

Lessons from utopia: Reflections on ‘peak transformative experiences’ in a university studio in Auroville, India

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Abstracts

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Why is it important to learn in communities with **utopian** ideals and experimental praxes, and what can these experiences teach us about designing and facilitating transformative learning? This chapter examines a global studio that took students from the Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation (BCII) at the University of Technology Sydney to the intentional community Auroville, in India. We identify principles of educational design that might create enabling conditions for ‘**peak transformative experiences**’ within this learning context. These design principles consider everything from location qualities and philosophy of place, to assessments and facilitated provocations for expansion of consciousness and integration of **whole being** and many ways of knowing.

A. INTRODUCTION

I'm waiting for my students to arrive at my Auroville guest house with trepidation and the thrill of anticipation. The air is pulsing with possibilities. In Auroville it's hard not to feel it, this future unfolding: and like all futures it's emergent, unpredictable. Who knows how the next three weeks will unravel? I have one big expectation and it's the hope that every student will 'get' Auroville and that they'll be transformed and inspired in the process, as I have been on so many visits. I hope that they won't leave the same as they arrived – that they'll never un-see the possibilities of what they have seen here – and that they'll take everything they've learned back to their homes to transform their worlds and our systems that are so ripe for change. (My personal definition of transformative learning.) No small ambition – and my expectations go far beyond the notion of any assessment task. But I also have a looming fear that they might not leave their cynicism at the door, that they will bring too much of their previous world to bear on this one, complete with its judgements and confines, and that they will lose this opportunity to understand what change is possible and how they might think differently about their futures. I fear that they may

feel threatened by Auroville's spirituality (albeit all-inclusive, beyond the notion of any singular religion), and that this might be too large to reconcile with their secular understanding of what a university education should entail. But I also have faith... in them...(Bem)

This is an inquiry that sets out to create and observe transformative learning within a three-week global studio in Auroville, an intentional community in India. This global studio is an elective within the fourth-year of the Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation (BCII) at the University of Technology Sydney (Australia) .¹ Throughout the BCII degree we experiment with new ways of learning, working, conducting research, which, most importantly, provides a context for understanding the potential of transformative learning for transforming self and society (Kligyte et al., 2019). What better way to culminate the transformative learnings than to bring BCII students to Auroville, which has been

¹ <https://www.uts.edu.au/future-students/transdisciplinary-innovation/undergraduate-courses/creative-intelligence-and-innovation>

experimenting with spiritualised individual and societal transformation (see Clarence-Smith, 2019) for over 50 years. BCII students study innovation through the lens of systems change, and as Auroville has conducted many successful experiments in social, environmental, educational and economic practices, it provided the ideal context for immersive global learning, outside the four walls of a classroom.

By taking students from a highly experimental degree (BCII) into an experimental society (Auroville), we witnessed experiences described by students, facilitators and Aurovilians as including an expanded awareness of self, of nature, of their cohort and of a fresh connection to lived human and beyond-human unity. In this chapter, we define these as 'peak transformative experiences': intense and profound moments of ineffable illuminations and discoveries, sometimes even spiritual or mystical states of consciousness, which, with processes of meaning-making and integration, can transform perceptions and enactions of self, identity, intrinsic values, and ways of being in society. We further uncover and synthesise the enabling conditions of these peak transformative experiences, and consider their relevance for transformative learning.

B. LEARNING CONTEXT: THE BCII ‘GLOBAL STUDIO’ IN AUROVILLE

BCII is a multi-award-winning transdisciplinary degree that encompasses high-level critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, invention, complexity, innovation, future scenario building and entrepreneurship/social entrepreneurship.² Students study together in a combined, accelerated degree from 25 other core degrees from each faculty at the University of Technology Sydney. Since there is no way we can teach students from diverse disciplines knowledge at any depth, our focus is on developing lifelong learners who can manage uncertainty, work collaboratively and creatively, and learn well beyond the parameters of their discipline. The ultimate goal is that students transform themselves and their society as they progress, a goal that aligns neatly with the philosophy and mission of **Auroville**. For some leading educators, a focus on ‘**being**’

²www.uts.edu.au/future-students/transdisciplinary-innovation/undergraduate-courses/creative-intelligence-and-innovation.

(ontology) rather than simply ‘knowing’ (epistemology) (Barnett, 2012) – or a ‘Curriculum for Being’ (Le Hunte, 2019) – is a better way to prepare students for the supercomplexity of our world and an environment where knowledge is more transitional than ever. By privileging ‘being’ over ‘knowing’ we also align with non-western practices and ways of knowing that intersect elegantly with those fostered in the Auroville context.

Auroville is the largest and amongst the oldest intentional communities³ in the world, with 3,000 people of 60 different nationalities, founded in 1968 in South India. Based on the living philosophy and practice of Integral Yoga, Auroville strives to become a spiritualised society in which “all life is yoga” (Sri Aurobindo, 1999, p.8). This embodiment of Integral Yoga aspires to gradually bring a higher consciousness into all aspects of life by means of a conscious individual and collective evolution. In the past 50 years, Auroville has envisioned and

³ Alternate terms used are communes, utopian communities, communal utopias, cooperative communities, ecovillages.

experimented with this **spiritually** transformative agenda in a multiplicity of pursuits: commercial and social enterprises, alternative schooling, environmental restoration, participatory governance, and a vibrant artistic and multicultural life. The township has been recognised by UNESCO for its contributions to the advancement of innovative, sustainable, peaceful and harmonious social, cultural and educational development, specifically for its living contribution to the experiential development of life-long learning (Auroville, 2018).

Auroville is a hive of learning opportunities for people of all ages both within and beyond the community in India and internationally. These opportunities range from new forms of schooling to volunteering opportunities, internships, and training within the community's enterprises, schools, farms, forests and research centres, to personal development workshops. University student groups, such as from the BCII global studio, regularly visit the community on accredited, immersive field trips and semester programmes to use these offerings and the opportunity to experience life within an alternative, experimental society.

A report on educational practices and opportunities for adults in Auroville reveals that an immersion in the Auroville environment facilitates an inner dimension of personal development (Grinnell et al., 2013). This learning orientation is grounded in Auroville's Charter: "Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages" (Auroville, 2020), and in its ideal of integral education, which strives towards the development and enrichment of all faculties of being and spirit (Auroville, 2016).

The BCII Global Studios in Auroville take place over three weeks. During this period, the students are encouraged to create their own journey of learning within Auroville. This involves developing relationships with the place and people, undertaking a creative residency or research project, and becoming aware of one's own transformative learning as it is happening.

C. REVIEW: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PEAK EXPERIENCES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Across diverse ecologies of transformative learning, unifying aspects are the concepts of deep change in consciousness, worldview and self-awareness towards greater openness and inclusion, resulting in changed actions (Stuckey et al., 2013; Lange, 2015; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Our chapter draws on this understanding of transformative learning, but we explore it through the lens of ‘peak transformative experiences’ for several reasons.

‘Peak experiences’ is a term coined by Abraham Maslow to explore the farthest positive potential of humanity (1971). To study ‘peak experiences’, Maslow inquired into utopias and individuals becoming the most authentic beings each could be. He believed that ‘peak experiences’ were fundamental to achieving positive self and societal transformation and should be fostered within learning institutions. Similar to transformative learning, Maslow (1971) saw peak experiences as those which help us listen to our self-identities (p. 175-177); develop a

“cognition of **being**” guided by intrinsic values (p. 176-177); strengthen a consciousness of radical interconnectedness and unity (p. 187), and create actions for social improvement (p. 347). As this global studio, with its **‘Curriculum for Being’**, took place in an experimental society with **utopian** ideals, the lens of Maslow’s peak experience is relevant to and applied in this case study.

In exploring the concept of peak experiences, Maslow was inspired by William James’ inquiry into **mystical** and **spiritual** states of consciousness (1902). James and Maslow concurred that the **spiritual** and **mystical** experiences could lead to transformative insights of self and world important for ‘growth in **being**’ (Maslow, 1971; James, 1902) - although the context for what they suggested comprised **‘spiritual’** were fascinating and diverse. As this global studio took place in a **spiritualised** society, Maslow’s and James’ notions of peak **spiritual** and **mystical** states as they contribute to transformative learning are relevant and therefore explored in this case study.

The discussion of **spiritual** and **mystical** insights in transformative higher education is growing (Duerr et al., 2003), including in Indigenous (Napan et al., 2020), cultural (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003), creativity (Netzer & Rowe, 2010), integral (Gunnlaugson, 2004; Osterhold et al., 2007), sustainability (Lange, 2018) and contemplative courses (Dencev & Collister, 2011; Hart, 2008; Morgan, 2012; Morgan, 2015), yet these discussions do not use Maslow or James' original markers of peak transformative learning to identify these moments or as a means of reflecting on what might contribute to these peak transformative experiences. This case study contributes the novel application of Maslow and James' characteristics of **spiritual** states to understand the experiences of the learners.

In addition, the ideas of integral learning are growing within the transformative learning literature as a way to "reconnect education with its transformative and **spiritual** dimensions in modern academia" (Ferrer et al., 2005) and to develop increasingly comprehensive worldviews (Gunnlaugson, 2005). Sri Aurobindo, the philosopher of Integral Yoga, is recognised as a seminal theorist in integral and contemplative ecologies of

transformative learning (Morgan, 2015; Ferrer et al., 2005); and, this case study offers a rare exploration of peak transformative learning in the context of the experiences which students of a university course have when immersing themselves in the society founded on Sri Aurobindo's ideals.

D. METHODOLOGY: TOWARDS IDENTIFYING PEAK TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND THEIR ENABLING CONDITIONS

All four authors have had direct involvement with BCII and Auroville. Bem is the founding director of BCII and leader of the global studio. She first visited Auroville in 1989. Katie is a doctoral researcher in transformative learning at UTS, a staff participant in the BCII degree and mentor of the 2020 BCII global studio in Auroville. Suryamayi and Aditi are native Aurovilians, who have each undertaken doctoral research on the community, and presented modules on Auroville within BCII, during the global studio and at UTS.

To identify peak transformative experiences, we first reflected on students' experiences of the global studio in light of two existing

frameworks: a synthesis of Maslow's characteristics of peak experiences (concepts offered by Privette, 2001⁴), and James's characteristics of **mystical** and **spiritual** states of consciousness (James, 1902) (Table 1). After reviewing our own notes and observations of the course through the lens of these criteria, we came together in a dialogic method (Labonté, 2011) to identify examples of these peak experiences we witnessed. In the section below, Bem employs a new ethnographic approach (Goodall, 2000) to share the students' '**peak transformative experiences**'. New ethnography can include creative narration of context through scene-setting and reflection of the researchers' personal involvement as well as reflexive examinations of observations of (in this case students') lived experiences (Goodall, 2000). Finally, we again used a dialogic method (Labonté, 2011)

⁴ We recognise that Maslow's characteristics are much more complex and interlinked (see Maslow, 1971, p. 168-195) than Privette's synthesis of Maslow's work, but we employ Privette's synthesis for the purposes of this chapter as she has honed and condensed these three key features in her 25 years of investigating Maslow's peak experiences.

to arrive at a synthesis of the enabling conditions that allowed for these experiences to take place.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE (Characteristics of peak transformative experiences adopted in this chapter)

E. PEAK TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES IN BCII'S

AUROVILLE GLOBAL STUDIO

*...The students arrive, exhausted but excited, in a bus they've hired from Chennai. A good start. They're absorbed in each other – I recognise this. It's necessary to take this leap together, and as much as **Auroville** is about personal breakthroughs and insights, it's a collective experience. The one giant, optimistic leap into the unknown that's shared. Students bring their own epistemologies and ontologies to individual sense-making, but together we're bigger than this – and we're about to witness many personal revelations about our connectedness. The educational thrill-seeker in me awaits these collective moments when the heat rises for everyone. It's like watching popcorn – moments of **being** when awareness*

and discovery are amplified. I'm acutely aware of the fact that you cannot force this 'transformation.' It happens spontaneously through wonder, gratitude, connection to nature and each other – I call it the 'contagion' of learning. Of course, some students come along accidentally speaking of the 'holiday' that they're about to take with their peers, but by the end they acknowledge that the inner journey is as profound as the external one.

*We all check into shared rooms together, go to get bikes together, and then come our shared outings and activities around **Auroville** and the bioregion. Learning about permaculture at Solitude Farm. Experiencing a sound bath with facilitators from **Auroville**'s Swaram music factory. Going to the glorious Matrimandir Inner Chamber, **Auroville**'s iconic temple beyond any religion, and introducing students to the 12 meditation "Petal" spaces surrounding the Chamber where they can meditate on 12 "soul qualities" such as sincerity, courage and equality. For the more pragmatic, a visit to the Youth Centre and the Treehouse Community introduces them to peers to broaden out their understanding of utopia in the context of their generation. Our co-author, Suryamayi, takes them for an Awareness Through the Body session, an experience that allows them to ground an*

*unbounded awareness in their physicality. They're also free to go on the numerous classes and workshops run by Aurovilians – for example on the Tamil traditional **spiritual** practice of kolam...*

**INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE (First engagement with
'kolam' practice in an **Auroville** workshop, Photo K. Ross)**

*And of course, the students have to do assessments, as per the requirements of our university, but I make sure these are fascinating and fruitful to help facilitate the integration of what they've experienced. Marking these assessments is qualitatively different from any other kind of marking experience common in universities, as student work is intensely personal, filled with acute observations of self. In keeping with Privette's framework (2001), the assessments are enriched with an awareness of the **significance** of what they are learning. Many of them speak of the need for radical change in their outlook; one student works with the notion of 'applied hope', with increased self-awareness of how a lack of hope, or action in the future, was actually quite debilitating before his moment of epiphany. **Fulfilment** is another marker that comes through strongly. Their*

*extremely positive experiences are described by students as a feeling of being more centred, connected or inspired – open to expansion. This school receives a 5 out of 5 rating in its anonymous student feedback survey – and students frequently speak about the experience as life-changing. In my feedback to them I write that the discoveries ‘were often explosive and overpowering, because they involved a completely new understanding of self and context.’ A deeper understanding of the meaning of **spirituality** beyond religion or faith is mentioned repeatedly, along with the realisation that students need to work on themselves. One writes about their initial cynicism of **spirituality**, and how they arrived at an understanding that a **spiritual** and pragmatic world has to exist as one. Others explore the feeling of the ecstatic – through poetry, dance and boundless experiences of self never previously explored. Many students describe their **spiritual** selves as having been neglected – one speaks of a realisation that they’d only lived a half-life without it. Several students had realisations of our human unity with nature, through close observations of the natural world.*

James' framework for peak **mystical** experiences (1902) is also relevant in many ways. The **ineffable** is profound. Many students articulate the fact that they simply cannot talk about the deeply rich learning that takes place and do it justice – an explanation of it is considered 'futile'. One student presents part of an assessment as a sound graph, because of the ineffable quality of their self-discovery. Others use poetry or art – they speak through the 'Philosophy of Clay.' They use symbols to capture their ideas (inspired by the symbols of **Auroville**). I see the **noetic** (or revelatory) nature of experience in every assessment. One student writes about herself in the third person – of the previous persona and current person, and the revelation and illumination of the striking difference between the two. The **transience** of the experience is captured again and again: thoughts of what they might wish to take home with them and how they will sustain the revelations they've had when they leave utopia and return to Sydney. One student wants the red dust of **Auroville** to stay on her when she returns... Of James' framework, the only criteria that applies less to student experience in our data seems to be the idea of **passivity** – that feeling of being held by a higher power. Although this may have been experienced, it

is not articulated. (Perhaps because active learning requires our students to seek out opportunities and become agents of change rather than simply passive vessels for transformation?)

*On our last night, we have a farewell party on the beach under the stars – all of us together, with some Aurovilian friends. We lie down on the sand and one of our students plays a sound bath of recordings from our journey through **Auroville**. In a circle, a few of us reach for words to describe what we've been through collectively, but the words don't do it justice. Nonetheless, each of us has been touched by the ineffable. For me, the experience is imprinted as a quest – knowing what is possible now. It's a quest that centres around the hope for a better world with transformative learning at its core. And this heartfelt question: if the world really is split up into **'peakers'** and **'non-peakers'** as Maslow describes (Maslow, 1964), then how might we help the latter to experience the privilege of this kind of high? (Bem)*

F. ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR PEAK

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

The peak transformative experiences evoked above were enabled by a variety of conditions prompted by the alignment between the design and facilitation of the global studio and Auroville itself.

1. Alignment of worldview of place and program

A strong resonance exists between the worldviews of the BCII program and the place of Auroville, allowing students to experience similar values in a double-space. Amongst others, both of these settings encourage conscious evolution, boundary-breaking, experimentation, liminality, and both believe in the validity of individual and collective reflexivity, and privilege multiple ways of knowing. Students in the BCII were invited to take and apply everything they learned about creativity and innovation over the past three years into this community. Several students said in conversation that the integration of a “Curriculum for Being” in a “place of spiritual being” helped them tap into a new understanding of self and their learning to date.

Important to transformative learning is the balancing of *brave spaces* for learners to step outside of their patterns and habits of comfort, and *safe spaces* for any disorientations that may happen; in other words, a blend of challenge and support (Gunnlaugson, 2004). The relationship between **Auroville** and the BCII program enabled a *safe and brave space*. **Auroville** offered the space for bravely experiencing and stepping boldly into a place totally outside of the dominant paradigm. The students' past experiences within the BCII program offered a sense of safety. The students have been in the BCII program for three years and had developed an appreciation for learning outside the dominant paradigm; and learning from risk-taking. They had developed a trust with Bem for leading them into liminal spaces.

2. Enabling processes and characteristics of the BCII program

Characteristics and influences of facilitator

The lead facilitator, Bem, with the support of other participating mentors, curated and offered diverse enabling conditions to assist with the manifesting and integration of these **peak transformative experiences**. Most

importantly, it is imperative for the educator to have deep connection with this type of learning, so that they are able to act as a bridge or guide for the students through the liminality (Ross, 2020). Similarly, travel abroad programs can increase potential for transformative experiences when the facilitator has deep knowledge of and connection to place (Morgan, 2010). Bem offers both. She has a lived and family history with **Auroville** and India, and has had extended stays in **Auroville**, both as a visitor and academic. Her extensive and embodied knowledge of Indian and Aurovilian philosophical principles and practices enabled authentic integration with the community for the students. As well, Bem has been meditating for many decades, within the Indian traditions, and has explored these realms of consciousness discussed in **Auroville**, and thus could model and provide support for the students in these situations.

Bem's embodiment of both typical Aurovilian and Sydney worldviews meant she was an experienced and prepared mediator for students in this liminal space wherever the discussions roamed; for example, helping students compare their preconceived ideas of 'yoga' from a Sydney perspective, verses yoga as 'a way of **being** in all that we do

towards growing our consciousness and finding connectedness and unity'. She also brought in Indian philosophies of consciousness expansion. For example, from the start of the first week, Bem led the students in discussion circles for developing the witness-self. These discussions were prompted with questions such as "how can we observe our own learning as it's happening?" Several students reflected on how developing their witness-self helped as a method of both observation and transformation. Developing a witness-self is a tenant of contemplative, transformative education, particularly as defined through yoga (Morgan, 2012), and this ability for continued meta-awareness is as valuable as the learning (Netzer & Rowe, 2010).

Having gone through these transformative experiences oneself, and having a meaningful relationship with the place enabled Bem to teach authentically; and, teaching authentically is crucial for transformative learning (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Sohn, 2020). She shared personal stories, joined shared explorations with the students, and helped the students feel comfortable bringing in their own authentic selves.

The influence of the students' mind-sets

An important principle of transformative learning is that no one is 'forced' to have a transformative experience (Moore, 2005), but rather the mind-sets of the learners play a significant role in whether experiences are transformative (Morgan, 2010; Ross, 2019). As the course could only accommodate 20 students, participants were prioritised based on their demonstrated openness to non-judgement, intentionality and reflexivity for this collective learning opportunity.

Influence of student cohort

The closeness of the student cohort can be incredibly profound in terms of enabling transformative learning (Cohen, 2004; Sohn, 2020), which was also witnessed in the global studio. The smaller cohort size enabled comfort in showing vulnerability and getting to 'deeper levels' of conversation of their shared immersion and insights. Together with close contact with the facilitator, the enabling conditions were in place for accelerated interactive realisations.

Learner identified praxis for brave and creative self-discovery

Throughout their time in **Auroville**, the students were engaged in collective workshops, circle discussions, delicious meals and inspiring field trips, but an important part of the studio, and transformative learning in general, was for each learner to engage in a praxis of their choice as a form of self-discovery – synthesised in the form of a creative, personal authentic assessment (Dencev & Collister, 2011; Netzer & Rowe, 2010; Sterling et al. 2018). Regardless of the form of praxis chosen by the students, the primary aim as communicated to the students, was self-discovery.

To support the students in deciding on what to do for their assessment, students were asked to reflect on their ideal *sadhana* (i.e. work as an offering in Sanskrit) or what their “Bliss-ipline” might be. In designing this assessment, Bem was manifesting her belief that learning should be something that is joyful, lifelong and life-supporting. This type of freedom (combined with commitment) created profoundly fertile conditions for nourishing **peak transformative experiences**.

Providing tools sense-making and integration of peak experiences

As the global studio was designed to be open and emergent, allowing for each student to follow their own areas of fascination and curiosity, it was also incredibly important to provide learners with sense-making tools throughout the three weeks (Naor & Mayseless, 2017; Ross, 2019). Reflexivity as a form of sense-making and integration was continually encouraged, in particular in the group circle dialogues – and sage questions were posed as reflection and meaning-making – a profound enabler for transformative learning (Duerr, et al., 2003; Hart, 2008). The assessments were also designed to support the process of integration, as demonstrated by this introduction to one of the assessments:

*Nearing the end of this Global Studio, we are hoping that you will have had many rich experiences of **Auroville**, met many fascinating people and understood more about the philosophical, cosmological and **spiritual** context of this place. Your next task is to **map your personal journey / transformation / discovery in any creative format you wish, and share it as a story**. Note: this is an individual exercise – it's about **self-reflection**,*

*personal discovery and connection to **being** and place. As this is an exercise in deep **self-observation**, when describing your personal journey / experience of **Auroville**, you may wish to use the integral learning framework as described by Sri Aurobindo, exploring the mental, physical, emotional and **spiritual** experience of this Global Studio. (What we are privileging here is multiple ways of knowing. You may also like to explore how you might take this experience forward into your professional / social / emotional / **spiritual** life after BCII.)*

Importantly, the assessments were incredibly open; they asked the students to look within to make meaning of the peak experiences without telling them how to do it. They were framed to prompt a deep, personal, unbounded, emergent, intuitive inquiry into one's own meaning-making, using 'multiple ways of transformative knowing' (Gunnlaugson, 2005; Osterhold et al., 2007). Importantly, students were also encouraged to translate these experiences into ideas for action or change, i.e. another form of integration for peak experiences (Ross, 2019).

3. Enabling conditions of Auroville

Auroville's transformative worldview

Auroville's reason for being is demonstrating and enabling transformations into a spiritualised society – with an aim of deliberately allowing a unique, deep connection and enquiry into interconnected self, society and consciousness. Students continually described illuminations of 'self', of experiencing true authenticity in others and seeing other 'selves'. As the notion of transformation is so explicit in Auroville, it provided a shared backdrop and language for students to experience transformation and to reflect on their experiences.

Diversity in transformative experiences of place

As a result of its integral philosophy, Auroville fosters and facilitates a great diversity of transformative experiences. Students were free to engage with this diversity, and experience new paradigmatic premises without being constricted to one particular field or aspect. In particular, many of them described peak experiences – such as their first awareness of an energetic body and the energetic bodies of others - during

practices of ‘Awareness Through the Body’ (Marti & Sala, 2006), an Integral Yoga practice developed in and by Auroville, which places particular emphasis on the development of the witness-self. Students also described peak experiences in the Matrimandir: some became spell-bound by the quality of its silence, for example, or another with *noetic* revelations about the need to live life with courage.

Embeddedness in and engagement with nature

A core aspect of being in Auroville is the awareness of nature and its role in the Auroville narrative, which describes the transformation of a barren plateau to a flourishing ecosystem (Blanchflower, 2005) replete with sustainability initiatives. The notion of unbounded, undifferentiated self in this context, allowed many students to speak about peak *spiritual* experiences of deep connection to and unity with nature - a kind of ‘beyond human unity’, which amplified their connection to the planetary challenges we all face. Students mentioned these *significant* experiences empowered them to take action in their own spheres back home, and were

able to gain courage and optimism through the narratives offered by some of Auroville's environmentalists and the ethos they provided.

G. CONCLUSION (AND A FEW PROVOCATIONS)

Students are gathered in a circle in Auroville's Botanical Gardens. Bem asks them to share with their neighbour a learning experience they've had before BCII that was transformative of their sense of self and the world. When they finish, she asks the group "Did any of those experiences happen in a classroom at school or university"? Not a single student raises their hand.

Our case study offers several important contributions to the theory and practice of transformative learning. Based on the work of Abraham Maslow and William James, and our lived experiences of the BCII program, we coin the concept of 'peak transformative experiences'. We define 'peak transformative experiences' and their impacts as: 'moments of profound, perhaps spiritual or mystical insight into self-identities, intrinsic values, and the nature of reality, which are then integrated into deep, lasting changes in worldview, self-understanding, and action'. This concept

and the peak transformative experiences identified contribute to our understandings of **mystical** and **spiritual** experience as powerful processes within transformative learning. We identify several enabling conditions for **peak transformative experiences** by offering a rare exploration into how students experienced an experiential university course immersed in a society based on Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, which has informed aspects of transformative learning practice (Ferrer, et al., 2005; Morgan, 2015).

We would like to conclude by inviting educators to examine how the enabling conditions described above could be translated into their particular contexts. For example, how could your courses acknowledge and immerse students within alternative ontologies and epistemologies? Where possible, we encourage educators to – ethically and consensually – engage with intentional or Indigenous communities. Additionally, how could your courses integrate a wide range of **spiritually**-infused field-based activities as learning experiences, and curate diverse, deeply-reflective assessments that facilitate students making sense of their experiences? Importantly, how could you emphasise a witness-self through various methods so that

students and faculty develop skills in observing their own transformation and its implications for transforming society?

In this time of such uncertainties, our educational programs have an enormous opportunity to be aligned with transformative agendas by integrating these types of processes. What unites these processes are the conditions they enable for a **Curriculum for Being**; that is, a curriculum that promotes peak transformational experiences and integrates self, society and consciousness. In the words of Sri Aurobindo: “It is only when we have seen both our self and our nature as a whole, in the depths as well as on the surface, that we can acquire a true basis of knowledge” (1939).

Index Terms

Auroville
Being
Curriculum for being
Mystical
Peak transformative experience
Spiritual
Utopian

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