THE PEASANT WORLD UNIVERSITY:
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A Concept Note by

Farhad Mazhar (UBINIG), Jacques Chevalier (Carleton University), Farida Akhter (UBINIG), Daniel Buckles (Carleton University), and Michelle Bourassa (Ottawa University)

AUGUST 2006
This is an invitation to engage in the development of a Peasant World University (PWU), an idea initiated by a group of five friends gathered on the Island of Canard Blanc in Quebec, Canada. A beautiful place coupled with good company helped congeal and provide direction to a dream that has been nurtured within UBINIG and among friends for quite a long time. This dream was written up in July 2006 and shared with UBINIG colleagues in Bangladesh for their input. We are now circulating the result, to share our excitement in this venture and to invite friends, always with us in spirit, to engage in another cycle of thinking and planning.

The thrust of this note is mostly conceptual. It emphasizes the vision we want to communicate to friends who share similar concerns about the exclusionary, hierarchical and patriarchal practices that currently prevail in universities and other centres of ‘advanced’ learning. We are deeply concerned about the current politics of ‘knowledge production’ and technology geared to maintaining systems of domination and control of ‘others’ on a global scale. What we propose instead is a mode of knowledge generation based on the principles of intellectual carefulness and human caring, a ‘shahaj’ (precise and simple) way to ‘ananda’ (bliss, joy in life) that is mindful of the greater web of life and cultivates the spirit of human solidarity, well-being, and joyful thinking.

Given its ‘visionary’ inclinations, the language we use is at times metaphorical. This is intentional given our wish to counter the mainstream metaphors of military and financial inspiration that advanced learning institutions commonly deploy, often without even noticing: hierarchies of classes, grades, medals, credits, accounts, subjects to be mastered, thesis defenses, devastating intellectual attacks, etc. The metaphors we offer to replace these will eventually be converted into practical steps to nurture learning strategies that can unleash the full potential of creative learning and human interaction. We are building these steps on the pedagogical foundations outlined in Part 2 of this document and the concrete experience of the Nayakrishi Andolon, the peasant movement in Bangladesh that grounds the PWU initiative. Although our proposal emphasizes the agrarian reality, we recognize that there are other realms of
human learning and experience that we would like to link up with in due time, such as health and medicine, engineering, education, and communications. For the moment, our task is to sketch the profile of a PWU, with the help of those who wish to contribute ideas of their own.

**Part 1: PWU Innovative Learning Principles**

The idea of a Peasant World University aims at creating an ‘institution’ of ‘innovative learning’ and ‘learning innovation’ dedicated to a ‘Peasant World’. Universities as we know them are establishments with a mission to create new knowledge founded on universal claims of truth, empirical and logical. They are ‘advanced learning’ establishments in a hierarchical sense. Lower-ranking institutions act as preparatory schools dedicated to the transmission of bodies of learning and technologies produced by scientists and experts endowed with proper credentials and corporate financial support. The university we are proposing is committed to generating new knowledge without the hierarchy of power relations built into the politics of mainstream learning. It is also geared to innovative thinking conjugated in the plural, where knowledge-claims are situated in history and are endowed with a sense of purpose. Our particular focus is on building an ‘institution’ capable of generating new and inclusive learning on agrarian livelihoods, bringing to the forefront the marginalized expressions of living knowledge. The PWU will thus seek to dismantle the existing hierarchies of knowledge systems, rather than claim credit for its own contribution to ‘advanced learning’, and create conditions for the appreciation and appropriation of all expressions of innovative thinking and doing.

The ‘Peasant World’ expression embedded in our proposal should be understood in the literal sense as well as in a metaphorical perspective. The literal sense points to a university institution fully committed to involving and serving the interests of peasants across the world, tillers of the land otherwise excluded and subjected to the politics of ‘civilizing knowledge’ and transnational business interests. In this regard the PWU will seek to dispel two myths concerning peasant societies. The first myth consists in the notion that the ‘peasant’ way of life is ‘backward’ in comparison to urban lifestyles, with the implication that progress takes place when
agrarian society gives way to industrial civilization through linear motions of history. In our view the simplistic idea that modernity comes into being and thrives on the ruins of peasant life and agrarian culture is a dangerous narrative that jeopardizes the survival of life on earth. The second myth is that peasant populations, by virtue of exploiting the resources at their disposal (as does any form of livelihood on earth), constitute a threat to a pristine Nature otherwise pure and unpopulated. The PWU will make every effort to dismantle these stereotypical views of peasant life and to underscore the Earth-caring values and the progressive lessons that can be learnt from a better understanding of peasant culture and history.

On the ecological plane, these archetypal values include a deep-seated ‘paysan’ attachment to a ‘pays’ (French), from the Late Latin word *pagensis*, inhabitant of a district, and the Latin word *pagus*, district — hence a ‘country’ forever located and interacting in a broader world. A peasant’s ‘pays’ has always been a portion of the earth located in a broader universe consisting of other forms of life dwelling in the underground, the waters, the mountains, the skies, and every imaginable realm of the universe. In Bangladesh
this profound attachment to the land is central to the livelihood of every ‘krishok’ (peasant), an independent worker who cultivates the land, to be paid back not in cash by his or her master but rather in kind by the Earth for his or her contribution as steward and caretaker of the land. Reciprocity between the earth and humans pursuing the good life is fundamental to peasant culture everywhere, finding countless expressions in mythology and cosmology. These are representations of life-affirming interaction on a scale that the entire world urgently needs to emulate.

With this attachment to a portion of the Earth comes a constant effort to achieve **food sovereignty and sustainability** — being able to co-generate with the world everything that is needed to sustain all life forms, and being able to make full use of everything that is created collectively so as to achieve well being and joy in life. This is a far cry from the pursuit of ‘economic growth or productivity’ for its own sake, and the massive waste associated with its immediate corollary, over-consumption. Productivism and consumerism are founded on the separation of ‘work’ and ‘subjects of labor’ from other domains of life and from Nature as well (the object of labor), as if only humans engaged in acts of productive labor and reproductive consumption. This is a naïve, anthropocentric notion with many unsustainable consequences, including the brutal impoverishment of the interaction of Nature and humans, reduced to ‘raw materials’, ‘means’, ‘factors’, ‘forces’, and ‘relations’ of production.

On the plane of knowledge, peasants are accustomed to celebrating the diversity of human experience, **skills and fields of learning**, those of men and women, the old and the young, the potters and the farmers, the artisans and the healers, the fishers and the hunters, the leaders and the priests, the dancers and the story-tellers. They have developed a deep understanding of the tangible expression, reproduction, and growth of **learning co-generated and distributed in multiple spaces** — located in the practices, the products, the fields, the animal wisdom, and the village campuses of living knowledge. They have created their own **systemic art and science** of combining
and integrating all aspects of human learning, dimensions that Civilization has systematically broken into institutional and social silos, including livelihood (labour), wealth (capital), reciprocity (market), governance (government), spirituality (religious institutions), knowledge (science), aesthetics (arts), love (family), and pleasure (sex and entertainment).

The systemic approach of the peasant ‘episteme’ also combines two key ingredients that tend to be kept apart in modern science and advanced learning institutions: on the one hand, the ability to pay ‘careful’ attention and apply precise thinking and mental activity to the examination and understanding of minute details of Nature; and, on the other hand, the vital ability, eminently feminine, to show a sense of ‘caring for’ and being ‘mindful’ about things and people that need attending and minding, including one’s ‘pays’, neighbour, community, and the Earth. A bold peasant and feminist challenge to university learning lies in this wholistically ‘thoughtful and mindful’ approach to living knowledge, an appropriation and nurturing of the world that is both empirical and emotional, instrumental and symbolic, practical and spiritual, precise and engaged, sustained by the logic of experience and the hopes of joy in life.

On the social plane, peasant societies have always shown a strong sense of close-knit community and interaction between all humans and life forms dwelling on Earth, with no hegemonic centers to regulate the entire world. They have shown a firm commitment to a longue durée history that requires resistance to anything that puts human livelihood and survival at risk, including reckless changes and violent actions that uphold systems of domination and exploitation of humans and other webs of life. At the same time peasants are known for their perennial engagement with the broader society. Far from being isolated from the rest of the universe, peasant societies have always been part-societies, part-territories, part-cultures, and even part-life-forms in relation to larger worlds (Wolf). Moreover peasants have always been and still are part-
peasants only, combining subsistence (and surplus-producing) agriculture with other forms of livelihood and fields of identity and solidarity, including gender, age-group, lineage, ethnicity, language, nation, religion, caste, and class.

The PWU will espouse this ‘glocal peasant’ (both local and global) perspective on a world scale, one that promotes people’s attachment to a portion of the world situated in the multiple identities and solidarities that now mesh in the global nature-culture community we call the Earth. The learning innovation enterprise proposed here will promote this deep-rooted sense of attachment to everyone’s ‘pays’ interacting with the multiple spaces of a larger universe.

The PWU is committed to promoting a learning enterprise that builds on the preceding values of peasant culture and history and enriches them in light of opportunities and challenges of our time. The Peasant World University we have in mind will set up activities that promote attachments to the land and the Earth conceived both locally and globally, with a focus on the issues of nourishment and well being pursued through food sovereignty, sustainable biodiversity-based livelihoods, and the ecological designing of rural and urban spaces. It will encourage an equitable, *longue durée*, low-risk approach to interchanges between human beings and the greater webs of life. It will foster a sense of collective solidarity and a communicative spirit to guide all encounters and *mixed cropping* and harvesting of living knowledge. It will nurture this great web of innovative learning outside the narrow walls of classrooms and college buildings. It will celebrate the diversity and synergies of human skills and the integration of all dimensions of human learning, creating fertile ground for collective action aimed at achieving the common good. It will also invite a feminist contribution to a full-fledged ‘care-structure’ engendered in the heart and the spirit of our learning enterprise. The PWU will take up the challenge that the current era is offering us, which consists in regaining our inherent ability to experience the world authentically, pursuing joy in life through the full integration of mind, body, and spirit.

The implications of these archetypal peasant values for a rethinking of university life and the challenge of innovative learning are far-reaching. They are essentially threefold.
First, university activity should mobilize all the powers of human intelligence and creativity. All human beings, without exception, are engaged in the collective creation and co-generation of living fields of knowledge. This is done through the application of complex skills, imagination, meaning, and sustainable reasoning to problem-solving activity expressed and reproduced in the material objects and the interactive practices that shape and emerge from our daily lives. Tools, machines, books, farming techniques, languages, the internet, airplanes, political institutions, kinship systems, the conventions of writing, religious and cultural practices, cooking recipes, etc. are so many teachings and tangible ‘publications’ of learning processes, living forms of knowledgeable doing that are constitutive of human experience and the world that we live in. By implication, there is no such thing as ‘bodily activity’ conceived as mindless and thoughtless experience, the kind that befalls workers and tillers of the land living off the fruit of their physical labour. Nor can there be ‘thinking’ as an activity fully devoid of physical labor, to be instituted as a privileged occupation and lifestyle granted to the educated and intellectuals alone.

Any university worthy of its name must hold on to the universalistic ideals and promises of a University life concerned with everything that is part of the ‘universe,’ with its attention ‘turned’ (Latin versus) towards the ‘whole’ (Latin universus) of knowledge, history, and the world. The challenge of universities in the global era is to create organized, formally instituted centers of interactive engagement and co-generation of sustainable knowledge and innovative learning. These centers would have as their purpose the creation of synergies between the living knowledges of people from all corners of the world, including the hundreds of millions of peasant reduced to the status and stigma of ‘have-nots’ and ‘know-nots’ with little to contribute to human history. The PWU hopes to make its own modest contribution to this universal vision by reclaiming the plural spaces of learning that permeate all spheres and walks of life and knowledge. It is committed to the vision of a World
Universe-City no longer catering primarily to the interests of the Old World or the New, to the exclusion of peoples of the Third World or the Fourth. If the PWU is to count and assign numbers to the world(s) it will support, the only meaningful figures it will contemplate are One (global) and the Infinite (local), both ranked as first and foremost.

Second, innovative learning should essentially aim at **resolving real life problems** affecting the world as we know it, towards the co-generation of living knowledge sustained by experience, adapted to its context, and responding to the pressing needs of the poor. This means that university activity should develop strategies to ground action in constant thinking and also thinking in sustained action. It should revolve less around the further expanding of physical establishments and technologies that become ends in themselves and obstacles to the growth of human wisdom. More importantly, it should make no concessions to the jealously-guarded enclosures of ‘cultural capital’ — a parochial locality of credits, credentials, patents, titles, and entitlements promoting business interests and ‘academic productivity’ for its own sake (in support of over-stuffed CVs and star-like careers). Universities should not dedicate themselves to the enterprise of banking, crediting and transfer of information, knowledge, and technology produced and possessed by legal subjects alone, more often than not in the interests of the few. It should avoid the parochial defense of isolated interests and localities, and the imperialistic attack on the entire planet or portions of the earth colonized until resources are depleted and the potential for life and survival is spoiled.

Third, the PWU we envisage will be a World Community University fully grounded in the concrete localities of human history and geography. In keeping with its peasant
focus and resistance inspiration, the PWU will be particularly attentive to the historical struggles of communities against all forms of oppression based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, color and patriarchy. Given this mission, the PWU will exercise caution vis-à-vis all universal truth claims that are oblivious of their historical foundations and purpose. At the same time the PWU will take care not to isolate itself as an ‘alternative New Age’ institution working with the poor-peasant rich in knowledge, as though it were an exercise in anthropological nostalgia and rescue. While there is reason to be critical of grand narratives of universal emancipation that become sterile and unimaginative, the task of the PWU will be to re-imagine a future that can resolve the contradictions and antagonisms of our time. This includes efforts to strengthen the great mosaic of ‘villages’ that constitute the World Community of Villages envisaged by the PWU — not to be confused with a brutally homogenized ‘Global Village’ serving the interests of the few. The university we envisage will thus communicate and make alliances across institutions, nations, classes, castes, professions, disciplines, religions, and genders. It will work at upgrading the interfaces between science and local/indigenous knowledge and learning systems. It will attempt to solidify bridges between formal and informal paths to innovation (combining reason with symbols, intuition, imagination, and the art of guessing). It will foster conversations between the manifold expressions of learning — those of language, literacy, science, technology, the media, the internet, the visual arts, theatre, poetry, songs, story-telling, and games.

In short, the PWU will advocate an ecumenical spirituality or territoriality (Fr. écumène) defined as the capacity to move freely between all perceived boundaries and communicate in the many fields and spaces of knowledge, in support of thinking, learning, and living in a world of unity and great diversity. This will be a spirit inspired by the careful precision and sustained patience that peasants demonstrate when facilitating interchanges and conversations between soils, plants, animals, humans, and spirits, careful and responsible attentions that feed into the sustenance of life. This inspiration will also entail a political reclaiming of the symbolic mode of communication, using poetry and spirituality to oppose all reductions of language and learning to the imperialistic claims of any particular discipline, discourse, ideology or sect.
The ecumenical learning spirit we propose will value humans and life as more than “subject-matter” and fodder for the objective mind, to be tamed and harnessed by science and the interests of capital, bringing ruin to all meaningful communication between humans, negating all sense of spiritual kindred between Culture and Nature, and playing havoc with our very existence and the livelihood of Nature on Earth.

Part 2: PWU Learning Innovation Strategies

The values and principles that give shape to the idea of a PWU would be like empty vessels if they were not filled with specific learning strategies. Still, practices, techniques, and tools to facilitate the co-generation of living knowledge cannot be mechanically derived from the general principles we have just outlined, and should not be confused with teaching defined as the art of transmitting information and instructions to other minds treated as empty pots. The learning strategies will have to be discussed in considerable detail and, most of all, tested and improved in real life situations, sustained by experience, reasoning, and a sense of purpose.

Fortunately, there are several existing pedagogical strategies that are compatible with our principles and can be combined and adapted to achieve PWU goals. They include approaches that emphasize the cultural-historical mediations of the learning experience, mediations that are social, symbolic, environmental, material, and technological (Vygotsky, Freinet, Feurstein). In our view these mediations of living knowledge call for strategies of learning by doing where learners interact with others, their products, and their environment, actively searching solutions to problems encountered in real life situations that have meaning in the here and now (Dewey). These are pedagogical practices that can support emotive processes of self-discovery and realization (Rousseau, Freud). They also presuppose the cognitive development and application of advanced reasoning to sustain claims of truth, formal learning strategies that tap into the inherent curiosity of all human beings and their motivation to become competent...
at various tasks that may be difficult but always doable, such as learning new skills or new forms of experimentation (Piaget, Bruner).

All these progressive strategies will have to be grounded and adapted to the ‘knowledgeable adult constituency’ of the PWU and its active contribution to humanity’s ‘greater intelligence’, acknowledging the fact that people from all walks of life reach full intellectual maturity and high levels of conceptual development, whether they are ‘literate’ or not. The PWU enterprise will be staunchly committed to the assumption that ‘formal operations’ involving abstract ideas and the logical formulation and testing of hypotheses expressed in meaningful symbols and sustainable truths are not a prerogative and privilege only of the schooled, the literate, and the experts. The PWU will combine this meaningful exercise of sustainable reasoning and learning with the principles of ‘learning by doing’, and a focus on critical thinking activities that seek real solutions to the pressing problems faced by the poor and the oppressed (Freire).

The experience of the Nayakrishi Andolon, or ‘New Agriculture Movement’ of more than 100,000 farmers supported by UBINIG provides an important grounding and practical setting for the development of the innovative learning strategies outlined above. The Nayakrishi Andolon and UBINIG have actively combined efforts to put into practice the art and science of learning by doing through a variety of inter-related knowledge producing activities. These include a systematic rethinking of agriculture as the art of generating and managing both cultivated and uncultivated space, with innovative practices that go beyond the mere creation of new technology to include the active discovering of complex ecological interactions embedded in everyday language and agrarian livelihoods. Nayakrishi Andolon thus promotes innovation in language that captures the dynamics of oral culture as the medium of living knowledge, the kind that cannot be harnessed by the powers of writing and conventional linear thinking alone.

It is with the latter approach that the Nayakrishi movement has succeeded in collecting and preserving seeds of biodiversity, using oral culture to secure the collective memory of the properties and possible combinations of varieties of plant genetic resources and other life
forms, in support of ecological farming.

The institutional and organisational ramifications of learning innovations of this kind have been far reaching. They include the creation of Nayakrishi Seed Networks, regional Natural Resources Auditing Committees, and also the Network of Birth Attendants and Medicine Women. These are strong networks that contribute directly to biodiversity-based farming practices that are steadily expanding by virtue of their productive capacity and ability to meet various household needs. Household and village-level seed huts are established as visible means to develop and share the specialized knowledge of women farmers. The huts act as spaces for the exchange of seed and knowledge and as living monographs of particular farming strategies. Field experiments based on these seed collections are organized in UBINIG Centres located in all major ecological zones of Bangladesh, in cooperation with national scientists and plant breeders. These experiments allow farmers to directly test claims of the Green Revolution regarding the inherent inferiority of local seeds in comparison to the few varieties that make up the commercial seed system. They enhance the capacity of farmers to resist the monoculture imposed by techno-scientific and commercial paradigms of food production. The findings of these and other experiments are shared by farmers through regular regional exchanges among farmers of neighbouring countries and at international conferences. They are also celebrated nationally and locally in biodiversity festivals linking the act of seed saving to the spiritual practices of Bengal through poetry, song, and the living knowledge of wandering musicians. In lieu of being banked for the use of institutionally-based plant breeders, seed is regenerated and disseminated physically and through oral culture, integrating spirituality, art, networking, and other forms of interactive engagement.
The knowledge co-generated by the farmers of the Nayakrishi Andolon is linked by UBINIG to other groups who are inspired by them, contributing to the development of a national discourse on ecological agriculture and informing debates on global issues from the perspective of peasants. These groups include the women’s movement in Bangladesh (through the Narigrantha Prabartana or Women’s Resource Centre), the trade union movement (through the Trade Union Education Center), and cultural movements made up of poets, philosophers and performers immersed in the oral spiritual traditions of South Asia under the banner of the Nabapran Andolon (New Life Movement). UBINIG publishes a bimonthly journal (Chinta), runs a book store and ecological farmers’ market, and manages a restaurant in Dhaka where food festivals are organized on a regular basis linking urban and rural concerns. These initiatives play a critical role in binding and bonding individuals and groups with collective visions that can contribute to a Peasant World University.

In recent years, UBINIG has been searching for ways to innovate and improve on the processes of knowledge generation in the various groups it supports, and the whole notion and practice of ‘learning’ central to its organizational work and critical reflection. The idea of a Peasant World University is an outcome of this interrogation, which has also brought the organization into contact with the Social Analysis Systems (SAS$^2$) initiative of Carleton University, a project and approach to the experience of learning that articulates and puts in practice all the principles revolving around the ‘co-generation of sustainable knowledge’ presented in this proposal.

SAS$^2$ is an original collection of concepts, techniques, and software tools for collaborative research and social action compatible with recognition of the social and collective nature of thinking as an activity and knowledge-generation process unfolding in living experience. It offers a complex systems approach to diagnostic action that draws on lessons from current participatory research models (Rapid Rural Appraisal, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Participatory Action Research), and
overcomes various conceptual limitations in these models (see www.sas-pm.com). The 50+ SAS\(^2\) techniques, written in clear language, are organized under three modules: Problems faced by people, Actors affected by or with the capacity to intervene in a situation, and Options for social or collective action. The techniques are theoretically informed, rigorous, and fully adaptable to group work. They can be used in either oral or literate cultures. More directly related to the challenges of the PWU, the SAS\(^2\) approach works in contexts that require dialogue across divisions in society, culture, and learning systems. It is especially relevant for multiple stakeholder settings where effective communication is critical to the development of plans for social action. Simpler and more advanced versions of each technique allow for adjustment of the analysis to different contexts, depending on the time available, the goals of the analysis, and the size of participating groups. Instructions for using the techniques show how to feed the results of ongoing diagnostic thinking into plans that evolve in response to new information and changing circumstances, turning research into a diagnostic practice that informs social action. Since 2001, the concepts and tools have been applied and adapted to fields ranging from natural resource management and organizational development to education, public health, governance, and conflict management in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and North America.

SAS\(^2\) offers a relevant learning strategy for advancing the capacities of UBINIG and the Nayakrishi Andolon while at the same time pointing to ways of transforming the existing politics of knowledge generation in Bangladesh. The fusion of SAS\(^2\) and UBINIG learning strategies is currently being tested in the context of a collaborative study on the
constraints farmers face trying to shift out of tobacco production into ecological forms of food production. The research is designed to set into motion a community process of learning and generating knowledge with a practical purpose: developing transition strategies of use to farmers and policy makers. The research and knowledge sharing processes involve various stakeholders at local and national levels, including educational and research institutions and many other social and political organizations.

To these grounded learning practices the PWU also proposes to adapt the learning strategies of P5BL, for People, Project, Product, Process, and Problem Based Learning, strategies that are already embedded and further developed in SAS². The Problem-Based version of this learning approach — using problem solving exercises to support the learning process — is already well known and widely used. It has been tested and applied in practically all disciplines, including anthropology, archeology, biology, chemistry, business administration and management, engineering, communication sciences, journalism, economics, education, geography, graphic design, history, medicine, industrial design, information science, law, literature, mathematics, nursing, pharmacy, philosophy, physics, psychology, and sociology (see http://www.pucp.edu.pe/eventos/congresos/pbl2006abp/docs/abp_ing.doc).

The more advanced, fivefold understanding of PBL has been developed mostly in medical schools and is currently on the agenda of various primary and secondary educational reforms of socio-constructivist orientation occurring in countries such as Canada (Quebec), Switzerland, and Belgium. There are many versions of what ‘P5BL’ and socio-constructivism in education are all about, but they tend to have in common efforts to combine two or several components of effective learning.

The first component has already been mentioned. It centers on practical exercises in solving complex Problems with a view to applying and developing a particular body of knowledge and set of skills. The second component involves the mastery of Process — being able to follow or construct sequences of precise steps and activities to solve problems skillfully and effectively, with the support of experience and evidence to sustain claims of truth.
The third component links problem with ‘project’ — situating every problem in the context of a larger Project that has meaning and is worth pursuing. The fourth component, complementing the preceding, involves the ability to generate tangible Products that solve problems and usefully meet project needs. The last component, in our view the most important, consists of People. The highest form of learning centers on people constructing and negotiating project goals, putting in place the processes needed to meet these goals, working together to resolve problems along the way, and generating the products that express real achievements and the tangible learning developed in the entire process. The PWU will endeavor to develop the full potential of this comprehensive learning strategy, not towards the effective transmission of a fixed and narrowly defined body of knowledge and skills (which is how PBL is now generally used), but rather towards the co-generation of living knowledge to sustain a better world.

The concrete implications of our Peasant World rethinking of PBL (yielding a hybrid form of Peasant-Based Learning) are many. First of all, the projects we will support and the problems we will tackle will be real, complex and even messy, as opposed to simulated exercises used for didactic purposes. They will revolve around the pressing issues of poverty and ecological degradation, with a particular (but not exclusive) focus on peasant people and their immediate environments.

Secondly, the advanced learning products we will support and honor will not be restricted to printed publications and patented technologies. They will include such achievements as women’s seed huts, cooking recipes, innovations in local governance, breakthroughs in green manure cultivation, or peasants presenting videofilms, stories, and models of biodiversity at international conferences. Thirdly, the processes we will support will mix positive science, logic and reasoning with local symbolism and theory, expressions of uncertainty, improvised planning, story telling, ritual performance, visual imagery, and sheer pleasure.

Fourthly, the PWU will not be student-centred but rather people-centred. It will bring people from different disciplines, professions and walks of life — from peasant women to geneticists and
government officials — in a common pursuit of new learning worthy of our fullest appreciation.

This brings us to the issue of the evaluation and appreciation of learning innovation and contribution. Without negating absolutely the legitimacy of credits, credentials, patents, titles and entitlements assigned to individuals or legal entities, the PWU will make every effort to promote a broader range of ‘tokens of appreciation’ (from Old English *tcen*, *tcn*, sign), formal and informal, into its own *universus*. These signs bestowed upon individuals, groups, families or communities will serve to acknowledge and support the five branches of the tree of knowledge: the meaningful projects that people pursue, their innovations in the art of resolving problems, the skills and precise methods they deploy and develop along the way, the novel products they generate, and the new collaborative paths they open to learning for the common good.

This PWU contribution to methods and strategies of ‘authentic assessment’ (see [http://www.fairtest.org/perfbib.html](http://www.fairtest.org/perfbib.html)) will mirror the twofold ‘care-structure’ of our peasant-based learning enterprise. Signs of appreciation will thus be used to acknowledge not only the *careful precision* that people must apply to solving problems and generating novel products and processes but also the sense of *care and interactive engagement* they must show in their projects and communications with other people and forms of life. Signs of appreciation for contributions to this tree of knowledge will take many forms, including joyful celebrations of the returns of Nature, tangible expressions of community respect, and the recognition of respected individual or collective names that can sign skilled services, products, and publications serving the common good.

**Conclusion**

The idea of a World Peasant University demonstrates our determination to interrogate and transform the existing politics of knowledge generation and ‘advanced learning’ institutions. To be effective, the idea must be nurtured by concrete strategies that contribute directly to national debates on educational systems at all levels. A key step in advancing these
possibilities is engagement with a wider range of friends that can contribute general ideas and concrete modalities, including institutional designs, accreditation models, learner exchanges, and collaborative experiments in demonstrating the social nature of thinking and knowledge-generation unfolding in living experience.

As already explained, the experience of UBINIG and the Nayakrishi Andolon is already a source of inspiration and practical support for the proposed PWU enterprise, with basic concepts and concrete learning strategies emerging from the SAS\(^2\) initiative and reforms in education based on the PBL approach illustrated by SAS\(^2\).

To use the language of daily poetry, our PWU proposal finds its source and inspiration in a Nayakrishi Andalon movement conceived as both a journey and a destination — a ‘shahaj’ way to ‘ananda’. While deeply rooted in Bengal’s politico-spiritual tradition, the everyday bangla word ‘shahaj’ denotes a blend of ‘simplicity’ and ‘precision’. The ‘shahaj way’ means a simple and precise way of going about doing things in life, one that demands balance in all aspects of human existence — cultivating all the biological capacities and faculties that form part of the growth and unfolding of our human essence and experience. To be ‘simple and precise’ is to be attentive and mindful to all of our senses and faculties interacting at all times, letting them act collectively in many different ways and contexts.

Humans behaving the ‘shahaj way’ avoid privileging one organ, such as vision, over the others such as touch or taste. In the same vein one particular faculty should never grow to the point of overwhelming other faculties. Reason is important but should never be exercised to the point of undermining the expression of human emotion or imagination. Likewise, the pronouncements of law or abstract and fixed moral principles should never be so strict and rigid as to undermine our sense of responsibility or empathy towards other fellow men and women. This is the ‘simple and precise way of life’ that constitutes the path to ‘ananda’, a state where we can enjoy and hope for happiness in both the material and spiritual sense, as long as we continue dismantling the many divisions and contradictions that separate humans from each other and from the greater web of life.

The idea of a Peasant World University is consistent with the ‘shahaj’ way to ‘ananda’ already embedded in the Nayakrishi Andalon, a movement that has generated a wealth of experience now ready to be shared and further developed with other learners in different parts of the world.