Communities of Practice at the Cidade do Saber
Plural Citizenship and Social Inclusion in Brazil

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**Abstract:** I explore the relationships among state, culture and politics in the context of the largest educational project of social inclusion, local participation and citizenship in the Municipality of Camaçari, state of Bahia, northeastern Brazil. The City of Knowledge (Instituto Raimundo Pinheiro – Cidade do Saber), or CDS, offers free access to education, cultural events, and sports and leisure activities to economically disadvantaged children and adults, based on the concept of ‘plural citizenship’, the understanding that wider access to education, culture and sports shortens social distances and generates sustainable human development. Concepts of social inclusion, local participation, critical thinking and constructions of citizenship are applied, tested and contradicted on the ground. Sustainability is experienced as sustainable human development; sustainable urbanism; environmental sustainability and challenges to the sustainability of CDS, a community of practice where stakeholders are potentially producing a new way to understand what it means to be a modern Brazilian citizen.

**Keywords:** citizenship, culture, human development, local participation, politics, state, sustainability, urbanism

Learning and knowledge are interconnected. Learning is a social process occurring within the context of engaged networks and relationships; knowledge is a situated product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed, a ‘co-production of the mind and the world’ (Seely Brown et al. 1988: 1–2). The concept ‘communities of practice’, first proposed by Lave and Wenger in 1991, has been applied across a number of fields to facilitate connectedness among groups. Communities of practice – organisational forms promoting learning through information sharing – refer to groups of individuals who learn together and assist each other in internalising and interpreting knowledge (Kapucu 2012). They imply a greater engagement for sustainability by local and global actors, lasting professional and community relations and a framework where ‘experts’ are equal partners with those who are in the position of learners.

The concept has succeeded in various disciplines. While there is a substantial literature addressing the concept’s positive outcomes (Edmonds-Cady and Sosulski 2012; Kapucu 2012; Lave and Wenger 1991), there is less discussion about its limitations (but see Haneda 2006; Kanno 1999; Toohey 1996). To contribute to filling this gap, this article addresses both the accomplishments and limitations of communities of practice formed organically in the largest educational project of social inclusion, local participation and citizenship in the state of Bahia, the Cidade do Saber (CDS). Although the CDS is not framed as such, I regard this project as an example of communities of practice where faculty, staff, administrators and students are potentially producing a new way to understand what it means to be a modern Brazilian citizen.

This article is based on ethnographic and library research conducted for nine months in 2008 and 2009, as the first social scientist invited to study the CDS. Data sources include field notes based on participant observation in the Centre’s day-to-day activities and every course offered; eighty audio-taped interviews...
Defining Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concept of communities of practice, defining them as social constructs that are self-organising and that ‘share the capacity to create and use organisational knowledge through informal learning and mutual engagement’ (Wenger 2000: 3). The concept has been applied to several disciplines and subjects such as language and gender research (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), second language acquisition (Toohey 1996), critical anthropology (Lave 1988, 1991), organisational knowledge management (Hemmasi and Csanda 2009), online communities (Schwen and Hara 2003), intergovernmental networks (Agranoff 2008) and cultural psychology (Brown et al. 1989).

Key elements of communities of practice are the concepts of situated learning, knowing and belonging. Likewise, the individual and the context are understood as co-constitutive within such communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). As Haneda (2006: 807) states, ‘individuals do not simply receive, internalize, and construct knowledge in their minds but enact it as persons-in-the-world participating in the practices of a sociocultural community’.

These communities provide organisations with a way to capture tacit or implicit knowledge by connecting people with similar interests, allowing them to encapsulate and share information (Hemmasi and Csanda 2009). Wenger et al. (2002) assert that most such communities are formed on a voluntary, informal basis and that this organic approach is key to their success. However, proven cases demonstrate that communities of practice can also be formed intentionally.

Communities of Practice and Marginality: The City of Knowledge

Brazil’s educational system is central in maintaining the country’s striking inequalities (Ireland 2008; Rosemberg and Puntch 2003). Education was shaped by the colonialists’ affinity towards classical and elitist training (Haussman and Haar 1978: 33). The Church and the elite believed that mass education was neither possible nor desirable; literacy for the poor was assumed to generate ‘social anarchy’ as late as the 1950s (Ireland 2008). These beliefs produced a system that combines Herbartian idealism and formalism, which assumes that the method applied to education is ‘scientifically’ approved, and therefore infallible (Da Silva and Davis 1996). Consequently, the student is to blame for inadequate learning (Ireland 2008).

Despite advances over the last seventy years, Brazil’s quality education is intimately related to wealth distribution, one of the most unequal and concentrated in the world. Geographically, most Brazilians without access to education or who are illiterate are in the northeast (22.4% in 2004); ethnically, indigenous peoples and peoples of African descent have the highest rates of illiteracy (Ireland 2008). Traditional public K-12 schools have a narrow standard curriculum and generally lack athletic and arts/humanities facilities. Higher education has been largely exclusive, with few non-whites admitted until recently when affirmative-action quota policies were instituted.

The Cidade do Saber (Instituto Professor Raimundo Pinheiro – City of Knowledge) or CDS reacts to this traditional educational system. It is the largest educational project of social inclusion, local participation and citizenship in Bahia, and one of the largest in Brazil. Not without political controversy, the CDS was inaugurated in March 2007, during the presidency of Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ Da Silva (2003–2011) from the Partido do Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party). While Da Silva’s government avoided direct provision of literacy, it introduced a new discourse giving priority to poverty relief emergency programmes and adult literacy. The regime also focused on fostering inclusive education for historically marginalised populations, including Afro-descendants, members of quilombolas or maroon communities, and rural populations (Ireland 2008: 725).

The CDS offers free access to education, cultural events, sports and leisure activities to economically disadvantaged residents of Camaçari. Luiz Caetano, former mayor and current federal senator, and Prof. Raymundo Pinheiro, a teacher and politician assassinated in 2003, envisioned the CDS. Mostly funded by the Town Hall (Prefeitura) of the Municipality of Camaçari, it is administered by the Institute Professor Raimundo Pinheiro, a non-government entity legally established as a social agency by the Municipality. Its mission is to ‘promote and democratize access to cultural, sporting and educational goods, granting ex-
cellence in the construction of citizenship’ (Soares-Palmeira et al. 2006: 11). To date, it has served approximately 90,000 children, youth and adults, and it is recognised as a model of inclusive education in Brazil, receiving six prestigious awards between 2007 and 2015.

Camaçari has approximately 242,984 inhabitants and is located about 42 km from Salvador, Bahia’s capital. Camaçari’s population grew in the 1970s, when it received internal immigrants working for the newly established industries (Gileá de Souza 2006). While non-residents generally portray it as a cultural backwater, the municipality is an economic powerhouse as it has the first planned industrial complex in the nation. In fact, Camaçari is one of the richest municipalities in northeastern Brazil, with a GDP of $15,891,624 billion (U.S.). Economic activities revolve around the petrochemical industry, the most important source of income since 1978 (Roos 2003). Since 2000, Camaçari has also attracted the tourism and automotive industries, as well as Poloplast, a conglomerate made up of twenty small companies. In spite of this economic growth, its social development has not kept pace: it occupies the second place in the state for its economic development index (IDE) but the tenth place for its social development index (IDS), with a poverty index of 21.3 per cent in 2000 (Gileá de Souza 2006: 107–8).

The CDS is based on the concept of ‘plural citizenship’. Whereas legal scholars define the term as the opposite of ‘national citizenship’ (Marques and Albernaz 2010), for the CDS it means that wider access to education, culture and sports shortens social distances and generates sustainable human development.4 As Soares-Palmeira et al. state, ‘the conscientious exercise of citizenship is the best way to transform human rights from intent into reality’ (2006: 14). Although not fully articulated in the development plan of the institution, the notion of plural citizenship recognises the existence of sub-citizens, the emergence of new collective identities in Brazil, and the social and legal issues that surpass the nation-state (such as international human rights).

The administration takes pride in offering high-quality education. The Centre’s general director, Ana Lúcia Alves da Silveira, noted, ‘Our students are people who otherwise would have not studied at a school like this. This is their only opportunity, and we cannot make any mistake’ (A.L.S., 10 February 2008). A critical characteristic of the CDS, which distinguishes it from other projects, is that it fosters the pursuit of knowledge to produce well-rounded, educated individuals. Its goal is not to insert them into the Bahian workforce (Figure 1). In other words, the Centre is not a vocational school, but an epicentre of knowledge to counter the limited social capital (Bourdieu 1997) of Camaçari’s population and to recognise its community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) by advancing social inclusion.

The CDS is divided into three coordinating units: Culture and Art, COART; Sports and Leisure, CODEL, and Pedagogy. It offers more than fifty musical, artistic, language and athletic activities, from ballet and capoeira to violin and water gymnastics. One of its most evident attractions is its infrastructure. In addition to thirty-two rooms for instruction, it has a library, the state’s second-largest professional theatre with 568 seats, a semi-Olympic swimming pool, four auditoriums and a gymnasium. It offers symphony concerts, symposia, theatrical and music presentations, and cultural fairs at little or no cost (Figure 2).

**Constructing the Pillars: Sustainability in the Making**

At the CDS, communities of practice formed organically around the institution’s foundational concepts. I focus on the communities formed specifically by administrators and instructors. I make a clear distinction between the administrators and instructors of the Centre, while recognising that there are individual administrators who share the more radical views about social inclusion education espoused by many instructors. Administrators and instructors agree that their work is to translate sustainability concepts to a wider audience to generate sustainable human development and environmental and ecological sustainability locally, regionally, nationally and globally.

However, precisely because the CDS is not a vocational school but one whose purpose is to foster the ‘conscientious exercise of citizenship’, there are tensions and conflicting views within these communities about the best way to run the Centre and its guiding theoretical principles. Some revolve around the extent to which the theoretical pillars of the school – social inclusion, citizenship and critical thinking – are defined and applied daily. Since instructors and administrators understand these concepts differently, their implementation produces divergences. Some examples follow.

Social inclusion, fundamental for the development of this project, is the most difficult concept to define and implement. At its most basic, the CDS defines social inclusion as the tangible possibility of integrating any Camaçarian – regardless of colour, gender, nationality, literacy level or motor and mental abilities –
without making distinctions. However, actual experiences demonstrate the difficulty of making this statement a reality. For example, at a planning meeting on 16 June 2008, several instructors noted that the social and racial differences that permeate Bahia were not left behind at the Centre’s classrooms.

The official definition of citizenship used by the CDS is ‘the rights and obligations of a person, based on respect for differences and the ethical relationships of people with themselves, others, and the world’ (L.M, personal communication). This definition is expanded and, at times, contradicted, in practice. For example, Isabella Neves, who runs a recycling workshop, defines citizenship as protection of the environment. For her, environmental and sustainability literacy (Moseley 2000) should be fundamental cornerstones of instruction; thus, students should understand the value of recycled materials in their lives. ‘If you respect the environment, you are already a citizen of Brazil and the world’ (I.N., 29 March 2008). For many instructors, an unofficial understanding of citizenship revolves around daily coaching on hygiene. These lessons are not administrative mandates, but most instructors carry them out. For instance, and although not related directly to her course, the karate teacher reserves a space in each class to discuss the importance of cleanliness, dressing properly and behaving appropriately. A more comprehensive understanding of citizenship, one that incorporates engaged civic participation (such as running for office or voting during elections), is not addressed directly at the CDS. However, in line with Freire’s ([1971] 1993) notion of conscientização (consciousness raising), the Centre has become a vehicle used by students, faculty and staff to express their rights as Brazilian citizens by becoming grassroots organisers. In this regard, the CDS has fostered a form of democratisation of public life, or what Holston (2009) calls ‘insurgent citizenship’. An example worth mentioning is the case of Arnoldo. Arnoldo was a young Camaçarian taxi driver unconcerned with social or political issues. While working the night shift in Camaçari, he was robbed, shot and badly injured. Resulting from this assault, he lost mobility of his legs and was confined to a wheelchair. After mourning his misfortunes for a period of time, Arnoldo decided to start anew by taking swimming lessons at the CDS. Soon after, he became so interested in and dexterous at the sport that he initiated a rigorous professional training schedule. Within a few years, he was representing Brazil at Paralympics games in South America. His story inspired several individuals in similar situations in the area, and with the legal and institutional support of the CDS, Arnoldo formed the Association of People on Wheelchairs of Camaçari (Associação de Cadeirantes de Camaçari). This association assists people on wheelchairs at the CDS and within the municipality, and works closely with other organisations in the state that aid individuals with special needs and attitudes.

The concept of critical thinking is based on Paulo Freire’s (1993, 1994) popular education framework, which was crucial for alternative literacy programmes throughout Latin America (Seda Santana 2000). The CDS believes that its activities – with their emphasis on creativity and motivation – stimulate critical thinking and self-knowledge. Rosa Bauman, plastic arts instructor, noted, ‘If a person comes to the CDS to find out about its programmes and then stays, that is knowledge that should be recognised and supported because Camaçarianos do not have the culture to make culture’ (R.B., 10 May 2008).

Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that three crucial characteristics of communities of practice are mutual engagement, joint activity involving a collective negotiation process and shared repertoire. All are present in the communities formed among instructors and administrators. However, control of resources and knowledge are intrinsic components of communities. While negotiation between the administration and instructors occurs daily, unequal relations of power exist.

Of the three coordinating units of the CDS, CODEL is the most successful in incorporating the Centre’s theoretical concepts into classes and presenting a unified front to the administration, thereby forming a coherent community of practice. Because of its many sections and the nature of its activities, COART has more difficulty embracing an amalgamated pedagogical approach. Instructors navigate between structured and less structured approaches (Stein and Rankin 1998), partly because many have had experience with social mobilisation and political consciousness. Thus, it is not uncommon that a course on recycling is taught as a course on ecological consciousness raising, or that a theatre course utilises Augusto Boal’s pedagogy known as ‘theatre of the oppressed’ (Boal 2006). To the question ‘Whose knowledge counts, and whose knowledge is discounted?’ many CDS instructors answer that their students’ empirical knowledge must be recognised. Therefore, they disagree with rigid curricula and view learning as part of the social fabric and a natural and inescapable aspect of life (Wenger 1998).

Although the term is not used directly, generating culturally relevant curricula is a key objective among COART’s instructors. Susana Teixeira, arts instructor,
provided a good example of the difficulties of reaching this objective. She was requested to teach six hours of theory followed by practical activities, but knowing the class population she chose to spread out the six hours of theory and combine them with hands-on activities, producing a very successful model for her workshops. However, after reporting on her approach, she was told to maintain the structure originally proposed. Susana and her colleagues believe that instructors must be flexible to meet their students’ needs. This perspective conflicts with the views of the pedagogy unit, which expects each unit’s curriculum and philosophy to be normative.

Conclusions

The CDS was conceived and funded by the local government in Camaçari, resulting in a top-down approach to social inclusion. However, almost since its formation, it has become a laboratory of community-based transformational sustainability practices (Figure 3). Thus, studying the CDS contributes to understanding how a framework for social justice in education is constructed, and demonstrates the complexities of creating an agenda that incorporates individual success and collective solidarities (Walker 2003).

My research points to promising outcomes regarding individual success. The CDS expands opportunities to children and adults otherwise marginalised within Brazil’s educational system. For example, ballet students (mostly girls) benefit from a partnership between the CDS and the prestigious ballet school EBATECA (Escola do Ballet do Teatro Castro Alves). Founded in 1962, EBATECA follows the method of the Royal Academy of Classic Ballet of London. A number of former CDS ballet students have initiated professional careers, and four girls and one boy were granted Bolshoi fellowships to train at the first Bolshoi School outside of Russia, in southern Brazil.

In a music appreciation class, adults of all ages and professions study Beethoven’s and Mozart’s lives, along with the staff, notes, harmony and rhythm. For most, this is the first time they have heard about classical composers or the art of music. This approach cultivates growth in artistic expressions, contrasting with what Gomes (2011) calls the cultural alienation produced by Camaçari’s limited opportunities.5

Another example comes from the courses run by Olivia Meireles, an artist with twenty years of experience using recycled materials to create art. Her courses incorporate discussions of global warming, carbon emissions and basic recycling concepts, while also teaching her students the techniques for making paper, transforming it into papier-mâché and using it to make objects of art. She wants to go beyond nominal environmental literacy to reach operational environmental literacy, which involves the capacity to perceive and take positions on environmental issues (Moseley 2000: 24).

Undoubtedly, the strength of the Centre – in addition to its stupendous infrastructure and considerable economic resources – is its faculty. The administration has sought out qualified and dedicated instructors, who have achieved tangible outcomes in their students’ lives.6 Instructors are patient and provide information that is suitable to the students’ cultural knowledge, while also being rigorous, disciplined and demanding. This mirrors Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities pedagogy, which acknowledges that working-class experiences are important knowledge resources, a model based on Freire’s pedagogy (Levinson et al. 2007), and connected to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning paradigm.

The larger question of collective solidarities are also present in the Centre’s curriculum. While most instructors agree with the value of offering ballet or ballroom dance classes, some believe the curriculum should be Afro-centred, given the composition of Camaçari’s population. Aside from capoeira, no other course connects directly with Brazil’s rich African heritage. The music section focuses on teaching classical instruments such as guitar, piano and violin. As a result, the Centre resists the production of what Prudente (2003) calls a ‘quilombo utópico’, an educational alternative to the uniculturalism of the official curriculum through teaching African drum percussion. Conversely, it could be argued that by offering Camaçarians the opportunity to sample a classical high-culture education, the CDS is challenging the uniculturalism of the official curriculum.

In an operation of this magnitude, not surprisingly tensions coexist. There are conflicting views about what should be the core goal of the Centre and whether it is realistic to expect to accomplish more than one goal simultaneously and competently. For some, producing Brazilian citizens implies instilling
students with a sense of order and progress, in line with the definition of Brazilian collective identity (Schneider 1991). For others, the CDS should be a laboratory for the production of committed social citizens, willing and able to hold local, regional and national governments accountable. The tension between offering students a taste of high-culture education and contributing to the formation of a more literate and well-versed underclass without any substantial social transformation is a constant at the Centre.

The communities of practice formed by administration and staff at the Centre understand their mission differently. The administration believes that matters related to family or children’s therapy, hunger, unemployment, access to transportation or disability issues cannot and should not be addressed by the CDS. The CDS should exclusively be concerned with social inclusion: fair and equal treatment of students and excellence in the courses offered. Consequently, if a student has been abused, its role is not to provide psychological or social assistance, but to incorporate and welcome the student into the school and not discriminate against behaviours that might be the direct result of the abuse. For many instructors, however, this view is somewhat myopic and non-holistic. Instructors experience the outcome of having to teach children who walk for two hours to arrive at the Centre, who have not had breakfast or lunch, or who have family or behavioural problems. In planning meetings, private conversations and interviews, many instructors repeatedly highlighted the need to offer psychological and even financial assistance to the most pressing cases of abuse or neglect. Many also called for psychological assistance for themselves as they felt burned out and ill-equipped in their jobs. Additionally, the Centre’s pillars do not include a fundamental discussion of embracing diversity. In fact, the concept of social inclusion used at the Centre obscures the recognition of privilege and oppression in Brazilian society. While individual instructors and administrators recognise that they are working with historically oppressed populations, there is no systematic effort to incorporate these conversations in the curriculum.

Ultimately, this project challenges the hierarchical Brazilian educational system from within. However, a few questions remain unanswered. How do we measure the outcomes of the CDS? How do its programmes prepare their students to take advantage of economic opportunities, thus improving their quality of life? How will a project not focused on providing new workforce skills produce well-rounded citizens with social skills that may enhance their opportunities? Contradictions develop as a result of the tension between the need to follow a mandate for critical thinking and the consequences of accomplishing the mandate for the future creation of Brazilian notions of citizenship and nationhood.

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Notes

1. Illiteracy rates for those over fifteen years of age have declined from 56% in 1940 to about 7% in 2012 (UNESCO 2012).
3. The Municipality of Camaçari includes three districts: Camaçari, Abrantes and Monte Gordo.
4. In the national rank of the Human Development Index in Municipalities, Camaçari has a IDH-M of 0.73, occupying position no. 2,319 among 5,507 municipalities (Gileá de Souza 2006: 109).
5. Today, the CDS has its own Popular Symphonic Orchestra.
6. With few exceptions, instructors at the CDS are not full-time employees. They are hired to teach one or more courses on a temporary basis.

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