

Community Resource Sharing and Capacity Building Through Experiential Education

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Background

Traditional models of education, particularly in Latin America, have always emphasized top-down power relations¹. Learning is a one-way process whereby knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student, with little room for innovation or critical reflection. CTY aspires to something closer to the ideal set out by Paolo Freire:

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: no pseudo-participation, but committed involvement².

Teachers and students at CTY work in tandem and, because students have played such an important role in the creation and maintenance of the Colegio, students at CTY have the chance to be more actively involved and committed to their education than most.

In recent years, terms like “community capacity building” and “sustainability” have been repeated so often that they begin to lose their meaning³. The program being implemented at the Colegio seeks to avoid many of the problems inherent in projects whose ultimate goal is to build community capacity: Locally-based and driven solutions are far more likely to create sustainable systems than those based on outside expertise. Rather than importing solutions, CTY is teaching local youth to create their own.



Colegio Técnico Yachana

Teachers and students at the Colegio Técnico Yachana are engaged in an innovative educational project that is attempting to integrate theory and practice in Mondaña, Ecuador. Education goes far beyond the classroom for students at the Colegio: Their assignments include spearheading projects to provide clean water to elementary school students and designing and implementing sustainable agriculture projects that are destined for distribution throughout local communities.



Community Capacity Building and Sustainability

The majority of the curriculum at CTY involves working directly with surrounding communities, or is destined for eventual dissemination to those communities.

- Water filtration systems delivered to local elementary schools
- Sustainable agricultural techniques that not only contribute to the ecological health of the region, but also increase yields and reduce the need for expensive inputs that cut into small farmers' profit margins.
- Rainforest conservation
- (re)learning indigenous knowledge

Students attend school in a 28 days on, 28 days off cycle; during their month at home, students are encouraged to apply the knowledge they've gained at school in their home communities.

Maintaining trust in CTY (and its parent foundation) in the surrounding communities: The Colegio's reputation is essential, not only to maintaining good relationships in the region, but also to make parents and students feel comfortable enrolling in an as-yet-unproven institution.

One of the ultimate goals of CTY is to educate and prepare youth to return to their communities and effect substantive, positive change.

- In Ecuador, as in many poor countries, there is a constant struggle to stop hemorrhaging smart, motivated youth to the cities and abroad. CTY aspires to give students the tools (both practical and theoretical) and motivation necessary to remain in their home communities.

Challenges

Many of the ideas and techniques CTY is experimenting with are so new that it's difficult to foresee how they'll work out long-term. In their first few years of operation, there have been failures as well as successes. However, students, administrators and teachers seem to be learning from their mistakes. Moreover, although CTY has struggled with a tremendously high drop-out rate (almost 50%) in its first year of operation, they also have a core group of students who have returned and are invested in the Colegio's success.

The ultimate benchmark of CTY's success will be determined by the success of its graduates. As of yet, the Colegio has no evaluation systems in place. As the program becomes more established and students begin to graduate, CTY will need a way to track its graduates and their progress in the “real world.”

- Establishing benchmarks and systemic evaluation methods is especially important for keeping and obtaining funding for the Colegio. In the coming years, CTY needs to establish more concrete measures of success and failure.

Experiential Education: “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally”

The program at Colegio Técnico Yachana (CTY) strives to make abstract concepts like “sustainability” and “development” more meaningful and practical for students:

- Connecting the dots between sustainability, local knowledge and the outside world.
- The curriculum at CTY is designed to encourage a critical, global perspective, and teachers emphasize the importance of indigenous knowledge while exposing students to new perspectives and techniques.
- Students at CTY are gaining important social skills, as well as learning to place themselves in context, both in their own communities and the world.

