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Vision – A Local Learning Commons

A "Commons" can be defined as any resource that is shared by a community or a group of people. Much discourse has been dedicated to the "Tragedy of the Commons" where the gathering of resources from the commons by individuals and groups creates an eventuality of the accumulation of waste, greed, class distinctions, "haves" and "have nots", the educated and the uneducated, the wealthy and the poor. Within this tragedy, hierarchical leadership, meritocracy, specialization in learning and vocation - drive an over-arching system which leads to social, educational, political, and economic inequality.

Within a "Local Learning Commons" we attempt to change the stories of education, learning, community engagement, and meaning-making. A Local Learning Commons is a non-hierarchical, co-creative, collaborative "alternate institution" for learning and engagement. It is not dependent on - nor beholden to - elected officials, business models, schools, colleges, standardized curricula, or a "one-size-fits-all" measure of success. It is a grassroots, organic, living and breathing entity. It encourages exploring, wandering, evolving, questioning, and transforming. The greatest leaders and educators are ourselves. Everyone is a teacher. Everyone is a learner. Our greatest gift is our presence with one another, as we build a shared vision and manifestation of "the common good." We are the ones we have been waiting for to create the world we wish to see.

As an alternate institution, a Local Learning Commons seeks to fulfill aspects of intrinsic learning and passionate human engagement, without perpetuating the divisions, hierarchy, and injustices of the dominant culture of education, schools, and "meritocracy-based leadership." *Meritocracy* can be defined as a philosophy which assumes that people are inherently unequal in their talents and abilities, and therefore should be accorded a station in life corresponding with their differential capacities. Instead of working to measure, divide, and classify people according to standardized ability distinctions (hence perpetuating these distinctions in employment, leadership, and power status), a Local Learning Commons seeks to uncover hidden talent, enhance knowledge and skills, and uplift all learners to uncover their true passions and potential.

Contrasting the Education/School/Leadership Institution with the Local Learning Commons*

Education/Schooling/Leadership Institution	Local Learning Commons
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' predefined 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/dialog
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

* Table based on writings of Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development – Udaipur, India
<http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>

Types of engagement within the Local Learning Commons

Hosting Creative Conversations
Learning Exchanges
Co-creative Projects and Activities
Harvesting

I. Hosting Creative Conversations - Conversations that Matter

Using models from The World Cafe, Art of Hosting, Peer Circle Spirit, conversations are hosted where "all the leaders we need are already present." In circle-based conversations, each participant is treated equally as a leader and a listener. Those persons who self-select for participation are all who are needed in the conversations. The interaction between friends, neighbors, and even complete strangers, can empower a shared common vision, through shared common questions and inquiry, as well as "what is emerging" within the circle. Participants create shared drawings, pictures, and other visual structures within the conversations to provide deeper understanding and synthesis of ideas and dialogue. Through these conversations we attempt to "get the entire system in the room" to explore the questions that matter, and the emergence of shared knowledge and insight.

The following is an example of a series of hosted conversations in a Learning Commons:

Conversation I: Calling the Question

What are the questions that matter in our community, locally, when we speak of transforming our community and very lives? How are sustainability, economic and social justice, environment, the land, our interactions - relevant to these questions? What do we each care about deeply? What visions or dreams do we hold for ourselves and our community?

Conversation II: Exploring Relevant Questions - Sharing our knowledge and experiences

Using circle and World Cafe models, we mix in conversation around questions previously asked. People come together to answer those questions with shared vision and come to listen, collaborate, network, make connections, and add their ideas and knowledge to the whole. After the smaller sessions are concluded, we come together as a group to see what is emerging in the "whole" as we come together. Which topics need more inquiry - more discussion - more depth? Out of what is emerging, what is most vital? What is least vital?

Conversation III: Exploring vital issues - Creating Visions

What are the questions that matter around these vital issues? What visions do we have for change? How would we "change the story" to a shared vision? Continue through collaboration. ***What is emerging in the center? What learning needs to take place to aid our vision? What co-creative projects and activities are possible within our vision? How do we "harvest" our efforts?***

Continuing Conversations - Topic or Theme related

Throughout conversations, people with like-minded interests and passions can begin to collaborate, connect, and explore specific topics. Invitations to continuing conversations can take place surrounding these topics, as questions and inquiry are further explored. Furthermore, conversation sessions can be more fluid. If the group wishes to hold additional conversations to further probe questions, it may freely do so.

II. Learning Exchanges

Instead of placing ourselves only in roles of "teacher" or "student" - we come together to "exchange" our learning. We share common insights, gather wisdom from elders, learn a new skill, or find ways to adapt a skill we already possess. Learning Exchanges become a living "laboratory" of our curiosities. They are collaborative, co-creative, inclusive, participatory, and build foundations for lasting relationships within a community. All people have experiences to share, and all people have the curiosity to learn. Some examples of Learning Exchanges can be:

Learning about self
Learning a new skill
Learning inter-generationally
Free Skool Learning

Sharing our art
Sharing our words
Creating art collaboratively
Co-Creating as Learning

Emphasis

Free and low cost learning
No degrees or certifications required nor given
Learning as a collaborative and co-creative process
Learning as a uniting force for community - rather than creating divisions or "merit distinctions"
Learning as an inter-generational uniting force
Learning as a means of preserving cultural tradition or lost knowledge
Grassroots learning - in living rooms, parks, open spaces - for and from all citizens - adults, children, elders
Learning Exchanges - learning as a gift or trade economy
Skill sharing for personal, social, economic, and educational enhancement

III. Co-Creative Projects

The term ***co-creation*** refers to creativity where more than one person is involved. A separating factor between creation and co-creation could be that within co-creation, the products or "fruits harvested" are those which none of the creators could or would have achieved working alone. Co-creation is a collaborative process, where all contribute to the "whole" - facilitators, mentors, and "teachers" are not mere observers or evaluators, but conscious collaborators. Again - all are learners - all are leaders. Co-creation adds a more unified, egalitarian, and perhaps non-hierarchical experience within the learning process - for all persons engaged.

Possible Learning Exchange Activities and Co-Creative Projects

Dream Analysis/Exploration groups
Non-violent Communication groups
Open Mic Reading events
Herbal Remedies classes
Cooking classes and exchanges
Nature Walks and Awakening Quests
Reiki Share Evenings
Holistic Healing Evenings
Open Yoga Classes
Drum Circles
Permaculture Films
Conversations that Matter - World Cafe Events
"Think Tank" Imersion Retreats
Puppet Making
May Day events, parades, theatre
Song Circles
Eco-Art Creation

Cob and Straw Bale Building
Carpentry Skill Sharing
Auto Repair

Learning activities can be endless...

IV. Harvesting

How do we measure our Learning? How do we "harvest" our co-creations?

"Harvesting" relates to the "picking of the fruits" of our individual and collective learning. It is the gathering of memories that demonstrate what we have noticed, what has shifted – or changed in our relationships, in the culture, through our actions and sharing. Harvesting lies in making sense of the multitude of in-put, noticing the emerging patterns, finding the seeds/questions to feed forward. Harvesting both the objective (audio or video recordings, photographs, created works) and subjective (individual feelings and reactions, stories, and interpretations) aspects of the Local Learning Commons as it is in progress, can provide further insight and momentum to continuing co-creative efforts. As well, these collected memories can also be an "invitation" to others to participate. Harvesting can be a tool to "continuing to feed the process" of the Learning Commons, as questions, insights, and new points of inquiry can emerge as a result.

Example Methods of Harvesting:

Individuals

Portfolio Creation
Drawings
Art
Poetry
Journals
Blogs/Web sites
Books
Writings
Articles
Photography

Group Harvesting

Co-Creative Outcomes
Public Art
Blogs/Web Sites
Publications
Physical Structures – Public Art
Art, Writings, Anthologies, collaborative works

Resources

Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development
<http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>

The Berkana Institute
<http://www.berkana.org/>

Art of Hosting
<http://www.artofhosting.org>

The World Cafe
<http://www.theworldcafe.com>

Peer Spirit Circles
<http://www.peerspirit.com/htmlpages/circlebasics.html>