

# Transforming Learning for Transformation

Paper for *Human Learning in the Anthropocene*,  
an Exploration, Research, Reflection & Development (ERR&D) programme  
of the Learning Development Institute

A written input into the colloquium on *Learning to Think in the Anthropocene*,  
Villanova, PA, USA, 25 to 29 July 2018

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In this paper, I articulate some questions and pointers for Human Learning in the Anthropocene, based on a critical appreciation of my journey as a young woman learner from the Global South. I shall begin by presenting my understanding of human learning, and then proceed to critique current learning (schooling) systems in my social and geographic location, which is India<sup>1</sup>. I shall develop this critique with the help of my own learning journey, which has been an unconventional one, as well as by reviewing relevant literature. Finally, I shall discuss the transformations that need to take place for more meaningful learning processes to emerge and take shape in the Anthropocene. I conclude the paper with recommendations and questions to take the discussion further. In an annexure, I present cases of diverse experiments around transformative learning which have taken place or are currently happening around me.

I intersperse these arguments with an autobiographical narrative of my learning experiences. I am an action-researcher who strongly believes that no knowledge is purely objective or neutral, and thus needs to be contextualised or 'situated' in the identity and life experiences of the knower (Huang, 2010). Hence, this autobiographical indulgence, which I hope can anchor and embody my arguments and recommendations.

I begin by briefly discussing my understanding of human learning and what it should entail for the Anthropocene. Learning as a verb is by most people understood to be the broad process of acquiring certain specific skills or knowledge that enables us to survive in our environment. In this meaning, learning appears to be a natural process of acquiring skills for survival, possibly through instinct, imitation, or environmental factors. Initially, all of us go through this process of natural learning. Babies learn a number of things, from identifying their mothers through olfaction, to walking, talking, and comprehending. However, I agree with Jan Visser (2001) when he says that human learning is more specific and needs to be differentiated from 'natural' learning as well as machine learning. He defines learning as:

... the disposition of human beings and of the social entities to which they pertain, to engage in continuous dialogue with the human, social, biological and physical environment, so as to generate intelligent behavior to interact constructively with change. (p. 453)

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<sup>1</sup> India is a post-colonial developing country which is touted as being one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, the underside to this 'growth' narrative is a widening socio-economic disparity and poor human development indicators. India's Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index in 2016 was very low, at 0.455. Similarly, India is ranked 125th of 159 countries in the Gender Inequality Index, with a high maternal mortality, low female workforce participation, and a marginal number of women in parliament.

In this definition, I understand human learning to be distinguished from natural learning in two ways. Firstly, that such learning when undertaken by humans is *intelligent*, in that it is guided by an intelligence, a consciousness of oneself as well as of the environment in which one is located. Secondly, human learning is *intentional*, driven by a desire to change the environment or the learner herself, so as to not just survive, but thrive, in our given environment. Human learning is hence *situational* – based on the natural, physical, socio-political, and cultural environment of the learner, as well as *adaptive* – enabling a continuous critical and constructive engagement with the environment.

In this framework of learning, I can identify two interconnected learning patterns that have shaped my journey and identity as a learner. I call these ‘walking out’ and ‘walking on’. *Walking out* means critically examining social norms and challenging those that are oppressive or discriminatory. It also means *walking on* to create egalitarian and inclusive alternatives in living, learning, and relating with others. Walking out and walking on reflect the intelligence (critical consciousness) and transformative intention of human learning that is essential for humans to survive and thrive in the Anthropocene.

In my life, this ‘walking out’ began with my name. In many Indian communities including mine, naming is patrilineal (Jayaraman, 2005), wherein a woman is given her father’s surname at birth, which changes upon marriage to her husband’s. Hence her name, the primary marker of her identity, is of the men she is related to rather than chosen by herself or her mother. Challenging this norm, my parents decided not to give me my father’s surname. Instead, I have both my parents’ first names as a combined last name which recognises their equal roles in birthing and nurturing me.

Following my name, many other taken-for-granted aspects of my life were put under scrutiny: questioned, challenged, and experimented with alternative possibilities. One of them was my education. I went to school<sup>2</sup> until Grade 7 and was an academically well-performing student. However, it was this time that my parents and I started questioning the belief that school was the only place to ‘learn.’ How would this learning contribute to my present and future, how would it enable me to lead a meaningful and sustainable life? While I did well in exams, I realised I did so because I was good at memorization and rote-learning, and not because I found the content relevant or useful. I could not come up with a good enough answer to the question of why I was learning a particular subject (for example, geography) and how it could be of use in my life.

After further introspection and discussion with my parents, I came to a realisation that something significant was missing from the formal learning space that school provided. I identified two things that were crucial to learning but missing in schooling:

1. **Ownership:** What I wanted to learn was not in my hands. Someone else who did not know me, or my reality, was deciding what I was to learn, how to learn it, and how much learning was ‘enough.’ I had no control over my own learning.
2. **Relevance:** What I was learning in school made no sense in terms of how I could employ this learning to understand myself or the world better, to gain skills that could generate a livelihood, or even to find my passion. Further, the method of teaching and learning in school was centred around examinations which assessed how much information a learner could memorize and recollect, instead of encouraging independent thinking, critical

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<sup>2</sup> A private, English-medium school. While there is state-sponsored public education in India, most urban middleclass families (the economic strata I belong to) prefer to send their children to private schools, which are more in number than public schools. Private schools are believed to offer better quality education than public schools, which cater to the working classes.

reasoning, or creativity. This made learning not just irrelevant, but also dreary and uninspiring.

My critique of schooling was built on these two analyses, which are certainly not new: Much has been thoroughly discussed in critiques of mainstream schooling (Holt, 1970; Illich, 1971; Carnie, 2003; Gatto, 2005). Torsten Husen (1974) in his essay “The School as an Institution” talks about the emergence of alternatives to schooling as the symptom of the failure of mainstream schools:

The mere fact that in different parts of the world so-called alternative schools, free schools—whatever their labels—begin to emerge is a symptom that we in the rich and highly industrialized countries have failed to create a school which stimulates young people to learn relevant things and which permits them to develop according to their individual needs. (p. 15)

However, what was different about my critique was a concomitant search for a creative solution. Walking out led to walking on. And it certainly led me down some untraversed paths, at least in my part of the world: I decided, with the support and encouragement of my parents, to literally walk out of school, at the age of twelve. In doing so, I was taking the responsibility of my learning back into my own hands and walking on to create a path of ‘self-designed’ learning<sup>3</sup>. It was a risky and daring move, and in a society that equated education with higher status and financial stability and social status, our family and friends felt that I was (rather, my parents were) squandering my chances of a decent career and future for the sake of a dubious experiment.

But looking back, fifteen years later, I feel a sense of pride at what I consider a very successful experiment. Stepping out of school was a turning point in my life, which not only transformed my outlook to learning but also instilled in me the lenses of criticality and creativity, and the passion to apply these lenses to other aspects of my life. These lenses are deeply connected to the twin practices of ‘walking out’ and ‘walking on’ in human learning, which enable us to challenge entrenched and ‘normalised’ notions of what should be, and also empower us to be unafraid in discovering, inventing, and reimagining what is possible.

Walking out and walking on is at the core of human learning that needs to take place in the Anthropocene. It shares an ideological foundation with Paulo Freire’s (1972) pedagogy of the oppressed, which employs the tools of ‘denunciation and annunciation’ (Freire, 1985, p. 57) or ‘the naming and analysis of existing structures of oppression; [and] the creation of new forms of relationships and being in the world as a result of mutual struggle against oppression’ (Weiler, 1991, p. 452) in its pedagogical approach. For human beings to survive and thrive in the Anthropocene, we must learn, more than anything else, the tools of critical thinking and creative (re)imagining to be able to constantly and curiously engage – at times in struggle, at times in creation – with each other and our environment.

How do we create learning spaces that foster this criticality and creativity? What methodologies and tools may be employed to take this learning forward? And what should the larger context encompass, for such learning spaces to work? I cannot supply all the answers to these questions, but I shall attempt to take the dialogue forward by offering insights and further questions from experiences of participating in diverse learning spaces.

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<sup>3</sup> More insights from my experiences of self-designed learning are given in the annexure. See also my Tedx Talk on being a self-designed learner at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-MIEtFsngs&t=6s>

In response to the first couple of questions, I elaborate two insights on deepening criticality and creativity which have emerged from my own experiments with self-designed learning and from literature about other transformative learning spaces. The first insight is that learning emerges best from within – and in response to – our situational contexts (Visser, 2018). According to Visser, it is crucial for humans in the Anthropocene to approach and develop human learning from an awareness of ‘the diverse and always varying life-wide and life-deep situational contexts in which we find ourselves over the length of our life’ (ibid, p. 14). In the context of India, I offer an example of transformative learning that grew out of a situational context.

In 1992, an ‘anti-arrack’ (country liquor) campaign was initiated by a group of women in the Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh in South India (Pappu, 2004, p. 29). These women were students of an adult literacy programme sponsored by the government’s National Literacy Mission. In their literacy primers was a story titled ‘*Seethamma’s Katha*’ (Seethamma’s Story) about a woman in a village who committed suicide because she was troubled by her alcoholic husband. The story, although fictional, became a starting point for women to discuss the issue of alcoholism in their own lives, which triggered a collective mobilisation around prohibition of liquor sale in their villages. The anti-arrack movement became ‘a point of discussion for the entire nation’ (ibid, p. 30) and the government soon issued a ban on the sale of arrack and all other forms of liquor.

There are two interesting points to note here: First, despite the literacy programme’s objective being completely different, the method of learning (perhaps unintentionally) was situated in the women’s contexts, hence allowing them to develop a shared critical lens to their own lives and come up with a collective solution to the issues they identified. Second, it offers an expanded understanding of the aim of learning, which according to Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen takes on an ‘empowering and distributive role’, whereby ‘disadvantaged groups can increase their ability to resist oppression, to organise politically, and to get a fairer deal’ (Drèze & Sen, 1995, p. 15). I shall elaborate on this further ahead in the paper.

The second insight of critical learning is learning from questions. A unique pedagogical approach known as ‘indigenous learning’ (Heckman, n.d.) has been explored by the West Sacramento Early College Prep Charter School, an experimental school in the United States, which encouraged its students to engage in personal investigations which stemmed from their questions and ‘wonderings’. Instead of graded classes, students undertake individualised projects grounded in their prior knowledges, interests, and concerns. In India, a similar approach to individualised learning is being experimented at Swaraj University<sup>4</sup>, an alternative university for self-designed learners to explore their passions and questions through a semi-structured program that offers experience-based apprenticeships and mentoring.

Swaraj University’s methodology is centred around the learners (known as ‘*khojis*’ or seekers) articulating burning questions about their lives, which are tailored into individualised learning pathways designed by the learners themselves, along with their mentors. Swaraj University is a unique learning space because it is individualised in its approach to learning, but concomitantly provides an opportunity to be part of a community of self-directed learners – people who had walked out of institutionalised spaces such as schools, universities, and corporate jobs. The community supports the learner’s individual learning process as well as a space to learn collectively from one another, asking questions and providing diverse perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup> See more at <http://swarajuniversity.org>

Also see Jan Visser’s notes on Swaraj University -

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259673533\\_Swaraj\\_University\\_Reflections\\_on\\_an\\_experience](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259673533_Swaraj_University_Reflections_on_an_experience)

After six years of self-designed learning, I decided to join Swaraj University as I felt the need for a community as well as mentoring support to continue my learning path. Soon after I joined Swaraj, I visited a village in the heartland of India in order to build my understanding of the issues and challenges confronting people living in rural areas. During this visit, I was staying with a family whose daughter-in-law was in her late teens – the same age as me, and we became friendly. Over the next few days, as I helped in the work she did and listened to her stories, I felt increasingly frustrated at the starkly different realities that this young woman and I inhabited, although we were born at around the same time and shared the same gender identities. Then, on the final day, I saw her husband hitting her. After he was done, she was bruised all over and had a black eye. At that moment, I felt utterly helpless; alone in the horrifying realisation that I could do nothing for her, to salvage her from her situation.

It took me months and many sleepless nights to recover from this experience. However, it woke me up. It shook me awake to confront, for the first time, what I later learned to call ‘location’<sup>5</sup>. I realized that, had I been born – with this very body – in a different context, I would have been the young woman getting battered by her husband. That even as ‘women,’ we were placed so far apart along other axes of privilege that we inhabited completely different worlds. I felt an intense desire to dig deeper into this identity of womanhood I shared with the young woman in a remote village, and to unearth and obliterate the fear of violence so closely connected to it. At the same time, I was sharply made aware of our disconnected realities, of how removed my life experiences were from hers. Were these fissures too deep to be bridged? And yet, why was it that having the bodies of women, we were both threatened with systemic violence, abuse, and shame? These became my life’s burning questions and I decided to learn about and contribute to a movement working towards ending gender-based discrimination and violence in my country.

Reflecting on this experience, I see a powerful and profound learning that emerges not just through questions, but more specifically, through questions that are un-easy and full of pain. Engaging with these questions has been transformative, for the pain has enabled me to see beyond the boundaries of my location, to understand with greater clarity the underlying power structures that determine our lives. This has resulted in the development of an unafraid criticality as well as given a sharper edge to my politics – to the intentional aspect of my learning. It has pushed me to develop skills and build knowledge that can change the status quo and plant the seeds of transformation – in myself as well as in my larger community.

Armed with these questions, the learning that I have experienced has been transformative in more ways than one. Through Swaraj University, I interned with various feminist organisations, participating in campaigns and documenting stories of change. It was through this practice that I felt motivated to go deeper into an inquiry of patriarchy and analyse the systemic roots of a society disproportionately tilted against women and girls. I also realised that while this inquiry was self-driven at its core, it needed a deeper, more rigorous engagement with theory and knowledge generated within and through diverse feminist discourses. Towards this aim, I chose to return to a formal learning space and joined the Tata Institute of Social Sciences<sup>6</sup>, Mumbai, to pursue a Masters in Women’s Studies.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Location’ is understood as one’s social location, which refers to an individual’s position in society. An individual is located at different points on different identity spectrums, such as gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Each position confers a certain set of social roles and rules, power, and privilege (or lack thereof), creating an intersectional identity of each individual.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://tiss.edu>

Immersing myself into academics after ‘walking out’ of school a decade earlier was an interesting experience. Firstly, it made me aware of the heterogeneity of formal learning paradigms. The program that I was part of, Women’s Studies, while being situated within the context of academia, was unique in its emphasis on challenging the boundaries of knowledge and knowledge production (Pereira, 2017). It reemphasised multiple sources of learning and knowledge-making – especially lived experience as a starting point for what Sandra Harding (2005) calls ‘strong objectivity’; and further helped me realise that all knowledge is ‘situated’ in the knowledge-producer’s location and life experiences. It pushed me to ask questions about the relationship between power and knowledge; particularly about whose knowledge – emerging from which locations – was currently being viewed as ‘objective’ and universalised.

My understanding of learning was broadened during my engagement in this formal learning space, in two ways. One, it gave me the lens and tools to critically reflect on my prior learning experience and examine the universality of its applicability. Even as a self-designed learner, I had privilege of getting exposure and access to different learning resources and communities due to my social position and networks, which would not be available to everyone. Despite being outside school, I had enjoyed the space and time to engage in learning and was encouraged to do so. I realised how unique I was in my social context, where most of my peers – girls and young women in particular – are not provided similar opportunities to learn. In India, while enrolment rates in schools have increased following the implementation of the Right to Education Act 2009,<sup>7</sup> many studies show that girls continue to be left behind in higher grades of school as their education is not taken seriously or is discontinued due to pressures of marriage, housework and caretaking (Shah, 2011; Subramanian, et al. 2016). An UNESCO-funded action-research project<sup>8</sup> that I have been associated with showed that in a village merely three hours away from Mumbai, 75% of girls between the ages of 14 to 18 years had dropped out of school to be forced into early marriages and childcare.

Further, it enabled me to view learning not just as a path towards an individual’s personal development, but also as a means of social transformation – a tool to become conscious of oppressive power relations and transform social structures (Freire, 1972). In this framework, the focus of the critique changed from the function of learning in one’s life to viewing learning and education as a social responsibility. It meant asking questions about who had the right to learn, and whose life experiences were not recognised as ‘learned.’ When I endeavoured to learn something, whose knowledge, whose definition was I learning? Who had the power to translate their experiences into ‘objective knowledge’ (Harding, 2004)? Whose ways of being, living, and learning were being invisibilised, ‘traditionalised’ and even annihilated in the process of this knowledge creation?

Learning is intrinsically connected to knowledge – its acquisition, use, and distribution. In Indian society, there have existed, and continue to exist, structures of power that determine which knowledge is legitimate and hence ‘worth knowing,’ who shall have access and control over this knowledge, and who will be kept away from it. Historically, learning was linked to religious scriptures and text. These could be ‘learnt’ and taught only by men of the dominant ‘Brahman’ caste which gave itself the highest social and spiritual status and controlled the knowledge production resources and processes. The caste used its self-appointed status as the controller of knowledge (especially religious doctrines) to control and regulate society and social relationships. With time, this control

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<sup>7</sup> The Right to Education Act (2009) recognises the fundamental right of every child to attain primary education. It provides free and compulsory education for children between the age of 6 to 14 years in India. See more at <http://mhrd.gov.in/rte>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://uil.unesco.org/literacy/youth-led-research>

got even more entrenched and ritualised. The entrenchment of Brahmanical (upper caste) and patriarchal power legitimised the oppression of women, 'untouchable' castes, and tribal communities, who were denied any contact with the knowledge of upper caste men.

Here, it is important to note that along with an entrenched social hierarchy, Indian society became even more fraught during the British colonial rule. The school systems propagated by the colonial rulers imposed Western knowledge and learning paradigms – including the English language – as an effort to 'civilise the natives' but which actually reproduced the hierarchical differences of the natives from their colonial rulers and hence provided the rationale for sustaining colonialism (Vallgård, 2011). The school system established by the British has perpetrated further categories of difference and exclusions – of the 'uneducated', the 'vernacular' (non-English speakers), the 'illiterate' – that converge with existing marginalized identities and reproduce social inequalities. These exclusions not only serve to keep marginalised groups such as indigenous people, Dalits<sup>9</sup>, and women away from accessing education, but they also fail to recognise them as learners and knowledge-producers – ostracising their existing life experiences and cultural practices from the ambit of 'knowledge'.

In this context, can there be ways of conceptualising learning paradigms premised on overcoming systems of oppression and exclusion, but not, concomitantly, creating their own? I find this question particularly relevant speaking from my location in a post-colonial country from the Global South. As we get ready to talk about what human learning should be in the Anthropocene, it is crucial to examine the context of such learning. We must ask ourselves what conditions must be in place for such learning to happen. One of the basic conditions for human learning is the recognition of *all* humans as learners. However, Indian society, with its fraught history of caste-based exclusions, patriarchal kin structures, and a 300 year-long colonial appropriation and pillage, is even now deeply inimical to this very fundamental condition. Structural exclusions operate in many other societies and cultures as well, and indeed, are pervasive at a global level, where Western paradigms of learning and knowledge-production continue to erase and devalue other modes of learning and knowing.

Hence, I think it is of utmost importance to first transform the social conditions so as to make transformative learning possible. It will require a collective effort across the Global North and South to critically interrogate learning and education models that are exclusive and exacerbate hierarchies and inequalities rather than mitigate them. It will also require the creation of critical pedagogies that engage with communities and social identities who have been historically ostracised from education, to enable them to reclaim their right to access and produce knowledge: to access the universe of the 'written,' in order to critique it, question it, build upon it with the knowledges they have amassed from standpoints of marginalisation, which have not been seen as veritable knowledges.

To conclude, my journey of engaging with diverse learning methodologies has taught me that human learning has the power to transform. It not only transforms the individual learner, but also stimulates the transformation of the larger context in which the learner is embedded. But human learning is also an iterative process that constantly emerges out of and feeds back into its environment. Hence, the environment must be made propitious through interventions that go beyond learning, perhaps interventions at the socio-political, economic, and trans-national levels that aim to realign and diffuse consolidations of power.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Dalit' means downtrodden. It is a political term coined to describe the ascribed 'lower' or 'untouchable' castes, as a recognition of their oppression and struggle to overcome it

### Recommended issues for discussion:

1. How do we build trans-local learning spaces that inspire criticality and creativity, enabling learners to transform their lives and the lives of others?
2. It is imperative to recognise different needs of learners across the globe, without universalising or standardising them. In many societies – including my own – the need to survive takes precedence over learning needs. How do we collaborate at the global level to create conditions whereby the basic needs of all humans are met, and they are recognised and celebrated as equally able learners who have the power to question, challenge, and change the world?
3. The Anthropocene is fraught with a history of conquest and destruction – whereby imperial powers have destroyed not only physical lives and environments, but also local cultures, local knowledges and local epistemologies. In building new learning paradigms, we must take into account this erasure of the non-Western cultures of knowing and being, and seek to reengage with local, marginalised forms of learning – to allow them to challenge Western conceptions and assumptions.
4. Current learning paradigms in the Anthropocene have vested the access to learning and knowledge-making in the hands of a privileged few who dictate and control the majority of our world's resources. They have produced knowledge that takes us away from nature and provides a contrived justification for the destruction of our planet and its ecological, cultural and social diversity, ushering in a consumerist monoculture of limited ideas and identities. There is an urgent need to move away from this. Transformative learning needs to go together with other transformative endeavours in the Anthropocene, which seek to transform the definitions and indicators of success, of development, of happiness.

## Annexure

### Some examples of transformative learning processes in India:

1. **Swaraj University:** Inspired by India's *guru-shishya*<sup>10</sup> tradition, Mahatma Gandhi's *nai taleem*<sup>11</sup> and Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan Ashram, Swaraj University is a nurturing space for young people to self-design their learning process in becoming green entrepreneurs and social change-makers. It believes in reclaiming the right and responsibility towards an education that is uniquely shaped according to one's passions and dreams, as well as the needs of one's local community, personal life questions, and green livelihood options. Swaraj is India's first university dedicated to strengthening our local cultures, local economies and local ecologies. Sustainability, social justice and holistic, healthy living are the core principles of its vision. Within this larger vision, Swaraj University aims to support young people in putting their dreams into action and developing socially just and eco-friendly businesses that make a difference in the world. For more information, visit <http://swarajuniversity.org>. Also see Jan Visser's notes on Swaraj University - [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259673533\\_Swaraj\\_University\\_Reflections\\_on\\_a\\_n\\_experience](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259673533_Swaraj_University_Reflections_on_a_n_experience)

<sup>10</sup> A form of Hindu pedagogy whereby students or disciples (called 'shishya' – but only young men belonging to upper castes were allowed to learn) would be initiated into a structured form of study by going to stay with 'gurus' (teachers) for an extended period of time.

<sup>11</sup> The pedagogical approach propagated by Gandhi for his vision of holistic development of an individual as well as society. For more information, see <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/naitalimmarjoriesykes.htm>

2. **Kanavu:** Kanavu is an educational organisation managed by tribal youth in Cheengode village of Wayanad, a hilly district in the southern state of Kerala, India. Kanavu describes itself as an alternative education institution, using alternative pedagogies to impart knowledge and skills to its students. The students themselves belong to tribal communities, and are drop-outs from mainstream schooling. At Kanavu, it is believed that learning is a natural, lifelong process that emerges out of and in response to one's natural environment. A unique aspect about Kanavu is that while it was started by a non-tribal couple, they have handed over the management of the school to the students, who run it collectively. It is also a self-sustaining collective, and the students raise funds by selling handmade products and through other entrepreneurial activities. Teena Augustine and Milind Brahme (2014) have written an in-depth paper about the philosophy and pedagogy of Kanavu, which can be accessed here - <https://jual.nipissingu.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2014/06/v81151.pdf> .
3. **Khabar Lahariya:** Khabar Lahariya is a weekly newspaper published in various local dialects of Uttar Pradesh, a state in the northern part of India, run by a group of rural women. Khabar Lahariya started out as a literacy initiative for women by Nirantar. The women were so inspired to share their stories that they started a newspaper, and have now expanded it to a digital media platform. Their main objective is to reach out to the nearby villages and provide them with local news from a feminist lens. Khabar Lahariya has strongly highlighted cases of violence against women, issues of Dalits, and more. This 8-page newsletter also covers issues on institutions like schools, marriage, and health care. To know more visit <http://khabarlahariya.org/>
4. **PUKAR:** PUKAR is an independent research collective and an urban knowledge production centre based in Mumbai, India, that conducts multi-sectoral, cross-disciplinary, community-based participatory research on issues related to urbanization and globalization. Pukar's aim is to 'democratise' research by engaging marginalised youth to undertake participatory research in their communities. These 'Barefoot Researchers' use the city itself as a learning lab to build new knowledge without the intermediary of a formal structure of learning that tends to otherwise distance them from their contexts. In this process, the youth get exposed to existing hierarchies and social, cultural and economic diversities of their society, thus enabling them to reflect upon themselves, challenge the prevalent norms to make arguments about their future and become problem-solvers in their local communities and cities. Arjun Appadurai (2006), Founder and President of PUKAR, has elaborated on the concept of democratising research using PUKAR's example in his paper (full text available here <http://youthfellowship.pukar.org.in/about/the-right-to-research/>)
5. **Shodhini:** An action research initiated by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in collaboration with ASPBAE in three countries, engages marginalised youth to lead an action-oriented research which builds knowledge about their education and learning needs. It has been expanded in India by Abhivyakti Media for Development, to engage with over 100 rural girls who are trained to conduct research on different aspects of their lives – education, livelihoods, gender-based freedoms, and health concerns. This also leads to the production of knowledge about girls' education, livelihoods status, and its linkages to their lives, coming from the standpoints of those who live those realities. The action research not only builds new knowledge about the lives of marginalised girls but also empowers these girls to change their lives. The action-research enables the girls to deepen their critical thinking faculties and life skills, build collectives for empowerment, develop their leadership skills, and document their reality using different media forms. The project empowers the girls to understand their realities and to negotiate with their families about their lives, marriages and livelihood. It creates a conducive space for girls in villages to talk about their learning aspirations and

livelihood choices, participate freely in events and involve the larger society to think, dialogue and discuss new forms of educational, skilling, and livelihood opportunities for village girls. For more information, visit <https://www.abhivyakti.org.in/youth-action-research/>. Oral narratives of the girl researchers can be viewed [here](#) and [here](#).

6. **My self-designed learning experience:** Instead of following a fixed curriculum of study in different subjects, I created my own curriculum, starting from my prior knowledge of or passion for a particular subject. For example, I felt motivated to pursue creative writing as a passion and as a possible livelihood source. I identified publication of my writing as one of my learning goals. Towards this, I started two regular activities. First, I began self-publishing a small quarterly newsletter which was circulated amongst family and friends. In the newsletter were stories, reviews, anecdotes, poems, crossword puzzles, riddles, along with 'editorials' about learning and education. Secondly, I invited an intergenerational and diverse group of people – including friends, family members, and ex-teachers, who together formed a Feedback Council – to give me writing prompts, read and critique first drafts, and generally provide feedback to everything I wrote. One of my Feedback Council members encouraged me to send some of my articles to a local English language newspaper. To my surprise, the paper agreed to publish my articles and also invited me to be part of their youth editorial board. At the age of fifteen, I started working as a freelance journalist with the newspaper.

In this process, I was able to identify my learning interests and develop them into a constructive and financially sustainable activity, as well as use it as a medium to involve my circle of family and friends into this process of self-designed learning. It was situated as it stemmed from a personal passion for writing, as well as in its deployment of resources and tools available in my immediate environment. Moreover, it was intentional as I tried to creatively engage my surrounding community into thinking more critically about learning and education.

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