

Culture, learning and surviving a PhD: a journey in search of my own path

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Over the past years, I have been struggling with my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) research. My goal is to describe and understand the relations between local culture and entrepreneurial learning practices in the Colombian city of Manizales. Such a research journey has led me to discover culture from different perspectives and to identify and even develop networks that facilitated my movement in the local entrepreneurial world. There have been inspiring days but also many difficult ones where the lack of clarity, methodological and theoretical gaps and personal struggles have made progress difficult. My story reflects on my journey with the aim of providing insights on the culture-learning relation and research tips to cope with the challenges emerging from the PhD process.

The PhD is an academic exercise that is at the same time an exploratory and learning process, and it moves along two tracks. On the one hand, it is a move in search of theories, models and, empirical data to explain or describe a phenomenon. On the other, it is a journey to find our own place within a particular field of knowledge and a community of practice.

The journey I started four years ago brought me to the borders of three different academic domains: culture, local economic development and learning. I already had strengths in the former two but was weak on the last one. My aim was then to acquire enough knowledge and practice on learning. Using the terminology of this field, I wanted to become a broker linking three different knowledge domains and associated academic communities: culture, learning and local economic development. Here the meaning of broker is taken from Wenger (2000) as an actor who connects different learning communities at their borders, rather than having a core position in each community.

Being a mid-career professional, I aim one day to reach the mastery stage described by Dreyfus (2001). This means to be proficient in my field of expertise with a large practical experience, with my own style. This is the story I share with you. As with many life stories, this one has not yet ended and is just a part of a process that goes on. Now the picture so far is clearer to me and I can put it here in a few pages but it took me many years and struggles to reach this clarity.

Approaching the city and the topic

At first sight, I was not sure if the city of Manizales was standing on the edge of a mountain or hanging from the clouds. At that time (1981) weather conditions were different and often the warm clouds from the lowlands used to invade the streets and hide the cathedral and higher buildings. It was a permanent game of hide and seek between the moving clouds and the standing city.

During the following years, I visited the city for work purposes but my main link with academic research started in 1995. That year I was appointed to coordinate the Colombian team that was in charge of data collection for academic research carried by the Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands. This task was an excellent opportunity to approach the entrepreneurial world of Manizales; a goal that was already in my agenda. I had opportunities to visit the region and to interview leaders, politicians, academics and, entrepreneurs. I inquired about the impact of recent economic reforms (neoliberal policies reducing the scope of State action and opening Colombian market to foreign goods) and the responses adopted by firms to face the new challenges that emerged from these changes.

I asked them about the reasons that would explain some decisions and practices that had been identified. Many entrepreneurs and leaders explained that this was part of the 'coffee culture'. As Manizales is located in the core coffee growing region of the country, I first wrongly thought that they meant the culture associated with such economic activity. When I asked about this coffee culture, I only received vague replies; it was a common phrase repeated by all but never explained. I decided then that my PhD would try to provide an answer to the core structural elements and practices of this coffee culture.

This investigation of the local culture was, in essence, part of a quest to develop my anthropological skills. I first assumed that it was a search for qualitative data. However, culture is a vague and broad concept which covers all sorts of social practices, objects and relations. It was therefore necessary to focus my approach. Considering my background, experience and training on local and regional development, it was clear that my areas of focus would be within these domains. I also considered my interest in the entrepreneurship and business domains.

Many development theories, policies and efforts have failed because of their strong emphasis on economic relations but lack a deeper understanding of sociological and cultural factors embedded in any economic or productive process. In other words, I have been trying to develop my academic career as an anthropologist in a field almost completely dominated by economics and economists. The scope of the project therefore would be to study the sociological and cultural factors affecting entrepreneurship and local and regional development in Manizales. Even this additional scope reduction was not yet enough. The key to find a more focused entry to culture within local economic processes came from my supervisor. He advised me to focus on learning. According to him, the key issues in the field of local and regional development were moving towards learning. As has happened very often in our relationship, I followed his suggestion without having a clear idea of its scope and content. My project was then oriented to study the relation between culture and learning practices among small firms in Manizales.

Distance and culture

In the past four years, I moved geographically four times. The first move was when I came to The Netherlands to start my PhD at the Institute of Social Studies, The

Hague. Then, on three occasions, I visited Manizales: the first two visits took place in 2003 and the last one in spring of 2005. My fieldwork has been done on both sides of the Atlantic namely in Manizales but also in The Netherlands where the possibility to contrast Dutch and Colombian cultures has been a permanent source of data and inspiration.

The fact that I am a Colombian by nationality made it difficult to uncover the hidden patterns and relations that shape the local culture in Manizales. It is a city embedded in a particular regional culture with some specific characteristics while sharing many other features with the rest of the country. Moving to The Netherlands created enough distance to allow me to be objective about my own culture. In many respects, Colombian culture is rather homogeneous, even though there are regional variations. that the surface area of Colombia is more or less the same as Belgium, France, The Netherlands and Spain combined, although the population is only one third of the population of these four countries. While most of the Colombians are Catholic and speak Spanish, in the European countries mentioned above, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims all have an important presence and several languages are used. The possibilities of finding important cultural contrasts between these European countries are higher than in Colombia where less than five percent of the population belongs to different ethnic groups (Amerindian or African descendants).

However, regional variations do exist. For instance food, accent, music, and, clothing change from one region to another but there are no strong contradictions among these aspects. More important differences exist in terms of family structure or individualistic and collective trends. As in all countries, there is rivalry between regions. Very often, these rivalries are related to power struggles, economic imbalance or (de)centralisation issues.

By moving to another country it was possible to identify patterns that would distinguish Colombians from Western cultures. This proved to be important and useful when doing fieldwork. It allowed me to capture those patterns that would characterize Colombia in general and the region in particular. In such an exercise, my original objective to study the local (coffee) culture came to be questioned. To set borders to local culture became difficult, especially in the field of business. Limits became diffuse as many practices from the business field seem to belong to a more global domain. For some traditions, such as those related to food or celebrations, it might be easier to draw a line between local and global but this is not the case with the field of business.

Hunting theories by building traps

One of the most difficult parts of my PhD process has been to learn about learning to give me the competencies and skills required to interact fluently with this academic field. The search for theories relevant to my research has been an ongoing process.

The first thing I learned was that most of the articles written within the field of local development about learning do not combine theories and knowledge from the learning field. There are some references to classic thinkers on education, such as Piaget,

rarely going beyond that. In other words, learning has become an issue within the local development community but it appears as an empty concept with no clear and strong linkages to the academic communities working under the umbrella of sociology of education and learning. I decided to explore these literature. I usually felt like a blind person hitting here and there with my cane. It was an exploration through a huge domain with many theories and models that were completely new to me. In such quest, I have regularly applied both instinct and common sense.

Scanning through these theories, I moved quickly along the constructivist and more social-oriented approaches rather than the cognitive and more behavioural one. I explored different alternatives without any results. Because my focus was on local culture, I did not want to focus on organisational learning and this was an important methodological constraint. Finally, I found two different approaches that helped me to anchor and ground my research project. The first one has been the key model to link internal and external learning processes proposed by Holmqvist (2003) which combines several learning concepts. Even though Holmqvist developed and used it to analyse firms, I use it to look at a set of firms. This model is my main connection between two academic fields; namely learning and local and regional development.

The second anchor has been situated learning connecting culture and learning academic fields. In the beginning it was a diffuse domain where the main concepts and tools were not clear enough. When I wrote my research design in 2002, I put my emphasis on this theory without having a strong knowledge of it. It was the limping leg of my theoretical tripod. Unfortunately no one noticed and my proposal was approved. It took me many months to really understand the scope of situated learning. This gap made me neglect some observations and data in the first round of fieldwork. Only later I could understand and manage what I was supposed to search and do in relation to learning. Finally, I managed to move forward but it was a hard and long process.

It is worth mentioning the role played by the supervisory team. Fortunately, I have two positive and fierce critics who have provided me useful feedback and have supported throughout. More than supervisors, I see them as team mates with different abilities. For example, they have an amazing ability to forecast gaps and opportunities and, fortunately, an enormous amount of patience.

Missing compass: back to basics

But these theoretical battles were not the most difficult; they are part of the game. I would say it is normal to go through such struggles. The tough part of my journey was that I had lost my intellectual compass, and I did not realise it until a short while ago. I was an anthropologist trying to be an economist and, somewhere on the way, I lost my ethnographic lenses.

After many years of working surrounded by economists, my defence system was overwhelmed and I did not notice it. Unconsciously, I appropriated some of their behavioural traits and approaches. Percentages, indicators and other related terms

became part of my normal language. This led me into dangerous waters where I was not secure: I was playing a game whose rules and skills were not my own.

There was only one way out of this closed road: to go back to basics. First slowly, but then more and more enthusiastically, I started to move back towards an anthropological approach and more specifically an ethnographic one. This methodological regression required me to go once again to the city to do a third round of fieldwork. At the same time, I went back through all my archives, notes, transcriptions, diary, recorded interviews, e-mails and, other sources I had compiled in these years. This shift allowed me to identify new benchmarks; new patterns became visible and it was possible to identify and develop a fresh look into my research problem. I had been locked in, moving in circles, and this shift out of the frame allowed me to find a path forward.

What do I mean by moving back to anthropology? I would say it is simply a change in the lens I had been using to analyse data. I had been stressed trying to build up indicators to measure learning in one way or another. In such process I did not allow the data to talk to me as any ethnographer should do. The information has been there for long time ago. The hints, the relations, the patterns were there but I was focusing my effort in the wrong direction, trying to read from them another, alien story and not listening to them.

Beyond a characterisation of roles, actors and relations among the communities of practice, I established that different cultural factors explain and shape both the learning processes and the communities of practice. Due to historical factors, the city overlaps rural and urban identities. Practices from the former rural colonisers are still alive in the city and are mixed with modern, Western ones. For instance, using family structure, gender roles, and trust relations, it is possible to track such continuity and their combinations with new forms and practices. Coffee culture seems to be a reflection of this mix of rural and Western culture. This coffee culture was a characteristic of the rural areas and of the many small towns from the region. It was associated with several cultural artefacts and practices: music, dressing, food, celebrations. Coffee culture has two dimensions: one is positive and provides identity through goods, relations, practices, etc; while the second one is more negative and could be summarised as being paternalistic and highly dependent.

To be continued

None of the information on doing a PhD prepares you for the huge challenges you would face. They focus mainly on the academic part of the story. My experience taught me that this is only half of it. What is clear to me now is that such an adventure relies on a combination of academic skills, intuition, hard effort and confidence, allowing you to stand independently in the academic community of which you have chosen to be part.

References

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Abstract

This story describes my current work on a PhD thesis examining the relations between culture and learning in small firms in a Colombian city. Doing a PhD implies a double quest. On the one hand, it is an academic exercise with theories and data in search for descriptions or explanations. On the other, it is a search for a personal path within the appropriate academic community. This story describes my steps, struggles and moves forward in such journey. It reflects on such a journey, aiming to provide both insights on the culture-learning relation and research tips to cope with the challenges emerging from the PhD process. By reflecting on the different phases and elements involved in this processes over the past four years, the story offers some tips on how to manage such a challenge.

About the author



Camilo Villa is a Colombian anthropologist with a master's degree on Development Studies from the Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands. He has extensive experience in both academic and public agencies working on local and regional development matters. In his work and publications, special attention is given to the relations between culture and economic development. During the past four years, he has been involved in research on learning practices among firms and development organisations in Manizales, Colombia. Recently he joined the knowledge sharing team at Hivos.

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