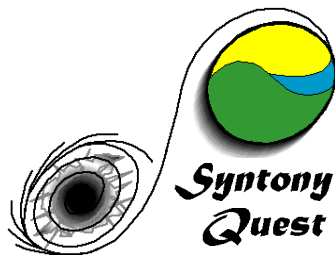


 A Better World:
Co-Creating Learning Communities
in Mexico 



Project Report

Prepared by
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1. Summary

Syntony Quest designed and facilitated the project “A Better World: Co-Creating Learning Communities in Mexico” which took place in the city of Monterrey, Mexico. Two learning communities were formed with people of middle-class socio-economic status who accepted the invitation and the challenge to get together once a week, over a period of three months, to learn and collaborate on issues—decided by themselves—that could enhance their quality of life and prepare them to participate in the improvement of their communities. A virtual team, composed of the two project coordinators and four learning facilitators collaborating via Internet, managed and guided the process of the two learning communities. One learning community, comprised solely of women, created a safe space for sharing life stories, and through conversation, strengthening self-esteem and the will to bring into the world the love, respect, and dignity that has been lacking in their life experiences. The other learning community, comprised of both men and women already engaged in community development activities, explored topics related to their role in the improvement of their neighborhood and their role as parents, which lead them to make a commitment to form an on-going learning community for parents. At the end of the project the participants felt that their involvement in this project had helped them to communicate their ideas more effectively, to think in a positive way, and to believe that they can achieve their goals when they are willing to work for them.

1. Purpose

This project sought to explore how we can create educational opportunities relevant to the improvement of the quality of life and the promotion of community development. In particular, it sought to do this through small groups of people of all ages who learn together in a flexible and self-organized way about topics that are relevant to their lives.

The idea of a learning community challenges many of the assumptions of traditional schooled education. While schooled education emphasizes teaching, a learning community—as its name indicates—emphasizes learning. A teacher *instructs others*, a learning facilitators *learns with others*. In an authentic learning community each member supports, enhances, and strengthens the motivation to learn together.

The project presented in this report sought to give access to a high quality learning experience to people economically active but with basically no educational opportunity, and by doing so, to expand the traditional boundaries of what we call education. The creation of learning communities and the furtherance of collaborative learning demand a new way of thinking about education and human development. Collaborative learning in learning communities not only presents new challenges, but also new opportunities for the creation of a better world.

2. Design

There were three functional groups of people participating in the project: the coordinators, the facilitators, and the learners. The role of the coordinators was to design, manage, and facilitate the development of the project. The functions of the facilitators were to learn about learning facilitation and life-long learning orientations, to participate and assist in the development of the learning communities, and to be participant-observers and researchers of the processes of the learning communities. The learners were people from Monterrey who committed to collaborate in the project.

One learning community was composed of 7 participants and the other of 8, including 2 facilitators in each one. The coordinators and facilitators formed a *virtual* learning community focused on learning facilitation and learning communities in action. It was *virtual* because their main mode of interaction was mediated by information technology, more specifically, by e-mail and other Internet based technologies. The virtual mode allowed interaction at different times and from different places—since one of the coordinators of the project was based in San Francisco, California, while the rest were in Monterrey, Mexico—and it also provided a way to document the conversation. Figure 1 shows the three functional groups and the way they formed two learning communities (darker circles) and one virtual learning community (dotted circle).

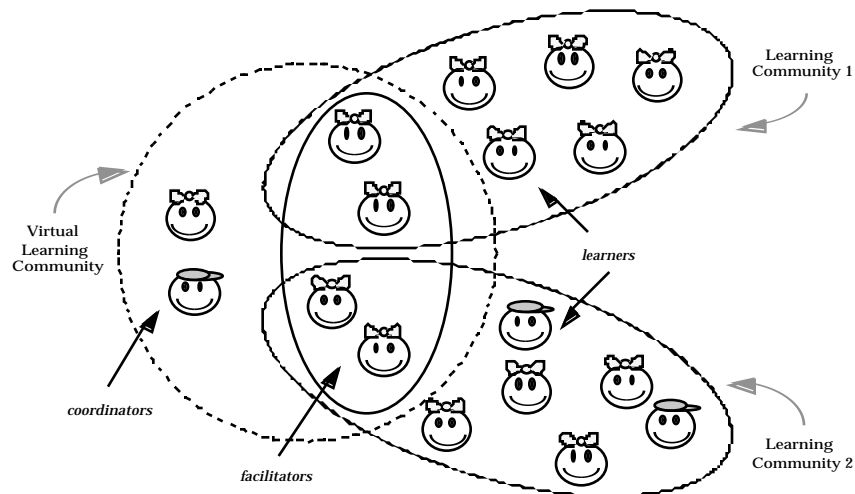


Figure 1. Configuration of the project

Social systems design (SSD) was the main co-creative methodology used in this project. The ethics of design indicates that nobody can design a system for others. A social system—either a school, a family, a community, or an organization—should be designed with and by the members and stakeholders of the system. The process of SSD involves working back from an ideal vision of the future into the present taking into account real-world limitations. Two interactive phases of conversation comprise this process: 1) the generative dialogue phase in which the group transforms

itself into an authentic community, and 2) the strategic dialogue phase in which the decisions for creating a new social system are carried out in a comprehensive and systematic way.

The content of the learning sessions within each learning community was not pre-defined. The coordinators and facilitators provided a supporting process, with tools and resources, that could enhance open exploration and collaboration so that the participants could decide what and how to learn.

The facilitators of the learning communities were also participants who observed—as researchers—the development of the project. The virtual learning community of facilitators and coordinators created an “electronic journal” of the experiences in the learning communities through their e-mail interactions. In-depth unstructured personal interviews with the learners complemented the information gathered in the journal. The coordinators of the project analyzed, synthesized, and interpreted the insights gained through this experience.

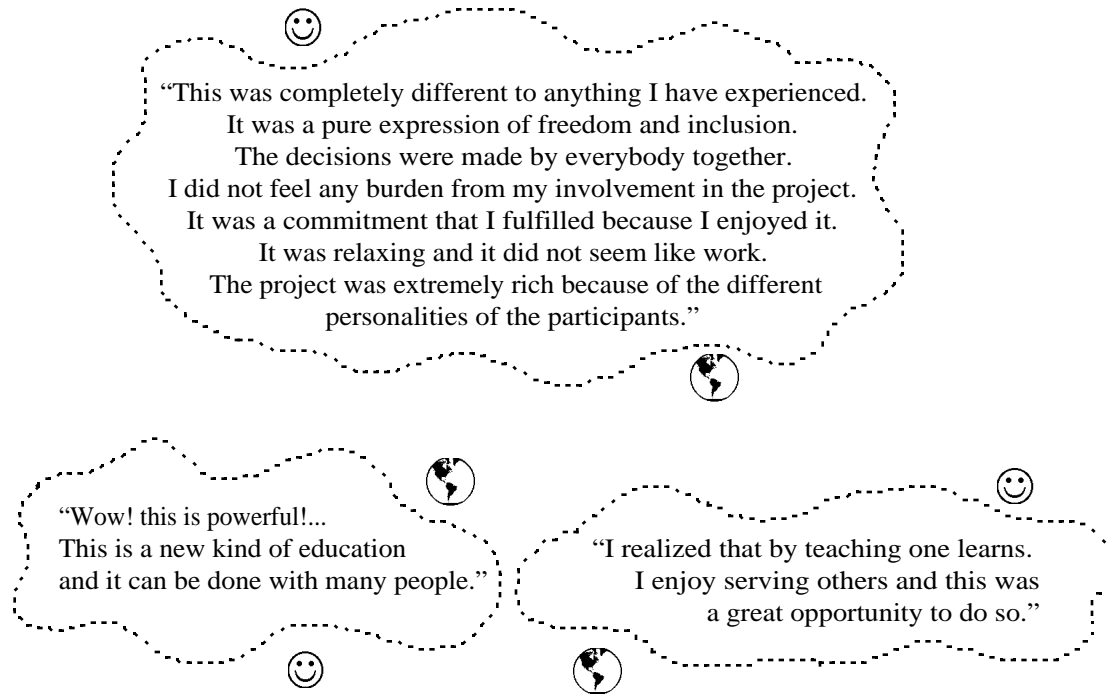
3. Experiences

The Virtual Learning Community •••

The experience of the virtual learning community of facilitators and coordinators was challenging for most of the members. As was expected, several factors limited the potential of information technologies as a tool for the development of this team. For example, three of the four facilitators did not have access to a computer connected to the Internet and had limited abilities to use Internet technologies.

Nevertheless, the members of the virtual learning community managed to overcome such technical problems and to communicate among themselves to an extent sufficient to carry out the project successfully. This remarkable achievement is largely attributable to the enthusiasm with which the members of the virtual learning community engaged in learning what was needed to make this project work, their collaborative spirit for helping each other, and the relationships created before and during the project.

All the four facilitators expressed feelings of satisfaction after have participated in this project. Upon its completion, they felt that they better understood the learning philosophy of this project; they saw it as a clear example of what can be accomplished, and one that can be shared with other people interested in creating learning communities.



**Learning Community 1:
A Women’s Space for Self-Empowerment •••**

This learning community was composed of 7 women. They began their process by sharing their lives; their main experiences and struggles from childhood to present, as well as a description of their current daily routines. Without specifying the level of detail for their stories, the first participant shared both her painful and joyful experiences, as well as her current struggles. Her openness created the conditions for a space of trust and caring listening. Through this process they re-discovered their value as human beings and as women. The struggles and successes of some of them provided inspiration and energy for others to try to improve their own lives.

Since the two facilitators also shared stories of their lives with the rest of the participants, the community enjoyed an environment in which all felt equal (without distinction between facilitators and learners—simply as co-learners).

This sharing was a healing experience for all the participants in the conversation and it helped them to bond as a community. However, it was difficult for the facilitators to catalyze the transition from generative to strategic dialogue. Any attempt to try to identify a learning objective brought the participants back to their personal realms. In order to create a more strategic and learning oriented dialogue, the facilitators suggested to the participants that they talk to someone in their families with the objective of trying to identify values that need to be reinforced or promoted in their relationships. This was a very relevant learning activity for all of them and some significant breakthroughs occurred. For instance, some of them talked to their parents with



whom they had had negative experiences. They found out about similar experiences that their parents had had in their own childhood, and through this dialogue the participants were able to understand, to forgive, and to express their love. They realized that they could be catalyzers of change with other members of their family and community, in much the same way as the facilitators were helping them change. They felt that they had improved their communication abilities and that this was helping them to improve their relationships with others. In this project, these women learned about themselves and about their unlimited potential. They learned to love and respect themselves as individuals, to think in a different way, to be more optimistic and to feel stronger and more able to deal with any challenge in their lives.

The participants of this learning community reflected the idea that we need to give confidence to future generations: we need to let them know that they can achieve their goals, if they want and are willing to work for them. They mentioned that if we help people to discover who they are and to have self-esteem, to understand that it is never too late to learn something new, and to always strive toward new goals, we could empower people capable of creating a better world.

The participants continued to meet as a learning community after the project was over. They were interested in learning handicraft skills to discover and develop their creative abilities; to create objects for their home, family, and friends; to see if they can sell some of their crafts to generate extra income; and to have a reason to continue meeting each week.



“I was very attracted by the title of the project: ‘a better world.’ That’s what I want. But most people think that this is very difficult or impossible. For me nothing is impossible, if one really wants it. This project was a therapy, a relaxation. It was the space to forget about my problems and tensions. It helped me to see myself more deeply. It injected me with energy and strength to continue fighting for my goal.... Now, I believe in life, and in human beings. Before I didn’t.... I would like that this project happen everywhere. When I didn’t have any faith, my family turned their back on me. But now people that I didn’t know have given me much more. This makes me feel that there still are good people. This is really wonderful. You all are this kind of people. You have become a fundamental part of my life. Thank you very much.... I realized that I have a lot to give. I love to help other people, and I have a lot of energy. I don’t think about it twice: if someone needs me, I will offer help, especially to those that shout in silence for help... especially to women.”





“I liked what we talked about. I learned a lot... before I was timid. I didn't know how to express myself, everything was difficult for me. I was somewhat asleep....

I shared a lot of the sessions with my children. When we got some homework, I asked my daughter who is in secondary school because I didn't know what to do. She helped me and encouraged me. The little one told me ‘I want to go with you.’ And he really liked to be there, so he continued to accompany me. Then he told my husband that the meetings in which we were participating were really beautiful and that even if he doesn't want us to go, we will continue going. My children tell me that I changed a lot.”



“In this project, I changed.

I am very happy....

I learned that I need to respect myself to be respected by others....

I was a person who didn't enjoy to talk.

I was timid.... Here I was taken into account...”



“I feel so happy. I experienced an unfolding of my interior. I feel inspired to tell you all that I feel really good, full of energy. I feel strong, I don't have negative thoughts, and I can deal with the problems I come to.

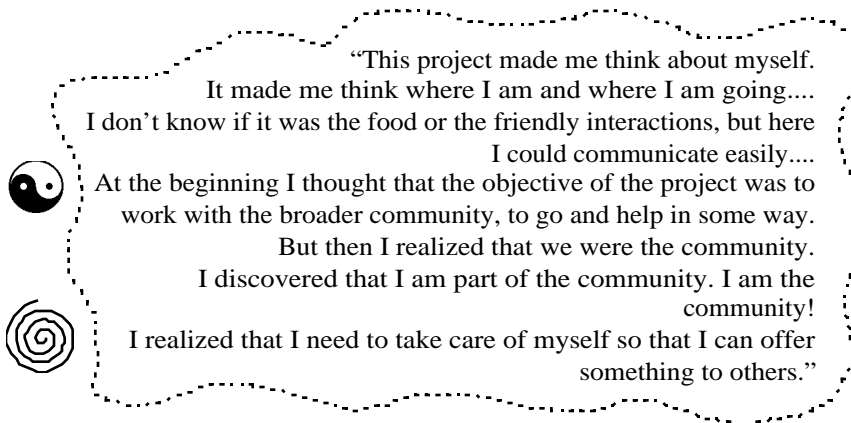
Before I felt full of negative energy....

I learned to trust in myself....

At the beginning I told my children that maybe I can't learn anything in this project. But they encouraged me... they told me that I should go even if my husband didn't like it. This project also helped me to know and get closer to my children.

You arrived in the moment in which I needed a hand. I call this experience the awakening of my life, because I was in the dark, and now I have light. You made me feel that I am a person, and that if I decide to do something I can achieve it.”





Learning Community 2:

Preparing the Ground for Other Learning Communities •••

This group of 8 participants (6 women and 2 men) was a community of activists. One of the participants explained to the others in her learning community that “each time that we have a problem with youth using drugs in our neighborhood, we call the police. However, this is like being hungry, and asking for fish. In this project, as I understand it, we can learn to fish for ourselves.”

The initial learning sessions were dedicated to get to know each other. The sharing of their lives was focused on what they and their children do. All of them are involved in volunteer work for their community. This directed the conversation into political/activism issues such as complaints that have not been listen to by the local government. The challenge for the facilitators was to guide the conversation to topics in which they could empower the participants to be proactive in the improvement of their community, rather than just to talk about what to ask the local government to solve for them.

One of the facilitators prepared some triggering questions and ideas related to the concepts of “change” and “development.” Each participant shared the change in their life that they are trying to achieve. They reflected on the idea that sometimes it is necessary to dream in order to resolve the problems.

In exploring their definitions of “community,” most of the participants responded that it is the place where one lives: one’s group of neighbors. But, what if a community is a group of individuals that come together for a common purpose? The participants realized that according to this definition their neighborhood is not yet a true community. This was an important realization for everyone. A participant summarized it like this: “a community is a group of people who get together with a common end. They get together to learn, to progress, to improve.... The ideal is to continue improving so that we can help other people. We can arrive to the ideal if we work as a team.”

The participants of this learning community want to form learning communities like this one, but with a more specific end, that in this case is how to be better parents. They stated their

common purpose as: "To prepare ourselves in order to help other parents, and to learn from others how to improve as parents....in order to create a better world."

These are some of the comments that the participants of this learning community made about the project:



"I liked that in this project we all felt we were equals."



"I liked everything about this project. I never felt depressed or confused. Every week, I eagerly awaited Wednesdays (the day of their learning sessions)....

To learn something new is always good....

I am ready to help to create a learning community for parents in my neighborhood."



"I liked your way of thinking; it is very positive and it is what we need these days....

There is a lot we can do by ourselves.... Everything is possible."



"This project helped me to realize that I should help others. If I go and intervene in someone else's problem it is not because I am curious about someone else's business, but because I care....

This project helped me to gain courage. During these months of learning I was able to help people who otherwise I wouldn't have known how to help.

I don't want this to end, we need to apply what we learned here in our neighborhood. People need it, and we also need it....

I don't like negative people. You cannot know if something is possible if you don't try....

I feel proud of myself."



4. Outcomes

Change in the Participants •••

The most remarkable outcome of this project is the change in attitudes of the participants. There was a drastic difference between the participants who we met at the beginning of the project and the participants who celebrated the ending of the project. Some of these emergent attitudes were:

- Optimism and perseverance.
- Openness to learn from any experience, with every person, always.
- Strong desire to serve and to help other people in their communities to learn and improve.
- Sense of responsibility—they cannot remain as spectators, they want to participate in the improvement of their communities.
- Sense of who they are and where they are going, both individually and collectively.

This project proves that when a group of human beings interested in learning and change get together to collaborate, wonderful things can happen. The future *can* be co-created—in fact, the possibilities for a better world depend on our willingness to bring them into being.

“What our world needs... is... flexible and functional learning environments where people, young and old, can be exposed to concepts and ideas relevant to their present and to their future”

— Ervin Laszlo

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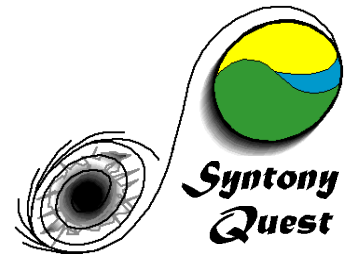
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Syntony Quest

seeks to create conditions that empower individuals and groups to develop the skills necessary for the co-creation of sustainable, evolutionary futures.



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