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# Co-learning the city: Towards a pedagogy of poly-learning and planning praxis

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## Introduction

*“From now on, I’ll describe the cities to you”, the Khan had said, “in your journeys you will see if they exist”. But the cities visited by Marco Polo were always different from those thought of by the emperor. “And yet, I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced”, Marco answered. “It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exists. But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real”. (Calvino 1972: 44)*

In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino reimagines the conversations between the Venetian merchant Marco Polo and Chinese Emperor Kublai Khan. Exploring the incongruences that emerge from contrasting the exceptions that make each city unique rather than universally apprehendable, Calvino produces an imaginary and invisible city that is all cities.

Literary philosophers like Calvino help us to grasp the possibility of plural learnings through miniature narratives of the city, constructed by characters whose learning draws on complex bodies of knowledge, experiences and imaginations to explain how cities work, how they change, and why. Calvino never claims universalising explanations, but rather invites the reader to interrogate the junctions between these micro-narratives and the social construction of the urban world.

How do we learn the city? How does such learning relate to our learning of other cities? How can learning produce actionable knowledge that can impact upon urban planning, without claiming to be universal? How can learning activate and consolidate new ways of linking urban theory and planning praxis, and counteract the historical hegemony of global North academia?

Much has been written in recent years about the need to decentre urban theory and, with it, the importance of shifting from the production of academic knowledge ‘about’ the urban global South to its co-production. But what does this mean in the actual assembling of urban planning pedagogies? With a few exceptions (McFarlane 2011; McFarlane and Robinson 2012; Watson and Odendaal 2012, among others), the question of how we approach the pedagogy of learning urban change has not yet been analysed in a systematic way, particularly in planning circles. We argue that when seeking to constitute new modes of learning the city, what matters the most is not where learning happens but how learning with others engages with questions of ‘where’, ‘with whom’, ‘how’ and ‘why’.

The chapter draws on the pedagogy developed by the first two authors through the four-year journey of ‘Learning Lima’, a co-learning alliance established by the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London in 2012, which brings together researchers and international students from the Practice Module of the MSc in Environment and Sustainable Development (ESD)<sup>1</sup> with various institutions

and collectives of the urban poor in Lima. This alliance emerged in response to a request by a group of Lima-based NGOs that had become aware of the DPU's work in previous learning platforms in Accra and Mumbai, who felt they could benefit from taking a wider and more radical perspective towards issues of social and environmental inequality by exploring how such issues were being addressed in academic and policy debates elsewhere.

A series of informal exchanges led us to a first unofficial visit to the city, where we met several of these NGOs and visited the neighbourhoods where they work. These exchanges led to the decision to focus our common endeavour on learning how unjust water trajectories manifest in different parts of Lima; where, for whom, and why. Since then, Learning Lima has included four cohorts of ESD students – approximately 200 students – interns from Peruvian academic institutions, and staff from four NGO partners: Foro Ciudades para la Vida, Instituto de Desarrollo Urbano (CENCA), Centro de Investigación, Documentación y Asesoría Poblacional (CIDAP), and Servicios Educativos El Agustino (SEA), in addition to hundreds of local residents and civil society groups from seven case study areas. Together these areas capture the full diversity of Lima, both in terms of ecological structures and the multiple everyday and institutional practices that drive urban change across Metropolitan Lima.

In this sense, Learning Lima constitutes not just a co-learning alliance but also a means for trans-local learning, understood as the set of unique practical and epistemic opportunities that arise from immersing ourselves in exploring the “plurality of connections between different places established both by traceable routes . . . and by immaterial and less traceable ones” (Soderstrom and Geertman 2013: 257). However, weaving such routes into a collective learning process that combines a high diversity of learners and geographies is neither an easy nor straightforward process. We approach such a pedagogical undertaking as a fundamentally political process that opens, in our view, multiple opportunities to explore new ways of conceiving, perceiving and living the city; to contrast and interrogate preconceptions and ultimately, to oxygenate the ways in which we connect urban theory and planning praxis, within a world made of differences.

Both London- and overseas-based members of Learning Lima have been involved in several aspects of teaching, research, planning and advocacy relating to pro-poor development and environmental justice in the city, often working in various capacities simultaneously. The convergence of their multiple engagements with the city makes the co-learning alliance dynamic, flexible, responsive and open. Moreover, the co-learning is sustained through time as teaching, action research and planning are designed to be cyclical and overlapping. Leadership shifts between the DPU, NGO partner organisations and civil society groups. The alliance places great emphasis on documenting the learning process and outcomes; building an incremental legacy that grows organically through inputs from its multiple constituent parts.

While the initial focus of Learning Lima was on water injustices, it soon became evident that some parts of the city, and its social fabric, were rendered invisible in official maps and were thus excluded from public policy and programmes. Similarly, an exploration of unjust water trajectories soon transformed into an investigation of everyday risks. Thus, over time, Learning Lima expanded its scope, particularly through two action-research projects led by the DPU in collaboration with local partners. The first, ‘ReMapLima’, used drones to generate up-to-date images of otherwise invisibilised settlements in the historic centre and steep slopes of the periphery. These images were used as a cartographic base for participatory mapping and community-led diagnosis of spatial patterns of urban risk. The second project, ‘cLIMA sin Riesgo’, explored the conditions that produce and reproduce risk accumulation cycles, how and where they materialise, and with what consequences for marginalised women and men, as well as their capacity to act individually, collectively and with state organisations.

This chapter offers some critical reflections on the methodological and epistemic conditions underpinning the pedagogical approach developed through the journey of Learning Lima, with specific reference to a number of interrelated learning pathways: learning trans-locally, co-learning; learning spatially; learning through individual and collective critical reflection; and the significance of practice-oriented learning for the production of actionable knowledge. The discussion draws on reflexive portfolios produced by ESD students and from observations and interviews conducted by the third author with members of Learning

Lima in London and overseas.

## **From urban knowledge to urban learnings: situating co-learning in discourse and practice**

The plurality of ways in which urban knowledge(s) and theory are produced has been the focus of much debate among urban theorists in recent years. In the work of Edgar Pieterse, AbdouMalik Simone, Colin McFarlane, Jenny Robinson, Gautam Bhan, Sue Parnell and Vanessa Watson, among others, a common denominator is the search for more plural modes of knowledge production and a critical engagement with our theoretical constructs wherever we are. However, such a search for plurality requires an engagement not only with multiple ‘wheres’ but also ‘whos’, opening the reframing of urban knowledge through the assemblage of co-learning networks.

The notion of co-learning is rooted in a variety of concepts and pedagogical approaches, including but not limited to: ‘communities of practice’, defined by Wenger as “social leaning systems” (1998, 2000); ‘co-production’ (Ostrom 1996); participatory action research; and critical pedagogy (Freire 1993). In recent years the term has become ubiquitous across a number of disciplines. Invariably positive, the use of the term correlates closely with the proliferation of ‘partnerships’ that characterise contemporary research agendas; across the global North–South, across disciplines, and across academic and non-academic institutions.

Despite the diversity of ways in which co-learning can be understood, it is possible to identify some common principles. First, co-learning challenges the individualist epistemic notion of knowledge as ‘justified, true beliefs’. By appealing to social epistemology, knowledge is understood to be socially constructed, and so, laden with socio-political and historical presuppositions and biases (Goldman 2010).

Second, co-learning challenges the dichotomy between *codified* and *tacit* knowledge. Within a co-learning framework, tacit knowledge, including social and inherited practices, are valued equally with codified, ‘scientific’ knowledge, and to some extent the two should be considered inseparable (Polanyi 1966). This combination of knowledges is itself relational. As McFarlane (2011: 3) explains:

If knowledge is the sense that people make of information, that sense is a practice that is distributed through relations between people, objects and environment ... learning as much about developing perceptions through engagement with the city as it is about creating knowledge.

Broadly, a co-learning network can be characterised by a plurality of knowledges; a reciprocity of knowledge production and communication; a shared community of interest and practice; and a real-world engagement that extends beyond academic discourse. Co-learning supports a process of knowledge production within and across groups and organisations, creates spaces to challenge and contrast existing narratives and holds particular significance for the production of actionable knowledge.

## **Co-learning actors and alliances**

The last decade has seen an increased recognition of the need to challenge global North-centred urban planning and urban knowledge production paradigms; characterised by the reconceptualisation of urban citizens as agents of their own development, rather than beneficiaries of interventions or service consumers. Foremost this requires a reformulation of the relationship and terms of engagement with universities in the global North. The co-development of a research agenda that produces knowledge by, with and for citizens in the global South requires a critical examination not only of the social-political-geographical ‘spheres’ of all ‘learners’ involved, but also of the relations between them. So, what do trans-local learning engagements mean for a Northern academic institution like the DPU? Do we embody the ways of a

Northern institution or do we revert back to the experiences lived through our repeated engagements with different elsewhere? Does working in trans-local groups, with learners are often neither 'here' nor 'there', a different dynamic might emerge capable of disrupting the differentiation between 'observers' and 'observed' that often prevails in overseas study tours?

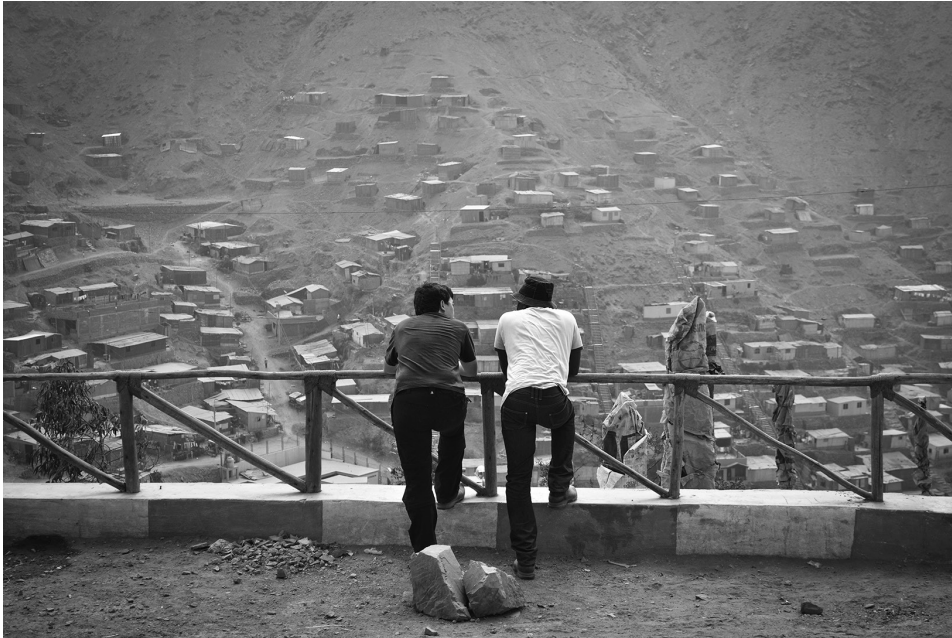
For the DPU, the development of learning alliances allows the establishment of fruitful connections across our teaching, research and planning praxis. It also offers a continuous reality check in our attempts to respond to our vision and mission while operating within a Northern knowledge production framework. For over 60 years the DPU has dedicated its work to challenging mainstream theorisations of urban change and the role of planning, as well as the hegemony of Anglophone knowledge and its self-proclaimed prevailing authority to produce urban theory. In practical terms, DPU does this by actively engaging in partnerships of equality with multiple centres of knowledge production and planning practice across the urban global South. Moreover, its international membership – both in terms of students and staff – feeds from and into highly diverse translocal trajectories for experiencing, understanding and working across the world.

The departing points chosen to interrogate both existing theorisations and empirical analyses of a particular city are fundamentally important in addressing the above questions. We therefore depart from the deconstruction and reconstruction of existing bodies of knowledge around specific issues and geographies from an environmental justice perspective, as a means to tease out what transformative change actually means in concrete circumstances. This involves interrogating urban processes not only through the maldistribution of 'goods' and 'bads' that characterises highly unequal cities, but also their roots. This perspective takes on a hyper-specificity in each context to the point that the diagnosis and strategies to disrupt unjust urban trajectories cannot exist anywhere else.

The nature of the alliances developed through the DPU's engagement with Lima (and with other cities in the past) is central to the process of learning. These alliances are sustained through an engagement that lasts not only through time but also through a number of distinct mechanisms, as exemplified by the intensive use of social media and the Learning Lima online platform, which is collaboratively developed and managed from London and Lima, as well as being open to contributions from other learners from other cities (Figure 1).

It is also important to reflect on the dynamic composition of Learning Lima. Through the platform, links are made across residents and their collectives situated across Lima spatially, as well as with activists, civil servants, local NGOs, academic researchers and planning practitioners, among others. Engagement with those coming from London creates new spaces for participation and critical engagement for heterogeneous urban actors. Indeed, in restoring old or developing new public fora, this process explicitly aims to challenge the socio-political structures that hinder genuine multi-stakeholder urban development planning. In supporting the exchange of ideas and bodies through the city, local and visiting learners navigate and make sense together of the complexity of the city and its parts through transect walks, mapping, workshops, discussion panels and the production of shared outputs such as bilingual online story maps, video documentaries, policy briefs, newsletters and so on.

While all participants are equal learners in this process, the risks, responsibilities and consequences of engagement are different. This means that the learning process weaves together a variety of relationships, some continuous, others sporadic. Some based on the tacit commonalities of living in the same city, others on the opportunity to explore contrasting experiences. Each of these relationships brings different challenges that need to be carefully addressed. For instance, a must in our pedagogic approach is that the process should deliver 'positive' impacts and gains for all, and so expectations about what constitutes such gains need to be discussed ad-front.



*Figure 1* From the desk to the field: ESD participants' first encounter with the Lima. *Source:* Teresa Belkow.

This happens through a careful discussion of the learning objectives that inform the Terms of References (ToR) adopted each year, which tackles the following questions: What will be the focus of the work and why? How does this build upon past work? What are the learning objectives for local communities, partners and participants in the MSc? What will be the outputs? And how will these be produced and shared?

Thus, the ToR are co-designed by local partner organisations, residents in Lima and academic staff and students in London, through ex-ante discussions and the evaluation of the outcomes achieved each year, primarily through face-to-face presentations and debates. Through these engagements we identify specific questions and themes that could drive the next phase of work, knowledge gaps, why these gaps are relevant and to whom.

While the ToR frames the work each year, through the actual process of co-learning, the rights, risks, responsibilities and gains for each participant are continuously negotiated. Thus, for instance, the right of local dwellers to engage in the fieldwork on their own terms becomes a responsibility for the students to manage and in turn an opportunity to learn how to avoid an extractive approach and engage sensitively in the field. Does someone want to be interviewed, photographed or filmed? Is a meeting or a transect agreed with respect to local inhabitants' daily routines? Are certain questions making people uncomfortable? Above all, are we all on the same page with regards to both the content of the issues explored and the manner in which this is done?

Similarly, people might want to share stories or denounce processes that would put them at risk if these are publicly disseminated and it becomes our responsibility to minimise and avoid such risks by taking a cautious approach to the information that is recorded and disseminated. Furthermore, local dwellers might push for an agenda that talks to individual interests but not necessarily to collective ones, and this needs to be interrogated and challenged beforehand but also through every step of the fieldwork.

In short, weaving so many different participants into a common learning arena brings multiple challenges that need to be constantly read and addressed. Such challenges are connected to avoiding purely instrumental and extractive relationships, the conflation of personal expectations and benefits with

collective ones, or even the well-intended confusion between sensitive engagement and uncritical sympathy.

Power relations are constantly at play in any co-learning engagement and work in all directions. The only way they can be addressed is by learning to recognise and evaluate them to start with. Community leaders might first interpret the possibility of engaging with members of a British university as a means to obtain financial aid, academic staff might unconsciously approach their engagement on the ground as an opportunity to illustrate an intellectual personal pursuit, local NGOs might initially seek engagement with a Northern organisation as a means to raise their profile in political and policy fora, and the list goes on.

These possible misconstructions can only be avoided by spending considerable time and effort to comb all expectations in the actual design of the work to be done together, and addressed in more subtle ways by securing a repetitive and prolonged engagement that combines academic teaching, action research, planning and advocacy.

Formal discussions are complemented over time by tacit exchanges of knowledge, spoken, written, electronic and face-to-face; visual, scientific and poetic. As well as these links, a critical culture of reflexivity developed between diverse institutions and groups supports the transformation of planners and researchers from experts to learners and of local residents from spectators or beneficiaries, to active agents in the co-production of knowledge and praxis. Learning collectively and across scales plays a key role in such transformation. As expressed by one of the local founding members of Learning Lima:

Without working collectively, it would be impossible to understand the city. Working with people most of the time and the different ways of seeing the cities for each of them ... allows me to understand the different scales of the city, metropolitan Lima, the neighbourhoods, the blocks. It is only collectively that one can make sense of new understandings across scales. (Interview with the Director of Foro Ciudades para la Vida, Lima, May 2014)

### **Learning spatially: from ‘here’ to ‘there’**

History has a geography, both actual and imaginary, real and figurative. Just as with modernity, which was about a geopolitics of knowledge and a putative teleology of history that localised all truly modern knowledge in Europe and that thus centered the historical vanguard of progress in the heartland of Europe, globalisation also traces geopolitical maps. (Mendieta 2007: 18)

Like geography, urban planning relies on all sorts of spatial distinctions, conceptualisations and assumptions to construct its knowledge. However, how we go about this when approaching the pedagogy of learning urban change is rarely discussed, either in geography or planning circles (Allen *et al.* 2015b).

Our contention is that the co-production of planning knowledge – and indeed of understanding how social and spatial relations coproduce one another – is intimately linked to the activation of co-learning through space and in place. Pedagogically, Learning Lima approaches this enterprise through the use of maps and mapping, not as mere representations of what is ‘there’ or ‘here’, but as a means to provoke new framings of urban change, linking epistemological, ontological and methodological questions on how we learn the city.



Figure 2 Reading neighbourhood maps together with inhabitants during a transect. *Source:* Luise Fishcer; PROLIMA (2014).

The spatial interrogation of the city offers an entry point to understanding urban injustices, and where and how these can potentially be disrupted. As spatial tools, maps can reveal what is otherwise invisible and the myriad relations that constitute the city. They help to analyse and communicate, but also to perform, because they support the actualisation of ideas (Corner 1999; Dodge *et al.* 2009).

Through Learning Lima we adopt three interrelated sites in the mapping process: the reading, writing and audiencing of maps (Allen and Lambert 2015). The strategic inclusion of various actors in the city within these sites brings to the fore a plurality of knowledges and contributes to reframing previous diagnoses and to identify strategic opportunities for transformative change. As one participant reflects: “I have learnt that the construction of a map is part of the social construction of knowledge . . . this for me leads to the power to get things done” (Interview with ESD student, Lima, May 2015).

Within the ‘Site of Reading’, we interrogate hegemonic representations of the city and the role these often play in fostering exclusionary planning processes. The overlaying and critical examination of existing maps becomes a means to capture the spatiality of injustice, making evident the socio-environmental power struggles driving these representations, as well as helping to identify who and what is left ‘off the map’ and why.

The ‘Site of Writing’ focuses on the collective decision of what to map, how to map and toward what end. It also encompasses the actual process of data gathering in the field and its representation. One important starting point is an open discussion of ‘why’ and ‘what to map’ together with local partners and residents.

Mapping is hereby used to foster critical reflection and awareness, helping to grasp the spatiality of problems at various scales and denounce otherwise invisible processes. As observed by one of the community mappers engaged in using free apps to survey her settlement with the support of smartphones:

People often don’t know what is happening at the back of their own settlement ... Working with this technology has meant that a lot of information was gathered about the risk areas. With the drone images, the leaders realised that new roads were being opened and they started to pay attention to the matter, raising awareness of their community and promoting the planning and safeguarding of open spaces. (Interview with a female resident and community mapper from José Carlos Mariátegui, Lima, May 2015)



Beyond the moment of collecting spatialised information, the community mappers together with the supporting NGOs, CENCA and CIDAP, take it upon themselves to deepen the data collection and analysis and devise strategies, exploring legal avenues and various coordinated efforts needed to disrupt the unwanted processes that increment risk for the inhabitants.

Finally, the ‘Site of Audiencing’ of maps involves making collective decisions on who should see the maps, where they should be displayed, and how to frame new interpretations emanating from the contrasting of existing and newly written maps. In the audiencing, the inclusion of a wide range of actors is sought to provide a scalar jump in the possibilities for advocacy and action. But how are these different forms of spatialised knowledge articulated to travel from the neighbourhood to the city? Towards this aim, we produce online story maps that capture quantitative and qualitative data in a single platform that can be further populated over time.

The three sites of the mapping process – the reading, writing and audiencing – all play a key role in facilitating the co-learning and co-production of knowledge for action if strategically designed and sensitively managed as a fundamentally political process.

### **Learning as an open-ended reflexive exercise**

Recognising the significance of individual subjective insights as a form of learning, the ESD programme encourages students to identify and reflect upon what it terms ‘ah-ha’ moments; moments of understanding that significantly shift one’s perspective. These moments are evocative of Kierkegaard’s ‘leap’ and commitment to subjective truth as the highest truth. For Kierkegaard (2009) the highest truths were arrived at through individual epistemic ‘leaps’, so called because they are irrational; they cannot be deduced and cannot be taught. These insights can only be arrived at through individual reflection, and as such have unique epistemological significance, offering insights on our positionality vis-à-vis our learning.

Opportunities for critical reflection are instigated at various stops throughout the journey and reflection is pursued in a number of ways, starting with an exploration of the students’ assumptions about urban socio-environmental transformation and the skills they require to become active players in pursuing transformative planning (Figure 3).

To support this process, students develop two personal portfolios that can take many formats, ranging from videos and posters, to written essays, blogs and diaries. The first portfolio allows students to reflect on their own ways of learning the city and the links they establish between familiar and unfamiliar contexts; cities they ‘know’ and cities that they are discovering. The second portfolio is produced after the actual fieldtrip overseas, and captures a significantly different learning mode, one that is shaped by a multiplicity of concrete encounters. As observed by one of the ESD students:

As a citizen you look at Google maps aerial view and street view you see garbage piling up and you can see there is no water and you think “if they just brought the truck more to take the garbage, if there was just a little more water that would do”. But when you look at it as a system you see there are topographical, geographical limitations on how water comes into the city and where garbage can be put, it becomes less about criticising and more about critiquing. (Interview with a female ESD student, Lima, 2014)





Figure 4 Community mappers of Barrios Altos together with cLIMA sin Riesgo surveyors walking into every compound to interview their neighbours. Source: Rita Lambert.



Figure 5 cLIMA sin Riesgo and ReMap Lima exhibition opening in November 2015. Source: cLIMA sin Riesgo.

### **From trans-local co-learning to the production of actionable knowledge**

Planning, and indeed its search for knowledge to solve the problems faced by a city, can be understood as the ultimate act of taming the city; but “in this regard, discourses of planning are so bound up with

hegemonic power structures that the power at work often becomes hidden or naturalised” (Allen *et al.* 2015a: 11). Whether such taming narratives are linked to the ‘smart city’ agenda or the assumption that building urban resilience to climate change should be an overriding priority, every attempt to contribute to urban planning theory and praxis is inevitably confronted by the simultaneous challenges of deconstructing the diagnoses from which it departs, and identifying strategies to transform urban injustices. Following the learning pathways discussed here constitutes one specific response to this challenge. We believe that the pedagogical power of the approach lies not just in the outputs produced, but more fundamentally in the learning outcomes achieved.

First, trans-local learning helps us to pause and think about the consequences of where we learn from and how. As Brazilian scholar Marcelo de Souza reminds us: “[n]o contribution in the field of social sciences, urban studies included, is free of ‘accent’, since every piece of knowledge directly related to social life is both culturally embedded and historically-geographically situated” (2012: 315).

As such, learning the city trans-locally requires us not only to be reflexive and explicit about our accents geographically, but also methodologically, intellectually and politically. The ESD approach to co-learning encourages reflection not only on individual and collective positionalities but also on the dialectic between theory and practice, in so far as they variously support and legitimise, or challenge and undermine one another.

Second, certain modes of learning the city are better suited to enabling actionable knowledge than others. For example, spatial learning and the process of mapping can be impactful as a mode of investigation and communication; enabling learners to engage with, rather than reduce, complexity. Additionally, the process of knowledge production within a co-learning network can itself mobilise and consolidate various organisations and actors.

Third, developing an ethics of practice is a key learning outcome of the ESD programme, both in terms of defining an ethical engagement and reflecting on the role of an urban development planner. Through engagement in a co-learning network, and through critical reflection, students develop an awareness of their own position in the context of international urban development. As observed by a former student: “The planner’s role is not to bring knowledge into the system from externally; it is to facilitate the distribution of knowledge throughout the system such that solutions emerge from within it” (Female ESD student portfolio, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to reflect on the emerging potentials of dynamic, translocal, university–practitioner alliances and a poly-learning pedagogy. The ESD Practice Module’s pedagogical assumptions lead to a particular arrangement of learning pathways and learning outcomes. Central to its approach is the activation of trans-local learning and subsequent commitment to developing co-learning alliances, spatialised learning and critical reflection. The assemblage of learning pathways presented here is not exhaustive, but is intended to promote further reflection and discussion on the nature of poly-learning pathways, and the way they are socially, geographically and historically embedded within wider processes.

The diversity of learning modes adopted – reflexive, spatial, policy-oriented and narrative-based, among others – not only allows for the triangulation or enhancement of different knowledges and modes of learning, but also creates new spaces for critical reflection. It engenders a critical consciousness of the complexities and tensions between urban theories and planning practices, equipping learners with an open mind-set and concrete skills to activate refreshing perspectives on how cities are produced and on the role that planning can play in a more inclusive and progressive practice. A practice that does not seek homogenising explanations and solutions but rather an incisive and continuous commitment to learning urban change as a messy process and to be responsive to difference.

As the quote from Calvino in the introduction to this chapter reminds us, the process of learning the city emerges from our engagement with exclusions, incongruences and contradictions; no matter how far or close we travel, cities only exist through their exceptions.

## Note

1 The ESD Practice Module is part of a full-time Masters planning degree. It runs over three academic terms, culminating in a period of overseas fieldwork in a city in the global South. Previous learning alliances have been established in Cairo, Mumbai and Accra.

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