

The 4 Denials and Elephant in the Room

The 4 Denials are used by the University of British Columbia and the progressive movement gesturing Towards a Decolonial Future. You can find more information on it at <https://decolonialfutures.net/4denials/> and the more in-depth course work on it can be found here <https://blogs.ubc.ca/facinghumanwrongs/>

1. the denial of systemic violence and complicity in harm

- How is material prosperity here created by poverty somewhere else?
- How do poor (or rather, impoverished) countries and peoples subsidize our comforts, securities and pleasures?
- How do we benefit from exploitation, expropriation and destitution?
- How are we complicit in harm? Why don't people talk about this?
- Why can't people stop this?

Tools to explain further: [The House that Modernity Built](#)

2. the denial of the limits of the planet

How are we consuming the planet and making it un--inhabitable?
Why do people deny that the current patterns of ecological destruction, consumption and exploitation are unsustainable?
How long do we have left?
How are we going to face the end of the world as we know it?

Tools to explain: [Country overshoot day](#), *the number of planets*, [Planetary Boundaries](#)

3. the denial of entanglement

Where does the separation between (hu)man and nature come from?
Why do we see ourselves as separate from the Earth and from each other?
What are the consequences of thinking and feeling we are separated from nature and from each other?

Tools to explain further: The Apu Chupaqpata Global Education Centre's Global Education Principles* 2012- from Pincheq, a tiny village between Pisac and Cuzco in Peru

Mapping narratives as a key critical literacy exercise For people over-socialised in the first three options (i.e. most of us who

have been schooled), these possibilities would be extremely difficult to even begin to identify or to experience. Even though their principles for global education may seem self-evident and understandable, a deeper experiential cognitive-relational engagement with the metaphoric ontologies of that region would be necessary to unlock contingent meanings that are not obvious in what we can represent in writing (see Andreotti, Ahenakew and Cooper 2011, 2012). I use this here to illustrate the limited nature of our interpretations (that always rely on inherited concepts) and the complexity and difficulty of translating and representing these worldviews outside of their contexts (e.g. if you think you 'understand' this, think again), both of these preoccupations are key to critical literacy.

4. the denial of the immensity of the problem

2022 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Club of Rome's landmark report, 'The Limits to Growth'. This report - first published on 2 March 1972 - was the first to model our planet's interconnected systems and make clear that if growth trends in population, industrialisation, resource use and pollution continued unchanged, we would reach and then overshoot the carrying capacity of the Earth at some point in the next one hundred years.

The denials represent big elephants in the room, but we'll delve now in to our own!

There are many different ways on how we can interpret what is currently going on in the world. Today we are offering a space for us, an opportunity to talk the really difficult questions that we usually prefer to brush aside - the elephants in the room.

However, we come from very different contexts and understandings and there is no one mega elephant that is the most important one. There are many and today we are going to meet several of them. However, in order to facilitate the engagement with the different elephants that will appear it may be useful to start with an adaptation of a famous Buddhist story about how four blind men were given the task to determine what an elephant was by touching it. Hopefully this story can teach us something about the value, but also about the limitations of different perspectives.

4 blind men-each of them was able to touch a different part -a rope-tail, a rug-ears, hose-trunk, leg-pillar.

The first touched its tail - he said, 'an elephant is a rope'.

The second touched its ears - he said, 'an elephant is a rug'.

The third touched its leg - he said, 'an elephant is a pillar'.

The fourth touched its trunk - he said, 'an elephant is a hose'.

There are many different ways how this story can get interpreted, but one of the possibilities is that our 'readings' of the world - the way we imagine our elephants, are based on our experiences of reality and the kind of knowledge and conceptual frameworks that we have been socialized into. So, the kind of elephants that we see are never the "real elephants" they are necessarily only our interpretations of what the elephant is.

Conversations that we should be having and we're not having! Not one mega elephant

Our readings of the world-these are our particular ways of seeing things... think

However, as we engage with other people from other political, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds our own understanding of things may change through interaction.

Although our partial language and concepts are essential to construct our understanding of the world, they are also what blinds us to understanding the concepts of others. They also blind us to the awareness that our own concepts are restricted, and culture bound.

The elephant as a metaphor for uninterpreted reality is beyond our capacity of comprehension. There is no consensus in science, education, physics, politics, theology, philosophy or any other field about the true nature of things (or what the elephant really looks like). And yet whatever understanding we have of it affects the core of our identities, relationships and 'readings' of everything else. This is because we understand these as being firmly based on 'reality' itself, which, as the story illustrates, may be just our version of it. Therefore, dealing with the unknown (and we are living in times of unknown and unknowable futures) - or difference - is essential to put into perspective our notions of identity, knowledge, truth, reality and values. At the same time that this is deeply unsettling, the reward is the perception of interconnectedness and its importance.

Thus, in this experiment you are invited to explore your own idea of the elephant - through the engagement with the ideas of other people.

Not the true elephants. As we talk to each other our elephants become more complex. Join some together maybe...

Introduce your elephants-3 people-guiding questions on how to put them together.

- *Was it difficult to identify an elephant/s or did it/they come easy for you? How easy did they come?*
- *How do the elephants in your group relate to each other? Common themes between your elephants and the elephants of the others - anything in common*
- *How do your individual elephants change when you consider other elephants?*
- *What other elephants could be missing?*
- *Share your respective elephants (as much as you'd like). Was it difficult to identify an elephant/s or did it/they come easy for you? How easy did they come?*
- *Common themes between your elephants and the elephants of the others - anything in common*
- *Why do you think these elephants are present? How might we approach these elephants (differently)?*

Elephants appear in a few sayings that we have. 'The White Elephant' which is something that is useless but expensive to run (its roots are in the worship of an albino elephant)-For instance could the aid sector itself be this White Elephant?

'The UN is a White Elephant' which was brought up in conversations about our elephants-are the SDGs really working? In our context of Global Education, we need to question if it is working enough to make effective change in the world? Global Education is currently the fire in the belly of the elephant-we need to hold it there.

Elephants it's also said 'never forget' reminding me how much of the pain, discrimination and violence is entrenched in our society since colonial times and indeed way before. The elephant has a large cloud in his brain here to hold all these 'elephants in the room', it does not forget history and therefore is unlikely to have the 4 Denials our society holds.

Another elephant that sprang to mind while doing this doodle is Doctor Seuss's elephant Horton in 'Horton hears a who'. He looks after a tiny speck with such care because he knows in that one speck there's a whole world of Whos* to look after.

Extension activity: produce a piece of art, writing, drama, music on the elephants you have-individually or collectively:



In my doodle here the elephant holds lots of nature with care in his trunk. As you can see, optimistically, nature is breaking down the walls of Universal Reason and Global Capital in the House representing some of the respite nature is getting during Corona Times. This also represents how we should be tackling the House using nature to break these constructs. The Nation State remains untouched as we have all observed how the worrying negatives of what the nation state represents seems to have strengthened through the Corona Times.

The elephants we explored involve so many contradictions and complexities, so the elephant's trunk ends with a yin yang-a bit of good in every bad and a bit of bad in every good.

So, can you spot our elephants represented in the elephant?

Can you see death, over population, violence, inequality, power imbalance, hunger, extraction, and gender inequality?

***The Apu Chupaqpata Global Education Centre's 'Global Education Principles' (2012) are:**

1. The entire planet Earth (i.e., Pachamama) is my home and country, my country is my mother, and my mother knows no borders.
2. We are all brothers and sisters: humans, rocks, plants, animals and all others.

3. Pachamama is a mother pregnant of another generation of non-predatory children who can cultivate, nurse, and balance forces and flows, and who know that any harm done to the planet is harm done to oneself.

4. The answers are in each one of us, but it is difficult to listen when we are not in balance, we hear too many different voices, especially in the cities.

5. The priority for life and education is balance: to act with wisdom, to balance material consumption, to learn to focus on sacred spiritual relationships, to work together with the different gifts of each one of us, with a sense of oneness. Our purpose is to learn, learn and learn again (in many lives) to become better beings.

6. There is no complete knowledge, we all teach, learn and keep changing: it is a path without an end. There is knowledge that can be known and described, there is knowledge that can be known, but not described and there is knowledge that cannot be known or described.

7. Our teachers are the Apus (the mountains-ancestors), Pachamama, the plants, what we live day by day and what has been lived before, the animals, our children, our parents, the spirits, our history, our ancestors, the fire, the water, the wind, all the different elements around us.

8. The serpent, the puma and the condor are symbols of material and non-material dimensions, of that which can be known, of that which cannot be known or determined, and of the connections between all things.

9. The traditional teachings of generosity, of gratitude, and of living in balance that are being lost are very important for our children -it is necessary to recover them.

10. The world is changed through love, patience, enthusiasm, respect, courage, humility and living life in balance. The world cannot be changed through wars, conflicts, racism, anger, arrogance, divisions and borders. The world cannot be changed without sacred.