

Action Education in Morocco: An Enduring Throwback for the Future

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Theme: [History](#)

Social scientists across their different disciplines have shared an enduring observation. They have found that the people who apply methods in real settings to understand social life find more elucidation of the inquiry process than those who seriously analyze the same but without adequate field application.

We learn best by engaging people in the locations that embody our questions – communities on the ground – to not only glean information from our subjects but also to address people’s needs. Learning by doing provides the context to achieve our educational potential as well as humanity’s growth.

Recognizing this also means that there are defeating practices, commonly rooted in stunted expectations for the outcomes of research, skewed designs resulting in vacuous experiences. This can lead to superficial or misleading explanations of social phenomena’s causes, and even worse, detached remedies.

Unfortunately, this limitation informs the mainstream structure of research and higher education and is also fixed in learning’s infrastructure. After all, interactive engagement with local communities to gain awareness through experience is a pedagogical orientation that is antithetical to classrooms with bolted down chairs facing one direction, positioning participants to not sufficiently interface and engage.

Way beyond a credible doubt, evidence also shows that our ability to integrate knowledge based on experience is basically always there with us and literally has no minimum age. Academic disciplines, considered in the aggregate, have incrementally reformed toward what was realized again during the West’s Enlightenment: students need to co-inquire with communities, with a seamlessness between data gathering and actions to enhance well-being. We see growing appreciation at universities and education centers for all ages – with their commensurate and increasingly dedicated administrations and resources – of providing students with a practical approach to meaningfully internalize the range of life’s insights by honing professional and citizenship abilities.

As we experientially learn about the roots of social challenges, poverty, social stratification, and persistently-generational unrealized potential, we uncover shared basic features. It involves members of local communities discussing these very patterns and identifying local projects for change, livelihood, and justice. It involves investigation, and rolling responses and reactions, which with persistence penetrate the intertwined forces that lead to socio-economic and environmental struggles and solutions. It involves someone assisting the communication among the many and diverse who express themselves, and whose information needs to be retained, organized, and acted upon as the primary basis for

decision-making. And, it also involves the reconciliation of past pain, with apologies and regrets conveyed, and the determination to achieve consensus and create the personal and common benefits that are collectively sought by the people.

We know progress, large and small, never seems to be linear. Every context is its own. Global stratifications in unbearable forms find their way into school rooms. And all of this, this ride through the frailties and hope, ignites a lifelong pursuit among the learning youth to help implement community initiatives that seem so right, so fair, needed, and inexplicably long-delayed. This experience in young people can be so compelling that their life's trajectory becomes new, unanticipated, and invigorated.

I consider myself lucky to have had this kind of essential education in my mid-twenties as a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco, followed by action-study, and now leading the High Atlas Foundation in Marrakech 27 years later. I am struck when young student-interns have visited and are immersed in their analyses, observation, participation, and support of the practice of people's movements for development. These gap-year, late-teen students are astute to the work's difficult contradictions and transformative potential of what happens when community members work through what can be uneasy discussions toward finding consensus and advancing ahead.

As we celebrate 2021 International Education Day this week, I express a wish, which I suppose is customary for anniversaries: that classrooms are designed as community centers where middle and high schoolers, elementary students, and toddlers, draw their community maps for participatory planning, including in gender groups to reveal outlooks, depicting their visions, places they like and feel to enhance, and ideas for their future. It is a hope we extend for youth and pre-teens to weigh together their priorities they would like to see unfold in their surroundings, localities, and classrooms. It is that old dream when education becomes ever more about the awakening heart, of one's feelings for others' feelings, of the communities' data filled with relativity that guides to sustainability, and the pursuit of not just understanding but to intently improve every day the days of living.

If, indeed, we can know and affect more by doing more in communities than we would by conceptualizing about it, as revered social scientists have so said, then it begins at the onset of education - or even before - when those bolts for the chairs are thrown away.

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Featured image: Youth in northern Morocco participating in a community meeting (2020 by the High Atlas Foundation).

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