

Reclaiming our Freedom to Learn

The Universidad de la Tierra

Gustavo Esteva

2004

They came from villages and barrios as naive refuseniks, mostly indigenous, who were fed up with the classroom. They came with curiosity, rather than conviction. They had heard about Universidad de la Tierra from friends or acquaintances and decided to give it a try. The cost of the whole adventure is ridiculously low, almost irrelevant.

Most of the 'students', however, require support for food and lodging, since they are away from their communities during their learning process. This has been a limiting factor, preventing us from accepting all the 'students' that apply to Unitierra.

They knew that we have no teachers or curricula and do not provide State-approved educational services. But they loved the idea that they would be in full control of their own learning: the content, the rhythm, the conditions.

But it was not easy for them to take such control into their own hands—even those who had suffered school for only a few years already had been conditioned to be passive receptacles of official instruction. That would change as they started to work with a tutor, a person doing what they want to learn and who is willing to accept them as apprentices.

In doing their work, in observing their tutors, the 'students' usually discover how they might make better use of books. As apprentices with an agrarian lawyer, for example, they observe how his work refers to articles of agrarian law, and from seeing this put into practical terms, are led by their curiosity to that little book full of strange legal sentences. At their request, a reading circle then starts, where several 'students' study agrarian law together. They also discover that they need specific skills. Most of the time, they get those skills through repeated practice, but they may ask to attend specific workshops in order to shorten the time needed to obtain those skills.

Simply said, what we are doing at Unitierra is reclaiming the practice of apprenticeship, a model as old as the hills, and complementing it with some contemporary practices for shared learning and study. In defining areas of apprenticeship, we work with the communities to discover both the kind of knowledge or skills that are not available to them and the kind of learning that they would want for their young people.

We have seminars that freely explore a theme of common interest (the number of participants in every session varies from 6 to 25). Someone may suggest a specific text pertinent to an overarching theme, and in the next session, we organize the conversation around what we have read. We also organize special seminars to accommodate the ideas of an interesting visitor who may have something to share. The speaker speaks for 40 minutes and all the participants discuss the subject with him or her for the next hour or two.

A regular seminar of ours focused on the ideas of Ivan Illich. We have been investigating how he may or may not have effectively articulated our lives at the grassroots. We use a selection of his texts to frame our own experience. The seminar has been very fruitful and has sharpened the consciousness of participants.

Our 'students' have been learning faster than we expected. Some of them are combining different lines of learning in a creative way—one of them, for example, combined organic agriculture and soil regeneration (his original interest) with vernacular architecture. Through exposure to a variety of learning environments and work with tutors, he has enriched and extended what it is that a hardworking peasant usually does.

After just a few months, they start to be called back to their communities to put into practice what they have learned at Unitierra; instead of producing and selling professional services in order to secure dignity, they understand that sharing what they have learned with the community can be even more gratifying.

We consciously manipulate the symbols of the oppressive educational system—after one or two years of successful learning, the ‘students’ earn a fancy university diploma to provide ‘social recognition’ that has been denied to them by the official educational system.

Unlike conventional university diplomas that are awarded to those achieving a certain number of ass-in-the-seat hours, we certify a specific competence that is more immediately appreciated by the communities. We are also extending similar diplomas to wise people who may never have been in a school or our university. Their competence is certified by their peers and the community. The idea, again, is to ridicule and appropriate the symbols of the dominant system.

In the Unitierra adventure, we use the analogy of a tree. In recent years, indigenous peoples have been repeating an old saying: “They wrenched off our fruits... They ripped off our branches... They burned our trunk... But they could not kill our roots.” The foliage represents the visible aspect of a culture, its morphology. The trunk, part visible and part invisible, represents the structural aspect. And the roots represent their myths, their view of the world, their notion of the self, space, time, spirituality.

The tree of culture may have grafts—something brought by another culture that became fully incorporated. The Spaniards, for example, brought the plow that is now an intimate part of our peasant cultures. But in order to flourish, a graft should be of the same species and it must be grafted in an unobtrusive way. In the communities there are also many alien elements that cannot be grafted—they may decide to keep them and use them with a critical distance in their own way, or they may decide to reject them entirely as something damaging.

The school is often the first example mentioned by the participants when we discuss such alien elements. They remember that three years ago, in a public forum of the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, after months of reflection and discussion, they declared: “The school has been the main tool of the State to destroy the indigenous cultures.”

We are learning together, with these young and old people who have been designated by indigenous communities’ assemblies as a participant in this adventure of “reflection in action.” We are learning how to regenerate our own cultures.

We are hospitably opening our arms and hearts to others, but fully aware that we need to protect our own cultural trees from inhospitable people, and the tools and practices that corrupt or kill them. We are thus healing from the damages done to us by colonization and development. And we are joyfully walking again our own path, trusting again our own noses, dreaming again our own dreams...

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Fifth Estate #366, Fall, 2004

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