

The stories **we tell ourselves**

by Rene Suša

REFLECTION February 2014

DEEEP citizens'
Empowerment
for
Global
Justice

European NGO confederation
for relief and development
CONCORD
Confédération européenne des ONG
d'urgence et de développement

DEEEP is a **project of the DARE Forum of CONCORD**, the European Development NGO confederation. As facilitator of the European **development education** sector, DEEEP and the CONCORD DARE Forum aim to be a driver for new transformative approaches to development and education through working towards systemic change and active global citizenship.

We believe that **research has a vital role to play in promoting innovation within the field of education**. We adopt a participatory, cross-sectoral approach to our research which enables us to explore a range of different perspectives and approaches to change. We regularly publish reports and articles with academics and practitioners that stimulate innovative thinking about new paradigms for development and education based on global justice. Our publications target development education practitioners and academics, civil society organisations and anyone interested in education and social change.

We are producing a range of publications under three different categories:

EXPLORATION

- This collection explores new ways of weaving development education into the daily practice of various stakeholders.
- The publications aim to reach a broader audience such as civil society organisations or active citizens, who are interested in global justice and global citizenship and are seeking inspiration to put these concepts into practice.

REFLECTION

- This collection provides a space to present and reflect on new lines of thinking within the field of development education. The publications are personal, provocative pieces intended to inspire further debate and discussion on a particular theme. Our thinkpieces target predominantly development education practitioners and researchers, as well as anyone interested in the transformative potential of education and learning.

- **1. “The stories we tell ourselves”** by Rene Suša

RESEARCH

- This collection provides research reports and publications which help to contribute to innovation in development education theory and practice. They act as a tool to stimulate greater critical reflection and learning amongst the development education community.

- **1. “Development Education and Education in International Development Policy: Raising Quality through Critical Pedagogy and Global Skills”** by Amy Skinner, Nicole Blum and Douglas Bourn in *International Development Policy*.

- **2. “Catalysing the ‘Shadow Spaces’: Challenging Development Discourse from within the DEEEP Project”** by Amy Skinner and Tobias Troll in *Policy & Practice*.

Published by: DEEEP – CONCORD DARE Forum
10, Square Ambiorix
1000 Brussels

www.deeep.org

Please quote this publication as: Suša, R. (2014) *The stories we tell ourselves*. Brussels: DEEEP.

DEEEP and the CONCORD DARE Forum are committed to the CONCORD Code of Conduct on Messages and Images and respect its principles in all publications. More information on www.deeep.org/code-of-conduct

This work is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0. International licence
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)



You are free to:

- Share: copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt: remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. In particular:
- Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- ShareAlike: If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original (copyleft principle).

The stories we tell ourselves

by Rene Suša

In the past few years global education (GE) has been subject to substantial critique on the grounds of whether it can deliver on its promise of inducing (positive) change in societies that would lead to a better understanding of global issues and the development of the necessary social and personal skills that would lead to more active global engagement. To the best of my knowledge, very little effort has been invested in examining the assumption that understanding and skills alone can lead to deeper and lasting engagement in the first place.

I strongly feel that the question « How do we know it's working? » from RISC's classic evaluation toolkit needs to be supplemented with new questions and tentative attempts at exploring them. At least two or three come to mind. First: "In what way is it supposed to be working?", second: « After all these years, why do we still have to keep asking that? » and perhaps « Why did we think it would work in the first place? »

From Maastricht to Monty Python and back again

Thinking about what GE is all about I surprisingly often remember the venerable Maastricht declaration that defines GE as *an education that opens people's eyes and minds to the realities of the globalised world and awakens them to bring about a world of greater justice, equity and Human Rights for all*. While I remain continuously sceptical of any definition, I find this particular one to be very inspiring and indeed a compass in the never-ending quest of learning. Leaving aside the notions of big concepts, such as globalisation, justice, equity and Human Rights, there are real gems hiding in there that have surprisingly remained largely unmined in the decade since its adoption.

At its core the Maastricht declaration speaks of education as a process that opens people's eyes and minds to the realities of the world and awakens them. Please read this sentence again – it is an education that *opens people's eyes and minds to the realities of the world and awakens them*. If you don't find it challenging, please read it again. I am reading it over and over and I am constantly being amazed by the ambition and beauty embedded in these precious words.

Can we even imagine what it would mean to be actually doing that, doing it with full passion, dedication and necessary abandon? Do we even DARE to awaken to the world we inhabit? Or are we afraid that we may find it too overwhelming for us to bare? Too astonishing for us to witness? At least for 'us', the rational, individual, sceptical, mediated selves that we have been building up for most of our lives.

If we are losing our capacity to stand in awe and wonder it could be because we are not learning anything new and meaningful anymore. If we are not amazed by the world every day anew then we are quite likely running in circles, simply deepening the path that has been trodden so many times before. The circle gives us an illusion of motion, but we are not really moving anywhere, except a few millimetres below the terrain every time we deepen the same track with the increasing weight of our knowledge and experience of the same kind of stuff.

How do we get off the track then, off the treadmill and into the forest, or anywhere else in the external or internal universe where we can again allow ourselves to be amazed again and again instead of being numbed by the same imagery of everyday? New paths begin to emerge as we develop our capacity to imagine them. So, can we imagine awakening to a world slightly less narrated by competing stories and scripts that we tell ourselves every single

day about who we are, how we are and what we are doing? About what is important, what is wrong, what is right, what is possible and what is not? Can we *really* imagine that?

Starting with the supposed evil-doers; are we willing to try stop blaming our politicians, bankers, advertisers, corporations, governments, bosses, teachers, friends, partners, parents and siblings – the system as manifested by all kinds of powers external to us for creating a world that we (too) have imagined into existence? And we continue to imagine it into existence because we don't dare to come up with something else, something unknown, something that we have not tried before.

Yes, there are of course some very shady people in powerful positions and they must be held accountable for their deeds, but on the other hand they may be doing a very good job undermining the political-economic reality precisely by being greedy and corrupt. Nobody can destroy a bank as thoroughly as a banker can. If we would like the 'system' to crash – so that it can change, we might as well applaud all the gamblers on the financial markets for doing such a great job in bringing it down. So instead of externalising our concerns, could we try to deal with something beyond our imaginary for a change, beyond the capacities that we already know we have? As Monty Pythons would have it: How about something completely different?

For the purpose of this paper and beyond I propose that we consider to freeze this very moment now, because it is likely the only moment there ever was. Freeze and examine the situation. If global education is about *opening our eyes and minds to the realities of the world* than why do we think it can be done by telling people where our bananas grow and how much the producers are being paid? Why do we engage in intercultural and keep forgetting about inter- and inner-personal dialogue? Why do we put so much emphasis on learning argumentation and communication skills and give absolutely no attention to the relational power of silence? And how can we even imagine of talking about peace without first trying to calm down our minds and hearts? Are we curious to find this out or are we afraid that the institutions that fund us might say – well... this is not global education and withdraw their checks? Tricky, unpleasant and messy questions. Precisely the stuff of global education. Messiness.

It is definitely not an easy task to get our hands dirty and reconsider what it takes to enable deep commitment and care to grow. It won't come cheap and it is dangerous as well, because deeply committed people often run the risk of getting into trouble for what they stand for. But we have remained in our safe spots for too long, leaning on what we know and procedures that have been tried before and not learning much about what we don't know and can't (yet) do. As so often, the scale has been tipped to the side and it is important to balance it out. To enrich all the information and all the theories, practices and policies with insights that come from learning that seldom, if ever, happens in schools. From learning that can't be taught from books or read from the screen and can't be transmitted through lectures or workshops.

This kind of transformative knowledge can't be taught at all, we can't work towards it, but we can create conditions that allow it to surface on its own. It requires us to allow ourselves to be touched by the world, so that we can also learn from it, not just about it. For that to happen we do have to quiet down our blazing minds that keep on explaining to us how things are. Simply put, we need to learn to shut up. Whatever emerges from that place of silence has value in our narrated world as well. It is not something ethereal and separate from it. No, it is there to enrich what we do in our daily lives and to inspire us to explore broader and deeper than we thought possible. It is there to encourage us to re-imagine and re-create our theories and practices and do that over and over again. It is a limitless source of energy that keeps the wheel in motion. It prevents us from falling asleep – literally. Remember Maastricht – global education is about being awake!

The importance of telling silly stories

What I would like to propose here is not that the issues that we normally engage with such as poverty, development, (in)equality, (in)justice, solidarity are irrelevant or that we engage with them in meaningless ways. It is not about that, it simply about the fact that we are approaching the limit of the transformative potential of information and cognitive knowledge. It is about enriching that knowledge with questions and methodologies –

whatever they may be, that will stir and reignite the deepest, most intimate yearnings within our souls. Learning about what is wrong and what should be done about it is just a part of whole story, a necessary part, but not the whole thing.

Just imagine – and I admit that it is a silly example: How many of us will stop using toilet paper (provided this is a solution), because we know that the source of that paper are trees that were cut in the Amazon rainforest (provided this is true), without which we won't be able to breathe anymore (provided this is a problem)? Not that many probably and by the time we start to imagine doing something about it, the problem will likely resolve itself by running the process beyond the point of reversal. The reason we might not engage is because the way the issue is presented is too abstract, too cerebral, too unreal and too overwhelming for us to get really involved. Of course it is just a made-up story anyhow, so we don't have to bother about it.

Now let's try a different story. A very short fairy tale. Imagine that you have a sister (if you really have one that's a plus in this case) that you love very much and your sister was kidnapped by an evil witch. The witch was very envious of your sister's kindness and beauty, so she turned her into a tree. A beautiful birch. For many years now you go to that birch every day just to be there and because she is your sister and you enjoy her company even though being a tree she does not talk much. With time you learned to discern some faint words that can be heard when the wind breathes through her branches and leaves. It feels good to be in her company and you imagine that she appreciates yours as well. One day, when you were just enjoying the shade she offered you against the summer sun, you notice a group of men equipped with chainsaws coming to the forest where your sister now lives. They are employed by a paper mill company and start cutting down the neighbouring trees. They approach your sister. Your blood turns cold in your veins. What do you do?

Now, both stories are made up of course. But depending on how much we allow ourselves to get immersed in any of them we might actually feel compelled to do something because we feel some sort of a connection. If we can move away from objectifying relations and begin to acknowledge subjectivity where it did not exist before, we might open up spaces for developing much deeper connections. If they are allowed to grow really deep, as they can be for instance between siblings, than we might do something we would not even dare doing under 'normal' circumstances, because we allow ourselves to be touched, and we allow ourselves to enter into a crisis state that boosts our willingness to act.

If we want to do unusual and extraordinary things – and the usual solutions have run quite dry by now, then we have to stop running away from crises and start exploring the power that they offer us. It may be very silly to imagine having a birch for a sister and the rational mind will adamantly refuse to do so, but the point is simple: unless we are true sociopaths we probably won't let someone massacre our sister with a chainsaw. Not even in Texas. But we might just as well let someone cut down a completely anonymous tree somewhere in the Amazon basin, because anonymous trees are not very relatable and there are plenty to go around. Sisters usually come in somewhat limited supply though. In the world of rationality all this is plain nonsense of course, but if we are looking for results and motivation for action, then I would propose that at least for the sake of trying out something new, we condition the mind to the state of a watchful guard-dog, but we do let other kinds of reasonings and rationalities slip in through the door and see how they mingle. If anything too quirky enters, the mind will bark, that's for sure.

Suspended between ideologies and fantasies from la-la-land

What I will try to argue for is that if we really want to become engaged not just as citizens, but as human beings that are part of the web of life (another story) on this planet, then what we are predominantly in need of is relationality. Threads that have to be woven between us and the world around us and they will have to be woven very, very tight. So tight that the difference between our egoic selves and everything else will begin to fade into the fabric. Again, this is not about the death of the individual or going insane in la-la-land (although it may occur as a side effect), it is however about diminishing the importance of our egoic selves, so that we can be infused in our skin encapsulated bodies with more than just ourselves, so that we may be able to connect beyond our form, both within and without.

We will find it very difficult to do justice to other people, other beings and even to ourselves for that matter, if we consider ourselves to be purely separate individuals that engage only in commodified relations with the rest of us. Every time we smile at somebody and expect a smile or a sympathetic nod in return we enter a market relationship. We give and want something back. The depth to which ideologies penetrate to the very core of our beings is anything but superficial, it is terrifying actually. This is why it is quite rare for us to simply smile. Usually we smile for a reason. Or a reward. Scary.

It still is a tough bite for me to swallow, but I do believe (faith in social sciences?) that questions of justice, solidarity, empathy are primarily questions of identification. As long as there is an 'other' that we perceive as distinct from ourselves and thus not very much relatable we are probably not going to treat that other with the respect she deserves. We will continue to deal with the problems of intercultural (or any other kind of) dialogue as if we are merely dealing with issues of difference and similarity. Both are visible and tangible and thus their visibility obscures a more fundamental presumption that underpins all our relations. It is the presumption of separateness between us and everything else that remains something we almost never touch upon, because we can't see it due to its omnipresence. Yet it is nothing but another story, another script.

A script so persistent and so powerful that it is causing even personality splits within us and which causes us to lose touch with ourselves to the point where we develop and nurture a double (narcissist) self- image – an external, more or less socially desirable mask and our true and usually less acceptable internal self – our hidden inner 'other'¹. As long as we keep on doing that we are not going to be able to even treat ourselves with the respect we deserve. Then how can we expect to share with others something we don't have in the first place?

Elephants in the room and skeletons from the closet

It seems reasonable to suggest that healing the gaps that we have created within and without ourselves is one of the ways towards a more inclusive and uncoercive engagement with the world around us. We would most likely be less afraid of letting go of our scripts and agendas, if we would be able to perceive other scripts and agendas as 'somehow' ours as well. But in order to be able to do that we first have to find ways of coming home to ourselves. And there are many, many ways to achieve that, however most of them are ignored and discredited, some are ridiculed and a few are even illegal.

It is our loss, because already some of the more benign forms, such as storytelling, playing certain types of music or connecting through expressive dance and other types of art already have incredible transformative power. We don't necessarily have to go through a rite of passage, meditate, jump off a cliff, or spend ten years on dr. Sigmund's sofa to get to know something about ourselves. Anything counts to some degree. However, we have been very successful in storing away so many of these paths that can take us closer home to our true unified selves on the same shelf of cookie jars with labels such as: primitive, subjective, esoteric, irrational, Eastern, occult, therapeutic, exotic, childish. And we are still quite willing to do whatever it takes to prevent us from facing ourselves, even if it means destroying the world we live in.

But what is really that nasty skeleton in the closet that we keep pushing away and that we refuse to face? Just some part of us that we are unwilling to reveal or is there even more? Here's a terrifying thought: what if also every dreaded 'other' is simply - us? Every smelly junkie, every corrupt politician, every whimsy tree hugger, every brainwashed soldier, every deluded shaman? Empathy and understanding – why not try, at least as a game, to imagine people and other beings around us as merely slightly different slices cut from the same loaf of bread? Would we still want to cause pain to a fellow slice or teach/change/convert them for their 'own good'?

Probably there would be less of that, but that does not mean that we would suddenly agree with everything the other slices might be doing. No, it would however allow us to engage with this disagreement without the urge to

¹ A Gollum to our Frodo. But who destroyed the Ring in the end? The public hero, the chosen one that everyone put their bets on, failed. But the shadow character, the bad guy, got his reward and subsequently his doom as well. Thus the world was saved and renewed. The reference is to the characters in Tolkien's popular saga Lord of the Rings.

annihilate the other slices. And if we are all cut from the same dough then we do not have to make everyone be like us, because fundamentally this is how they already are, right? We can do other slices justice by acknowledging their own paths of learning and whatever they are learning has value for the whole loaf as well.

Now, allegedly global education should be about moving towards a more just and sustainable world, somewhere in the unforeseeable and undefinable future. But how about right now? How about today, this very minute? Is that another unpleasant question? If so, why is it unpleasant and where does it touch us? What does it imply? Change? Deep, fundamental change? Isn't that what we are talking about all the time?

We are supposed to change the world and yet we so seldom ask ourselves about our true potentials. How can we even know what is collectively possible if we are not aware of our personal power? How can we know what our powers are if we don't ask ourselves who we are? How can we change patterns of behaviour or attitudes that we don't know we have? How can we reach out to others if we don't know where we stand? These are not philosophical speculations. The proposed questions have very little to do with philosophy or religion and any other system that will consistently fail to give us full answers. These are enquiries that no one can answer for us. And yet all the various teachings from the four directions of the Earth are not irrelevant either. They are signposts and meaningful scripts that we can use as we proceed further on our paths of re-discovery and re-membering. They also make great firewood for heating as we take further steps through the narrated coldness of the void.

The quest for new, more exciting mistakes

None of this is true of course – at least not in the singular understanding of truth. And the obsession with truth is precisely what troubles us. Finding the right answers, asking the right questions. How do we solve the problems of the world? How do we eliminate poverty, how do we make sure that the more fragile among us also have a safe home in which they can explore and play as long as they have to? Instead of always searching for the ultimate truth, that great algorithm that will crack the ever more complex and digitalized code of our lives, we could be doing other things as well. After all, what will keep us excited and alive if we get all the answers right?

Instead of designing perfect policies, perfect workshops and perfect educational resources – which are all an important part of the game, I propose to dethrone the quest for knowledge – not abandon it, but merely open equivocal spaces for the quest of the good and beautiful as well. These two have been side-tracked for far too long, so long in fact that we have almost completely forgotten what we may discover if we venture along their paths. And that is exciting, because we have very little or perhaps no idea of where we are going. Here lies a place where we can make new mistakes. Unpredictable errors. Nothing will compute, because there is nothing to compute. We'll have to draw our maps by hand, because no GPS will work in this terrain. Maybe our hands, our bodies will remember something that our minds have since forgotten.

If these words somehow speak to you they don't speak to you merely because they are true or untrue, if they touch you in any way it is also because they align with something within you that also feels good or bad and feels either ugly or beautiful. What happens if we observe not just our thoughts, but also our emotions and our bodily responses to the messages we are receiving and creating? What was your response to this text? Be honest to yourself about it. It's perfectly fine even if reading it is making you sick. I have no idea, how all this will be received. But I guess that if something is making us sick we won't be able to policy our way around it.

I do feel however that the sterility of knowledge and reason is insufficient for deep and meaningful change that we will have to achieve in a very, very short time. We will have to connect to the world around us in ways that will defy and challenge common rationality if we want to *feel at home* on this Earth. If we want to share in her beauty and her breathing as the air that we can imagine to be and not as the masters we can only fool ourselves to be. Our very lives are at threat, not only because we are destroying the capacity of the planet to sustain us, but also because they are in danger of becoming so empty and boring that they may not be worth living anyhow.



About the author

Rene Suša

Rene works for Humanitas in Slovenia as a facilitator of global education (GE). He is the coordinator of the GE working group at SLOGA – the Slovene NGDO platform and represents SLOGA in the DARE forum. His professional interests are tied to the questions of quality in GE, while his academic interests include critical approaches to global education, non-discursive paths of knowledge, ethics of silence and epistemological pluralism.

Rene holds a BA in Political Sciences/International Relations and is an MA student of Anthropology at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and a PhD student of Global Education at the Faculty of Education in Oulu, Finland. He is 30 years old and a father of two children.

European NGO confederation
for relief and development

CONCORD

Confédération européenne des ONG
d'urgence et de développement

development awareness raising & education

DEEEP

citizens'
Empowerment
for
Global
Justice

ENGAGE WITH US ON:

www.deeep.org

 [deeep.project](https://www.facebook.com/deeep.project)

 [deeep_project](https://twitter.com/deeep_project)

DEEEP is a project co-funded
by the European Union.

