



Death and Rebirth of Atlántida: The Role of Social Learning in Bringing about Transformative Sustainability Processes in an Ecovillage

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of social learning in bringing about transformative sustainability processes among individuals and communities. At a time when sustainability is being seriously questioned in terms of what it is and how it can be implemented and evaluated, there are increasing calls to focus instead on sustainability processes. Drawing on 12 months of action-oriented research, including interviews and community-reflection meetings, and with contributions by two co-researchers from the community studied, this paper explores the triple-loop learning process of an ecovillage in Colombia called Atlántida. The findings show that disruptions in the community provided the opportunity for members to enter into a process of deep learning, because they were willing to reflect collectively on their process. This, however, took place in a tough reflective environment in which it was realised that differences in world views, ethics and leadership among members had contributed to the ‘death’ of the community, while their acknowledgement and acceptance of these differences were contributing to a process of transformative ‘rebirth.’ We therefore conclude that, when we talk about social learning as a deep transformative process, it is vital to remember that, though it may be necessary, nobody said it was going to be easy.

Introduction

There is an open invitation to live on a piece of land, to build together a community that celebrates the sacredness of life ... the earth should not be owned by anybody but used responsibly by all ... I want this for my child. (Y. Campo, personal communication, 20 February 2014)

This was on Yami Campo’s mind when she arrived in Atlántida 12 years ago in 2003, with her partner Jorge and their baby girl Inanna. Their vision was to create an ‘ecovillage’ in the countryside; an intentional community which would bring together social and ecological values through communal living in close contact with nature. It would be run through horizontal organisation, and would serve as a sustainability laboratory and as a source of inspiration for the rest of society. Nine years later, in 2012, the bustling community of Atlántida, with 15 permanent members and a strong focus on spiritual and community life, held ‘The Call of the Mountain’, the annual Colombian ecovillage gathering. With more than 450 participants from 26 countries attending, the event was a success, and Atlántida became, at that time, the best-known ecovillage in Latin America.

It is now September of 2013, almost two years later, and the community is falling apart. The residents of Atlántida are sitting down for a community meeting with less than half the people that used to live in the ecovillage, thinking and reflecting on what happened, on what they have learnt throughout the years, and on what to do next. This deep and challenging learning journey continues until this day.

As this paper will show, there is a lot to be learnt from people who have experienced living in an ecovillage and have reflected on the deep personal changes and realities of trying to establish sustainability in practice. Far from the abstract world of 'academic' sustainability, or best practices of recycling and buying 'green' products, living in an ecovillage forces an individual to face the interconnections of everyday sustainability actions directly through a communal setting. This includes the dilemmas and consequences of narrowing the knowledge–action gap and the sharing of agency when putting into practice (or not) visions of sustainability *together* with other people.

Yet ecovillages, in line with discourses on sustainability, face a profound challenge: putting them into practice is not easy. Taking the definition of an ecovillage (e.g. Litfin 2009:125) as 'a planetary knowledge community grounded in a holistic ontology and seeking to construct viable living systems as an alternative to the unsustainable legacy of modernity', one can quickly begin to imagine how difficult this would be to put into practice. In fact, as Christian (2003) argues, only 10% of intentional communities succeed in the long run, thus demonstrating the difficulty in reconciling the intentions and ideals of a community with its day-to-day realities. It is therefore not surprising that measuring sustainability in an ecovillage could be a disappointing experience. Even using a framework such as that developed by Gaia Education (2015), which is the academic arm of the ecovillage movement and which divides sustainability into the four 'keys' of sustainability – World view/Spirituality, Social, Ecological and Economic – a community such as Atlántida would fare poorly.

Yet there is increasing resistance to evaluating sustainability through indicators, with Sterling (2009) arguing that this encourages disconnective thinking and disintegrative practices in our education and society. Instead of looking at 'successful' sustainability – at what could or should be – there are increasing calls for more radical learning-based transformations among individuals and communities so as to transition towards a more reflexive and process-oriented interpretation of sustainability (Wals, 2009). In this sense, it may be more productive to think about the above ecovillage definition as aspirational in nature, and focus more on the processes involved in constructing more viable living systems. For, as Wals and Schwarzin (2012) argue, it is one thing to say that we need reflexive communities of learners; becoming one is a whole different matter. Individuals and groups actually need to learn to become reflexive, and this is a challenging venture. Considering the lack of research into defining how to achieve this in a practical sense (Medema, Wals & Adamowski, 2014; Sol, Beers & Wals, 2013), this paper will address this gap by providing a practical example of how a social-learning process has unfolded within the community of Atlántida, focusing on the reflexive loops of learning and on the dynamic nature of 'disruptions' within this process which have the potential to promote learning. It concludes with the wider implications this has on society's journey towards a more reflexive world.

Methodology

An important means of gaining access to these social-learning processes was obtained through collaboration with research subjects. For this reason, this research is action-oriented, which, according to Reason and Bradbury (2001), is an interactive inquiry process that balances problem-solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven collaborative analysis. This was accomplished through 12 months of ethnographic research by two of the researchers, which included semi-structured interviews, participation in day-to-day communal activities, as well as in-community reflection meetings.

The reciprocal relationships between researchers and subjects generated during this stage of research resulted in two of the subjects demonstrating an interest to act as co-researchers for this investigation, a characteristic of action research which acknowledges that knowledge is something generated *together* with other people (Valkenburg, Beukema, Almekinders & Tromp, 2009). To this end, the first co-researcher, Eliana Riano, provides an account of the collective reflections of the community, and what it has learnt about the complexities of putting visions into action. Finally, the co-founder of the ecovillage Atlántida, Jorge Calero, provides an account of his de-learning journey of transformative leadership, and the role this has played as far as he and the community are concerned.

From Horizontal Dreams to Circular Realities: Atlántida's Multi-loop Learning Journey

Located in Cauca, a region in southern Colombia, the ecovillage Atlántida has been involved in processes of learning about organisational issues and sustainable living throughout the last 12 years (2003–2015). This learning can be characterised as a type of multi-loop learning, signifying that the community has been through deep learning processes promoted by its desire to periodically reflect and use their learning outcomes as a base to improve the collective system.

In a general sense, multi-loop learning involves several layers: single-loop learning generates knowledge from 'doing' and entails corrective actions which do not alter present rules, objectives or mental maps (Are we doing things right?); double-loop learning explores the values and assumptions underlying our knowledge, and entails reframing (Are we doing the right things?); and triple-loop learning involves reflexivity on the process by which learning has taken place, and developing new processes for reframing values and mindsets; hence producing deeper changes (How do we decide what is right?) (Georges, Romme & Van Witteloostuijn, 1999; Medema *et al.*, 2014). This type of learning is increasingly viewed as a crucial element for sustainable decision-making in the field of resource management (Medema *et al.*, 2014).

The first loop: Are we doing things right?

One of the primary forces driving the early stages of Atlántida 12 years ago was the profound desire for a horizontal organisation based on relationships of equality and freedom. Decision-making was carried out through consensual processes, where the goal was to take into account

all individual opinions and interests, and to make a final decision only if everyone agreed upon the terms. The sense of community was highly promoted and the time spent on communal activities was valued more than that given to individual development. Members were encouraged to contribute to the collective gardens, the communal kitchen, and community chores, thus centralising the energy of the community rather than dispersing it through individual pursuits such as creating one's own garden or kitchen.

This was due to the desired rupture with the perceived individualistic modern life-style, in favour of serving the collective. At the same time, there was hostility to private ownership, and, with the possibility of using the existing infrastructure in the community, there was little incentive to construct one's own house. Land tenure was not discussed by members of the community, based on the philosophy that no ecovillager owned the land, not even Jorge Calero, whose father was lending him the land in exchange for administering it. Furthermore, the ecovillage attracted people with few monetary means or needs, enticed by a solidarity economy based on free housing and food subsidies for all residents. This was made possible through a collective budget generated by spiritual events held by the ecovillage, such as dances for universal peace, in which all residents were meant to participate.

This configuration helped the ecovillage grow in members, and the yearly events led to increased recognition of, and income for, the ecovillage. Nevertheless, over time, it also created tensions among residents. Several argued that decision-making was not democratic, as the most experienced members and those with the strongest personalities and leadership ended up dominating the decision-making process. On the other hand, the more proactive members complained about tasks not being satisfactorily completed. This led, in 2009, to the first thorough collective evaluation and reflection on *how they were doing things*. The community arrived at the conclusion that there was a need to change the organisational structure and the decision-making methodology so as to be more effective during meetings, and to give a stronger voice to those who were naturally more reserved.

Sociocracy was put forward by one of the community members (who had seen it used in other ecovillages) as a methodology for improving governance and decision-making. These organisational arrangements included horizontal and vertical structures of decision-making to improve effectiveness while maintaining participation. This way of organisation recognises that the best solution will come out of the collective wisdom of those closest to the problem, regardless of their formal position or group membership, and that feedback rather than power is the basic organising principle (Georges *et al.*, 1999).

Within this logic, a hierarchy of 'circles' was created. Each circle decided upon issues that were relevant to their work objectives through consent and was represented in the next-higher circle by a functional leader and one or more additional representatives, also chosen from the circle through consent.

The second loop: Are we doing the right things?

Although time spent in meetings was substantially decreased, the expectation of improvement in equality and decision-making through an organisational change was not met. Even though sociocracy supposedly decentralises leadership and power, many members felt that they were

still being inspected and criticised, while leaders on their side were arguing that only *their* circles were the ones working well and meeting expectations. Furthermore, commitment and dedication to the community began to be questioned among members.

During a meeting on conflict resolution, a second loop of reflection was undertaken in the second half of 2010. It was posited that the difference in commitment to the project and the inequality in decision-making processes were not being adequately addressed by sociocracy, because of the deeper issues of power resulting from the land-tenure situation. Commitment to the project and trust between members were believed to be influenced by these power relations, related to the fact that the community did not own the land. The community consequently took the decision to buy part of the property in the form of communal ownership (seven of the 45 hectares of the ecovillage), which was achieved by inviting new members to the community who paid a fee for joining. This action was carried out as a means of assuring ownership of land so as to promote commitment and equity.

In 2012, the issues of circular organisation, the arrangements in respect of new land ownership, and the arrival of new members in the community were put aside in favour of the opportunity of hosting the first Ibero-American ecovillage gathering in Latin America – a great honour, but a tremendous challenge for the community. All members of the ecovillage worked together to organise this event; 40 volunteers from around Colombia arrived to help, and people perceived the community as thriving. All members concentrated on the same goal: hosting volunteers and making the event a success, and tensions were put aside so as not to interrupt this momentous occasion. The event was considered a success by participants, transforming Atlántida into the best-known ecovillage in Latin America at that time.

During interviews, all members pointed to the event as a high note in the history of the ecovillage, but the event took a heavy toll on the community itself. The stress during the event, unresolved issues that had been put aside, and new ones arising through day-to-day communal life began to build up tensions and set the scene for what happened next. A severe emotional conflict between some community members acted as catalyst in which, in the words of Yami, ‘all the dust previously swept under the rug, began to appear’. Facilitators from outside the community were asked to help with the process, and several meetings to deal with the management of emotions and conflict resolution were held. During this tumultuous process, some of the residents ended up leaving the ecovillage, a few on bad terms, while others did so because they were tired of community life. The golden age of the community was over.

The third loop: How do we decide what is right?

After several months, in September of 2013, a meeting to gather collective-learning outcomes from all experiences and realisations was held with those still living in the community. In the following section, Eliana and Jorge each share some insights into this last loop of reflexion.

Eliana's attendance at the 'University of Life'

My name is Eliana, and I was 30 years old when I arrived in Atlántida in 2008 after leaving behind my life as a psychologist, researcher and teacher at several universities in Bogotá. I started living in Atlántida to help co-create an environment which would facilitate human

development in all its forms. I now consider that my seven years of experiencing Atlántida has been like attending an intensive course at the 'University of Life'. In the text that follows, I would like to share with you some of the lessons learnt.

After the 2012 gathering of the 'The Call of the Mountain' and the unfolding emotional conflict, it took us about three months to gather the energy to come together again to reflect on, and learn from, what had happened. The first fundamental aspect which we had to review was the assumption that we shared common ethics in terms of sexuality and relationships. Although there had been an initial intention in the community to be tolerant of different views on relationships and sexuality, in reality there was great difficulty in accepting, respecting and articulating the different emotional and sexual practices of community members. For example, some advocated free love as a self-development path, while others believed in more traditional family structures. We began to realise that the ethics of community members had changed over time and was a continuous source of tension which had not been resolved. The collective-learning outcome in this respect is the importance of periodically socialising individual ethical codes, as these can change over time.

This disarticulation of ethics brought about several emotional conflicts in the everyday life of the community, which were not always well managed. Although different spaces and methodologies for emotion-management were proposed, few members attended the meetings. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, there was an environment of mistrust promoted by power dynamics and alliances within the community. This hindered the creation of an atmosphere of trust and neutrality, which resulted in some members feeling uncomfortable in sharing their feelings during emotion-management sessions. Secondly, there has always been an underlying feeling of collective saturation in the community as a consequence of excessive communal activities and responsibilities. Organisational activities were put before emotional ones, in part because the solidarity economy scheme depended on collective earnings during events being used to subsidise the livelihoods of members. At the end of the day, there was a lack of energy for an effective emotion-management process.

The above reasons are connected to the realisation that the world views of community members had changed over time and were now in tension with one another. Despite the apparent homogenous world view in the community of living together in harmony, learning from one another, and being connected to nature, deep differences emerged during everyday activities. On the one hand, there was the prevailing 'Yang world view', as I will call it. Great importance is given in this world view to the achievement of stated goals through action. This demands planning, organisation and strong leadership. Moreover, the mental capacities of problem-solving are highly valued, while emotional and artistic skills are considered more of an added benefit. On the other hand, the 'Ying world view' gives importance to emotions, and thus to emotional well-being. In this world view, appreciation of creative and artistic skills is highly valued and their development takes a lot of space in day-to-day activities. Moreover, time for contemplation and meditation are crucial, and thus a slower pace in activities is needed. This Ying-Yang dichotomy is obviously an oversimplification, with members often displaying aspects of both, but it serves to demonstrate the opposing tendencies in the community.

A continuous struggle between these world views is embedded in Atlántida's story and has manifested itself in many ways. It is connected to a difference of work rhythms, leadership styles, economic schemes, and individual versus communal development. It is therefore little wonder that neither a change of organisational structure (first loop), nor a change to collective land ownership (second loop), adequately addressed power struggles in the community.

A pertinent example is the disagreements over how the economy should be generated and partitioned in the community. While, for some, it was important to generate resources and investment in infrastructure to improve events, for others, especially members who had families with small children, it was a priority to reinvest in sustaining welfare conditions. Eventually, there was a transformation from a clear sense of paternalism – the community taking responsibility for the economic well-being of its members – to a realisation of the need for members to resolve their own economic circumstances. Subsidies were removed, and members now have to gain at least part of their income outside the community so as to pay for services and food.

To conclude, although there are many other factors and interconnections which we unfortunately do not have space to share, we realised three main things. Firstly, to find a community balance, it is imperative to begin by resolving problems in the individual sphere before constructing the collective – for, in a collective, unresolved situations are always amplified. Secondly, a person's agency in a community (the capacity to influence and change activities around oneself) depends to a great degree on the collective. A person can have a great capacity for agency and a desire to change the status quo, but if he or she is not supported by other members, change is impossible. Thirdly, difference is always present; thus it is crucial to sincerely acknowledge and accept it so as to co-create sustainability and a learning community.

Transitioning towards a transformative leadership: Jorge's journey of (de)learning

The following account details the main processes of (de)learning which I have experienced in what I call 'transformative leadership'. In comparison with classical forms of leadership, which are based on motivating and encouraging people to take responsibility for their actions, this is an individual process of awakening and evolution towards new levels of understanding.

To contextualise the results of my de-learning processes and reflections, I consider it necessary to begin with a self-portrait. I am 37 years old and a father of a ten-year-old daughter. Being active since childhood in social and environmental initiatives, I felt, from an early age, a spiritual call that led me on various roads that currently converge in my practice of Sufism/ Dances of Peace and the Native American spiritual path. My strong commitment to making the world a better place is now balanced by the realisation that spiritual growth is the spinal cord of any long-term process of social change.

Through my work with grassroots communities, social movements, and, especially, as the co-founder of the ecovillage Atlántida in 2003, the relationship with my peers has been strongly influenced by my performance as a leader. In the light of the major conflict mentioned above, the subject of my own leadership in the project has been a significant component of the crisis and subsequent reflections.

I consider that the abuse of rank in leadership is one of my (de)learning points. By 'rank' I mean the natural hierarchy that occurs in every group and system. My rank originated from me

being the founder of the project, the landowner's son, having more experience and capacities in respect of environmental issues, permaculture and ecovillage design than the rest of the group, the ability to organise ideas and express them, and having economic security which some of the other members did not. Totally unaware of these simple facts, I have unconsciously been using my rank in the ecovillage for many years. I am now understanding what Mindell (1995:64) means when he says: 'You cannot let go of your rank ... the unconscious use of the rank is shown in the tendency to marginalise the problems of others'.

The aspect of efficiency serves as a perfect example to characterise this abuse of rank. Personally, I stand on the side of the efficiency 'addicts' who are constantly frustrated when their peers do not adequately fulfil their commitments, which results in the overall system not reaching its projected goals. Specifically, I was very determined in promoting shared leadership, as I believed that we are all potential leaders – that we all aspire to leadership consciously or unconsciously – and that all we need are the opportunities and motivation. Yet, encouraging leadership in others resulted in tensions, as, on the one hand, I became intolerant of the efficiency shortages of my peers, marginalising their personal problems and not being able to see their own limits and real capacities. On the other hand, people felt dissatisfied because they were not reaching their goals and were being criticised and oversupervised. These tensions in the expectations of leadership contributed to the crisis in the community.

During the processes of reflection after the crisis, in which I was forced to stay still for a period of time due to a motorbike accident, I began to relax and decrease my internal rhythm, my constant acceleration, and began to become aware of this simple fact of rank in groups, and the problems of unconsciously using it. It became clear that the problem of inefficiency originated in me and my tendency towards direct and classical leadership, which was to hold a clear vision of the path ahead and motivate others to share responsibility for the actions required to stay on this path. Instead, I am now acknowledging different types of leadership and learning how to use rank beneficially by enacting a new type of leadership. This is based more on mentoring systems in which the most important thing is no longer the result of the action, but the learning process involved.

The conclusion then is to respect and thank conflict as an alchemical path of transformation. As identified by Mindell (1995), conflict has the potential of being an enlightened sword that cuts the veil of illusion and makes visible what was secretly eating away the foundations of the group. There is conflict in the evolution of any group, and the challenge is not to run from it, but rather take advantage of its transformative fire.

Conclusion

I feel Atlántida is in a transitional point in its cycle similar to that found in nature: life, death and rebirth. As an organism Atlántida is dying, and this death is also a part of our learning process ... we're all in this transformation towards a re-existence ... re-creating from what we have learned without running away from the process. (Y. Campo, personal communication, 20 February 2014)

We can see in this quote from Yami the long circular journey she and fellow community members have come from their introduction to community life. From the ideals of living a sustainable life together with like-minded people, to the often difficult realities of enacting change together, this paper has attempted to show the complex processes involved in learning to live with one another and walk the talk of living a sustainable life. As Yami and other members have shown, this process is an organic web of life involving 'life, death and rebirth'. This echoes the ideas of Capra (1996), who links society, sustainability and ecosystems within networks of mutual dependencies and diversity.

Another characteristic of ecosystems, which Atlántida has also developed, is the capacity to withstand disruptions and learn from its effects. As Hurst (1995) notes with regard to ecosystems, we can perceive periods of relative stability and calm, which alternate with periods of increased dynamics and greater degrees of insecurity, brought about by disruptions or new challenges. Learning from the case of Atlántida, we can add that, in these periods of stability, a set of routine activities emerges where people encounter their dilemmas and paradoxes of the discourse–action/vision–reality gap, which can lead to frustration, negativity and a decline of energy. These periods of stability are broken by disruptions that can be in the form of negative forces (such as conflicts regarding land tenure and organisation in Atlántida), or a positive force (such as the joint mission of Atlántida to hold the ecovillage gathering). The importance of these disruptions is that they act, in the words of Jorge, as 'transformative fires' which maintain the activities as dynamic and evolving.

According to Wals, Van der Hoeven and Blanken (2009), it is specifically in the periods of dynamics and insecurity that one must rely on the learning ability of the system, and hence on social learning. The question we are then left with is: What was the learning ability of Atlántida, and what are the greater implications for social learning and sustainability in our society?

Some community members of Atlántida have shown a great deal of reflexivity in the life cycle of the community, as is demonstrated by the loops of learning they have gone through. There is also a surprising level of difference among its members, highlighting that, rather than an ecovillage being 'a planetary knowledge community grounded in a holistic ontology...' (Litfin, 2009:125), there is ontological heterogeneity which brings diversity and the need for a great level of flexibility. This is shown by their high tolerance for experimentation and failure, and an ability to employ systems thinking, acquired from their triple-loop learning process and their hands-on experience in practising sustainability. All these features have helped the community to navigate their internal processes. Yet it is interesting that it was a lack of acknowledgment and acceptance of difference which contributed to the big disruption which brought about the third loop of learning. Would they have reached the deepest and most difficult level of reflection had it not been for the conflict which accelerated the unravelling of the community?

Echoing today's world, the story of Atlántida suggests that disruptions will be important for the transition towards a more sustainable future. Despite the consequences of tough reflexive environments, such as broken relationships and dreams, these types of transformative processes are vital for a society to more realistically address the quagmire in which the discourse on sustainability is currently stagnating. Although we do not all need to live in an ecovillage to accomplish this, it is important that we learn from the experiences of communities such as

Atlántida so as to design and facilitate spaces for these ‘disruptive’ processes to happen in both formal and informal learning environments. This will require further theorisation into the role of disruptions in sustainability contexts, as well as the commitment of people and society to leave the comfort zone of the status quo and embark on deep, and perhaps painful, transformative processes.

Notes on the Contributors

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