

Report from the Curriculum Development Symposium
UMAPAZ – Sao Paulo, Brasil
5-9 January 2010

This was the first Curriculum Development Symposium convened by Gaia Education, the purpose being to prepare for the upgrade of the Ecovillage Design Education curriculum to Version 5. UMAPAZ (Open University for Environment and Peace) was chosen as the host location because of the relatively vast experience this institution has accumulated with EDEs in general, and EDEs with an urban focus in particular. Going all the way back to the Version 3 acceptance of the EDE as an official contribution to the UN's DESD – when UNITAR stated, something to the effect, “we really like the curriculum, yet would prefer to see it more applicable to urban situations, wherein lie our most intractable problems” – it has been acknowledged that the EDE would benefit from an explicitly ‘urban’ perspective.

It is quite possible that during the five days of the Symposium, our meeting hall at UMAPAZ was the most high energy location on the planet. This is so not only because of the exhilarating subject matter – upgrading an innovative international curriculum in the emerging field of sustainable community design and development – but also due to the character of the participants – a lively and talented group of experienced Brazilian educators. I've never witnessed such intense, concentrated, and prolonged dialogue by a group of symposium participants. This was a high-spirited ensemble, inspiringly devoted to the goals of an ecovillage design education, and, I surmised, believing they were being given the chance to make a meaningful contribution to the global education. Many sacrificed attention to their usual paid work in order to be present for this more evolutionarily involved work.

The Symposium itself was organized in such a way so as to facilitate open-ended creativity. The participants self-organized into their Dimension of choice – meaning the Dimension to which they are given responsibility for teaching. This provided coherent, consistent dialogue within each of the Dimensions; though, in retrospect, I think there would have been benefit in designing a little more cross-fertilization into the process. The EDE itself tends to produce ‘specialists’ within each Dimension, whereas transdisciplinarity (i.e. the ability to weave connections between Dimensions) would be a highly desirable trait among educators – and this has been mentioned before in GEESE discussion.

As the Symposium progressed, it became apparent that the open-ended creativity was producing a distinctly “Brazilian” – even “Latin American” – adaptation to the EDE. New Module titles were being proposed based on the experience and life history of the participants; yet, I began to wonder whether more boundaries or definition within the process would have produced more of a ‘revision’ and less of a ‘re-write’ working atmosphere. I'm quite confident, however, that in the final drafting of Version 5, the essential results of the open-ended creativity will be able to be incorporated – though perhaps not as structurally revisionist as the innovators initially intended.

Jonathan Dawson, Giovanni Ciarlo, and Hildur and Ross Jackson all made guest appearances via skype – and this was a wonder to witness: real-time conversations between people all over the world and our participants there at UMAPAZ. In these conversations, Dimension teams would describe their reasoning behind proposing new Module titles, along with their associated goals, to the authors of earlier versions of the curriculum. A palpably conservative attitude was shared by the original writers, where it soon became a hard-sell to propose a complete re-organization of any particular Dimension. For example, Jonathan expressed confidence that the first three Modules of the Economic Dimension were working fine in the field as they are, whereas Module 5 (Legal and Financial Issues) could be moved elsewhere, while Module 4 (Community Banks and Currencies) could be expanded.

Throughout the Symposium, we had to keep reminding ourselves of the immense proportions of our task: revising a curriculum that could satisfy the following three conditions: 1) applicable within any cultural context, 2) translatable to any real-world application: rural, urban, retrofit, etc., and 3) satisfying all four dimensions of a comprehensive sustainable community design and development scenario. In order to meet all these conditions, it became necessary to focus, re-focus, and re-focus again on *fundamental principles*. Over the course of the five days, and with the mentor-like input of our skyped GEESE, I believe that the teams were able to accomplish this: to distill down an initially flowery brainstorming into a more deliberate and conservative seed-bed enumeration of revised titles and goals.

There was an especially exciting and unanticipated possibility arising out of the Symposium: that was the spontaneous emergence of a proposal for a 5th Dimension – the Design Dimension. This proposal began to take form when Marcelo Todescan, a practicing architect, got up and began modifying the original two-dimensional mandala. His sketching started to reveal the underlying possibility of a more three-dimensional mandala, with movement. According to his reasoning, as I remember, there already exists within the 4 Dimensions ample opportunities for design; yet the applications at *settlement-scale* tend to spill over beyond the boundaries of the original mandala into a realm that incorporates all four yet is somehow operating at a new level beyond the four. His proposal was reworked and refined a couple times until now we have a sketch for a modified mandala that will soon be put forth before the GEESE for commentary and evaluation.

To further augment and reify this proposal for a 5th Dimension, a Design Team convened to work out a theoretical basis for this new Dimension. What they came up with is a set of 12 Design Principles, that can be applied within all Dimensions, coupled with a set of 12 Design Attitudes. These too will soon be put forth before the GEESE, since this is all new territory and currently at the proposal stage.

In closing, I wish to express heartfelt thanks to the Board for electing to invest in Gaia's first Curriculum Development Symposium, and to Program Director May East for initiating this gathering and for the amazing proliferation of Gaia Education throughout Brasil. Surely, after five years running of Version 4, the time was ripe for an upgrade to the UN-endorsed Ecovillage Design Education curriculum. Guided by the proficient experience of the Brazilian educators –

and soon to be revealed in a more-inclusive participatory design process to all GEESE – Version 5 ideally will incorporate all the lessons learned from EDE presentations to date, plus a few innovative proposals for the next round. I have some lingering questions and concerns but will save them for a time when all this new material has been better organized. Until then, I can say that it was a big thrill to be present there at UMAPAZ: the Symposium was a resounding success. I feel very fortunate to have made the acquaintance of so many new and interesting friends, and now to be given the responsibility for advancing this innovative, timely, and globally-relevant EDE curriculum – an education inspired by the world’s leading ecovillage education pioneers.

Todo Bem,
Your Program Development Coordinator,
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16 January 2010