Shikshantar, Udaipur: Towards an Organic Learning Community

Author - Shilpa Jain and Manish Jain, Published on - 28.2.2014

Shikshantar, the People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development, is an organization that studies and practices more natural and sustainable approaches to learning and development, most of which differ radically from typical approaches to “education” or “fixing poverty.” Now in its second decade, Shikshantar hosts a variety of activities, including providing guidance and resources for free-thinkers, organizing un-conferences, producing publications, and cultivating projects that challenge dominant systems of education and economy.

In 1998, a few friends got tired of hearing that they were “too idealistic.” Every time they raised critical questions about the dominant thinking on education and development, they were either asked for the magical all-encompassing Solution (to be given in thirty seconds or less) or pushed aside with comments like, “That’s all true, but how will we financially survive without the System?” They came from different contexts – UNESCO, a very large NGO in India and a major private school in Pakistan. Yet, each felt the global system of factory-schooling had thrown out the elders and sold out the children. It had cut people off from Nature. Worse, it was intimately tied to a destructive kind of Progress, which was leaving the diverse cultures far weaker, more tied to the whims and controls of State and Market institutions and stripped of their uniqueness and power (which had lasted for millennia). They decided, in the spirit of the Zapatistas, to say, “Ya! Basta! Enough is enough,” and promptly walked out of their jobs. After some traveling and searching, they decided to co-create an open space for exploring their questions and bringing their lives into greater alignment with their values of human dignity, social justice and ecological sustainability.

That became Shikshantar Andolan: the Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development. Named by an eminent Gandhian elder, Shikshantar is composed of two words, *shiksha* (learning as living and living as learning) and *antar* (transformation or difference). *Andolan* is a short form for *jeevan andolan*, which can be translated as ‘an agitation or movement which starts with and shows up in our own lives’. Put these words/concepts together in various combinations and you have Shikshantar. We are based in Udaipur, a small city (by India’s standards) in the northwest part of India, and are connected with friends and partners all over the world, who share similar questions, experiences and explorations.

What does Swaraj mean today? And how can each of us learn and live into it in our own lives? are some of the core questions Shikshantar started with (as opposed to launching with a mission statement!). For us, the concept and practice of Swaraj connects three dimensions of resistance and regeneration: the personal, the local and the systemic. We notice that all three are present at each moment, yet like a kaleidoscope, we shift focus from one to another.

Doing Together in an Organic Un-Learning Community

Over the past fifteen years, Shikshantar has supported the growth of co-creators in many different organizational and community contexts. During this time, we have also tried to develop our own space as an organic learning community to nurture fellow co-learners and incubate their dreams. It is a space for doing, for discovering one’s own path — not an individualistic path (which breeds selfishness), but one that is deeply re-connected with all beings in a web of life.
very beginning, we have focused on creating spaces in which people can start to reclaim control of their own shiksha. This is done in two ways:
1) by exposing the culture of schooling and unlearning the damage it has done to us; and
2) by reclaiming control over and regenerating our own up-learning processes, knowledge systems and sustainable learning ecosystems.

It is difficult to describe what Shikshantar is, as it does not fit neatly into a single category. Over time, it has evolved into a hybrid organization – a research institute, library, community meeting space, publishing house, filmmaking studio, zero waste upcycling center, organic farm, self-healing center, cafe – to allow it to cater to varying needs and experiments of the larger movement. People from ages 3 to 85 years informally volunteer (real or virtually) with Shikshantar. This group includes those who go to schools and colleges, those who have walked out of or never gone to school, working people, housewives, retired people, people from different parts of India and other communities in the world.

At any point in time, Shikshantar also formally hosts 6-10 full-time learning activists on our core team. As learning activists, we are actively involved in exploring ourselves and our local surroundings vis-a-vis the big questions/debates of our times. We are also involved in inviting others to consider their own unlearning and uplearning, which in turn adds to the larger Shikshantar movement. For this, it is critical that the learning activists develop themselves into co-learners. They are leaders without followers, each weaving together their own specific jeevan andolan.

There is no formal selection process for learning activists. Nor are any degrees or formal qualifications required. Learning activists emerge out of their own declared interests and intent. Whenever any new volunteer comes, we ask them to share what is special or unique about them and what is their dream for their community or village. We also ask them to share meaningful questions that they are exploring and concerns they have about what’s happening around them in the world. They are invited to get involved in some specific aspect of the work of Shikshantar and to understand the vision and activities of the movement as a whole. If and when they feel that they would like to make a full-time commitment to Shikshantar, they can apply to be a learning activist by sharing their ideas about what they would like to do to contribute to the movement.

There is no pre-set curriculum for the learning activists. Rather, the learning agenda (learning goals, environments, styles and pace, resources, evaluations) emerges from mutual dialogue among all of the co-learners. We have learned that there are, however, some processes that can assist in their deeper exploration:

- revisiting and (re-)valuing their own life experiences and intuitions;
- critically reflecting on their experiences with school, newspapers and TV and expressing their feelings and ideas through self-created media;
- exploring their ideas about concepts like leadership, swa-anushashan (self-discipline), social justice, voluntary simplicity, collaboration, creative self-expression, ahimsa (non-violence/love/respect);
- engaging in intense interaction with dissonant and paradoxical people, contexts and ideas;
- reconnecting with their hands and bodies and the beauty/power of physical work;
- re-examining institutionally-declared ‘problems’ (such as, Population, Politicians and Pakistan) from new perspectives in order to overcome our self-paralysis and finger-pointing;
- re-examining institutionally-declared ‘solutions’ (such as, ‘You need a lot of money to do anything.’);
- thinking as a jugaadi, which implies resourcefulness, creativity, starting with what materials, contexts, etc. exist (especially with so-called waste) and finding solutions from there
- learning with multiple generations – from the very young to the very old;
- discovering the possibilities of the local – desh bhakti (devotion to the local – not to be confused with patriotism or nationalism), local language, local media, local governance, local economy, local history, etc. – and understanding its links to the global;
- creating and carrying-out authentic work on local concerns, which is later shared with people around the sub-continent.
We have learned that there is no particular order or time-frame or even specific exercises for these processes to take place. Rather, they are explored with the individual learning activists’ own needs, capacities and dreams in mind — along with the flow of activities and new opportunities in the Shikshantar movement. We try to identify together what each of us is passionate about and what each of us holds as our strengths and weaknesses. On a daily level, learning activists read and share articles, books, videos, art, theatre, songs, etc. that inspire/challenge them; devise their own projects according to their interests and talents; meet, interview and hang out with diverse local people; create, as well as attend, workshops/conferences; and host learning journeys with other groups. At the core, it is assumed that the responsibility for one’s own learning and motivation rests with each and every individual. It is also understood that our own learning process is enhanced by supporting the learning processes of other friends. There is no hierarchy in learning together -- every human being (regardless of formal academic qualifications) possesses important learning resources (and can deepen and widen these). And every kind of work, if done honestly, is a spiritual act. Much of the day-to-day efforts of learning activists are plugged into our work in Udaipur as a Learning City (more on this below). This makes work very real, contextualized and authentic. The entire process is geared towards shaking the lethargy of the mind, expressing oneself and one’s vision of life, imagining new futures and developing the courage to break the chains of the TINA (There Is No Alternative) mindset. We hope to spark new possibilities beyond the dominant vision of fitting our lives into the Global Economy. Some learning activists include:

* Rohit is working to build a network with local organic farmers. Rohit is also running Banyan Roots Organic Store.

* Vidhi is nurturing a local and country-wide network of ‘families learning together’, many of whom are involved in homeschooling and natural living. She hosts a weekly English class for local housewives to share their lives and dreams with each other. She also edits the Hindi issues of Swapathgami magazine, which shares peoples’ unique stories of walking out and walking on.

* Vishal and Guddi are designing and running creative expressions workshops for children and families using waste materials. They have started zero Waste Udaipur Eco-shop at Shikshantar. Together, they are trying to expand the notion and practice of zero-waste in Udaipur’s NGOs, tourism district and in local families.

* Ramawtar and Uma are delving into traditional knowledge around herbal plants and natural medicines; they are planting herbal gardens with local families and preparing remedies to share with the wider community.

* Sunny and Manoj are cooking healthy food (no oil, no white sugar, no wheat, no preservatives or chemicals, no milk) and sharing their creations, along with their ideas about food, nutrition and healthy living, in various corners of Udaipur. They have started their own slow food restaurant called Millets of Mewar.

* Amit and Nirmal is working with local families to develop murals on public/private walls, so as to explore both community expression as well as the aesthetics of urban spaces.

* Pannalal is working on regenerating the local Mewari language and the tradition of story-telling; he has published several books in Mewari. Pannalal is also an organic farmer.

* Manish, Rama and Kishan are supporting the community video resource center, to make more available our wide collection of films and support more people who are interested in making films about their lives and communities.

Learning activists design and manifest their own learning webs (the various people, places, kinds of interactions, use of materials, etc.). But all of it is flexible and shared, and we take the time to give feedback and support each other’s work as it develops. It is important to note that we do not pigeonhole or compartmentalize ourselves in anyway, nor do we have any departments like “Research,” “Administration,” “Computer Operations”, “Publications,” etc. Unlike most professionals and institutions, we see ideas and practices as linked, and we strive to link our personal lives with our public work. Play, learning, working, creating, expressing, are all intertwined. And, oftentimes, core-team-wide collaborations bring together different strengths and interests. A current example is the weekly slow food cafe, Halchal Saturday Cafe, which brings various friends together to share different aspects of organic living in the city.
In all of the activities, learning activists are encouraged to identify new resources (beyond money) in Udaipur to support their work. This includes inviting local people to contribute space (their rooftops, terraces, courtyards), materials (cloth scraps, wood pieces, old boxes, etc.), and their time and energy. Learning activists also use ‘waste’ in innovative ways — for composting and city farming, in making useful items like paper furniture or rubber tire purses and in generating creative expressions like murals, masks, musical instruments… All of this helps to break the myth that having a lot of money is necessary for doing meaningful work.

It is critical that learning activists feel that they have full access to the learning environment and the ability to add to/change it. So, everyone has their own key to Shikshantar. Everyone has the power to convene a meeting when they feel it is needed. We can post things we find interesting on the walls. Everyone is encouraged to bring new ideas, new people and new possibilities into Shikshantar’s work. Learning activists are also encouraged to share problems they are having with their work, as well as personal problems. Nearly every day at lunch, there is a Circle Check-in, in which everyone present shares what is on his/her mind or heart. Learning activists also spend time in short internships to learn how others manage (or mismanage) their organizations, and to get ideas on how we can further grow Shikshantar.

We use and share our skills and knowledge across domains — to take Shikshantar’s spirit into other spaces and communities: our own families, friends, neighborhoods, caste and religious communities and other circles. Learning activists have also contributed to new experiments with our different partners around the country and the world, especially related to creative expressions, cooking, zero waste and learning without schooling. We also go on team learning journeys (with the dual intention of both being provoked and provoking) to places like Narmada Bachao Andolan and Auroville. From time to time, different individuals and groups come to Udaipur to share their efforts, experiences and burning questions with us. We are open to dialogue with anyone and everyone; we continually try to transcend categories of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ or ‘the Other’. Rather than rely on ‘experts’, we see each human being as uniquely and completely qualified to share their ideas, experiences, and dreams about learning and living.

If it wasn’t obvious by now, it should be clarified that there are no ‘teachers’ or faculty at Shikshantar. Each of the learning activists is a co-learner. We are not given grades; we do not graduate or get a certificate or take attendance. There is no threat of compulsion or use of punishment. Neither are there any financial rewards to look forward to. We make no attempt to quantify or rank the learning or growth that occurs among us. We simply observe each other as we grow and try to encourage ourselves to engage in continual self- and peer-reflection. This ensures that the power dynamic among us is always changing. At times, different people (depending on their knowledge, skills and insights) organically emerge to play the role of guide – to help facilitate deeper exploration, better communication and new connections. The temporary guide tries to make clear their role, their commitment to other co-learners, and their expectations. They also make themselves vulnerable to critique from others and to the possibility (and necessity) of their own unlearning and new learning.

What perhaps makes us most unique as a community is our collective openness to the different kinds of things we need to unlearn from the culture of schooling. For example:

- unlearning the culture of blaming others, in order to be honest with our own mistakes (and even more, celebrate them!);
- unlearning the school- and media-induced embarrassment of using our hands, doing physical labor and appreciating our local culture;
- unlearning our modern, urban disconnect from Nature, her language and power;
- unlearning the deference, submission, control or oppression which defines institutional relationships;
- unlearning our own biases around caste, gender, race, socio-economic groups, age, sexuality, religion, etc.;
- unlearning the laziness and disrespect of taking the easy-way-out, with readymade solutions, pre-packaged responses, master plans and other forms of monoculture.

All of this unlearning is important, if we are to recover our innate capacities to nurture healthy relationships with one another, to give and receive with authenticity and integrity.

Shikshantar is not an isolated space. The main stomping ground for all our reflections, actions and inspirations is the city we live in, beautiful Udaipur. Established over 500 years ago, the city is surrounded by the Aravalli mountain range and is home to seven man-made lakes and umpteen gardens, fountains and palaces. It is the former capital of the Mewar region, known for its history of resistance, cultural diversity and creativity. With a population of 700,000 and growing, Udaipur is suffering the same crises of all cities — getting bigger, faster, without much thought to maintaining its ecological, spiritual or cultural health. The beast of urbanization is expanding, and Shikshantar learning activists and friends hope they can do something to help change its direction.

Udaipur as a Learning City

Udaipur as a Learning City (ULC) is comprised of many processes to regenerate the local learning ecology. We see the city as a living organism, with natural, cultural, spiritual and physical elements, in which people are active co-creators of meanings, relationships, and knowledge. ULC aims to support these by re-valuing and re-connecting the diverse spaces for deep learning within the city and surrounding villages. It stands in direct challenge to the funnels of schooling and colleges, by reminding us that real learning requires actual, authentic spaces to ground our selves in. The city provides a variety of contexts for expanding our consciousness and bolstering our capacities to appreciate our strengths, address problems and build trusting friendships. ULC is an open invitation to people of all ages and all backgrounds in Udaipur, to explore ways of living and learning that are more balanced, more meaningful, more just and honest for them. The
four major principles or process-goals behind ULC are:

Developing our own visions and practices of 
Swaraj in Udaipur. Appreciating the unique strengths, capacities, potential, talents, skills of each person. Building feelings of caring and connected communities. Challenging unjust, dehumanizing institutions, attitudes, structures, plans, etc., particularly those related to urbanization and globalization.

These principles came out of a few years of dialogue with local people, and were articulated by volunteers at Shikshantar during the process of conceptualizing ULC in the year 2000. Given the openness and the spirit of the principles, they have not led to debate, but rather have inspired the community’s imaginations to make them manifest in practice. They have been, and continue to be, integrated into each activity that emerges under ULC. Such activities include:

Intergenerational Community Reflections and Dialogues

: Festivals have traditionally been potent opportunities for deep reflection and social engagement. With this in mind, ULC has hosted interactive dialogues on both local and international festivals, such as

Rakshabandhan

and TV Turnoff Week. Posters, cooperative games, discussions and hands-on activities are combined to explore the meanings and life-actions of such celebrations. Public dialogues are also supported both by hosting conversations/events on prominent issues, like water conservation/restoration and pedestrian-friendly roads, and by screening thought-provoking films, like

Baraka

and

Modern Times.

Producing a variety of community media not only helps Udaipur citizens to critically and creatively look at present problems with new perspectives, but it also builds friendships across boundaries. For example, despite a strong national and international trend toward Hindi and English, ULC offer opportunities for reflection and conversation in

Mewari

(the local language). This enables a more dynamic sharing of peoples’ stories, songs, proverbs, etc.

Unlearning and Uplearning Workshops: These particularly relate to critical media awareness and creative expressions -- people making their own music, dance, dramas, films, puppets, masks, sculptures, especially using so-called ‘waste’ materials. The underlying intention of such workshops is to actively nurture peoples’ capacities to say ‘no’ to the consumeristic, competitive and compulsory institutions/attitudes/behaviors/structures that enslave us, and to instead organically construct spaces and relationships that do serve them. Such workshops predominantly occur within local neighborhoods and are hosted by families at their homes, in empty lots or temple spaces. Questions raised during such workshops include: How can we share our feelings, stories and ideas through our own expressions? How are our creations different from the readymade world of mass media? What do notions like beauty, leadership, success, freedom, justice, peace, security etc. mean to each of us? What are our creative capacities and power (beyond institutions), and how do we unleash them to make the kind of life we want?

Natural Living in a City: ULC is currently exploring ways that city-dwellers can reconnect to their hands/bodies and to nature, through organic farming on their rooftops, rainwater harvesting, solar cooking, herbal gardens with medicinal plants, spinning cloth and other such efforts at home. Natural living efforts also give city people a chance to ‘get their hands dirty’. The soil and the sacred get reconnected in the most basic aspects of human life, like health, food, water, clothing and shelter. These processes enable city folks to link local culture with spirituality and the physical ecology; for example, the wisdom in Mewari is intimately connected with an ethical lifestyle and natural balance, which are essential for challenging urbanization.

Learning Exchanges: ULC seeks to move beyond NGO/Government institutional boundaries and agendas and directly involve local artists, organic farmers, artisans, businesses, healers, etc. in questions and experiments related to regenerating urban life. It also encourages youth who are not interested in school or college (or those who want to change their career) to create their own meaningful paths of living, livelihood and learning, by trying out exciting apprenticeship opportunities. We encourage people to reclaim their own learning processes by building their own learning webs (diverse networks of co-learners and spaces) around the city.

These different elements of ULC are geared towards regenerating the cultural commons. They stand in direct challenge to the violence of Development, Progress and Modernization, which has severely devalued local people and their knowledges and experiences and has led to high levels of dislocation, isolation and alienation. We are trying to revalue those which are important to our collective well-being but do not have direct economic value to the State or Market. The activities of ULC are entirely off-line, as internet use and access is quite limited in Udaipur. People meet face-to-face as needed, depending on the activity (whether a publication in Mewari, a rooftop garden, a theater workshop, etc.). No separate building has been especially constructed for ULC; rather, we have chosen to creatively utilize what already exists: peoples’ homes, local neighborhoods, public gardens and parks, art galleries, temples, ashrams, businesses, or local organizations’ offices. ULC focuses on families and diverse communities. We recognize that intergenerational learning is key if wisdom is to emerge and profound action is to take place. All of this ensures that the Shikshantar movement, even in Udaipur, extends far beyond one space – and therefore steers clear of the isolation and marginalization that face many alternatives to education.
People join ULC either through an existing activity, which has been initiated by the interests and questions of others, or by sharing their own curiosities to start something new. It is self-organizing, and the core team of Shikshantar plays a role in fleshing out, supporting, and deepening the emergent activities. This is why the work of ULC is so broad and deep, spanning everything from vermicomposting to anti-globalization campaigns to learning with local artists. Many people join in ULC for this spirit of bridge-building, border-crossing, intercultural dialogue and relationships. We ask people to freely share what they have with each other in the spirit of gratitude, thus aligning with an ancient Indian principle against the commodification of knowledge.

This is a fundamentally different orientation from many other learning city projects in the West, where the focus is on expanding technology (computers and internet usually). In those cases, the definition, purpose, means, and ends of ‘learning’ are often rooted in the military-industrial paradigm of development and rarely ask questions about the direction of this paradigm. ULC is also very different from the popular notion of public-private partnerships, where ‘public’ only refers to government bodies, and ‘private’ only to corporations. ULC is trying to transcend these categories of public and private and to appreciate and integrate the authentic concerns and strengths of local people. In other words, in Udaipur as a Learning City, individual people and intergenerational relationships are the starting point — not abstract ideas, pre-determined projects or results-based indicators. ULC enables us to be alive to surprises and to feel a constant excitement in journeying into the unknown.

Over the last ten years, we at Shikshantar have been astonished and inspired by the directions ULC has taken. We have realized that the more closely we work with individuals and families in neighborhoods rather than with formal institutions, the more motivated and invigorated we feel. Also, it is more self-sustaining than forced plans or formal arrangements. For example, our interactive dialogues in public spaces have been very effective. These are at a human-scale and have enabled our network of children and families to expand (much beyond normal NGO circles). Our resourcefulness with space and materials has also inspired and reminded people that they do not need a lot of money to do wonderful things in their lives and community.

Shikshantar Andolan

Layers upon layers upon layers — like a crisp red onion (grown organically, of course!) — is a good way to understand Shikshantar Andolan. Our personal learning community of learning activists and volunteers are nested in the larger local effort of Udaipur as a Learning City. Both in turn are connected to and continuously invigorated by friends from three other growing translocal networks:

The Learning Societies Network: Beginning with the question, “If not a schooling society, then what?”, this network seeks to break the monopoly of education experts by engaging the unusual suspects in the dialogue around education and development: artists, parents, farmers, activists, craftspeople, business folks, youth, elders and more. It focuses more on conceptual questions around the nature of human learning, policy options for learning communities, tools for dialogue and various experiments happening in the world. www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/lsdialogue.html

Walkouts-Walkons Network: Also known as the Swapathgami Network (one who makes his/her own path and walks it), this collection of people are engaged in exploring individual pathways outside of institutionalized structures, attitudes, lifestyles, products and much more. They actively challenge the existing label and connotations of ‘drop-out’. Rather, they are walking out of the Readymade World and walking on to endless possibilities of their own and other friends’ creation. The network features many non-commodified learning resources and apprenticeship opportunities. www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm

Families Learning Together Network: A group of families from around India are interested in learning and living beyond the boundaries of factory-schooling, home-schools, mass media and other forms of institutionalization. They are exploring dynamic notions of ‘family’, of joint families, of friends and families, of adults and children learning from each other. They believe that families can be foundation for learning and sharing skills, ideas, practices, love and friendship. www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/familieslearning.htm

These networks, Udaipur as a Learning City and Shikshantar learning community — they are all attempts to bring into being the world we want to live in. To borrow again from the Zapatistas, a world in which many worlds are embraced, where a diversity of locals can co-exist. We are standing in a threshold moment, walking the line between what is known and what is unknown. We invite you to take the plunge with us and join our growing family of co-creators. Contact us at shikshantar@yahoo.com or write us at Shikshantar, 21 Fatehpura, Udaipur, Rajasthan 313004 INDIA.

Reprinted from: http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/

Original Title:
Towards an Organic Learning Community
Read other articles on the web about Shikshantar:
Profile: Shikshantar and Swaraj by Christian Casillas on http://schoolreformed.wordpress.com