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Departing From “Education”: Finding Autonomous Learning The Ability for Knowledge that Gives Itself

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SIT Study Abroad

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Departing from “Education”: Finding Autonomous Learning

The Ability for Knowledge that Gives Itself

Matthew Jernigan

SIT México: Sustainable Development and Social Change, Spring 2011

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<http://charlotzi.wordpress.com/2008/09/07/cideci-universidad-de-la-tierra/>

"He aquí mi secreto, que no puede ser más simple: sólo con el corazón se puede ver bien; lo esencial es invisible para los ojos."

- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "El Principito"

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Though they contributed much more to my experience here in Chiapas than they would ever admit, I thank the family of Uzmar and Carina whom I stayed with. They provided me with a home to come back to each night, filled with playing, dancing, crying and occasionally annoying “chamacos.” From them I learned almost enough to do an entire ISP on the 12 kids and 7 adults I shared days with.

So with that being said I would like to show my appreciation to Julio who made my “homestay” possible and for being a source of help in which I could count on.

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Abstract

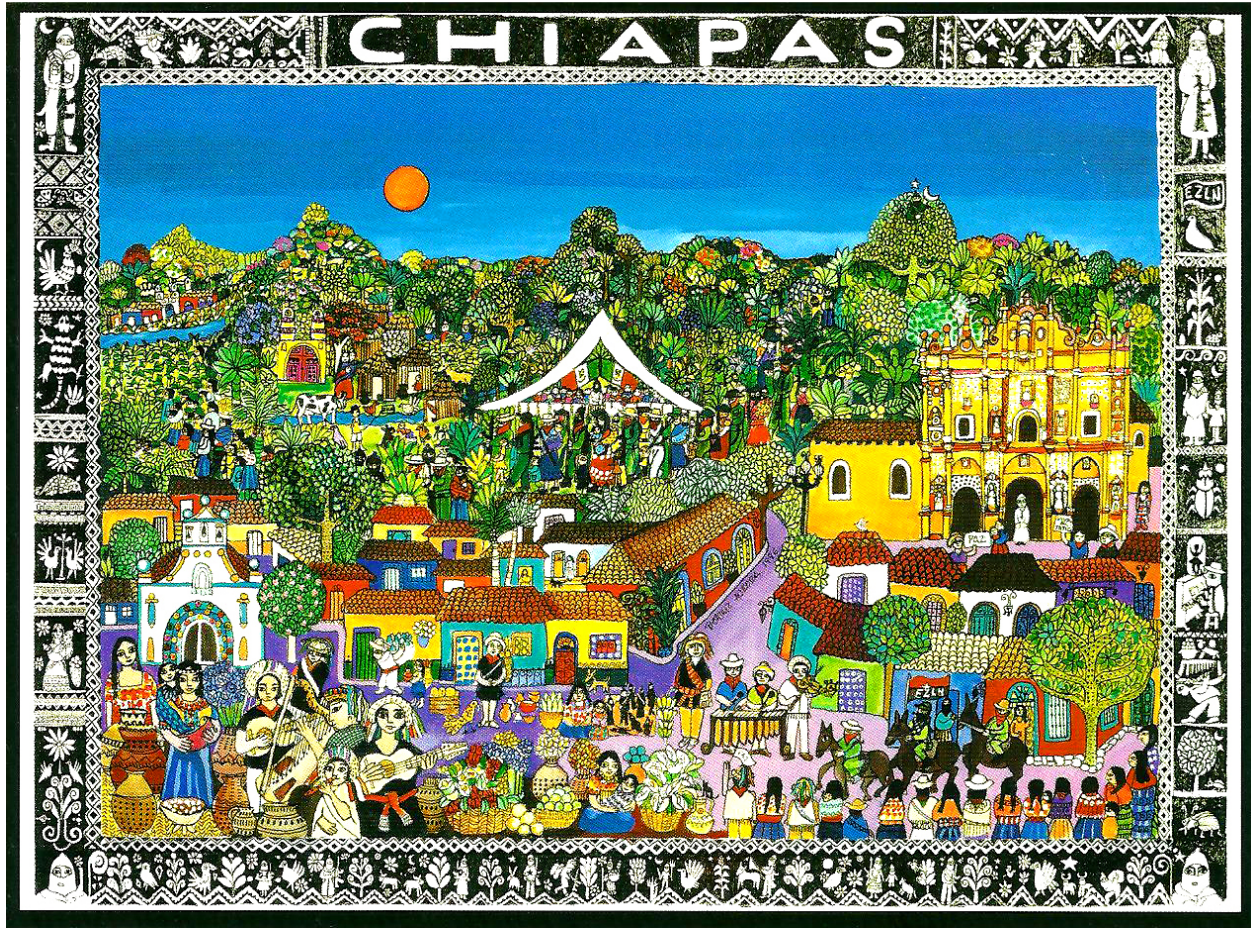
Initially, I set out to grasp an understanding of CideCI and its methods of learning, to observe these spaces in order to contrast them with those of modern western education. However, my time there has been a process of rediscovering as well as redefining the practices and routines of life; a life through struggle, through resistance, through passion and creation. Beneath the surface I found a different existence in which they pick up the world to hold it otherwise, as to see it from a new perspective, moving it further down and towards the left. So the following paper does not fully answer these original intentions. Rather it is a medium from which the river narrows enough to catch a glimpse of the other side, where the waters calm hoping to embolden one to gather up the courage to cross. Though in order to give form to this project I contemplate four aspects of CideCI, that of structure and curriculum, culture and community, learning, and creativity. Lastly, I conclude by reflecting on this experience, the time I have spent within a unique context; to try and understand what this could convey on to others, those in the diverse parts of the world, living distant realities, suffering yet struggling with their own means, walking the various paths towards dignity.

Resumen

Inicialmente, empiezo con el objeto de comprender CideCI y sus métodos de aprendizaje, con la idea de observar sus espacios para compararles con esos de educación moderna occidental. Sin embargo, el tiempo que pasó allí ha estado un proceso de redescubrimiento y redefinición de las prácticas y rutinas de la vida; la vida por la lucha, por la resistencia, por la pasión y creación. Debajo de las aguas superficiales, encontré una existencia diferente en que ellos recuperan el mundo y lo aguanta de otra manera, para verlo en una perspectiva nueva, poniéndolo más abajo y a la izquierda. Por eso,

este proyecto no puede contestar todas las intenciones principios. Más bien lo es un médium en que un río se estrecha para que se pueda ver el otro lado, donde las aguas tranquilizar le intenta regalar el valor para cruzarlo. Aunque hay que dar forma a un proyecto así. Por lo tanto, he creado cuatro aspectos para que se discuta CideCI. Ellos son la estructura y currículo, la cultura y comunidad, el aprendizaje, y la creatividad. Por fin, concluyo por reflexionar de esta experiencia, el tiempo que pasó adentro un contexto único; para intentar a comprender lo que esta puede significar a otros, esos de partes diversas del mundo, que viven realidades lejanas, sufriendo pero luchando con sus propios medios, caminando por caminos varios hacia la dignidad.

Introduction:



<http://radio.uchile.cl/noticias/90111/>

People are again acknowledging that to know is a personal experience, and that the only way to know, to widen the competencies for living, is to learn from the world, not about the world.

- Gustavo Esteva, MadhuSuriPrakash and Dana Stuchul, "Everywhere All the Time"

The Ending of My Way of Thinking

In my life up to now, it feels as if I've been trained to think. Though I am not programmed, it seems I've been funneled into a certain way of being. And there is some truth in these reflections. Though we are not always conscious of it, the environment affects our human nature, our behavior. If this were not true than marketing advertisements would have little purpose and babies would never learn to speak through listening. So with these examples, we must then believe that the media, our cities, our relationships, our schools must have some sort of influence on who we are and how we act. In some sense, the way our entire society is conducted must somewhat impact how we go about living. With a certain economy, with a particular life style we can't be entirely out of reach from their effects. So with this in mind I come to question how much control we actually hold over the interactions we have with others and our environment, with the things that run our lives. Are we capable of or even granted the creativity of doing things differently, of, for example, not accepting money exchange as a sufficient mode of communication or interface? I find some answer in Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*:

People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others. Prisoners in rich countries often have access to more things and services than members of their families, but they have no say in how things are to be made and cannot decide what to do with them. Their punishment consists in being deprived of what I shall call "conviviality." They are degraded to the status of mere consumers.¹

He goes on to explain "conviviality" as a term opposite to industrial productivity, the "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons and the intercourse of persons with their environment...individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value."² Reading this I

start to examine my own alienation from the world which sustains us, if it is taking the concrete, necessary aspects of life and turning them into abstract, complex concepts required to possess. The distance we live from where the food we eat grows; the houses lying vacant as people are sleeping on the streets. How these contradictions only further induce a cycle, as Ivan Illich states, using the example of education, “The commodity called ‘education’ and the institution called ‘school’ make each other necessary. The circle can be broken only by a widely shared insight that the institution has come to define the purpose. Values abstractly stated are reduced to mechanical processes that enslave men. This serfdom can be broken only by the joyful self-recognition of the fool who assumes personal responsibility for his folly.”³

So looking to explore the paths leading away from these abstractions and beginning to recognize the holes in my past learning experiences, I found CldeCI. And for the past month I have been living the principles of “education” based rather on autonomy and practicing the learning methods which avoid definition by the economy or bureaucratic institutions. As well, beneath the surface I discovered these spaces do more than simply educate, they help sustain a different way of being by focusing on the daily process of life and rebellion; forming new perspectives, a struggle, another direction transcending normalized notions of *modernprogress*. We find the people here reacquiring the tools instinctive to their humanity, refusing the offered “assistance” presented to them from the current system of power.

However, arriving at CldeCI I expected a recognizable alternative, to see all the points in all the right places of counter-action, of flawless responses to the problems of today. Like we believe Newton’s law of motion: *To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction, but* as we have learned over time that this assumption becomes less and less accurate taking into account the external, environment forces of an open system. So here I don’t believe I found the other side in the sense that it is the direct opposite of everything proposed by the current system. It seems to exist on its own, a

structure outside of modern thought, built through a history, struggle, and resistance. So for lack of better words, or maybe words we haven't learned are better to use yet, to me it is hope, it truly is a form of dignity.

But for some they need to hear the specific reasons for it's method of struggle, to understand mentally, intellectually what about CideCI makes it so unlike others, such a viable "alternative."

Unfortunately, for me I was unable to accomplish this. I was unable to fully apprehend those arguments looking to promote dissemination of places like CideCI throughout the world. Nevertheless, I realized this was not the point; this way of comprehension was not valid, not essentially important. What was important was that I started to feel it, the other world, the rejection of simply being an "alternative," a backup plan, a second choice to our first pick of economy, development, thinking, world view. I could not fully grasp this place intellectually, with my past learning, with my pre-established lens through life spent in a westernized system of the United States; but through the time spent breathing it, existing within it, I could feel its presence. Like the tiny watermelon seed you swallowed when you were still a kid, so frightened that it would start to grow inside of you. It was like that but with inspiration replacing fear.

Therefore, below I try and recount all that has happened to me since first arriving, attempting to impart onto other's what lays in the realm of possibilities, that which currently only exists within our imaginations and dreams. To present this paper as a mechanism to educate would be to neglect everything I have been shown. Instead, I hope to communicate it as a window, a painting, to which one can perceive through seeing rather than merely reading.

Methodology

I realize that our definition of learning can be quite broad; our opinions on what constitutes creativity and what it exactly is can be vague. Nevertheless, I believe this project, this question, started taking shape near the start of my life. Within the educational systems of the United States, and through the refinement of my own identity and self-expression, I feel I have already been gathering the necessary information for this project. The practice of formal, standardized education is in no way foreign to me. However, the other side of it is...the perceptions of what I'm able to identify as education, knowledge, learning and living are limited at best. There are instilled values within my mental framework which hinder my process of recognizing and distinguishing the practice of alternatives to the current system of education. Though a form of unlearning and the retraining of my awareness already began the moment I discovered the immeasurable paths of "education" in which we can travel, the endless methods, practices, classrooms, teachers, and forms of knowledge hidden behind what we initially see. So the resources from which I gathered "data" from are broad and varied, and though I have recognized the far-reaching horizon offered by learning, my pre-established lens has been unable to pick up many of the answering calls to my questions. This is merely the beginning to a life exploring issues of learning, culture, resistance, creativity, as well as the realization of our human potential.

The place in where I was to study these practices of autonomous learning, CldeCI, is a long standing organization with a rich history and distinct context. Therefore, my formal research began by attempting to grasp a clear picture of its background and purpose. Through reading many resources discussing CldeCI and other supplemental theoretical secondary research about education and culture the murky fog began to dissipate.

Then, my personal participation began as I enrolled as a student for one month taking courses in baking, carpentry, pottery, and music. From there I was able to freely experience the way of living and learning at CideCI. I shared conversations with students and teachers, observed the daily practices of the spaces, and came to better understand a different world. Though I spent almost an entire month there, I was still limited by the spaces of different courses I did not get to explore as well as the fact that I was an outsider and perceived that way. Despite these setbacks, the benefits and joys to actually being present in the processes within CideCI were invaluable.

In addition, some of my resources took the form of discussions with Dr. Raymundo and in the dialogue of the seminaries with one including a talk from Gustavo Esteva. The themes were always as though provoking as practical, yet my limited Spanish abilities and the informality of the situations resulted in many of the ideas being lost within the moment. Many of the explicit wordings of these statements have been displaced from their originality and specificity. As well, the time constraints of others prevented the answering of my unending questions. Many times I was unwilling to impose on them a commitment to sit down and talk.

Overall, I don't feel any of these restrictions prevented me from progressing and moving forward with my inquiry. Furthermore, my preference to use informal resources strongly gives voice to this project and provides the most important insight, those of the people truly living it. And though many questions remain, the good thing is that I have uncovered a long path of continuous knowledge I have yet to start walking.

Lastly, I would like to define my context and presence within CideCI. As Dr. Raymundo stated, CideCI is not a place to be investigated. It is more a space to share knowledge and experiences; to help better people through looking to restore and find their place within the world. Therefore, I was not any different than the indigenous students who come from their own communities to learn. I was not there

to interrogate or exploit any of the resources; rather I modestly drank from their pool of knowledge and chose to gather meaning from my own experiences at CldeCI, to know more about the place, people and reasons behind the initial assumptions.

Part 1

The Living History on the Border of Town



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/julia-e-rodrigo/4876371741/in/photostream>

The past is colonized every time the cultural practices or traditions for learning or study of pre-modern or non-modern peoples are reduced to that category understood as education

- Gustavo Esteva, MadhuSuriPrakash and Dana Stuchul, "Everywhere All the Time"

Becoming Their Own

CIdeCI (the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Comprehensive Indigenous Training Center), located right outside San Cristobal de Las Casas, serves as a center for indigenous training. They offer educational services for the indigenous population of Chiapas who would benefit from training in a specific area. Exploring a dimension of Mexican civil society looking to provide an alternative to development, they assist in creating sustainable local economies through the capacitation of individuals. Their form of education is affordable and practical for the indigenous of all ages in Chiapas and is operated within a context independent from the state and national governments, funded personally and through international foundations, as a resource to those who are ignored by the official education of the government. It is distinctive because, "It's not a center that's just for, but it's also by, the indigenous. It's an indigenous center in its work, in its definition, in its method of operating, in its components, in those who make it up."⁴

Founded on August 23, 1989, CIdeCI has led a long history of resistance and empowerment. Before, many of the organizers were involved in a similar project funded by the government, but it ended in 1989 giving way to CIdeCI, an independent center separate from the state. After, they were helped by Samuel Ruiz, Bishop of San Cristobal, until 2003 when they were no longer able to aid in their struggle and were asked to leave the space provided for them in the center of San Cristobal. So then, they moved to where they currently reside in Colonia Maravilla on the outskirts of the town. Throughout their story they have never accepted help from established power, finding meaning in their practice of working below along with the forces of society, slowly regaining the capacity for self-determination.

CIdeCI functions as a community of learning individuals who help perform the tasks necessary for self-sufficient living and the upkeep of the spaces. They follow weekly schedules starting from 8 in

morning until 9 at night. About everything needed is provided on site including dormitories, a health center, library, cafeteria, and all (except for the health center) are run entirely by the students themselves. As well, they are not obligated to stay and can leave for whatever reasons. Furthermore, their curriculum is anything but obligatory and standardized. Each individual student is cared for and exercises their own independent status. Dr. Raymundo explains the pedagogy of CideClas “aprender a hacer, aprenderaaprender, y aprender a ser mas.”¹⁵ They learn, but through hands-on experiences, by practicing rather than preparing. At the end, the students, if they feel they’ve learned enough, are then encouraged to return to their communities. To those who return CideCI helps with micro-projects, providing preliminary support for applying the skills learned.

Apart from their courses they also hold weekly seminars at their Center of Intercultural Studies. Here they discuss topics ranging from political thought, ethics and world issues. What they try and create in these spaces is a dialogue beyond the dialectic to reflect on the current issues of the present and future. As well, they’ve established an Immanuel Wallerstein Center of Studies, Information, and Documentation where they hold monthly seminars of studies. Here they try and reflect on the theoretical and methodological scheme to better understand their circumstances, regionally, nationally and worldly.

Lastly, the picture would not be complete without their notion of resistance neatly fitting in with the role the EZLN and Zapatistas. CideCI’s scheme of organization and purpose cannot be fully realized without the complimentary piece of the Zapatista’s, whose community members make up the majority of the student population. Also, they help with various events, like the March for Peace against Felipe Calderon’s War on Drugs May 7th, hosting Zapatista’s at the center and starting the march from there. With the constant presence of autonomy and resistance, one cannot imagine the two to be separate. A few would go as far as calling it the 6th Caracole.

I "Learn to do, learn to learn, learn to be more"

How to Structure a Life

Like Dr. Raymundo said, the structure of the place is not as impactful as the fact that it is their own, that which they have constructed. As well, it is the way in which they did it for and by themselves that makes it so unique. Of course the place is not 100% autonomous, but that is not the point. What is important is the struggle, the fight for autonomy. This is where you find the most promise. There is where people live the most hopeful. So they have shaped this space to fit that purpose. They are in the shadow of the Zapatista structure, in the shadow of that struggle, the border of this process to regain our capacity to live. So along with these spaces, comes the ability to apply the practices in everyday routine. Touching all aspects of life, the spaces allow for a little bit of practice, of re-familiarizing ourselves with who we are and what we are capable of doing. Though to understand what it's made up of, it is necessary to look at it as a whole, as a circular process.

Like an island in middle of a vast, unforgiving sea of colonial expansion and globalization, CideCI stands as a landmark, a point of reference to those struggling against these insurmountable forces. There they are salvaging their values, customs, dreams, and imaginations from the shipwrecked history of their ancestor's past, laying among the rocks left by the former invasions of church, state and market. So from there they can see the entire world, they are able to take a step back and better understand their place within the larger system without losing their identity, their culture. It helps serve to familiarize instead of educate themselves by actually living, to reflect on who they are and who they could be through the experiences of daily life because no one else learns for them, "Somos lo que hacemos"^{II6}. So this space allows them to achieve purposes with energy fully under their own control, unlike many others who's imaginations have been industrially deformed, they still hold the ability "to

^{II} We are what we do/make

frame in fancy a world in which sound and shared reasoning sets limits to everybody's power to interfere with anybody's equal power to shape the world"⁷. I could see this throughout the makeup of CldeCI. In its classes where the teachers and students learned together as equals, in the seminars where others partook in a different dialogue, choosing an informal manner of sharing knowledge through a contextual dance of relational patterns, sharing with both their minds and hearts.

So this organization constructs an atmosphere, an environment, and with it comes a different way of acting, of being. Instead of feeling the need to achieve the same purpose of standardized education by focusing on destroying its power or compromising with its politics, they redefine, redirect, the aim of learning by choosing to interact with their world from the fundamental fact that "the effectiveness of any learning experience depends on the frequency, variety, quality, and intensity of the interaction of the learner." They choose to "create interactive learning environments, rather than merely presenting information to passive students"⁸. However, growing beside this notion and gently intertwining with it is their autonomy and resistance. These ideas both play a role on the concrete human scale allowing them to be conscious of their struggle and express it daily at CldeCI. They are reminded why they are learning, for whom, and for what purpose.

To talk about specifics would be to pick at dry bones. Dr. Raymundo mentioned "our curriculum is there for those who really don't want to know what we do." So yes, they have many different classes of applicable practices to help one earn a living or find a job in a sense, but where would we be then? They don't wish to remake the system; they want to do away with its entirety. So although the students have schedules to follow and upkeep to do, is that any different than picking a certain time they'll do something or helping contribute to the well-being of where they stay. "This is a space of life, of history, of worlds."⁹ It's not to take you out of life in order to prepare you for that life, because what they are doing is history, what they are living day and night is life. To provide or create these vital spaces and

situation of real life is something the world has partially failed at in the past. We seem to have strayed from the path and got caught up in supporting a system that separates people from the things sustaining them. Alienated by countless contradictions, CldeCI provides the *curriculum of life* and gives it back to the people, putting them in control of what truly affects them.

I cannot speak much of the curriculum, much less of their system of operating, because I believe there is no secret formula behind it. They do what must be done within the realms of proportion, realizing their limits with what can be done and what should be done. So below my stories will attempt to weave together an image of the CldeCI that exists outside the modern perception of education, outside the constraints and molds we try to force it into.

Part 2:
Protecting the Sacred Roads of the Past



<http://www.beatrizaurora.net/galeria/displayimage.php?album=1&pos=32>

The idea long prevailed that, in the struggle against cancer, it was important to destroy those cells that a sudden and frenetic proliferation had condemned to wither away and die. It is preferable today to reinforce the life-potential of healthy peripheral cells and to favor the reconquering of what is still alive before annihilating those that death has already snatched away. I would be satisfied if such an attitude sovereignly determined our dealings with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the world.

- Raoul Vaneigem "A Warning to Students of All Ages"

The Living Roots We Tread Upon

I approached CideCI walking through the Colonia of Maravilla. Making my way down the dirt road a barbed wire fence lined my right side leading up to the gate and encircling the entire center. Appearing much like a military compound, the front gate towered over me, and upon asking to speak to Dr. Raymundo, the general director, I was told he hadn't yet arrived. So I sat and waited outside as the students safely examined me from the other side. Though the protection and security of CideCI seemed strange to me at first, I slowly began to understand the reasons behind their precautionous behavior. When I stepped in through that door way, I stood over the rich soil of culture, of resistance, of living history. And this was something to be cherished by those who cultivated and nurtured it. To be kept safe from those who abuse the fruits of labor; those who don't look to share but exploit nature and our surroundings, who only see our world in money signs, in terms of gross domestic product.

As I was getting ready to learn, things act differently here. Reality speaks another language and time doesn't travel in the same direction, at the same speed. For the people who occupy these spaces, it's a routine, like a tiny heart constantly beating the same rhythm; sometimes forgotten but always there keeping us alive. So these experiences traveled to me, like the sound of Eness softly singing in the bakery, patiently shaping her bolitos of masa into caracoles.¹¹¹ The gentle pace to which she went about this task, the care she gave to its form through the pressure applied with her hands. Later, as we sat waiting for the bread to rise in the oven, they discussed the different flavor in each person's bread though we knew it was all the same dough. It ended by them agreeing that each piece holds the taste of the hand that made it, each unique shape tells a story. The time spent in the bakery revealed secrets of other worlds, small narratives of the people who make the bread eaten by visitors and at seminaries. Here within these four wooden walls lays a culture existing under its own circumstances. Later, I caught a

¹¹¹Small balls of dough into shells

glimpse of the microcosm they live in, the community created by and for the people. During the seminary held that Thursday I spied someone eating the bread I made, dunking it in and out of his coffee. Here was the complete circle everything makes, how the things they produce return to give sustenance to their existence. Though this piece of bread may be small and insignificant the course it takes inside the spaces of CldeCI reflects the same paths of the people outwardly expressing their culture and practice.

Accompanied by the work done in many of CldeCI's spaces always came the constant play and revelry shown by the students with it. Not a moment was spared constructing a chair, when two students would come by sword fighting with two sticks. The time waiting for meals was filled with laughter as they playfully pushed the line back and forth. However, an important aspect of these interactions revealed itself in the fact that they rely on one another. Illich believed that "people will rediscover the value of joyful sobriety and liberating austerity only if they relearn to depend on each other," and that seems to be what's in motion there. Though they may gulp down their rice and beans and ask for 25 tortillas each meal, they are conscious that everything they eat has been prepared by their companions. So in this sense I hear the songs they sing in music class shared and sung together, I see the chores accomplished by students never done alone. I gaze upon a community of shared experience, where communal existence is breathed back to life through what they carry out hand in hand.

So speaking to one of the students at CldeCI I asked him what about the center he appreciated the most. He gave me a short response saying the way in which the people are treated. I thought for a moment about the reasons for having this space. The skills learned here to be taken back to the communities, to support their resistance against global markets, their resilience to become more self-sufficient, and their ability to remain distinct, what the people themselves make of it. I thought about the teachers and how they share their knowledge, about the innumerable amounts of municipals I've

heard the students come from, about the reasons they are here, and something the music teacher said to me in a conversation: “they carry with them seeds which will start to grow all over the world, where the people live. They come here and later leave with the capacity to cultivate something new again.” I then decided to ask, well how do they treat the people? And he replied, “Beautifully.”

Part 3: The Daily Teachings of Life



http://www.dominionpaper.ca/features/2005/01/18/photo_essa.html

In the individualistic and highly competitive environment in which people of the modern West live...the acquisition of knowledge is seen as the achievement of a highly profitable investment, as a way to build a career. People are suddenly caught involuntarily in a runaway zeal...in the addiction to competition for competition's sake ...and that once in it 'one forgets to live.' In such contexts, "love and friendship could be limitations or obstacles that hurt one's chances for career promotion." Reduced to a specific kind of "excrement of our minds," the knowledge of the educated continues to be a commodity, bought and sold on the market. The school was, of course, the institution that operated that reduction in a massive scale; it "educated" people to first accept and now globally market this contemporary horror

- Gustavo Esteva, "Escaping Education"

The Language of Learning

To reflect on the learning practices of CideCI would be impotent. To share through these dead words what is truly lived, a learning alive in everyone, would be hopeless. There is no accurate description of my observations, no graphs, diagrams or pie charts because that is not how one familiarizes himself with the world. As well, we cannot re-create these struggles elsewhere, they have “their soil which nourishes them, their own ground, their own context where there are circumstances which are not our own.”¹⁰ It’s impossible to administer to one another through teaching the knowledge of how to live; there is no way to study this, “Like life and love, learning is a continuous flow that enjoys the privilege of irrigating and fertilizing our sentient intelligence. Nothing is more contagious than creation.”¹¹ One has to experience it through doing, existing where one lives, not in research or investigation or interviews, but through feeling what you are learning and understanding exactly why you are learning and for what purpose. The point I’m trying to make is that maybe the way you learn something is not as important as the motives behind why you are learning it. None of this is about glorifying a certain practice or promoting a particular method, that would distort what they do at CideCI. Like how the Zapatista’s explain their reasons for revolution, “Somos gente ordinaria, por lo tanto somos rebeldes,”¹² those behind CideCI’s are not much different. They are practicing daily the actions needed to survive, to carry out the possibilities of a life filled with dignity, courage and self-respect. Learning is their form of rebellion, their resistance. So their potential lies along the same lines as the Zapatista’s promise, “the radical promise of the Zapatistas is not a new ideological construction of possible futures. It is continually self-fulfilled in their deeds, in their daily behavior, as a redefinition of hope.”¹³

Sitting at the turning wheel in pottery class, I repeatedly attempted to form something recognizable out of my unshapely mass of clay. However after an hour with no success, I became

¹⁰ We are ordinary people, therefore we are rebels

washed away everything I thought I knew or tried. But what I hadn't realized was that I'd only just started to learn, and the further I experienced this kind of learning, the deeper I found I could go, the more I saw how their diverse ways of doing invaded all aspects of life. For me, I saw these experiences as a way to put down what I've spent my whole life with and pick up something else, a new perspective, a different road to travel. So I tried to walk alongside them as they practiced daily the exercise of dignity and autonomy. I let go of the ideologies and theories for once and just focused on doing what I thought would work, trying to put my strongest ideals into the practice of daily life. From these experiences I took a great deal from the words of Paul Goodman:

Suppose you had had the revolution you are talking or dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now! Whatever you would do then, do it now. When you run up against obstacles, people, or things that won't let you live that way, then begin to think about how to get over or around or under that obstacle, or how to push it out of the way, and your politics will be concrete and practical. (Quoted in Holt 1970).

For them, as I began to understand, they don't have to search through books, write papers like this, or listen to lectures all day to learn. Instead, knowledge comes to them without having to prod and pry it out of a hole. "Today ['education'] is staked entirely on a change of mentality, of vision, of perspective. Pinning down a butterfly is not the best way to get to know it."¹⁴ So rather than receive a failing grade, I heard reassurance from Maestra^vEness telling me, "puedes, sipuedes."^{vi} Rather than quitting, I got the modest confessions of Maestro Ivan admitting it took him months to actually get somewhere with pottery, that every person has a different learning process, way of discovering, and how quickly they get it down isn't as important as that they should keep trying. All of these teachers taking into account the necessary step of failing redefine the meaning of the word teacher and its role. To Maestro Rafa, "we aren't teachers really to teach, we help more with sharing our passions rather than distributing them." So I recognized this method as a way for teaching me how to teach myself.

^vSpanish for teacher

^{vi}You can, yes you can

With the ways we were learning each day, came a change in habit, a new routine of philosophy through practice. The emphasis was never focused on the end product. The process was always more important. Like Marx warned, "What is frequently forgotten is that they want production to be limited to 'useful things,' but they forget that the production of too many useful things results in too many useless people."¹⁵ So the dis-alienation of our work and its products took place in this emphasis of the long term process. I didn't see improvement with my work every day or so, but I did recognize improvement with myself and the manner I approached the situation. These classes provided humbling encounters, each task allowed me to see the long term of the overall process and the beauty I put into the work little by little. I could distinguish it in others too, in the different shapes people made with the dough, with the absorbed look on the faces whittling wood and making something of their own, putting their own unique touches on it, taking their time. I can't stress enough the humility found within this work and they don't seem to think much about it other than it being a normal part of learning, to be humble about what you know and what you haven't yet learned. And it's not that they are conscious of what they are doing, it's more the reality they find themselves in, on the other side from where I came from.

Part 4:
The Creative Intercourse of Dignity



<http://maryestrellas-pepi.blogspot.com/2010/08/azul.html>

Societies in which most people depend for most of their goods and services on the personal whim, kindness, or skill of another are called "underdeveloped," while those in which living has been transformed into a process of ordering from an all-encompassing store catalogue are called "advanced."

- Ivan Illich "Tools for Conviviality"

Conversations in Poetry

Much of the term creativity deals with the regeneration of our capacities. The retaking of our potentials to imagine, create, and empower ourselves, that which is also involved in the recovery and regeneration of vernacular worlds. To restrict the meaning of this word to strictly art in the Renaissance sense would be to clip the wings of a bird. There is less we have to understand about how to express creativity than to recognize what we already do creatively. Like the passiveness of our learning and creativity, resulting from our perpetuated dependency on institutions and systems like schools, we have fallen into a hole of inaction and helplessness. So to fight this, “since the noun ‘education’ imposes a completely passive dependence on the system provid[ing] education, people are substituting this noun with the verbs ‘to learn’ and ‘to study.’ Unlike the noun, these verbs reestablish the autonomous capacity for building creative relationships with others and with nature –relationships which generate knowing, wisdom.”¹⁶ Similar to this, we are reclaiming our abilities “to create.”

So at CideCI they choose a “life of action” over a life of consumption, and from the first day I arrived I began actively participating, creating, and doing; holding the power to make something creative, “to make it by the hand with dignity.”¹⁷ Once I retook this potential inside of me, I recognized that the capacity for creative thought invades all areas of life. Throughout one day, I have never used my hands in so many different ways. The hands which are so constrained into monotony in the mass of jobs and classes restricting them to writing, typing, raising. So by exploring through feeling and using all of my senses, a possibility to create the world in my own image surfaced. By experiencing daily and immersing myself in the practice I changed my approach to problems as well as their meaning. Albert Einstein alleged, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them,” and I found that what I had been missing was the freedom to explore, to stray from the paved sidewalk of formalities and procedures. When I saw the same piece of dough, mound of clay, guitar

before me each day I chose to view it as something entirely foreign to me, unfamiliar. I tried new things focusing more on what I was actually doing here and now, working through my own self, seeing through feeling. Like the fox revealed to the little prince in his book, “one sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”¹⁸ So my time at CldeCl was learning to see through another window to the outside world, understanding not in terms of “un individualista”^{III} but rather in terms of “unapersona”^{IV} with a fabric of relations developing beside personal growth. As well, sometimes choosing poetry as a means of instruction, because “only poetry, appealing to the heart more than to the mind, can construct an intercultural bridge which can be crossed by everyone.”¹⁸ Walking through this hallway, I was starting to be able to recognize, to be whole. However, not for my own self, my own personal benefit, but in order to share, discuss and have an obligation to others. Discovering my own capacity to turn the world into a mirror in which to see myself through what I do, make and interact with.

All the while I was taking steps into a broader reality of existing, a move from single objects into systems of relationships. An outlook that our surroundings, and ourselves, are much more complex, open and connected than we initially supposed. It seems that the one is many, like Dr. Raymundo mentioned “una persona” lives in a relationship almost natural with nature, with the exterior, with other people, within the terms of others. It’s to have a sense of proportion in life and relationship. Unlike individualism, proposing that we are basically atoms in a hierarchy defined by instrumental, achieved status, we can look at ourselves and others as shared experiences and relationships, with statuses that can instead be ascribed relationally, historically. This idea holds within it endless possibilities to participate and interact with our environment and relationships. Here we had the right tools towards bring creativity and worth back to the everyday. As I felt the joy of creating, how I could invest the world with my own meaning, relating myself in action to my surroundings through the use of these tools, I was concretely acting in my classes of pottery, carpentry, bakery, music. I was enriching the environment

^{III} Spanish for individual

^{IV} Spanish for person

with the outcomes of my visions. Though they may have been imperfect, there was always the chance to improve, to continue generating enduring transformation through my own creative means.

Men with industrially distorted minds cannot grasp the rich texture of personal accomplishments within the range of modern though limited tools. There is no room in their imaginations for the qualitative change.¹⁹

So there is always potential to create new possibilities; to see things differently, by imagining, without being constrained by our lenses reducing the richness of the world in all its diversity and complexity. Slowly, I began to find the hidden purpose of imagination, which is not designed for my own world, but rather “to shatter my world, my horizon, and see where there are other worlds with different inhabitants of people, see its brilliant colors through my imagination”²⁰. Within a more contextual framework I started to appreciate things in a more integral, humble manner, picking up the clay cups and bowls and seeing the hands that made them, beholding every imperfection as its own distinct characteristic. Looking at the wooden chairs and understanding the time and energy one must put into the work. At CldeCI, their practice, their action and their resistance present spaces for creative expression and growth. They open the paths to explore a dignified life unlocking with it the possibilities of imagination and hope. So I became aware of this like it was the first time leaving a city and looking up to see a sky flooded with radiant stars. It dawned on me that I needed to seize myself from the limitations of individual perception, to find myself in other experiences like this. To push outside my own world’s boundaries and encountering those of others. To explore new frontiers visiting the other, those whom I’ve never imagined existed. I feel that I’ve been confined by a pre-established education, an assembly-lined value which has covered my world and only allowed me to see one thing, one facet of an entire universe.

Conclusion:

The End to a Beginning



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/donemuntomb/3675674284/>

"I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Caminar Pregutando (Walking While Questioning)

Each place has its history and it is led by the people who walk its path. The importance lies in that it's their own history being traveled, not someone else's, not some pre-existing story, their own lives. That's what is significant; regaining control of our futures, of our destinies, to be the ones to dictate with dignity and passion our direction in this world. And here they are doing that, each small step they take is their own, each part of the struggle is for themselves, not for a nation, a religion, an abstract ideal, but something real that can be touched, felt, breathed every day. Here is what it means to regain worth within our own unique worlds, to be able to have the means necessary to fulfill our lives, histories, well-being with hope. But it's hope in another sense, because "hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."²⁰ And so as Dr. Raymundo kindly reminded me, "No somos románticos." This is their community, their own creation. They have learned to take the good with the bad, the light with the dark. Though I did not spend enough time to see many of the weaknesses, drawbacks or shortcomings in their reality, I understood that it cannot be glorified or put on a pedestal. These people, this culture, this resistance "are source[s] of inspiration, not of guidance... It is not a sermon or a lesson, but a gesture, it is an invitation, not preaching or instructing."²²

Going through these experiences from start to finish, remaining right below the surface of what I thought was normal, universal, similar were the largest gaps of distinction. Here were entirely new galaxies and constellations, unreachable things, unattainable prophecies forever to linger there, only to be held within the grasp of our hearts or in the mind's eye of dreams and imagination. I didn't find as much in them as I found within myself. As Dr. Raymundo made clear the first day, this place is a mirror in which to see yourself. And so I looked and listened to this world, I heard some of its stories, a few of its songs. I took walks along the rivers it gently carved out of the ancient earth and felt the light winds

sweep through their forests. In truth this might just be poetry, but one can learn from the poetry that rises out of the diverse experiences of other worlds. And I have stumbled upon treasured knowledge from this world, in between these verses of poetry, relearning to trust my feelings: The knowing that learning is essentially only one part of a vast process towards making us whole again. So like the Zapatista's we continue walking while questioning, moving forward with our reflections because the most important insights can come from lived and unexpected experiences, to help us understand a direction to head off in. So at the end of this encounter I am left with the question: am I going to change the experience to fit my own life, or am I going to let the experience change my life.

¹Illich, Ivan. *Tools for conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973

²¹ Ibid.

³Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. London: MaryonBoyers Publishing 1970.

⁴Paget-Clarke, Nic. "Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza: A University without Shoes." *In Motion Magazine*, 5 Sept. 2005 <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/rsb_int_esp.html>

⁵Barraza, Dr. Raymundo Sánchez. Discussion in Office, 4/26/11

⁶ ⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁹ ⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barraza, Dr. Raymundo Sánchez. Discussion in Office, 4/29/11

¹¹Vaneigem, Raoul. *A Warning to All Students*. NOT BORED! 2000.

¹²"Entrevista a John Holloway." *Herramienta*. <<http://www.herramienta.com.ar/debate-sobre-cambiar-el-mundo/entrevista-john-holloway>>

¹³Gustavo Esteva. *Celebration of Zapatismo* (ed. 2). Oaxaca: Ediciones ¡Basta!, 2008. p. 31

¹⁴¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁵Esteva, Gustavo and MadhuSuriPrakash. *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing 2008.

¹⁶ Esteve, Gustavo and MadhuSuriPrakash. *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the soil of cultures*. London: Zed Books 1998. Part 3

¹⁷ ^5 Ibid.

¹⁸ Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. San Diego: Harcourt, 2000. Chp XXI

¹⁹ ^1 Ibid.

²⁰ ^10 Ibid.

²¹ Havel, V. 1991. Quoted in *In Context*, No.30, Fall Winter.

²² ^13 Ibid., p. 31

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