

## CHAPTER 5

# Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Change in Higher Education

## An Opportunity Not to Be Missed for Humankind

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### Abstract

Across my 30-year journey through higher education (HE), I have had the honour to learn from and with members of several Indigenous peoples in Colombia. I bear this in mind while appreciating the valuable opportunity that HE offers for human beings—to explore broader ways of understanding life and the problems affecting us all, and to co-construct alternative solutions. I argue it is not enough to simply acknowledge Indigenous knowledge (IK) in institutional discourses; these intentions for inclusion need to be translated into institutional actions. Academics must leave their comfort zones and begin an authentic dialogue as praxis

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with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples to imagine and help cultivate the better world we all desire. An intergenerational strategy can make our collaborative efforts sustainable through participatory intercultural education actions. To this end, HE institutions need to strengthen institutional governance through more inclusive participation in decision-making. Collaborative actions need to leave behind competitive models to re-signify the ‘higher’ component so long distorted in HE. These actions must aim to transform realities through university–school partnerships, and collaborative work with diverse cultural communities and entities at different levels. Practical suggestions include exploring with student teachers creative and innovative initiatives to support the school system. These initiatives need to co-create with diverse cultural communities a wide range of intercultural educational bridges and pathways, aimed at preserving and strengthening Indigenous students’ cultural identities in their transition to HE and throughout their academic journey.

### Preamble

“Things have to happen when they have to happen; neither before nor after.” This was the response of an Indigenous U’wa leader in 2017, when I expressed my regret that we could not begin working with the 20 Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers at the schools in the U’wa nation in the northeast of Colombia in 2015. He explained that his community had asked the university where I worked (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) to help them hold on to their cultural identity and language in the face of national policy guidelines imposed by the Ministry of Education. But as Guardians of Mother Earth, they had to prioritise their time, actions, and funding, to prevent attempts to transform their sacred snowed mountain Zizuma<sup>1</sup> into a national park. The proposed transformation to national park entailed authorising the entry of about 19,000 tourists annually to this sacred place of the U’wa people, with tragic consequences also for Mother Earth. The U’wa people asserted that they should be in charge of caring for

Zizuma, especially since one of its precious glaciers had already melted away.<sup>2</sup> The U'wa people's political action resulted in a series of agreements with the national government, one of which suspended tourist visits. By 2023, eight years later, Zizuma has recovered its pristine waters and snow.

This instance of the people's resistance and nature's recovery is just one of the many struggles where the U'wa people have been forced to invest their efforts to preserve their ancient lands. It is part of the endurance and determination that mark the collective efforts of the U'wa people to preserve U'wa heritage, as reflected in the wise words about time/happening that open this chapter. While certainly later than scheduled, by the end of 2017 the team I was part of from Universidad Nacional de Colombia could start working with these Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers of the U'wa schools in their territory, to more deeply understand their concerns and share some suggestions they could consider to enrich their teaching and students' learning.

Here I have flagged this memory of my experience with the U'wa people because I believe it illustrates well what I want to argue in this chapter. That is, HE may miss an enormously valuable opportunity to make positive and sustainable change to educational training if it fails to broaden understanding of the world with IK. Through long and deep reflection, I recognise that my own experience in HE is marked by meaningful milestones that happened when they had to happen, "neither before nor after". Across this chapter I present some important milestones that have influenced my practice and conceptual thinking in HE. My understanding of these experiences alerts not just my mind and my heart, but my entire being—my blood and bones as well as my soul—to the imperative to learn mutually from and with Indigenous and Afrodescendant people—for the well-being, or perhaps it is the survival, of humankind on this precious but abused planet.

### **Figuring out my role in higher education while forging my position in the world**

I spent 30 years of my 40-year working life in the field of education, teaching and researching the actual and possible contribution of HE to positive and sustainable social change in Colombia. For the first 10 years I focused on promoting critical intercultural communication, aiming to help construct a more socially just world by co-creating safe and respectful communicative spaces in which participants could acknowledge, celebrate, and co-construct a better world from and through cultural diversity. I was drawn towards participatory action research (PAR) because it emphasises participation and action by members of communities that are affected by the research, and in the process of research, education, and action, participants transform themselves as well as reality. And very significant for me, PAR gives priority to knowledge that tackles challenges caused by unequal and harmful social systems and seeks to visualise and realise alternatives. My background as an English language teacher and linguist, and my role as an English as a foreign language-teacher educator, led me to run several PAR projects with groups of interested colleagues and students. Works by Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986), John Elliott (1991), and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (1992) were my first English language readings on action research and its deeply participatory and inclusive approach, and they provided me with valuable insights that continued to inform my academic work. From a retrospective point of view, although I had already been introduced to Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1987) during those years, it is ironic that my initiation to the field of action research was triggered by readings from the English-speaking world. "Things have to happen when they have to happen; neither before nor after."

In 2003 I began employment as a part-time professor in the Department of Linguistics at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia's largest university.<sup>3</sup> This gave me the opportunity to start teaching, researching, and working with members of several

of Colombia's numerous Indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, I taught part-time in a master's degree in education in a private university, where academics from several universities were researching problems in HE. There, I included critical intercultural communication when researching on HE from multiple disciplines and professions. Works of Paulo Freire (1987, 1997) and Orlando Fals Borda (1979) emerged as the main inspirations in my PAR journey from these years on.

Starting my action research journey 10 years before with the views of scholars from the English-speaking world helped me to better appreciate the actual contribution of Freire and Fals Borda to the field of PAR in the world. Having met some of the action research and PAR scholars in person, in 2007 I helped organise a special event in Bogotá to honour the life and work of Fals Borda, where he could reunite with some of his long-standing colleague friends, many of whom were very well-known scholars from the English-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking worlds. Ten years later I co-organised an event in Cartagena, Colombia, to celebrate two of the most important conferences on PAR that were organised by Fals Borda in that city. Scholars from across most of the PAR approaches, and leaders of several Latin American social movements, including Indigenous ones, attended this event.

In 2006, by then a full-time professor at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, I led a research project on academic writing in Spanish of Indigenous, Raizal,<sup>5</sup> and Afrodescendant students in HE institutions in Colombia. This research proposal was my response to an invitation from Professor John Elliott of what was then called the International Centre for Applied Research in Education (ICARE), now called the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom (UK). He had invited me to join a discussion group about the geopolitics of academic writing, with HE researchers from the UK, Peru, Mexico, Pakistan, Tanzania, New Zealand, the United States of America (USA), and Australia. The group's key concern was the way universities were approaching the academic

writing process in English as a second or non-native language of international students.

Fate struck—or perhaps it was the U’wa wisdom that “Things have to happen when they have to happen”—when I started drafting my contribution on circumstances in Colombia. A student was protesting outside my office window, loudly voicing concerns about how academics were doing research *on* Indigenous communities. Maybe I could have ignored this call and kept on writing the PAR proposal I had in mind. But I couldn’t; the truth, the wisdom, the justice in this call resonated with my head and heart. Instead, I changed the nature of the research we would pursue. For me this was also a valuable, if humbling, wake-up call to listen to university students more carefully, more mindfully, before doing anything that concerns them. I proposed to my Colombian colleagues that we could formulate a critical ethnography on the academic writing of Indigenous, Raizal, and Afrodescendant students in bilingual and intercultural HE settings in Colombia, and my colleagues supported this idea. The critical ethnography model we adopted, to which the participating students had consented, emphasised ethical considerations that educational researchers should keep in mind to avoid reproducing social injustice through research practices in education. Working in the PAR paradigm, we conducted a descriptive study along these lines in each of the three universities where we worked (two public and one private).

### **Re-signifying the ‘higher’ component of higher education**

The critical ethnographic study we carried out in my university provided deeper understanding of these university students’ experiences in the Colombian education system. All of the Indigenous students we interviewed identified that their first contact with the language of the ‘whites’,<sup>6</sup> i.e. Spanish language, was in their early childhood, when this newfound awareness of difference awoke them to an overwhelming need to learn to deal with the people who were dominant, made the rules, and spoke the language of

'whites' automatically. Their childhood minds were not yet aware that this same power relationship had kept their peoples socially excluded for centuries. The participating students explained how their confusing but seemingly necessary desire to successfully interact with the so-called whites was always met with *mes-tizos'* unwillingness to accept them or recognise and treat them as equals. These students told of their experiences speaking the Indigenous and Creole languages at school, but the trauma of having to adopt white schooling practices. They were commonly frustrated. These feelings continued in secondary school, where most of the study participants experienced schooling practices informed by Catholic religious communities that imposed their colonially derivative world views. Indigenous communities have considered these schools to be the best option for their children to achieve the education they need as adults, to live in society, indeed, a nation, where whites still exert their dominance over people of other ethnicity.

The study participants' stories revealed that these feelings and experiences of disempowerment/inferiority to whites continued in HE. Overall, in fact, their life and experience of education worsened. Many of the participating students expressed their despair on discovering that although they were considered the best students in their secondary schools in the isolated areas where they lived, on entering university, academic staff told them they were the worst students in their classes. This about-face in appreciation of these students' academic achievements came alongside social and cultural discrimination in daily life both on and off campus, which prompted many to consider giving up at the very early stages of their university life. In general, the participating students described academics as implacable gatekeepers of academia, who justified their actions with "every student must be treated equally at the university", and "academic writing is painful". Ironically, the teaching staff we interviewed for this study claimed they did their best to support Indigenous and Raizal students, but perceived themselves as inevitably disadvantaged in their capacity to meet the needs of a culturally diverse university community.

Findings of this critical ethnographic study on academic writing (Santos, 2009) were the basis for two PAR projects aimed at supporting two curriculum reforms at my university. From 2012 to 2015, I led a PAR project to support course subjects aimed at helping a group of first-year students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) at the main campus to improve their academic reading and writing skills in Spanish. Also, from 2013 to 2015, I led a PAR project to work with teaching staff from all faculties and campuses of the university to collaboratively reflect upon and strengthen their pedagogical competencies to guide undergraduate and graduate students in academic reading and writing in Spanish (Santos, 2016). During these years, I supervised undergraduate teaching practices and research projects of students who were supporting Indigenous, Raizal, and Afrodescendant university students in the most isolated campuses of the university.

### **A personal turning point**

Before mounting these two programmes on academic writing, I undertook my PhD in Australia for three years from mid 2009. During these years in Australia, while studying the political lives promoted by PAR projects in HE, I experienced a turning point—truly enriching and exciting—in my positioning on Indigenous worlds. All my life I had assumed of myself, and identified, as a mestiza, even though I was frequently asked what ethnic group in Colombia I belonged to because of the shape of my eyes and the colour of my skin and hair. On occasion, while discussing first person and second person research at academic events, I was questioned about my ethnicity and my positioning when researching with Indigenous people. Some academics had asked me inquisitively, “What is this about you being a mestizo?” Uncertain about my ancestors, I always replied somewhat confidently that I wanted to think of myself as the best version of all of the ethnicities in my family history. While doing my PhD in Australia, I was asked to deliver an already designed subject on Aboriginal education in a teacher education course at the university where I was enrolled.



This request was on the basis that I had worked with Indigenous people in Colombia. I had to read and learn a lot about Aboriginal people in Australia and their historical and contemporary socio-political circumstances. I was particularly shocked to learn about the tragedy caused by public policies in Australia in the early 20th century, and their sequels in contemporary times. I went back home to Colombia looking not only at the Indigenous peoples' movements in Colombia with pride, but also at myself, with new, more curious, eyes.

### **Ideas for transforming higher education from within**

After my return to Colombia in June 2012, something that I had thought could never happen occurred. The Colombian government and the largest and longest-standing guerrilla group in Latin America, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), agreed to start a new dialogue process to end a 52-year armed conflict in which over 250,000 people were killed. In 2016 when the parties signed the peace agreement, many academics understood that HE could not continue as before. The power relationship between Colombia's ethnic peoples and the mestizo had changed irrevocably. The ethnic chapter was one of the last issues to be agreed in that five-year dialogue process. It was included near the end of the dialogue, then being held in La Havana, Cuba, because Indigenous peoples claimed their voices and requests had not yet been heard. Although the Indigenous–mestizo relationships have to change in these contexts, the change began as, and is still, a very slow process. I would be working with Indigenous people while the reincorporation and reconciliation processes were under way. Historical example has taught us that participatory methodologies are crucial to support peacebuilding in and after armed conflict, so I felt well placed to contribute.

HE was called to change its ways, while helping to sort out daily life troubles in the communities where many Indigenous, Raizal, and Afrodescendant people live. My university began to

face this challenge by issuing a set of institutional statements and initiatives to reaffirm its historical commitment to the pursuit of peace in Colombia. These were embraced by a small group of individuals and small collectives in the 21 faculties spread across 9 campuses. Supporting peacebuilding in isolated territories of the country meant academics had to leave the comfort zone of their campus offices. Indeed, this was the main call of the university's first female Rector, who was appointed in March 2018. By then I was participating in a face-to-face workshop run in New Delhi, India, by the UNESCO Co-Chairs in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, as part of their Knowledge for Change (K4C) mentorship programme. There, we were reflecting on key issues and challenges of different community-based research traditions with colleagues from India, Canada, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa, Mexico, and Colombia. In this learning context, I was able to share what my university was doing to contribute to the peacebuilding process through participatory methodologies (Santos 2022a).

To strengthen the impact of the university's efforts to support peacebuilding in Colombia, the Rector proposed creating an institutional network aimed at articulating individual and group teaching, research, and community engagement initiatives for peace. I coordinated this peace network from February 2022 to June 2023, when I retired from employment. But creating this institutional network for peace has been a very slow process given the difficulties it faces securing university funding (even though this initiative was formally proposed by the Rector!). Fortunately, the university has continued to support this peacebuilding process under unfavourable circumstances in the most isolated and complex territories of the country. And in the process, subtle and interesting institutional changes have been taking place. Finally, the network was officially formalised in 2019, after many administrative and financial obstacles. Since then, the network collective has been exploring and co-constructing new ways of approaching complex historical problems in the territories.

Academics have been creating new spaces of dialogue and action, where members of all the affected communities in these territories, including Indigenous communities, plan and work in a participatory way on short-, mid-, and long-term solutions to problems, aiming to satisfy needs and serve interests that sustain peace and promote well-being for all. They have been working with national and local government officers, professionals from institutions created by the peace accord, and various international community groups that accompany and verify implementation of the peace accord, among other actors, in ways these academics had not explored before (Santos, 2023a). In doing so, we have been transforming our academic practices for teaching, research, and community engagement. In 2023, times are still difficult in Colombia, but these ways of working with communities have nevertheless served to strengthen local and institutional governance. Eight years after the signing of the peace accord, we recognise that transformation of HE in Colombia will take considerable time in organisational terms, but we also understand that this transformation is already taking place while Network members and other university staff work with and across the communities.

### **Partnering for transformation**

When I moved from the university's Department of Linguistics to the Institute of Research in Education in 2015, I supervised a PAR project on bilingual intercultural education with Wayuú Indigenous school students in an isolated desert area in the north of Colombia. I also supervised an educational action research project with Embera Indigenous students in a school in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. These were school–university partnerships aimed at deepening understanding of the challenges Indigenous students and Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers face when trying to find alternative participatory paths and solutions aimed at promoting more socially just schools. In 2019 I also worked with the heads of all the public schools in the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, to help them while they

face pedagogical challenges to strengthen Raizal cultural identities and Creole language in their students' daily life. These school heads agreed that acknowledging and revitalising Indigenous and Creole languages must not be a minor issue in schools and universities. For these schools, geographical isolation was exacerbated by socio-cultural marginalisation.

In 2022 and 2023 I was invited to dialogue with Indigenous leaders in the Amazon territory in the southeast of Colombia. In our first encounter in 2022, two huge challenges were identified. First, the Indigenous leaders needed to work with the University to find new ways to strengthen the capabilities of many Indigenous people who served as interpreters and translators for non-Indigenous people. Second, young Indigenous leaders warned they were not finding echo from their Indigenous elders to support their ideas on preserving their cultural identities and cultures. Governance began to appear to be a critical issue for the university, and Indigenous communities were called upon to work together. In fact, in 2023, Indigenous leaders spoke out about the need for education in governance and leadership, to eradicate the seeds of corruption that produced a never-ending return to zero in their communities. They proposed exploring new pedagogies aimed at achieving authentic bilingual intercultural education in schools and universities.

### **Companions to understand the world we live in**

During the four decades of my work life at university, my teaching, research, and community-engagement efforts in and from HE have been inspired by the experiences such as those I have discussed briefly above. But I have also been inspired by the ideas of many academics, to whom I will be forever grateful. My journey to explore knowledge generously shared by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has been characterised by a never-ending, sometimes overwhelming, feeling of surprise at its power to transcend space and time. First, I want to especially acknowledge scholars with approaches from different critical pedagogies

around the world. With them I moved from radical positions on how to promote social change to more moderate, compassionate ones. This journey was dramatic; through it I learned painfully what happens to academics when those who hold power in HE perceive that change-making presents a threat to them. Human reactions and actions can be unpredictable, and may cause harm to many people beyond those leading change-making processes. Fortunately, during these experiences I learned key insights and strategies that I have held as a compass for life across the years.

Two Latin American scholars in particular became beacons for my actions. They are Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1921–1997) and Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1925–2008), whom I mentioned briefly above. Freire’s invitation to the world at large to reinstate ethics in education captivated me. His understanding of dialogue as praxis has inspired my facilitating role in many initiatives for social change-making, at many levels and with many types of communities and problems. I have also remained captivated by Orlando Fals Borda’s passion and wisdom, especially the notion of praxis as political action that helped me to make sense of the long history of struggles of many social movements. Many years of reading and re-reading their thoughts and analysing their work enabled me to understand more clearly why Freire and Fals Borda teamed together so well. Their teachings helped me to participate in contemporary trends that strengthen ethics in the academic world. Freire’s claim that there can be no dialogue without humility, faith, hope, and trust, and Fals Borda’s idea of the need to be ‘feeling thinking’ beings (*sentipensantes* in Spanish) when doing research, inspired me to fight against the idea that feelings must be cast away when working in contemporary HE (Santos & Soler, 2023).

Fals Borda’s *‘Investigación Acción Participativa’* (IAP, an acronym in Spanish for a specific approach to PAR) has served me and others well as a way to allow empathy, local knowledges, feeling-thinking researchers, and ethics to be central in education when trying to solve problems in our societies. Soon after encountering the IAP concept, I began to read about decolonial pedagogies that,

while aligned with critical pedagogies in many respects, added a powerful claim for reinstating Indigenous and Afrodescendant knowledges in contemporary societies after the imposition of European world views through education. It's now amply evident that these knowledges, which have enabled Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples to survive in a socially unjust world, are key to solving 'planet' problems that may erase the entire ecosystem, or most of it, in the not-too-distant future. The bilingual intercultural education movement became an urgent path for me to explore in HE. In this respect, I believe we need to overcome functional views of intercultural education that aim to fit those social and cultural groups different from the dominant ones into hegemonic world views. Rather, contemporary societies need an intercultural education, one that can help to build bridges that allow the encounter and dialogue of people who have different world views to co-construct ways of living together. These personal explorations led me to delve more deeply into political theories. Since the early 2000s, the writings of German-born American intellectual Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) have helped me with this.

Arendt invited readers/thinkers to 'stop and think' what we do as human beings to prevent evil-doing, and this is what I have continually tried to do, including in my PhD studies. In Arendt's understanding, the human condition of plurality underlies 'action', which with labour and work comprise the three fundamental activities of our being human in the world (Arendt, 1958). Her explorations of action as philosophical enquiry inspired me to revise my understanding of 'action' in PAR. She claimed that action, the only activity that goes on directly between human beings without the intermediary of things, and that can bring about something new every time it happens, corresponds to the condition of plurality, which is an essential condition of all political life. Therefore, the condition of natality, which Arendt argued is the central category for political thought, also guided me towards engaging more deeply in the political actions we PAR practitioners were promoting. So, with ideas of Arendt, Freire, and Fals Borda, I began to explore PAR in different ways within

and beyond HE, and to investigate the notion of ‘ethical literacy’ in studies on academic writing (Santos, 2022b).

The ideas and learnings from community-engagement projects to support the peacebuilding process in Colombia also enabled me to reflect on the pedagogies of community engagement in HE (Santos, 2023b) and in political education (Santos, 2023c). While studying for my PhD in Australia, I learned about the theory elaborated by a group of researchers from the international network ‘Pedagogy, Education, and Praxis’ (PEP). PEP was created in 2005 by action researchers from several educational traditions who aimed to promote social change by transforming educational practices. To more clearly describe and explain what they mean by a ‘practice’, a group of them proposed the Theory of Practice Architectures. I have started exploring this theory in a fruitful dialogue, with reflections upon the notion of ‘action’, and upon the place and role of feelings when understanding ‘practice’ in this way (Santos & Soler, 2023). More recently, and as a concern shared with a group of researchers in this network, I have started to reflect on PAR projects through the lens of ‘sustainable educational change’ (Santos, 2023d).

### **Drawing together my ideas about how Indigenous knowledge can help reshape higher education**

From my four decades of teaching, researching, and leading community engagement initiatives in HE, I have become especially concerned about the difficulties HE institutions face in practising what they preach, specifically in relation to making the importance of Indigenous knowledge (IK) a reality for helping to achieve a better world. Inability to do so has been strongly connected to the weakening of institutional governance in HE. Here I cannot follow through on this inquiry in detail, but I use this opportunity to present some ideas I have to help address these concerns.

*From embracing Indigenous knowledge in discourses to  
embodying it in institutional actions*

HE made a huge step forward when it began to formally acknowledge that IK is key to comprehensively understanding the world and the challenges that we, humankind, face as a species. We can see signs of this intention, conviction, desire, or project, explicit or implied, in most mission statements and visions of HE institutions, as well as in statements in cross-national proposals and initiatives. But statements/words are not actions. So, what is missing to inspire us, to enable us to move from discourse to meaningful institutional actions?

If we draw on the U'wa principle of life, “Things have to happen when they have to happen; neither before nor after”, we can make several interconnected claims about what is at stake. First, the transformation of the current idea of HE, still based on the understanding of what is the ‘whole’ in terms of knowledge that was created in Europe in the Middle Ages, will also take shape over some centuries. When a way of understanding what knowledge matters dominates for 10 centuries, its weight lasts. Second, while the Western appreciation of time for social change-making struggles with Indigenous notions of time for that same end, we could ask what sort of things should happen along the way. To identify possible answers, we could resort to what Arendt called the most political of all mental faculties, namely, imagination, which would mean leaving aside HE as we have always known it. Third, to achieve that, dialogue as praxis with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples would serve as a beacon to imagine HE as we described it in our institutional discourses, namely, one that can educate people to understand how to—and to actually seek to—live together in more socially just, egalitarian, and happier societies. Thus, imagination, or the mental faculty that enables us to bring into the present what does not yet exist, according to Arendt (1978), could serve us well to bring into the present the type of human beings and life together that we dream of in this already at-risk planet.



Fourth, although we are talking here about an intergenerational endeavour, we have in place some favourable conditions for education to ignite that collective challenge all over the world. What is missing is the socio-political requirement—the will—to make this happen. To make this educational change one that benefits all humankind and is sustainable, we need to learn from one another, non-Indigenous from Indigenous people and vice versa, in the HE institutions that already exist. Those who have influence in HE systems could lead the creation of intercultural communicative spaces where IK can be comfortably incorporated into learning and knowledge creation, and be welcomed for its valuable capacity to contribute to resolving the challenges communities and HE institutions already face. These people with influence could also help in initiating and establishing institutional arrangements that put into motion intercultural educational actions tailor-made so that IK can be not only used by non-Indigenous people, but especially can be acknowledged by all as equally important to Western ways of understanding and living.

An important move by some HE institutions is opening the door to include Indigenous knowledge in learning, teaching, and research, although this is taking place through already established non-Indigenous educational traditions, frameworks, and rules. These individual learning and organisational learning processes, informed by, incorporating, and cultivating Indigenous knowledge(s), need to be carried out intentionally, purposefully, and collectively in HE institutions, and in a participatory manner. To bring this learning into reality, we who work in or otherwise contribute to education need to mindfully change our approaches, to develop creative ways to inclusively explore alternative curriculum and leadership initiatives towards necessarily inclusive outcomes.

*Strengthening institutional governance with Indigenous knowledge*

Institutional governance may be the most important process in contributing to social change-making in HE. Some observers claim from contemporary trends in HE that broader participation is crucial to strengthening institutional governance. Unfortunately, however, participation has been instrumentalised to meet demands for 'efficiency' in this competitive, need-to-be-accountable, widely neo-liberalised world. The PAR initiatives I led across the years of my university employment positioned me to recognise that participation in decision-making is lived as a privilege in HE, as a result of institutionalised rituals performed by a few and the proximity to power that participation can bestow. PAR initiatives become opportunities to reflect upon and make sense of participation in decision-making and collaborative actions aimed at transforming realities.

In this context, institutional governance must not be defined by market-based or managerial trends, or be focused narrowly to address the challenges that HE now faces. These are fair claims. However, the challenges that HE must face require participation by social actors who can bring into the decision-making processes new understandings of, ideas about, and action for, such challenges. Members of Indigenous communities and other social actors can bring into the process their knowledge as partners who are also interested in and co-responsible for achieving a better world. When these partnerships are based on authentic and respectful participation, aimed at social change-making through collaborative work, a more inclusive approach to HE will emerge. Dialogue as praxis and praxis as political action can come about in settings that are more socially just. These partnerships may inform the characteristics of a governance system, which meaningfully serves academics and social actors involved in social change-making. Leadership in HE should change, or be changed, to facilitate the creation of communitive spaces that promote dialogue about

different types of knowledge required to solve complex contemporary problems.

In short, figuring out our positioning in the world through our experiences in and from HE can be an exciting journey. But further enriching this journey, by engaging with IK and the people who create, hold, and pass it on across generations, requires us to leave the academic practices forged throughout centuries, which many academics have long experienced as a comfort zone. Acknowledging, knowing about, and learning from Indigenous peoples can help us to re-signify the ‘higher’ component that has been distorted in HE as a result of decisions shaped in ideology and in practice by the currently dominant push to marketise education. Treating HE as a marketplace shuts out ideas, understandings, world views, and actions that would serve to meet the aspirations of individuals and communities at local, national, and international levels. Transforming HE towards inclusivity—of ideas, knowledges, and perspectives, and of people, irrespective of their ethnicity, heritage, and capacity to pay fees—will surely take time. Important changes towards this end can already begin from within HE. But this is not a task for individuals working alone. It can be achieved only by partnering with like-minded people and other institutions in the HE system, and with a diverse range of social and cultural communities with which we can learn from each other, particularly about how to make social change happen.

### Postscript

Here I have presented stories drawing from my years of experience in HE, mostly in Colombia. I hope these may offer some useful guidance for leaders of PAR initiatives in HE to collaboratively create opportunities for students, academic staff, and other social actors such as Indigenous, Raizal, and Afrodescendant people to strengthen institutional and local governance, while sharing knowledges and insights to make social change for the common interest. Articulating efforts in teaching, research, and community engagement can help us to make sense of them, while

exploring solutions to real-life problems in the communities and societies where we live—locally, nationally, and globally. Here we see how transformation from within HE can inform and otherwise contribute to social change-making in any place or context. Making this change sustainable, in HE and in communities small and large, calls upon us to think and work collaboratively, with our minds and hearts open to different world views and experiences. Only through pursuing such change inclusively, learning from Indigenous and other ethnic peoples so long closed out from HE, can we acknowledge each other as equals, from an authentic intercultural educational approach, to serve the interests of humankind rather than interests of a small minority.

### **Practical suggestions for consideration, discussion—and action**

Public policies on education mostly result in marginalising Indigenous people and IK in education systems at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. I strongly recommend promoting from the tertiary level, i.e. HE, the creation of school–university partnerships, in which academics and schoolteachers (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) together reflect on and explore ways of approaching policy guidelines through the lens of intercultural education. This entails starting to explore and implement with university students who are studying/training to become teachers, creative and innovative initiatives to support the school system in this way. The principles of PAR are particularly useful here, but this approach is not just for academics in education. All academics irrespective of their field need to participate in and contribute to a system-wide effort, exploring and implementing ways to transform HE inclusively, so that no valuable sources of knowledge, nor their creators or carriers, are excluded.

Initiatives proposed and explored through these partnerships should inform and gradually change daily life practices in the institutions involved, to make the change coordinated, transformative, and sustainable across all three levels of the education system.

Such partnerships can ideally be used to smooth the usually difficult transition for Indigenous students who continue from secondary education to HE. Creative initiatives through partnerships can build both intercultural bridges between education institutions and intercultural pathways within them. In this way the initiatives help to preserve the cultural identities of Indigenous students in their transition to academic life, and while navigating academic waters for their higher degree. When they are part of a broader collaborative effort to promote intercultural HE, these initiatives support both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and the shared interest of society at large.

### Questions for discussion

1. If we are called to broaden our world views to be able to work collaboratively in solutions to planet problems, how could Indigenous knowledges that are actually embraced by HE communities affect our cultural identities?
2. Indigenous people are diverse. Can we talk of Indigenous knowledge in the singular?
3. HE has been called to embrace world views that include understandings of knowledge different from the long-dominant scientific perspective that only what can be verified scientifically—seen or proved through hands-on testing or mathematical proof—is knowledge. Recognising other understandings of knowledge, such as Indigenous knowledges and knowledge created through PAR, what are the implications for curriculum development in educational systems worldwide?

### Notes

- 1 This snowed mountain is known in Colombia as Sierra Nevada del Cocuy.
- 2 While tropical mountain glaciers are melting swiftly worldwide and roughly 99 per cent are in South America, some observers suggest those

- in Colombia may melt completely by 2050. <https://unboundedworld.com/critically-endangered-colombian-glaciers-face-extinction/>
- 3 Universidad Nacional de Colombia has about 50,000 students and 3,000 academic staff spread over 9 campuses.
  - 4 By the 2018 national census, the Indigenous peoples of Colombia comprise 115 ethnic groups and about 4.4 per cent of Colombia's 48.5 million people, although some estimates put this share closer to 10 per cent. <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf>
  - 5 The Raizal people are an Afro-Caribbean ethnic group from the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, located off the Colombian Caribbean coast. They are descendants of enslaved Africans, British emigrants, and Amerindians. According to the 2018 census, they currently number about 25,000.
  - 6 The whites are the *mestizos*, people of Indigenous and mixed European ancestry.

## Recommended reading

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