

# Building R/evolution: An Educators' Journey with Ethnic Studies Pedagogies across Various Learning Spaces

Melissa Charles, Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education

People think that in order for something to work, it has to be complicated, but a lot of times the opposite is true. We usually reach success by putting the simple truths that we know into practice  
– Assata Olugbala Shakur

How does one build r/evolution? I feel I have spent the better part of my life asking myself (and others) this question. In seeking answers, I have found myself working as a faith-based organizer in a predominantly white space. I have found myself fraternizing with entrepreneurs and business-minded folks working towards the next great social endeavor. I have found myself studying the ins and outs of non-profits. I have found myself writing local policy promoting the use of restorative systems of accountability. I have found myself on the front lines, fists up, marching. I have found myself sitting in plenty of seats at plenty of tables, advocating for change.

As my experiences increased and my perspectives continued to shift, I found myself organizing in Pan-Afrikan<sup>67</sup>(or Afro-Indigenous) r/evolutionary spaces, volunteering my time to build tangible programs in pursuit of establishing self-determined communities. I have found myself centering my own healing—engaging practices of rest, somatics, and facing generational trauma head-on.

All throughout I have found myself a learner: studying, educating and learning some more. In order to build r/evolution, I quickly learned the importance of studying re/volution and the oppressive conditions leading to its necessity. I gained a deeper understanding of the truth that there is no single way to achieve our collective liberation and that if we are to survive in this world, we must be willing to learn, adapt and evolve. It is imperative.

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<sup>67</sup> Throughout this piece, the term Pan-Afrikan/Afrikan is used to refer to all indigenous and ethnic groups of Afrikan descent who now exist globally as a result of diaspora, dispersion, migration and miscegenation. It refers to a sociopolitical acknowledgement of a movement intended to promote solidarity between all of these groups of Afrikan descent across race, class, faith, sexuality, gender, tribe, ethnicity as well as other social identifiers. The use of the “k” in the spelling of Afrika is intentional and represents self-definition and an acknowledgement of the traditional languages of the Afrikan continent which primarily make use of the “k” as linguists.

Too many movements have failed because of their ignorance or unwillingness to center political education and adapt accordingly. In her assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Black Panther Party, r/evolutionary Assata Shakur (2001) said:

I am convinced that a systematic program for political education, ranging from the simplest to the highest level, is imperative for any successful organization or movement for Black liberation in this country. The Party had some of the most politically conscious sisters and brothers as members, but in some ways, it failed to spread that consciousness to the cadre in general. I also thought it was a real shame the BPP didn't teach Panthers organizing and mobilizing techniques. Some members were natural geniuses at organizing people, but they were usually the busiest comrades with the most responsibility. (p. 222)

At the time, she understood the necessity of widespread, accessible political education for the masses. R/evolutionary leaders Kwame Nkrumah and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. each vocalized their learnings of the ways, in hindsight, their work could have been more cognizant of the nefarious ways oppressive systems evolve to destroy progress towards liberation—Nkrumah (1965) in his analysis of the impacts neo-colonialism post-Ghanaian Independence and King (1968) in his famous quote about integrating into a burning house. Scholars such as Reverend Kapya Kaoma (2009) and Dr. Ula Taylor (2015) further highlight the threats liberation movements face when not politically educated and informed using intersectional understandings—Kaoma by exposing us to the promotion of homophobia within the African-diasporic community as a tactic of western imperialism, and Taylor in her detailing of the compromises women in the Nation of Islam [and other nationalist movements] make at the hands of the patriarchy.

What is clear from the reflections of these notable r/evolutionary movement leaders and scholars is that there is a necessary level of humility, introspection and willingness to engage as a lifelong learner with which those working in the realm of r/evolutionary struggle should be moving in the world.

Education serves as the cornerstone of any society, civilization, and movement. Where there exists a way of life, there must be processes for acculturating and assimilating new generations into a community's cultural ways of living. Early agricultural and indigenous forms of education centered around maintaining traditions via storytelling and providing skills related to homesteading. Similarly, capitalist societies center a form of education that promotes efficient productivity, conformity, obedience and amerikkkan nationalism (as depicted through their banking models of learning, use of "lines" and hand-raising, western curricula, recitation of the pledge of allegiance, compulsory attendance policies, and punitive forms of accountability). In his book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) connects this idea of education and knowledge production (or lack thereof) to the reality that our systems of education are structured in a way that reproduce broader social, political and economic goals.

The African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) understood this when they established over 140 primary schools within their "liberated zones" as they fought for their independence from Portuguese colonization and western imperialism (Borges, 2019). The leaders of the Cuban Revolution understood this when, immediately following their independence they launched a country-wide literacy campaign to ensure one of the highest literacy rates of all countries worldwide to this day (Murphy, 2012). The Zapatistas understood this when they

encouraged the implementation of schooling which emphasized indigenous teaching and practices for the young people in their liberated territories. Both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement understood this when they opened the Oakland Community School in California and Heart of the Earth School in Minneapolis, Minnesota as alternative schooling systems in alignment with their 1960s demands for self-determination and sovereignty.

One thing all of these r/evolutionary educational projects share is the way they employ what we now refer to as “ethnic studies pedagogies” to ground their work. Manning Marable’s (2000) look at the original “Justification for Black Studies,” which served as the catalyst for Ethnic Studies, emphasizes the goals to “oppose the Liberal-Facist ideology . . . to prepare Black students for direct participation in Black community struggles, and to define themselves as responsible to and for the future success of that community . . .” (p. 7) and promote their overall right to “democratic rights, Self-determination and Liberation” (p. 7). Faculty leader of the Black Studies revolt at SFSU is quoted saying “we must take our skills to the Black community” (p. 9). As such, the curriculums of these r/evolutionary projects focused on teaching knowledge and skills relevant to the students’ socio-ethnic backgrounds and aligned with their day to day lives/economies. Rather than emphasize a “banking model” or “memorization” as a means of learning and assessment, they create physical sites of experiential learning and employ creative student-centered methods for determining “academic growth.” As opposed to emphasizing a pricey western degree (Bachelors, Masters, Doctorate) as required validation to be a sharer of knowledge, they encourage and rely on families, community members and committed volunteers to bring their skills and serve as classroom educators in support of their overall mission of self-determination. Nurturing language and literacy remain central to these social movements.

### **Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education (MXA)<sup>68</sup>**

My journey as an educator began in 2010 when I was still an undergraduate student. I had the opportunity to teach a college-level first year experience course completely on my own and found myself working as a teachers’ assistant in a K-1 classroom. Early on, I drew upon my own experiences with schooling systems as a way to engage teaching differently. Throughout my schooling experience, I had been on the receiving end of racist practices, not relatable curricula, inattentive educators, intentionally whitewashed histories, and disengaging pedagogies. As a new educator, I sought to do the opposite. While I didn’t have a word for it at the time, I was focused on engaging ethnic studies pedagogies in my role as an educator. I spent hours poring over information on the internet to make sure I was using the most dynamic and inclusive teachings. I honed my practice as a facilitator to encourage creative discourse and varied yet engaging classroom activities. I expanded my perspective on “achievement” to enact formative and developmental assessment and evaluation systems. Most importantly, I intentionally incorporated relationship building with my students as a core element of my practice. This way of teaching

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<sup>68</sup> Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education is a Full Time, K-8 Community Liberation School which is modeled after numerous R/evolutionary Education & Community Schooling Projects. It takes its name from Malcolm X’s (then, el-hajj Malik El-Shabazz) 1964 Speech at the Founding Rally for the Organization for Afro-American Unity where he called on the Black Community to establish their own schools. You can learn more about MXA’s origins and pedogeological influences in the dissertation titled *Pedagogies of Love: Militant Education and the Development of Liberation Schools on Turtle Island*. You can find us on our Instagram page: @916mxa.

followed me all the way through my nearly 15 years as an educator in the classroom and organizing spaces until I suddenly found myself affirmed and dignified in my role as an educator seeking my next best step to fulfill my role as a *r/evolutionary educator* for my people. This is what eventually led to my co-founding of Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education on Nisenan Land, or what is today referred to as Sacramento, California.

Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education (MXA) serves as a socialist experiment of how community-centered education for Afrikan & Indigenous youth can work in practice. It is a full time, K-8 liberation school which pulls from the pedagogies and legacies of various revolutionary schooling projects including the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community Schools, the Zapatistas True Schools, The African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC)'s forest schools, and the American Indian Movement's Heart of the Earth School. MXA was founded by myself and my comrades who had already been engaged in our communities as long-time educators and organizers. As organizers engaged in Pan-Afrikan Praxis, we understood our roles as "the people" with a shared capacity to employ self-determined solutions to the problems which plague our communities; including but not limited to houselessness, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, environmental racism, and systemic violence and brutality. As educators in the TK-16 environment, we experienced firsthand the colonial curricula, racist-driven disciplinary violence, teacher exploitation and overall degradation of all Afrikans within spaces of learning.


Given our unique vantage point, our self-determined solution to the problem of education naturally was to open a school of our own where we could center an Afro-Indigenous curriculum, provide educators with a safe and generative space to do their work, instill a strong sense of dignity in our learners and teach them from a young age how to engage as change makers in their communities all while resisting oppressive systems of capitalism, neocolonialism and imperialism. At Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education we believe in the power of love and understand the importance of education as a major steppingstone towards our freedom. Our students and families deserve to learn and grow in spaces committed to service their basic needs and developing their skills for the future. In addition to promoting learners to reach a level of self-determination as it pertains to their education, we hold ourselves and our community accountable to the following Community Agreements:

- 1) We show love and respect to our friends.
- 2) We communicate with our friends.
- 3) We know being here is enough.
- 4) We honor our ancestors.
- 5) We are leaders.
- 6) We breathe when we have big feelings.
- 7) We keep our space clean.
- 8) We try hard things.
- 9) We eat together.

As a founder and the Minister for Education for MXA, I have found myself responsible for developing this decolonial curriculum, coordinating the engagement of learning guides, training community volunteer educators, and tracking the overall progress of our learners as they align with our desired outcome that they become self-determined learners with a strong sense of dignity and a value sense aligned with our shared community agreements (see Table 12.1). At the time I am writing this, our school has officially been operating as a full-time TK-8 school for three years.

A true practice in community-directed mutual aid, we operate with limited funding which has found us housed in three different spaces dependent on the modest rent our team is able to afford. Every member of our team works at least one other job to provide for themselves and makes themselves available during the school day according to our diligent coordination of our schedules. Our school supplies, daily lunches, and other classroom materials are all 100% the result of donation and strategic community partnership.

Table 12.1. MXA Sample Curriculum Materials

MXA Fall 2023 Curriculum	Sample Weekly Lesson Goals: Back 2 Afrika Movement	Sample MXA 2024 Weekly Check-In															
 <p><b>MALCOLM X ACADEMY</b></p> <p>WELCOME BACK</p> <p><b>FALL CURRICULUM:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Back to Afrika Movement</li> <li>• Harlem Renaissance</li> <li>• Civil Rights Movement</li> <li>• Black Power Movement</li> <li>• Indigenous/Native Sovereignty Movements</li> <li>• Black Arts Movement</li> <li>• Black Studies &amp; Ethnic Studies Movements</li> <li>• Die Die Murtos/Ancestors Holidays</li> <li>• Black Lives Matter Movement</li> <li>• Survival &amp; Self-Determination Movements</li> <li>• International Solidarity Movements</li> <li>• Origins &amp; Principles of Kwanzaa</li> </ul> <p>ENROLLING NOW</p>	<p><b>WEEK 2</b></p> <p><b>THE BACK 2 AFRIKA MOVEMENT</b></p> <p><b>WEEKLY GOALS</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HONOR THE LEGACY OF MARCUS GARVEY</li> <li>2. LEARN ABOUT THE BACK 2 AFRIKA MOVEMENT</li> <li>3. REFLECT ON AFRICAN IDENTITY</li> <li>4. IDENTIFY BLACKNESS/APPRIATED IN THE "WHITE WORLD" TO THE DISCOMFORT OF AFRA</li> </ol> <p><b>MATERIALS FOR THE WEEK</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TIMELINE MARKER (1905 - BACK 2 AFRIKA)</li> <li>• INTERNET ACCESS</li> <li>• PAPER, MARKERS/CRAYONS/COLORED PENCILS</li> <li>• OPTIONAL: INGREDIENTS FOR COOKING LESSON</li> </ul> <p><b>KEY TERMS/CONCEPTS: THE BACK 2 AFRIKA MOVEMENT</b></p> <p>IN THE 1920s, MARCUS GARVEY LEAD A MOVEMENT ENCOURAGING ALL AFRICAN BLACK PEOPLE TO LEAVE THE OPPRESSIVE AMERICAN SOCIETY AND HEAD BACK "HOME" TO AFRIKA. HE BUILT A LARGE MOVEMENT OF FOLLOWERS AND ESTABLISHED A SHIPPING COMPANY CALLED <b>THE BLACK STAR LINE</b>. THOUGH HIS MOVEMENT DID NOT TAKE OFF, MARCUS GARVEY HELPED MANY BLACK PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THEIR CONNECTION TO THE CONTINENT OF AFRIKA AND TO FEEL UNIFIED BY THAT FACT. HE HELPED INTRODUCED PEOPLE TO THE CONCEPTS OF:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>01. <b>DIASPORA:</b> WHEN AFRICANS WERE STOLEN FROM THEIR ORIGINAL HOMELANDS, THEY WERE DROPPED OFF IN MANY PLACES ALL OVER THE WORLD. NOW, WE REFER TO ALL PEOPLE WHOSE ANCESTORS WERE ORIGINALLY FROM THE CONTINENT AS "PART OF THE DIASPORA."</li> <li>02. <b>PAN-AFRIKANISM:</b> A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT THAT WANTS TO UNIFY AND BUILD SOLIDARITY BETWEEN ALL MEMBERS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA</li> <li>03. <b>THE PAN-AFRIKAN FLAG:</b> A FLAG THAT IS RED, BLACK AND GREEN AND MEANT TO UNITE ALL BLACK/AFRIKAN PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD</li> </ol> <p><b>SCHEDULE</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>M</td> <td>MATH</td> <td>WEEKLY THEME INTRODUCTION</td> </tr> <tr> <td>T</td> <td>LANGUAGE: SHIBHEP*</td> <td>BACK 2 AFRIKA RESEARCH PROJECT</td> </tr> <tr> <td>W</td> <td>ART: ERSON</td> <td>ART: ERSON</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TH</td> <td>SELF-DEFENSE: BOKING*</td> <td>CULINARY</td> </tr> <tr> <td>F</td> <td>MATH: COMBINED "BOKING" STEAM EXPERIMENT</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p><b>INTRODUCTORY VIDEO</b></p> <p>TO OPTIMIZE LEARNING, PLEASE AND EXPLAIN PROCESS THROUGHOUT THE VIDEO. A BASLINE KNOWLEDGE OF <b>SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM</b> FROM THE LEARNING GOALS/TOB/PARENT IS HELPFUL.</p> <p><b>GARVEY WORKSHEETS</b></p> <p>MXA X ACADEMY VMT WORKBOOK</p>	M	MATH	WEEKLY THEME INTRODUCTION	T	LANGUAGE: SHIBHEP*	BACK 2 AFRIKA RESEARCH PROJECT	W	ART: ERSON	ART: ERSON	TH	SELF-DEFENSE: BOKING*	CULINARY	F	MATH: COMBINED "BOKING" STEAM EXPERIMENT		<p><b>MXA CHECK IN</b></p> <p>date: 9/30/2024 Name: _____</p> <p><b>How Are We Feeling?</b></p> <p>Share 1 of your answers to the movie questions</p> <p>What does freedom mean to you?</p> <p>How are you feeling?</p> <p>Flags of Afrika</p>
M	MATH	WEEKLY THEME INTRODUCTION															
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### Pan-Afrikan Visions for Liberation: Past, Present, Future

While working to build Malcolm X Academy as an opportunity to meet students at the start of their academic journeys—before they are exposed to the traditional schooling models of the so-called United States—I was simultaneously working at the collegiate level to establish an experiential educational Summer Abroad program through a Black Studies Department locally, called “Pan-Afrikan Visions for Liberation: Past, Present, Future.” At its emergence, I had been working at a high-profile West Coast Public Institution for over five years, where I taught an introductory course in Black Studies to cohorts of first-year Afrikan students while also serving as a Student Affairs support professional responsible for the holistic support and development of the university’s Black community. During that time, I grasped the importance of instilling a sense of dignity in Afrikan students. I also understood and uplifted both the historical and the modern-day power students hold within university structures and made it my personal mission to ensure students were empowered and supported in their on- and off-campus activism.

As I established more relationships and deepened my networks within the university, I had more opportunities to strategically begin to leverage (and extract) resources from the university to develop the capacity for our ongoing struggle against imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and neocolonialism. Specifically, I was able to create a partnership between the university’s Department of Black Studies and Office of Support for African American Students which allowed students to (a) receive six units of academic credit towards the Black Studies Minor, thus also making them eligible for summer financial aid support, and (b) provide additional scholarship funding to any/all students affiliated with the Office of Support for African American Students. A strong partnership with the Study Abroad Office who also understands the value of this program as Ethnic Studies praxis yielded an additional scholarship to all students specifically associated with the Ghana Summer Abroad Program as well as a special fund for low-income students. Structuring this program in this way was a key component for me in developing any Study Abroad program as financial accessibility for BIPOC and low-income students remained a priority alongside the importance of creating a “Back to Afrika” experience for Afrikan descendent-identified students as I have witnessed the positive impact that has had on their sense of dignity and empowerment at the completion of these trips. More recently, our program accommodated a student to travel with her three children (ages 12, 4, and 4) and I am wordlessly grateful for the generational impact this program is having.

Pan-Afrikan Visions for Liberation: Past, Present, Future is a decolonial education practice in strategically leveraging resources from one of the top public universities in the world—a space built on the genocide of indigenous peoples’ and enslavement of Afrikans—and redirecting them to support the return of Afrikan youth “back home” to Ghana to study the legacies of Afrikan revolutionaries and develop their own personal liberatory praxis. Through the six-week immersive program, students are taught about Pan-Afrikanism and the Colonization and Underdevelopment of Afrika and Turtle Island (see Table 12.2). They are exposed to various Pan-Afrikan revolutionary/resistance movements spanning from the dawn of colonialism to present day. They are taught to analyze and critique these movements through the lenses of Resistance Tactics, Economic Independence, Governance, Accountability Structures, Resistance to Cultural Imperialism, and Political Education Strategies. Finally, students are expected to engage their personal skills, knowledge and interest in developing a working plan on how they plan to engage a self-determined practice which supports their community in service of created liberatory, decolonial, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist practices.

**Table 12.2. Pan-Afrikan Visions for Liberation Six-Week Program Outline**

Date	Topic/Activity
Week 1	Theme: Impacts of Capitalism: From Colonialism to Imperialism Lecture: Impact of Colonialism & Slavery on Africa Why Are We Here?
Week 2	Theme: Revolution & Pan-Afrikanism Morning: Life Maps - Why Am I Here? Afternoon: Who is “Afrikan”: Intro to Pan-Afrikan Theory & Black Solidarity Movements

Week 2 (Cont.)	Theme: Revolution & Pan-Afrikanism Morning: Resistance & Nationalist Movements Afternoon: Assata: An Autobiography (Chapters 1-6)
Week 3	Theme: Revolutionary Self-Determination Morning: Economic Dependence & #LandBack Ujamma: Building Communities of Self-Determination & Mutual Aid Media: <i>Black Power: The Documentary</i>
Week 4	Theme: Revolutionary Arts & Culture Morning: Resisting Cultural Imperialism Griot Rising: Afrikan Arts, Healing & Cultural Maintenance Practices Afternoon: Assata: An Autobiography (Chapters 7-11) Lesson Planning
Week 5	Theme: Immersive Learning & Applying our Learnings Travel North: Visits to Kumasi, Lake Bosomtwe and Mole National Park Free Time Can Be Spent Reading & Working Towards Your Lesson Plan or Final Creative Project
Week 6	Theme: Political Education & Scholar Activism Morning: Assata: An Autobiography (Chapters 12-End) Afternoon: Political Education: Learning Our Hxstories & Uplifting the Peoples' Narratives
Week 6 (Cont.)	Morning: Wrapping Up - What Are We Building? Why?

While the coursework itself serves as a vital component of the experience, it is the immersive and experiential portions which underscore the purpose and intentions of this program. Throughout their time, students are exposed to the indigenous cultures, languages, and practices of West Afrikans through tours, classes, and engagement with community. They travel throughout the entirety of the country visiting historical and spiritual landmarks and engaging with the locals on a daily basis. Students are encouraged to draw parallels between the cultures/communities in Ghana and the so-called "African American" experience. The material conditions of Afrikans in Ghana is highlighted alongside our shared understanding of the material conditions of Afrikans in amerikkka. Since the onset of this program, I have witnessed students return to campus with an emboldened spirit of activism. Alumni of this program have gone on to establish community breakfast programs for the houseless, serve as core organizers for campus Palestinian liberation encampments, set into motion their plans for community gardens and transitional housing programs for formerly incarcerated folks and organize campus-wide cultural experiences for Black/Afrikan students.

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## Building an Educational Practice in Service of Collective Liberation

During my time affiliated with this university in question, I was also responsible for securing the funding and a half-acre plot of land for a community farm which currently operates both as an educational agriculture project for undergraduate students and as the primary source of fresh produce distributed across the city of Oakland via a grassroots r/evolutionary Pan-Afrikan organization. I have similarly expanded my work within Malcolm X Academy's parent organization, Neighbor Program, to connect our farming curriculum and literacy curriculum to their grocery distribution program and their political prisoner program.

My journey from a curious carefree learner to a student of colonial models of schooling and eventually back to a curious and inquisitive student-teacher to an organizer who eventually merged my scholarship with my practice, have all fed into the orientation I hold today as an educator. For me, education underscores r/evolution, change, and liberation from the systems that oppress us.

Early crusaders and faith-based missionaries were built on the concept of sharing (or imposing) a way of being/life on foreign communities via forceful or otherwise coercive educational practices. Later, as European conquerors mastered the practice of colonization, they quickly engaged systems of education (i.e., Boarding Schools) to force the assimilation of Indigenous communities into colonial ways of being by stripping them of their language and teaching demonized depictions of their original customs and practices. To protect the practice of chattel slavery and the profit it generated, they again made use of systems of education (religious teachings, withholding access to reading, etc.). More than simply uplift their practices of domination, the educational systems built to maintain these systems are intentionally designed to suppress liberatory ones.

Just as systems of education build and maintain oppressive systems of domination which have systematically marginalized Third World peoples, so too must Third World peoples be intentional about shaping education to resist the violence that imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and neocolonialism fuel. Just as r/evolutionaries are concerned with the material needs of the people and decolonization practices we employ to achieve liberation, so too must we be concerned with the political education and consciousness-building practices that guide our work. Doing so will help prevent us from making the same mistakes of those who've come before us and help draw more people into a shared understanding of what our liberation can look like and how we can achieve it.

This understanding sat at the foundation of the leaders of the Third World Liberation Front and the organizers of the movement for Ethnic Studies. It is what underscores Assata Shakur's declaration:

The schools we go to are a reflection of the society that created them. No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. (p. 181)

My journey with employing ethnic studies pedagogies across various learning spaces is my response in practice: no one is going to give it to us, so we must build it ourselves.



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