Chapter 13

Educating for development or educating for the good life? *Buen vivir* imaginaries and the creation of one’s own myth

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**Abstract**

Current perspectives on education for sustainability tend to focus on sustainable development as a means for raising ecological awareness and determining the ecological conditions for development. Yet there are emerging standpoints which are questioning the very need for western styled ‘development’ for reaching sustainability goals. One such approach is that of *buen vivir*, rooted in the cosmovisions of the Indigenous peoples of Latin America. Roughly translated as ‘the good life,’ *buen vivir* represents a community-centric, ecologically-balanced and culturally-sensitive set of worldviews whose plural nature opens up the possibilities for bridging cultures and knowledge systems. What this chapter aims to show is how a decolonial pedagogy based on *buen vivir* is emerging in praxis, and the lessons it can teach us. This will be accomplished by following the story of the initiative *Colectivo Talanquera*, who over the past eight years have been co-creating hybrid learning pedagogies with Indigenous communities in Northern Colombia, and whose methodologies are currently being used by some public and private non-indigenous institutions in rural areas of Colombia. With the necessity for envisioning alternative futures, this chapter hopes to inspire theorists and practitioners to move beyond educating for development, and instead towards educating for the good life.

**Keywords:** buen vivir, Colombia, decolonial pedagogy, good life
Introduction

A joint project by the Colombian government and the international community saw a helicopter filled with technical equipment fly six hours to the isolated Indigenous community of Wiwa, situated in the territory now known as Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. After installing computers and a solar panel in the community – categorized as marginalised by the government, and thus in need of development – the crew and technicians left, having fulfilled their mission. The community was left technologically well equipped, but totally lacking in how to use these new tools. When we arrived, the dusty computers had been taken over by youths who had managed to learn the basic tools of watching Vallento music on Youtube, and using Facebook. I had to wonder whether this was what ‘development’ had to offer the community. (Sofia from Colectivo Talanquera, 2011)

Like Sofia in the quote above, many educators are encountering the disconnection between an education system aimed at ‘development,’ and the local realities of communities with different interests and needs based on alternative knowledge systems and worldviews. The tenets of such a modern development, in the form of abstract concepts of reason and rationality promoted through tools of technology, are the powerful narratives which define the world for many of us today. It is also defining for the state of our planet in which we see the premonitions of a global ecological collapse, social and community fabrics disintegrating, economic recession, and an increasing loss of ‘meaning’ in everyday life. As some authors suggest, we have entered the age of the Anthropocene, a new geological age brought about by human activities impacting on Earth’s geology and ecosystems (Steffen et al. 2011).

Yet, the modern narrative is increasingly being undermined by those who propose more plural concepts in the understanding of human and non-human relations. One such concept is buen vivir. Although rooted in the cosmologies of the Andean peoples of Latin America, buen vivir is nonetheless a plural concept with both Indigenous and mestizo (Spanish descendant) influences. Roughly translated as ‘the good life,’ buen vivir represents a set of community-centric, ecologically-balanced and culturally-sensitive worldviews whose plural nature exposes the possibilities for bridging cultures and knowledge systems. From küme mongen (living well in harmony) from the Mapuche people of Southern Chile, to volver a la maloka (to return to the ceremonial house) of the Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon, buen vivir can be viewed as a collection of different but connected projects. As social movements, communities have mobilised around the importance of their cosmologies in public debates (Huanacuni 2010); as
political projects the rights of nature and other principles of *buen vivir* have been included in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions (Acosta 2008, Walsh 2010); and, as an academic project to build a platform of ‘alternatives to development’ (Escobar 2011, Gudynas 2011).

*buen vivir* is also making its way into the field of education through its plural interpretations of what it means to live a good life within an environmentally responsible framework, and as such, reimagining where our knowledge comes from and where it is taking us (Cevallos Tejada 2012, Villagómez and De Campos 2014). Such new perspectives, we contend, are vital in addressing the ‘wicked’ problems facing society today, where there is a need to confront the complex nature of multiple perspectives and types of knowledge in such unstable and disputed issues as climate change and food sovereignty. With this in mind, this chapter illustrates how such perspectives are emerging through decolonial pedagogies which open up possibilities for not only imagining, but also putting into practice more sustainable alternative futures. This will be accomplished through exploring in theory and practice the emerging concept of *buen vivir* as it relates to education through the work of the Colombian initiative *Colectivo Talanquera* in creating and facilitating hybrid learning spaces in a municipal school in rural Colombia.

**Moving beyond the myth of modernity**

The logic of liberty and autonomy, so important in the modern project, can be most clearly observed in Latin America in the way the educational system is being restructured, from primary school to university. As argued by Walsh (2010), education is being transformed into an individual and personal project, which takes the form of a consumer good in which market competition is the strategic driver of ‘quality’ in the forms of ‘objective’ indicators such as exams, standards, and accreditation benchmarks. In a world that once valued solidarity, reciprocity and collective community, social gaps and injustices are now seen as personal and family problems to be overcome personally.

This has resulted in the steady emergence of novel decolonized pedagogies which go ‘beyond the myth of modernity’ (Dussel 1995). The possibilities of intercultural education practices have therefore been proposed where other epistemologies, ways of learning, and different ways of being and understanding the world play a part (Villagómez and De Campos 2014). This places importance on greater creativity among teachers and their pedagogies in terms of utilising more contextualized knowledge and participation from the local community, contributing to the creation of public policies to transform conditions of inequity and exclusion.
The gradual rejection of the modern project by increasing sectors of the Latin American population can be seen in their ongoing efforts to bring about ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise’ (Blaser and Aparicio 2008). *Buen vivir* is proving useful for reimagining these ‘other’ worlds as it addresses the hybrid character of culture, while providing a framework of principles (Table 1) within which to imagine a new global knowledge, culture and society (De Lissovoy 2010). Such a ‘transmodern’ perspective (Luyckx 1999) would combine intuition and spirituality with rational brainwork. Within this focus there is a strong connection to place, a promotion of difference and subaltern epistemologies, and a sustained critique of dominant ways of knowing and the over-romanticization of indigenous practices. The question then is what would such a decolonized learning pedagogy look like in practice, and what challenges and reflections can be made about its potential to contribute to alternative sustainable futures?

**La Casa de Pensamiento (the house of thought)**

Invited by the Wiwa community to integrate computer technology into their education, *Colectivo Talanquera* was involved in planning with the community the key links between their cosmologies, and the new technological resources. Through the analogy of engaging the computer and Internet as part of the ‘territory,’ meaningful uses were transmitted such as the collection of traditional stories in the community, written in their native *dumuna* language and translated by themselves, access to sources of information on programs and legislation that support the development of Indigenous communities, and direct communication to the outside world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. <em>Buen vivir</em> principles based on Gudynas (2011) and Villalba (2013).</th>
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<td><strong>Common principles of the <em>buen vivir</em></strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Another ethic to recognize and assign values based on a bio-centric perspective.</td>
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<td>2. Rejection of the the human-nature divide whereby non-human entities such as plants, animals and spirits, together with humans, form an extended community of local relationships.</td>
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<td>3. Non-human entities are considered subjects instead of objects in this extended community. Their rights and wellbeing are considered equally important to those of humans.</td>
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<td>4. Critiques the rationality of modernity: manipulation/control, individualism, competition, commodification, infinite economic growth and wellbeing based on property rights and income levels.</td>
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<td>5. Decolonization of knowledge by creating spaces of intercultural dialogue, which encompass a plurality of worldviews, and places importance on sensitivities, affections and spirituality.</td>
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The experiences and skills of bridging different ‘worlds’ in communities such as the Wiwa became important later in 2014, when the director of the Educational Institution San Bernardo, a rural school in the municipality of Sasaima, Cundinamarca, asked for assistance in setting up an ‘ecological classroom.’ Building on their vision to build and strengthen bridges between ancestral and western ways of knowledge, as well as a pedagogical philosophy based on building capacities, attitudes and skills for the caring of life, Colectivo Talanquera put forward a proposal for constructing La Casa de Pensamiento (the house of thought) in the San Bernardo school.

Finished in 2015, La Casa de Pensamiento stands nine meters high and nine meters in diameter. Inspired by the traditional ceremonial huts of Indigenous communities called Malokas, it is built on a terrace of stones, with a structure of bamboo joined by only 22 screws. It however incorporates local materials and practices, for example with a roof made of recycled billboard plastic, and plastic-filled bottles in its walls (Figure 1). Beyond its function of accommodating about 90 people comfortably seated in a circle, the building of the structure and its later use would be a means of actively exploring the relationships and interdependencies...
between people and territory – within the institutional setting of the school – with the further goal of creating an identity around the concept of *buen vivir* and empowering the local community in different aspects of sustainability.

**La Minga and the creation of the *mito propio***

The main methodology of this project was that of a *Minga*, which is the Quechua word for a communal work party, or what others might call a ‘barn-raising.’ This is a participatory strategy which brought together the local community of students, teachers, parents and community elders to construct together *La Casa de Pensamiento*. Besides the physical construction of the *Maloka*, the project had the goal of fostering an intercultural and intergenerational space for constructing *buen vivir*. Moreover, parallel with the construction was the teaching pedagogy that contextualized the construction and use of this space within the academic approach of the institution.

Fundamental to this pedagogy is the art of researching and understanding one’s own place in the extended community of relations that makes up our good life (*buen vivir*). From a more western and scientific point of view, *Colectivo Talanquera* connect this philosophy to the interdependency and system thinking theories, and to the holistic view of human-nature relations of deep ecology. In the language and cosmology of the Indigenous peoples of Northern Colombia, however, these relations are manifested through nine interconnected circles making up a double spiral of relations within the under-worlds, the upper-worlds and the middle layers of *Hytcha Guaia* – Mother Earth (Figure 2). The spiral of relations begins with the circle of the self, followed by the couple, and continuing to the family, the community, the territory, the planet, the cosmos, the superior entities of our spiritual path and, finally, the Ata (the totality). As Andres from *Colectivo Talanquera* states:

> Following these circles builds up one’s own myth, thus leading to great strength of collective belonging, leading to a life full of meaning through the empowerment of one’s own life, dreams, gifts and possibilities.

We will now explore how this pedagogy and the principles of *buen vivir* unfold in practice through considering the three dimensions of the *Minga* methodology:

1. **Human ecology**
   The first dimension is to strengthen the individual and his or her relationship to the ‘other’ and planet earth, in what we can see as *buen vivir* principle 2 (Table 1). Students go through all nine levels of the spiral which are connected to different physical parts of *La Casa de Pensamiento*. To give an example of
this we will show the first circle of the ‘self’ related to the ‘foundation’ of the Maloka structure. This involves a process of reflection, where one goes about discovering who one is (gifts, challenges, fears and behaviours), where one comes from (family and planetary history), and where one wants to go (what are our dreams for the future). This is both a personal and collective reflection where students (as well as teachers) seek to discover their mito propio (one’s own myth). This is one’s unique, but connected place in the world (buen vivir principle 1). This process is connected to the physical process of clearing the land where the Casa de Pensamiento is to be built. While clearing away stones,
logs and rubbish, each participant places a ‘purpose’ on the item being cleared away, thereby creating an intention to eliminate experiences, memories and feelings which do not serve one’s inner world. This can be viewed as *buen vivir* principle three whereby objects are given agency. The exercise becomes a psycho-magic space (Jodorowsky 2010) where through our intention for transformation and experiences of fear, anger, sadness and violence are recognized and symbolically discarded. This is then followed by placing a good intention on every stone which is placed in the foundation. This experiential exercise occurs hand in hand with a series of group reflection tools such as discussion circles, where students and teachers sit in a circle and take turns speaking as equals about topics of self-development and learn skills for conflict resolution. Such a process shows the *buen vivir* principle 4 of encouraging a feeling of empowerment whereby each student becomes a creator of his or her own history, giving a sense of responsibility and meaning to their education as well as their lives.

2. A living pedagogy

The above dimension of human ecology is integrated into the region and territory through a pedagogical basis of action-research, whereby the subjects of the academic curriculum are connected with local issues and needs. Students are given assignments on the local history of their region, where in this case students researched the ‘extinct’ Indigenous *panche* tribe who occupied the region many hundreds of years ago. Elders in the community recalled memories of these Indigenous people including stories, as well as markings and paintings on stones and in caves in the local area. Students were especially excited to see markings of a double spiral (the symbol for infinity), which was also used in *La Casa de Pensamiento*. Beyond links to past cultures, other forms of knowledge were sought by inviting local elders and *campesinos* (peasant farmers) to impart knowledge, which we can link to the decolonialisation principle five of *buen vivir*. For example, the *Guadua* (bamboo), was combined with bioconstruction techniques in the building of the structure and the walls made of plastic bottles filled with used plastic. This introduced topics such as recycling not just to the students and teachers, but also to the local *campesinos*.

3. Productive spaces

The last dimension addresses the possibilities of educational and participatory tourism based on agro-ecological components intended for attracting human, physical and economic resources to the community. Part of the curriculum involves students individually setting up a microenterprise. One such endeavour was a student who produced and sold cakes made from the local plant *bore* (Figure 3) which has a thick trunk which can be boiled and eaten. Forgotten as an important protein source in the local cuisine and usually prepared as animal food, the student through his research found out that local *campesinos* used to make cakes from it. Through using traditional and agricultural knowledge
to grow and harvest the bore, the student (along with fellow students and their respective enterprises) used skills from the conventional classroom such as maths, reading and writing, to market their good or service, determine a profitable price, thereby integrating many knowledge forms. There are also examples of students working to establish touristic sightseeing of the panche cave paintings, and a theatre group, which toured other schools with a play about ecological living.

**Moulding buen vivir to different contexts**

It is important to note that such cross-boundary learning can be seen in other fields such as that of civic ecology which brings actors together through local projects such as community gardens in the bronx, New York (Krasny and Tidball 2012). Addressing local issues through partnerships between students, residents and local councils helps create a sense of place and community, while bringing different perspectives to the table. From an education and learning perspective, however, what we want to add to the education field, are the benefits of looking at a more holistic picture of what it means to educate for buen vivir – a responsible good life. This grows out of the necessities of daily life: students in *La Casa de Pensamiento* learn how to grow their own food, build shelter, communicate and reflect, as well as an applied understanding of conventional academic material (e.g. maths, geometry, science, economy) through eco-construction and setting up their
own microenterprise. Such an education also requires the student to consider his or her relationship to themselves and the world around them. Whether we view this from a spiritual lens or a deep ecological perspective, students are encouraged to find their mito proprio – their unique place in an interconnected world.

Because this Minga methodology is based on bringing together the local community through project based learning, it can be moulded to different contexts. From pre-schoolers to university students, the most important contextual aspect is to encourage self-development while addressing local needs at the human-nature nexus through engaging with local residents, government representatives and other institutions. For example, in an urban area this could involve redesigning a run-down city park to include a food forest. Drawing on perma-cultural ideas of ecological design, local school children could learn biology through planting seeds and seedling, maths through geometrically designing where each tree should be, and chemistry through analysing soil samples. This process would include local residents and the municipality interested in the park’s revival, as well as inviting other diverse actors interested in developing a productive green space together.

For such an ‘outside classroom’ to be generative of student development and perspective, however, it would be important to employ a framework for students to understand their individual and collective role in the world. While this was the spiral of Hytcha Guaia for the cultural context of our Colombian example, different contexts would need their own locally suited framework. In more western contexts, the three principles of permaculture – care of the Earth, care of people, and return of surplus to Earth – could provide a framework from which students could reflect on their relationship to the environment.

Challenges and reflections on educating for the good life

Setting up pedagogies of learning based on buen vivir relations has the potential for students, teachers and the local community to connect to their territory and build a stronger social fabric. Although the students showed great enthusiasm in the project, this process has been challenging for all parties. Perhaps those who find it most difficult are the teachers, who after many years of formal training, must open themselves up to new ways of thinking and relating to their students. Giving a class outside the traditional ‘classroom’ is in itself radical for many teachers, not to speak of talking in a circle where the ‘expert’ knowledge of the teacher in front of the students is replaced with more horizontal forms of power. There is of course also a state curriculum with teaching goals, which must be met, and some teachers feel that concentrating on such areas as self-reflection and spiritual development takes away from the time needed for learning the conventional skills examined.
This last point highlights the challenges of incorporating intercultural pedagogies into institutions and organizations at a global level. Spirituality is still a taboo subject in most educational settings (though this is slowly changing) and although spirituality and aspects of interculturality may be incorporated into a curriculum, it is not foundational. Yet as Eschenhagen (2013) notes, institutions such as universities represent a powerful concentration of knowledge production in today’s world, so it is vital to continue integrating buen vivir into the curriculum. As Colectivo Talanquera also note from their experiences, there is also resistance by elders and traditional communities to ‘yield’ to other forms of knowledge, as well as to share their knowledge with the wider community. This suggests that rather than an open process of free flowing information between different knowledge groups, there will instead be negotiations between different worldviews where respecting and honouring agreements of exchange is critical.

To conclude, in addressing the challenges which face our one and only planet, we must learn to open ourselves to new ways of thinking, while being critical and innovative in configuring pedagogies which bridge these different worlds. Such a collective project can be viewed as educating for the good life – a buen vivir of harmonious relations – rather than educating for a ‘development’ towards what appears to be our own destruction. As this chapter has hopefully shown, this will require that students as well as teachers undergo a process of reflection, creating their own mito propio, and building their relations to the local territory through practical projects. Such pedagogy is applicable to any educational setting, but entrenched habits of modernity will offer challenges in any context. It will be interesting to follow the students who have attended La Casa de Pensamiento to see their learning put into practice and their potential to act as seeds in sprouting into change-makers in their respective spheres of influence.

References