Learning Centre offers. The challenge is to draw on ‘the vast cultural memory of the unlettered and use them creatively towards harmonizing ideas with a single, and genuinely humanitarian, symbolic framework of abstractions’ (Devy 2017: 73). Hence, paying attention to the myriad talents and skills of different groups of people will be a way to address the serious problem of ‘epistemicide’.

Learning assessment

Similarly, learning assessment of different modules/courses/training can be based on continuous in-built evaluations and assessment of a portfolio of assignments rather than on examinations. Work in portfolios/projects/submissions can also be subject to a process of error analyses-feedback-revision so that learning and internalisation of ideas/methods/processes are assured. Such a system of assessment assures learning at individual pace and levels while also ensuring that the stress of examinations, the limitations of ‘pass and fail’ judgements, and the cognitive limitations of learning for fixed exam performance are all addressed.

Training and continued support for learning facilitators

No alternative or innovative learning program or endeavour can succeed without adequate and prolonged orientation, support, and mentoring for faculty. Identifying persons who can transact domain-specialised knowledge within the framework of Social Transformative Learning and within the institutional culture of a Community Integrated Learning space requires substantial thinking, planning, and organisation. Providing freedom to the administrators to select persons who are knowledgeable in specific domains or fields of knowledge and skills and who will be able to lend themselves and engage with the STL teaching-learning methods will be important. Training resource persons and mentors in these skills and also enabling them to bring to the fore their own individual pedagogical skills will be key. Periodic review, support and co-learning among the faculty or resource persons should be the cornerstone of the way in which the curricula, syllabi, pedagogy, and assessment of learners are conducted. Giving centrality to the pillars of democracy, diversity, and decentralisation means that each Community Integrated Learning Centre should have its own distinctive syllabi while also subscribing to the broader orientation of Community Integrated Learning. Resource persons/faculty/teachers must be prepared to be continuous learners, and periodic reviews of their work and impact should be part of the reviews of the centres itself.

Internship/Apprenticeship

Community Integrated Learning Centres should have linkages to various employment centres and a range of internships and apprenticeships for the learners should be facilitated. Mid-term (after the first year?) apprenticeship at designated employment centres or support for initiating independent enterprises or endeavours after graduation should be considered. These linkages can be forged via access to government, non-government, and private institutions and organisations.

Conclusion

UNESCO's efforts in these times of 'complexity, uncertainty and fragility' (CIES 2020) to consider the future possibilities in education are commendable. However, to realise its own mandate of creating a just and equitable world through education and science promotion, UNESCO will have to expand its paradigms of what makes relevant learning and what its objectives are. Going beyond established and mainstream institutions that place emphasis on their linkages to dominant political economies, it is imperative that alternative institutions, curricula, pedagogies and practices that can make genuine learning possible for post-school youth be supported. If the stated goals of UNESCO's 'Futures of Education' are to reaffirm the humanist goals of education and to enable all persons to realise their potential, then the current conjuncture of a twinned collapse of ecological and economic systems (with society bearing the subsequent burdens of this collapse) and the negative fall-out of these on the large body of youth needs to be reckoned with as the key challenges. In order to do so, it is imperative that diversities of economies, life-worlds, knowledges, and identities be recognised. Alternative learning for/among youth can be the fount upon which new worlds can rise. UNESCO's objective of promoting public and common goods via education can be realised by initiating a diversity of Community Integrated Learning Centres. For true learning should enable youth to lead lives where

.... the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit"

(Rabindranath Tagore: "Where the Mind is without Fear").

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