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Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development

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Unlearning to See New Possibilities

Our experiences in India indicate that the synthesis and growth of any exercise involving action research and futures exploration inherently depends on the mindsets of observer/researcher/facilitator and on the participants involved. We would like to propose that the future of action foresight (and our ability to live a more sustainable future) will greatly depend on our capacities to more consciously incorporate "unlearning" into our various futures thinking processes.

Unlearning influences how we observe and make sense of different patterns, how we think about our roles in relation to these and how we evaluate (give value to) potential implications/solutions. Unlearning is critical for helping us move away from reactionary strategies, from linear techno-military trends analyses, mediated propaganda and from becoming overly dependent on a fixed set of tools.[1] (Dublin 1989, De Zengotita 2005) Unlearning is critical for helping us to visualize many world outside of the lens of institutionalized power (Scott 1998) which can open up new possibilities for seeing our present and future and our own agency as co-creators of these possibilities.

When You Think of the Term "Unlearning", What Word Associations Come to Mind?

De-conditioning. Toeffler. Krishnamurti. Questioning. Observing. Resistance. De-programming. Illich. Deschooling. Buddha. Letting go. Letting come. And/Or. Re-patterning. Honesty.

Reflection. Gandhi. Creativity. De-professionalization. Einstein. Listening. Forgiveness. Flow. Aha! De-institutionalization. Self-discipline. Humility. Conviviality. Voluntary Simplicity. De-colonization. Transcending. Wisdom. Uplearning...

These are some of the words that have emerged over the past two years as we have been exploring what does "unlearning" really mean, how does it happen in peoples' lives, what impact does it have on people and how can we go about supporting it. As part of our study, we invited dynamic young people (ages 20-40) from different parts of the world to share their own personal life stories with us. Thus far, we have collected 15 stories (see www.swaraj.org/shikshantar). We then asked 20 colleagues involved in learning, change, leadership, international development, etc. to reflect on these stories as well as their own personal experiences to draw out some insights for us about unlearning. These narratives have been published in *Paths of Unlearning.* (Jain 2003)

In this process, we have understood more about what unlearning is *not*. It is not about forgetting, emptying, destroying. Nor is it simply about critical thinking, positive thinking or problem-solving. At its most basic level, unlearning starts with looking at the realities and possibilities of life from other points of view. It involves becoming more conscious of the different mental models, assumptions, generalizations, sacred constructs, cognitive blindness, expectations, anxieties, etc. that influence how we understand reality, how we create knowledge, how we make choices and how we grow

and evolve. It also involves perceiving the innate strengths and limitations of various ways of seeing, techniques and media for communicating, and ways of organizing ourselves. We have also understood that unlearning is a continuous process that takes place again and again in one's life. It is not a one-time event, but should rather understood as a human predisposition that is important for continuous evolution. It happens when one chooses to consciously try to stand outside of their shoes and to consciously be "vigilant against the temptation of certainty." (Maturana and Varela 1987) In this sense, it is strongly linked to uplearning a deeper sense of consciousness.[2]

How to Trigger Unlearning?

What has most clearly been demonstrated by our research so far is that there can be no standardized curriculum for triggering unlearning. The unlearning process is very diverse, spontaneous and unpredictable – an experience that deeply touched one person didn't have much impact on another person (or it meant an entirely different thing to another person). We have found that for those involved in formal education and training programs, this messiness is quite a difficult thing to accept.

We can, however, highlight a few common elements among the unlearning process from the different life stories that might help us to better understand the conditions for unlearning to take place:

- the individuals have closely interacted with dissonant cultures, contexts and disciplines, crossed borders and have been confronted with paradoxes;
- they have had intense contact with narratives, languages and perspectives from across generations (beyond their own peer group);
- they have held both an insiders' and outsiders' position to the mainstream political-economic-educational System (or have seen close relations in these positions);
- they have experienced both success and failure (as winners and losers) in the political-economic-educational System and

have seen the arbitrariness and brutality of it;
- they have had opportunities to use their hands and hearts to learn, along with their heads;
- they have had time and space to make mistakes and the encouragement to overcome these;
- they have faced a combination of both support and discouragement from their families and close friends.

It is also interesting and important to analyze the experiences that people have had with schooling. Most of the stories indicated that the people were generally bored with school; the institution was unable to stimulate their imaginations or deal with their questions. As a result, they started to explore other spaces outside of the classroom, sometimes on their own, other times with the help of an adult (even a friendly and caring "teacher-resistor"). They came to the understanding that they could learn much more by themselves, with the help of their friends, neighbors and from Nature than from their classrooms. They also realized the limitations of fragmented disciplines and started to cross disciplinary boundaries on their own. Some even had negative experiences in school. They brushed up against its strict bureaucracy, rules or harsh punishments. They realized that school hardly lived up to its own rhetoric of "openness", "objectivity", "freedom" and "democracy". They also experienced that it was inherently unfair in terms of its early tracking policies and that it was characterized by racial, class, gender, urban, etc. discrimination.

At this stage, it is difficult to directly or fully assess the impacts or outcomes of unlearning. Our research gives us some initial insights into how unlearning processes are contributing to how people live their lives differently. First, these individuals are developing their own sets of questions (and questions about these questions) and their own conscious "learning edges" which continually fuel their interactions and explorations. They have moved away from thinking that there is only one right answer to every question, from linear, reductionist, compartmentalized and mechanistic modes of

thinking. They have started to appreciate the beauty of "gray" and the necessity of embracing the unknown. They have greater trust in and rely on their own intuition when making decisions rather than following accepted doctrine or dominant propaganda. They also have a profound faith in the ability of deep dialogue to transform reality.

Second, these individuals are in the process of developing their multiple identities, deepening and widening their understandings about the Self. They have realized that the Self has many potential selves, capable of being realized in different contexts and settings. When facing critical situations, they have up-learned to look both inwards and outwards for new solutions. They have also understood that their own creative processes are linked to the growth of others, and that others' creative processes are critical for their own continuous growth. They thus seek to foster associations of interdependence, mutuality and cooperation, oftentimes seeking to transcend relationships defined by the parameters of formal monetary exchange. At the same time, they seek to maintain a sense of their own individuality.

Third, these individuals are developing a deep understanding about dissent, resistance, leadership, self-organization and transformation. They are able to see power and resources from new perspectives. They are no longer bound by "dominator" symbols of power: Money, Military Weapons and the Political Chair. Nor are they limited by conventional notions of artificial scarcity as they operate from a paradigm of abundancy. They now have generated the courage to challenge and/or break existing rules (and even entire systemic frameworks, if necessary) and the wisdom to pick their battles carefully, knowing when to engage and when to disengage with mainstream systems. They are more willing to take new risks in their search for new ways of learning and living. They are able to see linkages between small changes in their own personal lives and larger systemic change.

In short, they exhibit a greater sense of intention about the choices they make in their lives and, yet at the same time, they are more open to making themselves vulnerable to the bumps, sharp turns, and overall messiness of transformational change.

Futures of Unlearning

Processes of unlearning will take on a greater significance in the future in relation to how we understand leadership and leadership development. Fields as diverse as Political Activism, Tourism and Health will be re-configured with a greater focus on unlearning as people begin to perceive the value of being able to see the world with new eyes. In polarized situations involving solving tough problems and intractable conflicts, unlearning will be important in helping individuals and groups to move beyond existing notions of identity politics, boundaries, resources and zero sum interactions.

We anticipate that unlearning will also play a greater role in the global community in opening up more imaginative discussions and committed efforts around sustainable development. Much of the foundational attitudes and fears underlying modernity will need to be more seriously engaged with if sustainable living is to become more than just a buzzword. In the process, a Pandora's Box of emotionally-conditioned themes from the 20th century such as progress, equality, security, efficiency, etc. will be re-opened for new interrogation. We believe that unlearning will emerge as an important aspect of many of the global Slow Movements. (Honore 2005)

Finally, the futures of unlearning will call on us to rethink education in more profound ways as we begin to re-understand unlearning as an essential aspect of deep learning. It will push us to explore alternatives *to* education rather than simply alternatives *in* education – to move beyond debates of standardized curricula, teacher-training, testing and schools. The capacities to explore and make connections across a wide range of contexts and domains will be key. We will need to explore how to co-create diverse learning ecologies necessary to trigger each human being's diverse unlearning journey and to sustain their unique lifelong and lifewide unlearning processes. This will involve

greater attention to the nurturing of robust learning communities that support experiences of pluralistic paradox, self-organization and interdependence.[3]

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Notes

1. It is our assertion today that a tool is only useful if it can be easily discarded by the community of end-users and if it encourages the end-users to co-create more tools on their own. In India, unfortunately, our experience indicates that NGOs generally end up blindly reproducing a tool until next one comes along.
2. For more insights on uplearning, see Rick Smyre's work in Communities of the Future www.communitiesofthefuture.org/
3. For more insights on this, see Shikshantar's work on Udaipur as a Learning City: www.swaraj.org/shikshanar/udaipur.html

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