



May 2021

## A Pedagogy for Life

### Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

**Rajesh Tandon**

Earlier this year, several community educators and local leaders undertook a journey to review the status of water bodies in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan in India. This was the first such “field visit” after a year-long lockdown due to the pandemic.

In Baap village of Jodhpur district, a pond “Megharaj sar” was built 500 years ago to store rainwater; a number of smaller storage tanks called “beriyar” were also built, with water 30–40 feet below surface. Over the years, this system provided adequate water for use by humans and cattle. Along with sound technical knowledge of locating and storing water, the communities had developed an elaborate social system for use of water. Separate arrangements for use of water for cattle and household needs were established and monitored by community leaders. Women played a very important role in monitoring compliance and ensuring penalties for those violating these social norms and protocols.

In the surrounding villages and towns, all schools and colleges remain shut down still due to the COVID pandemic, and some sort of “online” education and teaching is taking place. Students are generally sitting in their homes, instead of classrooms, but the teacher is “educating” as before, one-way, top-down, pre-prepared text (now slides), the curriculum derived from disciplinary domains, rigidly prescribed by “knowledgeable elders” of each domain. The students, including those from engineering and hydrology disciplines in colleges and universities, were totally unaware of the science and systems of water bodies being reviewed in their backyards, as described above.

Though not new, the disconnect between the world of formal education and teaching and the real world where people live (and die) has become greatly accentuated due to the pandemic. The enormous local knowledge and social learning mobilized in and by communities to create systems

and practices to cope with the pandemic and prevent virus infection has been documented across the world. These mechanisms are local, based on local context and knowledge. The inadequacy of written words and the dominance of European (English) languages has been repeatedly reported as panic, confusion, and chaos continue.

Webinars and conferences providing prescriptions for “building back better” have gained momentum as plans for “recovery” from the “loss” and “slippage” are being formulated by national governments, investors, and experts. Have we “unlearnt” any past behaviors, habits, or attitudes over this past year? Without “unlearning” first, new behaviors, attitudes, and worldviews cannot be learnt. Without unlearning then, “old” habits, perspectives, theories, and policies will continue to be practiced.

The most critical lesson from the pandemic seems to be what UNESCO is trying to promote for the next period: “Learning to *Become*.” Before we “learn to *become*,” we need to “learn to *be*.” “Learning to *Be*” in a post-pandemic world, with unpredictable climate changes affecting the people and planet, implies “learning to accept to be”—not to panic, rush, or solve—but just to be; to inhale, hold, and let go.

In this process of learning to be, we can discover those habits, behaviors, and attitudes which have become the obstacles to “building back better.” A pedagogy that stimulates “learning to *be*”—in sync with different others, with natural habitats, plants, birds, and animals—takes the focus of learning towards others, and thus prepares us for “learning to become.”

Such a pedagogy starts with the experience of now, explores joys and pains, and then connects the learning process with the “real” world around us, not just theories and concepts. That real world around us comprises of many of those who are not in school or college or have never been. Connecting with them, their experiences, their knowledge, and their worldviews enhances our repertoire of practices that can “rebuild for a better world,” a world where respect for each living being is supported through compassion and dignity.

Such a pedagogy re-combines the cognitive, emotive, and action modes of learning. It focuses on learning through head, heart, and hands; it explores the spiritual dimensions of being human. The past year made such elements of this pedagogy varyingly available to us all, as we navigated the uncertain terrain. Therefore, the transition has already occurred in us. We may not be able to recognize, vocalize, or value that transition, perhaps hoping to “return” to before.

The challenge of pedagogy, therefore, is to enable individual and collective learning to first acknowledge that transition is already occurring, and then to find ways to make sense of it (by learning to be), before rushing to *become*. For educators “schooled” in the pedagogy of entrepreneurship, a huge unlearning process must be facilitated so that they can utilize the pedagogy of life. The coronavirus reminds us that life matters; it’s not the matter (the “things,” with or without internet) that life pursues, it’s life that matters!

The pedagogy of resilience requires attention to the transitions already made, and occurring now. Learning to practice flexibility, agility, nimbleness, and “nowness” may require overcoming “instructional” obstacles that schooling has reinforced. Learning to seek social and emotional support while “unlearning” has been much painful for those of us “schooled” well up to highest of higher educations. Being socially connected, with its burdens and joys, has been more readily possible for those not so well “schooled.” For the latter, technology, including digital, is to help one *be*, not *become*. Human spirit drives use of technology when needed and discarded when no longer fulfilling life.

---

## About the Author



Rajesh Tandon is Founder-President of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a global center for participatory research and training, and UNESCO Co-Chair on Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. He also serves as chair of the Forum for Indian Development. He is the first Indian inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame and the Academy of Engagement Scholarship. He holds a PhD from Case Western Reserve University.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Rajesh Tandon, "A Pedagogy for Life," contribution to GTI Forum "The Pedagogy of Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-tandon>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.