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**Grassroots modalities of learning: creating and maintaining
pluriversal knowing, being and doing for collective survival**

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Abstract

This special issue highlights grassroots and place-based modalities of learning. It contributes to pluriversal ways of thinking and living emanating from diverse contexts and place-based and culturally specific ways of knowing, being and doing. It is written against the backdrop of global crises and it highlights practices and possibilities emerging from diverse grassroots contexts as a way forward for human and Earthkin collective survival. Contributions in the special issue all speak to one or more of three key themes, threads that are woven in and across the collection. These are: climate change adaptations, community food economies, and Indigenous language and communication tools that support grassroots living.

Keywords: pluriverse, grassroots, community food economies, climate change adaptation, Indigenous and local knowledge

Introduction

The last few decades has seen the emergence of a broad movement that attempts to reclaim the importance of grassroots practice within a globalising world. Many communities across the globe are starting to recognise that certain patterns of economic development and globalisation can potentially be economically and ecologically destructive and culturally homogenising (Klein & Morreo, 2019; Kothari et al., 2019).

There is an increased awareness of the need to make space for locally-based and place-specific efforts that work to re-embed economies in ecologies (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016) and engage humans and non-humans in ethical negotiations (Plumwood, 2009; Rose, 2004) around what it means to survive well together (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) or ethical negotiations around what constitutes ‘the good life’.

This is significant in the context of current global challenges. Communities around the world are dealing with a poly-crisis of the intersecting realities of deep socio-economic inequality, climate change and pandemic recovery, and the most significant challenges are being experienced at the grassroots (Jamal & Gordon, 2024). Additionally, there is an awareness in grassroots contexts of the ‘failure’ of external models of development, often imposed from ‘outside’ by neo-colonial actors. In many cases this realisation has itself been a catalyst for local community-led development alternatives that entail new knowledges, perspectives, practices, and institutions. While local communities are confronting significant challenges, solutions are also beginning to emerge at the grassroots level. In contrast to mainstream models focused on growth, emerging grassroots approaches are re-imagining development through principles of equity, solidarity, and sustainability (Gordon-Nembhard, 2023; Longhurst et al., 2016).

Add to this the spatial and temporal jolt of the global COVID-19 pandemic: lockdowns and travel restrictions prompted a widespread re-connection with place-based community spaces and locally-based networks around the world. For instance, Bieri et al. (2024) found an increasing popularity and demand for participation in community gardens from 2018 to 2022. In China, Terbeck et al. (2023) reported a surge in neighbourly help through gifting and sharing of food and daily necessities. Mollinger (2024) documented the various resilience-building strategies of the youth that revolved around cultivating a sense of neighbourhood identity and maintaining networks of care.

McKinnon et al. (2022) revealed local place-based actors and organisations taking much more ownership for research for development work in Australian government funded projects through grassroots relationships of trust and care. Still, there is much that isn't understood globally - in policy, development and education contexts. There is an urgent need to better understand, value, and support grassroots initiatives and to revalue and foster the role of local agencies, actions and networks in building sustainable futures.

Through this special issue, our intention is to offer opportunities for learning from what different communities are doing at the grassroots to create and maintain conditions for collective survival. We begin the main body by laying theoretical foundations, detailing the origins and importance of diverse ways of knowing, being and doing that challenge universal concepts of development. We discuss the concept of the pluriverse as a way of opening multiple possible pathways for learning and research for development. We then outline several questions that we propose as pluriversal opportunities for learning. We introduce the papers in this special issue and identify the contribution each makes to understanding and broadening grassroots modalities of learning. We conclude by reflecting on research directions beyond this special issue.

Theoretical foundations

In the early 1990s, a collection of texts were published which called for fundamental changes or even abandonment of development itself (Ziai, 2016). This body of work has come to be known as post-development. Drawing from post-structural ideas, post-development scholars have focused on destabilising the taken-for-granted knowledges and practices of development and highlighted the violence and loss associated with it. Other interpretations portray development as a form of neo-colonialism that reinforces the extractive power of Western political economic systems and knowledges over others

(Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992). What was once seen as liberating and altruistic has become repositioned as homogenising and oppressive.

From its early outraged collection of critiques, scholars observed that recent post-development scholarship has shifted towards a more constructive and experimental approach (McGregor, 2009). The field has therefore evolved to adopt what Gibson-Graham (2008) refers to as ‘hopeful geographies’ --- approaches that recognise the limits of development and attempt to imagine solutions by empowering alternative knowledges, voices, and perspectives. Rather than seeing spaces and communities in terms of needs and limitations, current post-development work is bringing to the fore their capacities and opportunities. Couched in the language of hope and possibility, the current and future post-development agenda “investigates the what, how, who, and why of everything that is transformative” (Demaria et al., 2023, p. 66).

Post-development scholarship has grown from its once critical interest in the meanings, norms, languages and truth claims of development into a burgeoning field of diverse research approaches and activities. According to McGregor (2009), the repoliticisation of development – i.e. emphasis on how the politics embedded in development interventions can create new spaces for alternative policies and opportunities – is a critical part of recent post-development writing. Additionally, post-development scholars emphasise the re-valuation and protection of local cultural priorities and beliefs. For instance, Bakal and Einbinder (2024) stress that the Maya-Achi communities in Guatemala offer both philosophy and practice that are better attuned to the urgency of climate change than mainstream models of development. Other scholars stress the growing importance of Indigenous and local knowledge systems in reconceptualising contemporary challenges like climate change and creating new worlds of possibilities (See, Cuaton, et al., 2024; See et al., 2022). Collectively,

this body of work underscores the importance of understanding the grassroots and articulating place-based and local-scale actions over general universal initiatives.

Demaria et al. (2023, p. 62) assert that “the current mood is to search for alternatives in a deeper sense, that is, aiming to break away from the cultural and ideological bases of development, bring forth other imaginaries, goals, and practices”. This requires challenging the modern ontology of one world and building on the notion that multiple worlds are possible. To move beyond conceptualisations of one world (i.e. a universe), Escobar (2018) highlights the importance of a relational ontology that eschew divisions between human and nature as well as between individual and community, and foregrounds the profound relationality of life where humans and non-humans can co-exist. Such relational ontologies suggest the existence of a world that is always multiple, a pluriverse.

We find the concept of a ‘pluriverse’—a world made up of multiple worlds of diverse place-based knowledges, values and approaches (Escobar, 2020) – as a helpful framework to enhance recognition of numerous and diverse ways of knowing and doing already present at the grassroots. This concept questions the idea of universality – a pillar of Western modernity that claims the world has room for only one world. The Zapatista movement comprised mainly of Chiapa, Mexico’s indigenous peoples, instead propose the concept of a world in which many worlds might fit. Western rationality is only considered an option amongst a plurality of options, rather than a paradigm or a grand theory. Discussing the pluriverse entails epistemological and ontological plurality that challenges Western rationality as the only possible and totalising framework of thought, analysis, and existence (Escobar, 2016).

We therefore build upon the work of scholars like Escobar (2018), Mignolo

(2018), and De la Cadena and Blaser (2018) who see pluriversality as a transformative path for world-building that begins with the belief that alternatives to mainstream development are possible. Pluriversality entails rendering visible and legitimate alternatives to existing development paradigms that facilitate healthier relationships with each other and with nature. It necessitates turning to the grassroots to see the diverse visions and innovations that various communities have been creating and living.

While the articulation of grassroots initiatives and practices are growing, it is important to note that many are not ‘new’. Rather, they have existed for thousands of years, long before they came to be articulated as at the margins of the “modern” world and as somewhat “hidden” from mainstream economic development landscapes (Gibson et al., 2017). As such, grassroots knowledges and practices do not require starting from scratch or re-inventing the wheel. Naylor (2022, p. 1195) argues that “an(other) world is already existing and present across place”. We therefore see pluriversality as about reclaiming and re-nurturing ontologies, epistemologies, and visions of diverse local communities and social movements that have been suppressed and marginalised by the one world view. In speaking about these communities and their practices, we contribute to enhancing their existence and viability.

The exploration of the pluriverse already finds concrete expression in a multitude of re-emerging and new concepts and practices. Some groups have revived long-standing worldviews of Indigenous communities, while others have recently emerged from social and environmental movements but reflect old philosophies and traditions. Examples such as *buen vivir*, degrowth, community economies, ecological *swaraj*, communing, *ubuntu*, and radical feminisms of various kinds serve as “examples of... post-developmental epistemic-political field towards a pluriverse” (Demaria et al., 2023, p. 62). These cosmologies and practices show that plural and relational

worldviews exist that are beyond the logic of mainstream development.

It is important to note that the pluriverse is more than just a notion or a concept. It also entails a call to practice. We argue that pluriversality necessitates two things. First, it involves a deconstruction of discourses and narratives that render invisible locally-based and place-specific knowledges and practices. Statements that regard Indigenous and local knowledges and ontologies as ‘exotic’, ‘backward’, and ‘illegitimate’ should be challenged. Second, pluriversality requires making visible the knowledges, worldviews, practices, and innovation by grassroots communities in their struggle to thrive. It is a relational creative practice focused on “nurturing new models of life and re-weaving our reality, not on destroying the old” (Leitao, 2023, p. 17). One path for this is researchers foregrounding diverse community economies that exist beneath the veneer of formal capitalist economy and obscured from the gaze of mainstream development (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). An example is Gibson et al.’s (2018) collective work on documenting and assembling keywords of place-based community economies in Monsoon Asia. By exposing these alternative community economies, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) enables new ways of conceptualising economic possibilities.

We see grassroots learning as bottom-up and emanating from place-based contexts where people are working collectively with one another and with Earthkin (Roumell, 2018). It is grounded in the history, culture, and environment of the local (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008), emphasises hands-on and real-world learning experiences (Sobel, 2006), and utilises a collaborative, learner-centred approach (Longo, 2007). In varied contexts around the world, grassroots modalities of learning are already at work, but have been labeled differently and implemented in a variety of ways. Examples include community-based learning, Indigenous co-design, peer-to-peer exchange,

environment-based education, real-world problem solving, to name a few. We see grassroots learning as encompassing these activities and concepts.

Questions

Questions about grassroots learning that guide this special issue surfaced, during the first author's 2022 Outside Studies Program (OSP), sabbatical, 'Grassroots learning for more sustainable futures'. The OSP program of work adopted a 'flipped classroom' mindset in various community development and education settings. It sought to position policy makers, government funding agencies, international development workers, academics, and community workers, as learners, and to call for all these stakeholders listening and learning from grassroots knowledge and practice. This focus stemmed from the author's increasing awareness over past decade of what gets lost in translation in the adoption of Western and universal development principles and English language, what gets lost when working with communities as an 'outsider', and with communities who are often framed as 'poor', 'marginal', and 'vulnerable' to colonial and neo-colonial exploitations. The first author developed a six month program of work around grassroots modalities of learning in three areas linked to current research:

- Climate change adaptations
- Community food economies
- Indigenous language and communication tools

Emphasis was on considering all the stakeholders mentioned above in different place-based settings and asking - Who is learning? What are they learning? How are they learning from grassroots examples? In the lead in to the special issue we organised two conference sessions in tandem with a Call for Papers: one session at the Institute of Australian Geographers' Conference and one at the international Community

Economies Research Network conference. We invited papers to speak to any of the following guiding questions:

- What is the state of grassroots learning for more sustainable futures? What gaps exist and what are the future research directions?
- What grassroots modalities of learning exist in communities? Who takes action and how do these address critical development concerns?
- How might grassroots knowledge systems and cultural practices be integrated into mainstream educational systems?
- To what extent do communities provide resistance to the neo-colonising processes in their respective local food systems, climate change adaptation practices, indigenous language and communication, and schooling systems?
- What research methodological processes and approaches can be developed to promote grassroots learning?
- What lessons can we draw from grassroots modalities of learning and from their practitioners?
- What possibilities might emerge when grassroots learning modalities are recognised and fostered?
- How might a focus on the grassroots provide opportunities for intersectoral, inter-spatial and intergenerational communication and collaboration?

Contributions

Addressing the question of what grassroots modalities of learning exist in communities and attending to the specific examples in this special issue, we embark on a journey around the world, beginning in the Philippines. Trinidad-Lagarto et al. (2024) highlight the experience of the *Manobo*, an Indigenous group in Mindanao, and reveal how a

Manobo community school operates sustainably in collaboration with other significant community actors within a politically volatile context. Positioning this work within the decolonisation agenda in Indigenous education, these authors broaden that discourse by examining Indigenous education from the view of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of 'community of practice' focused on mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

See, Fuentes, et al. (2024) explore climate change adaptations in the Philippines. Specifically, they examine the practice of *yaru* in Itbayat, Batanes, where people from different sectors of society voluntarily come together to share labour, knowledge, and resources to adapt to climatic challenges, and the practice among the residents of *Tambaliza* in Iloilo, where community elders share their local knowledges about their environment (e.g. understanding of climate and weather, local forms of prediction, and reciprocal practices for well-being) to the young community members. The authors stress the importance of place-based traditional knowledge systems in climate adaptation through intra-generational exchanges of information between elders/ leaders and the youth. They also demonstrate the importance of an inclusive and context-specific approach to climate change adaptation and contend that transformative actions should involve collaborative efforts between community members, civil society, government, and other development actors.

Guzman and Krell's (2024) contribution takes us to Lake Budi, Chile. The lake, a biocultural hotspot in the Pacific coast of Northern Patagonia, is a coastal wetland habitat for hundreds of endemic and migratory species. It is also the ancestral homeland for the *Mapuche-Lafkenche*, who through grassroots learning, are determining practical steps towards restoring their territory and its self-governance for *kvmemongen*. This Mapuche concept refers broadly to enacting forms of living well together, among

humans and non-humans.

Guzman and Krell (2024) are curious about the question of how grassroots action among the *Mapuche-Lafkenche* addresses critical development concerns. The authors acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge is ongoing and dynamic. Indigenous ways of being are in themselves knowledge-producing mechanisms that resist neo-colonising processes. In this sense, so called “resistance”, can be better understood in current context as resurgence and adaptation from within, through Indigenous-led interweaving of knowledge/learning practices, that defy the monopoly of elitist, unilateral academic and scientific practice, without dismissing the utility of culturally appropriating technological and methodological tools globally available to tackle new challenges, such as access to global interchanges, adapting to global warming, and participating in emerging polycentric environmental governance. The authors note the two-fold responsibilities that Indigenous youth face: to uphold their inherent patrimony passed down from generations, while equally becoming representatives and ambassadors of their communities in the western world. Intergenerational communication within communities goes hand in hand with dialogue among grassroots collectives, communities and territories.

Traveling to the Italian Alps, Elzenbaumer et al. (forthcoming) explore the community academy *La Foresta*, a physical, social and organisational infrastructure that supports grassroots learning practices centred on multispecies interdependence. Situated at the train station of Rovereto, *La Foresta* was established in 2017 and to date features weekly free access activities such as cooking, baking, growing and foraging plants, making music and dancing, drawing and painting, among others. There are currently over thirty people co-running the academy, each contributing to its daily activities that are place-based, locally-specific, and sustain local livelihoods and well-being.

Elzenbaumer et al.'s paper shares insights from four different community learning strands, each connected to food, and fosters skills for more socially and ecologically just modes of life. These are: (1) the community garden *comun'Orto* (2) the participatory drinks endeavor *Comunità Frizzante* (3) the traveling bread oven *Forno Vagabondo* and (4) the kids outdoor education programme *Sottobosco*. They argue that these four activities entail physically and collaboratively moving in the landscape and working with the soil, seeds, plants, compost, fruits, vegetables and stress the need for infrastructures that support multispecies care and interdependence.

Landing down under, in Cairns, Far North Queensland, Australia, Walshe et al. (2024) explore grassroots learning in schools. Grassroots learning in schools can act as a powerful form of resistance to neo-colonising processes by embedding place-responsive pedagogies that work with local ecologies and cultural knowledge. These pedagogies, particularly when centred around gardens, can help mitigate Environmental Generational Amnesia (EGA), a type of environmental forgetting brought about by prolonged disconnection from natural ecosystems and landscapes, characterised by “poor motor skills, deficient food origin knowledge, a lack of environmental moral affiliation, and undeveloped connections to place” (Ibid., p.1). Grassroots learning also fosters a deeper connection to place and an appreciation for all who have and continue to reside there. By integrating place-responsive pedagogies into the schooling system, they are encouraging children to connect to their more-than-human kin, deepening ecological literacy but also providing new ways of understanding the challenges of climate change. Garden-based learning can begin to undo the generational forgetting that has occurred in the post-industrial western world, reconnecting children with local food systems, cultural practices, and relational ways of knowing. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives, resists the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, and opens

children's eyes to the value of working with, rather than against, the world around them. Walshe and co-authors seek to explore the extent to which communities resist neo-colonising processes in their respective local food systems and schooling systems.

In Canberra and Sydney, Turner et al. (2024) explore what lessons can we draw from grassroots models of learning and from their practitioners? Their paper adopts a more-than-human approach to emphasize the importance of nonhuman compost companions as teachers or 'learning providers' that enable human food waste generators and managers to develop deep, embodied understanding of how they can reduce negative food waste behaviours and revitalise urban soil. Learning 'on the ground' our community composters grow generative habits and dispositions through attentive and responsive relations with more-than-human worlds. This learning – or development of a composting ethics – highlights the importance of community-led initiatives that responds to unique place-based conditions. The paper considers - What possibilities might emerge when grassroots learning models are recognised and fostered? Food waste remains a socio-technical challenge with government roll-out and management of organic waste collection constantly thwarted. The grassroots, community-building and more-than-human learning that occurs among community composters expands the repertoires of available strategies and practices to better care for soil and place.

Moving from one grassroots example to another across the globe offers us multiple layers of engagement and understanding. Each paper presents not only a geographical journey but also an embodied experience, as we immerse ourselves in the rich tapestry of local lives, practices, and knowledge systems. These stories create opportunities for meaningful dialogue across different contexts and cultures, while highlighting the diverse ways local communities address shared challenges. The authors

in this special issue engage multiple audiences and make various interventions through their work, weaving together academic analysis with practical insights from the ground.

This approach is evident in how Trinidad-Lagarto et al. (2024) are in conversation with Indigenous education practitioners as well as academics and seek to expand educator and academic understandings of Indigenous education, not only as a political and cultural enterprise, also as a grassroots modality of learning that allows Indigenous communities to sustain their educational directions by negotiating, collaborating, and complying with local policies. Indigenous education, in this context, then becomes a distinct community of practice embedded in wider social practice, simultaneously, resisting and working with socio-political volatility.

See, Fuentes, et al. (2024) are in conversation with government officials and practitioners of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in the Philippines as well as a wider public and academics working relevant fields. The authors' goal is to influence thinking on what transformative adaptation looks like, both in theory and practice. The authors hope their paper can benefit adaptation practitioners and government officials in the Philippines but can also be applied more broadly to other countries and contexts.

Guzman and Krell (2024) position themselves as researchers/practitioners outside formal academia. They seek to engage in conversation with allies and supporters of Indigenous-led or other grassroots initiatives where communities are impacted by 'unsustainability', contexts where Indigenous people have lost their own community, and wish to join others to create positive change. Paradoxically, the audience the authors target is precisely that of researchers, scientists and students aiming to establish generative learning and knowledge co-production with Indigenous Peoples' territories

and their knowledge agents, both human and their Earth-others.

Elzenbaumer et al. (forthcoming) working as practitioners beyond the traditional structures of the academe, are in conversation with other community organisers, people coming from the arts and social work, and people working in municipalities who have an interest in community empowerment. Walshe et al. (2024) identify their target audience as policy makers, environmental thinkers, and schools. Similarly, Turner et al. (2024) are in conversation with policy makers, environmental thinkers, and seek to engage further with schools to support compost education for students and carers.

As much as anything the special issue seeks to open us spaces for further conversation, to be a springboard for further research and development that begins and ends with grassroots led initiatives supporting human and planetary wellbeing.

Research Directions

The time is ripe to widen and deepen research, narratives, and action on the pluriverse. There is an increasing push to reclaim the importance of the grassroots modalities of learning in order to better understand and respond to complex place-based challenges of sustainability and environmental change (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022). The papers in this special issue highlight several critical directions for future research and practice.

First, grassroots learning requires sustained, long-term engagement that often challenges traditional academic and practitioner timeframes. As shown through the papers in this special issue, meaningful knowledge exchange with diverse stakeholders can take a long time and is typically slow ongoing work. This longer-term commitment to grassroots learning processes demands careful relationship building and often conflicts with institutional constraints and funding cycles that prioritise quick and

measurable outcomes. Future research needs to explore how to create institutional frameworks that support such “slow innovation” through sustained dialogue and engagement.

Second, there is a need to better understand how grassroots learning can foster more-than-human relationships and ecologies in order to remediate the manifestation of environmental generational amnesia. As demonstrated in the papers, grassroots modalities of learning often succeed in cultivating deep connections with non-human actors and local ecologies. Whether through school gardens that help children develop ecological literacy, community composting initiatives, or Indigenous practices that recognise non-human agencies, these approaches demonstrate the potential for learning that extends beyond human-centered frameworks. Future research should explore how the more-than-human might inform responses to environmental challenges and how communities can develop meaning relationships with their local ecosystems.

Third, future research needs to focus on how grassroots learning initiatives navigate and resist mainstream development narratives and practices. While our contributors demonstrate a host of such grassroots initiatives and strategies, more work is needed to understand how grassroots models can maintain their transformative potential while engaging with multiple stakeholders and systems. This includes examining how Indigenous and local knowledge systems can be integrated into mainstream educational and development policies and frameworks.

Finally, more research is needed on the methodological innovations necessary to examine and support grassroots models of learning. This calls for approaches that move beyond traditional academic research frameworks to embrace more participatory, experimental and collaborative methodologies. Future research might explore approaches that can work across diverse knowledge systems and can capture the

nuances and complexities of grassroots learning processes. Additionally, researchers need to grapple with questions of research ethics and power dynamics in studying grassroots learning, including how to ensure that research entails co-production of knowledges and that the benefits flow back to communities.

Escobar (2010) acknowledges that considerable challenges remain to conceiving of a world that goes beyond the logic of liberal modernity and its concomitant forms of neo-liberal, capitalist economy and society. However, these difficulties should not preclude us from taking action in making grassroots epistemologies and cosmovisions more widely known and more real. The papers in this special issue demonstrate that grassroots modalities of learning offer vital pathways for imagining and creating more sustainable and equitable futures. The task ahead is to better understand, support, and learn from these initiatives.

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