

ALL GOOD LEARNING IS SERVICE LEARNING

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Starting point

- In the conclusion of my recent book, I wrote:
“In partnership with local public services, NGOs, and housing units, schools* could get involved in the eradication of homelessness in their own neighborhoods. This type of involvement is sometimes called service learning..., a category that conveniently separates it from regular school learning and instruction. The perspective [of this book] suggests that all educationally organized learning should be service learning.” (Engeström, 2024, p. 184)
- Diego Di Masi read this and got curious; that led to this keynote
- So let me explain what I meant

* In this keynote, I use the term ‘school’ to refer to all levels and branches of formal education, including universities. Forgive me if this sounds offensive.,

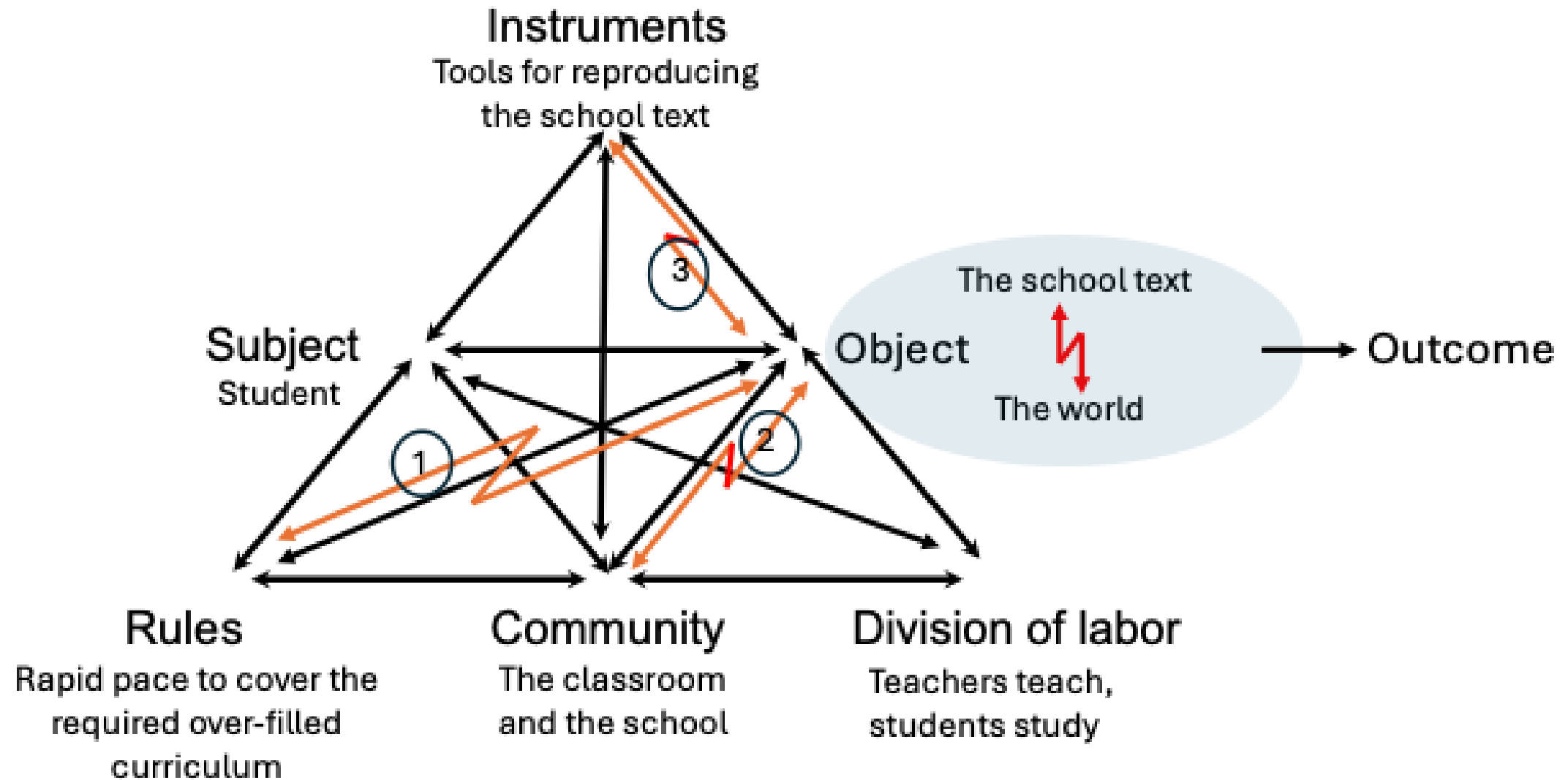
The idea of service learning – virtues and limitations

- If you go to GOOGLE and ask for a definition of service learning, you get this:

“Service learning is an educational approach that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. It pairs academic curriculum with active service, allowing students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world issues.”

- What are the virtues and limitations of this standard view?

Traditional school learning: the activity system and its contradictions



Contradictions

- PRIMARY CONTRADICTION: For both students and teachers, the very object of schooling is inherently contradictory: Is the object *the world* - to be understood and made better with the help of tools offered by the school? Or is the object *the school text*, as dictated by curricula and textbooks – to be reproduced so that one passes exams and gains good grades? Obviously, it is both - a true dialectical contradiction
- THREE SECONDARY CONTRADICTIONS:
 - (1) Object vs. rules: skin-deep, fast-paced learning
 - (2) Object vs. community: encapsulation
 - (3) Object vs. instruments: alienation and powerlessness

The virtue of service learning

- Service learning tackles the primary contradiction, lifting up the real world as the foundational object of learning
- In best cases of service learning, this transforms the students' from recipients of ready-made knowledge to agents of change for the common good
- This means that service learning has great transformative potential for education as a whole
- But service learning in its present shape has also serious limitations...

The first limitation of service learning: Isolation

- I searched for articles on service learning in the *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, the flagship journal of the International Society for the Learning Sciences, published since 1991
- Not a single article had *service learning* in the title or as a keyword
- This indicates that service learning has indeed become a separate niche, isolated from the broad transdisciplinary field of the learning sciences
- This isolation easily leads to radical narrowing of the transformative potential of service learning in education
- Service learning deserves better – and education deserves to learn from service learning

How to overcome the isolation?

- If service learning wants to realize its transformative potential, it needs to break through into the core of research in learning
- This requires that service learning develops a *theoretical understanding of its own approach to learning*
- Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and the theory of expansive learning may be helpful in this quest

The second limitation of service learning: Reliance on experience

- Service learning is commonly seen as experiential learning, or learning from experience
- But experience is a notoriously bad teacher – it typically reproduces rather than transforms, building superficial empirical generalizations and categories
- As Brehmer (1980) wrote: *In one word, not from experience*
- People have a number of biases which prevent them from using the information which experience provides; such biases include the tendency to use confirmatory evidence, assumptions about causality, and disregard of negative information

How to go beyond experience?

- Instead of classifying and categorizing experienced phenomena, we need to learn to trace their historical origins, their systemic interconnections, and their inner contradictions
- In other words, transformative and expansive service learning requires that the students, the instructors, and the communities learn to analyze and redesign their activities as historical, systemic, and contradictory phenomena
- In one word, service learning needs tools of *dialectical* thinking and concept formation

Vygotsky on 'good learning'

- Lev Vygotsky pointed out that “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89)
- He continued: “From this point of view, learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions. To summarize, the most essential feature of our hypothesis is the notion that developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. (...) Our hypothesis establishes the unity but not the identity of learning processes and internal developmental processes. It presupposes that the one is converted into the other.” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90-91)

But what is development?

- Vygotsky still saw development as primarily an individual-psychological process
- Today we need to see individual development as inseparable from and embedded in collective and societal development
- The key indicator of development understood this way is *common good*
- According to substantive conceptions, the common good is that which is shared by and beneficial to all or most members of a given community
- According to procedural formulations, the common good consists of the outcome that is achieved through collective participation in the formation of a shared will

Development for common good is object-specific

- Development for the common good is not a vague abstract notion
- The object of development must be specified and concrete
- In cultural-historical activity theory, the object refers to the materially embodied purpose of a collective activity; it gives direction, motive and durability to the activity
- For example in the Finnish Housing First policy, the object of development is *homelessness* – and its eradication
- In the case of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement MST, the object of development is equitable access to and ownership of *land*, to be used for sustainable agroecological production
- We may distinguish between the general object and specific objects; for example in homelessness work, the general object is homelessness, while each homeless person is a specific object
- At its best, service learning is a process of discovering and expanding the object – this means that service learning becomes expansive learning

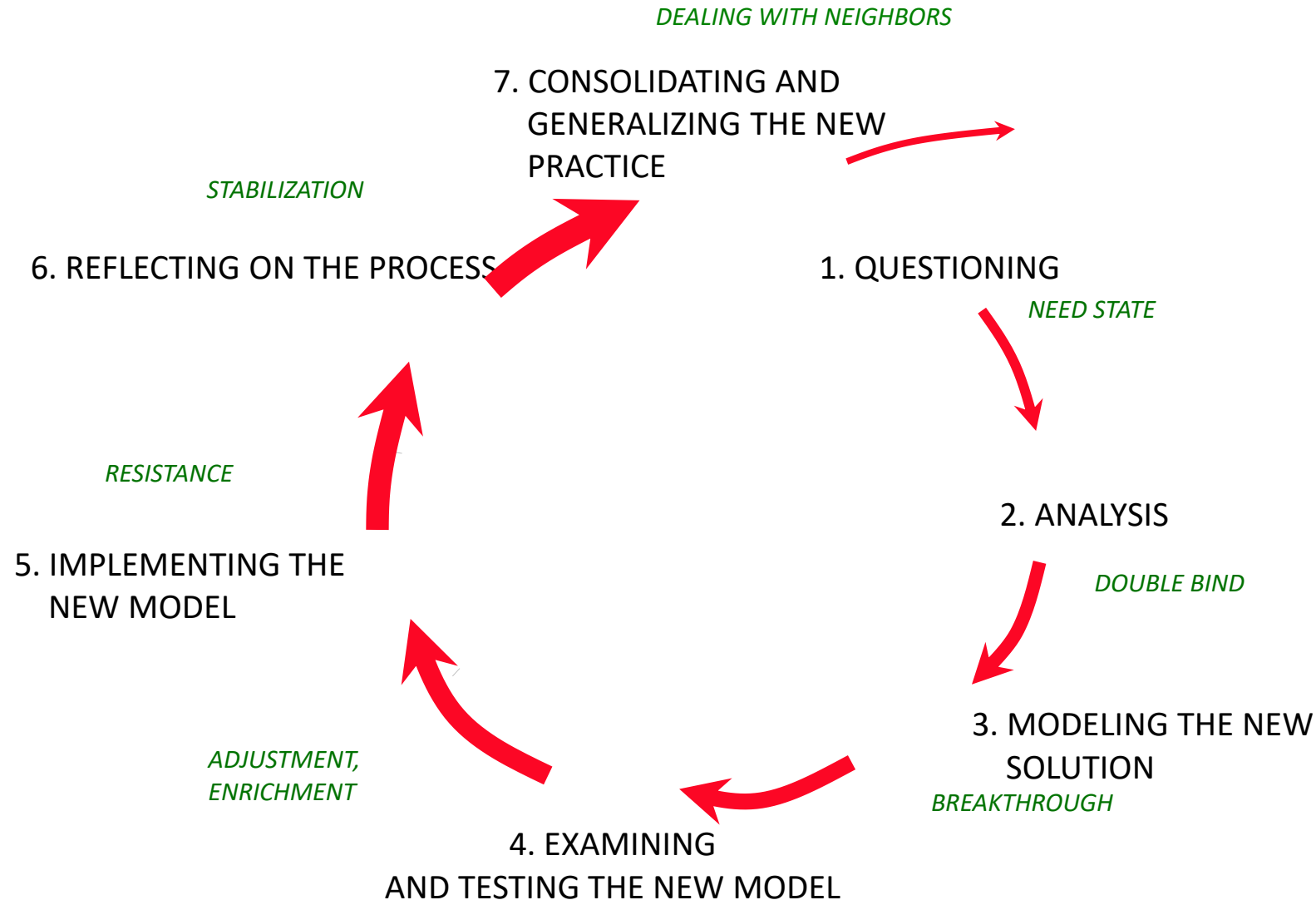
Expansive learning is...

- Learning embedded in transformations in collective activity systems
- Learning what is not yet there; collaborative creation of new forms of activity
- Learning driven by historically accumulated contradictions in the present activity
- Journey into and across a collective zone of proximal development
- Multi-voiced sideways learning; struggle, negotiation and hybridization between alternative perspectives

Expansive learning is a journey into and across a collective zone of proximal development

- ORIGINALLY VYGOTSKY' S CONCEPT, TO DESCRIBE THE DYNAMICS OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: "The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)
- REFORMULATED AT THE LEVEL OF COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY SYSTEMS: "The distance between the present everyday actions of the individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in everyday actions." (Engeström, 1987, p. 174)
- IN THE ZONE, THERE ARE SEVERAL ALTERNATIVE DIRECTIONS AND PATHS; IT IS A RELATIVELY OPEN FIELD OF UNCERTAINTY AND STRUGGLE

Expansive learning as a cycle of learning actions



OUTCOMES OF EXPANSIVE LEARNING

- TRADITIONALLY WE ASSUME THAT LEARNING IS MANIFESTED AS CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOR, KNOWLEDGE AND THINKING OF THE LEARNERS
- EXPANSIVE LEARNING IS MANIFESTED AS QUALITATIVE CHANGE IN THE *OBJECT OF THE ACTIVITY* OF THE LEARNERS
- SOCIO-SPATIAL DIMENSION: THE OBJECT BECOMES LARGER IN SIZE AND ENCOMPASSES MORE ACTORS
- TEMPORAL DIMENSION: THE OBJECT BECOMES MORE DURABLE AND SPANS A LONGER PERIOD OF TIME
- ETHICAL-POLITICAL DIMENSION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE NEW OBJECT ARE MORE FAR-REACHING AND REQUIRE NEW KINDS OF RESPONSIBILITY

SUMMING UP EXPANSIVE LEARNING

- *WHO* LEARNS: AN ENTIRE COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY SYSTEM, OR MULTIPLE INTERCONNECTED ACTIVITY SYSTEMS
- *WHY* DOES LEARNING HAPPEN: IN ORDER TO RESOLVE CONTRADICTIONS THAT HAVE EVOLVED WITHIN AND BETWEEN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEMS
- *WHAT* IS LEARNED: A NEW CONCEPT AND OBJECT, A NEW PATTERN OF ACTIVITY, AND A NEW TYPE OF AGENCY
- *HOW* DOES LEARNING HAPPEN: BY MEANS OF EXPANSIVE LEARNING ACTIONS WHICH TOGETHER FORM EXPANSIVE CYCLES

From partnerships to expanding coalitions

- Service learning commonly builds on durable partnerships between the educational institution and a community or a NGO
- Common good objects are typically connected to crises and acute threats to life and wellbeing – they are sometimes called ‘fateful objects’
- Such objects have consequences for many actors, sectors and levels of governance; they are in constant movement and require expanding heterogenous coalitions
- A good example is the longitudinal service learning process in defense of water and life, conducted by **Jesica de la Torre** and her colleagues at Western Institute of Technology and Higher Education (Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente, or ITESO) in Guadalajara, Mexico

(the following slides were prepared jointly by Jesica and myself)

Service learning at ITESO

- At ITESO, service learning is organized in the form of Professional Application Projects (PAP)
- 2004, the PAP are a way of linking ITESO, in learning scenarios, through projects of high social impact that address long-term social problems in a professional and interdisciplinary way (Ortiz, 2007)
- They have three basic orientations: professional training, sense of social responsibility, and reflective recovery of the experience

From a fateful object to common good

In June 2013, in the lagoon of San Pedro Valencia, in the Valles region of Jalisco, Mexico, an intentional spill of molasses caused an ecocide that killed more than 500 tons of fish and left a population of 500 people without sources of income; unleashing a social, economical and environmental crisis

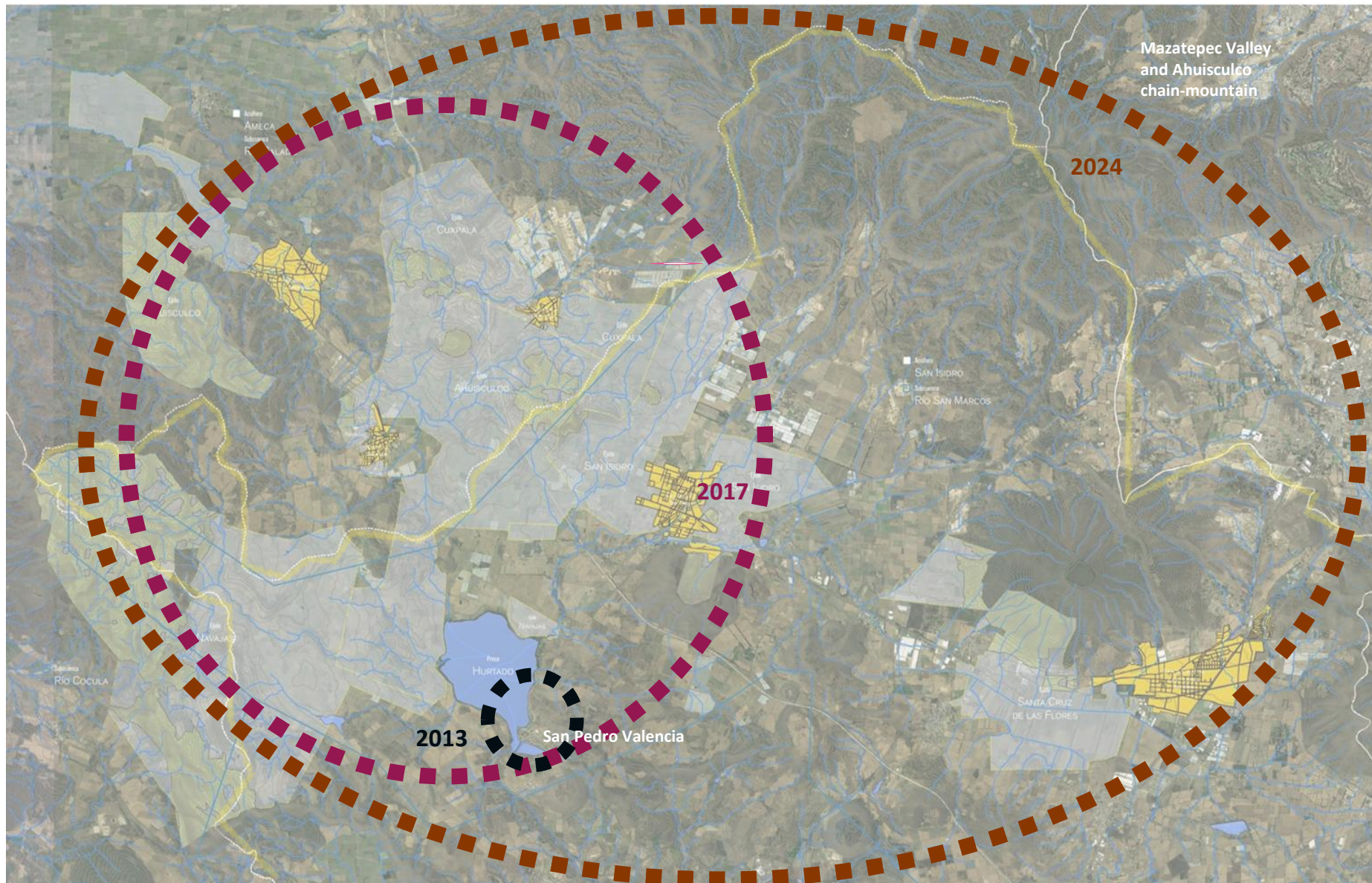
The residents of the community, mostly fishermen, organized to deal with the crisis that broke out

- In that search, one of the actions that the villagers undertook was to request help from the ITESO university in 2014 – this led to a PAP devoted to the defense and recovery of the water and lives of the affected communities
- From 2015 where the collaboration with ITESO started until now, there are 8 communities and more than 10 NGOs involved in care and defense of the common territory

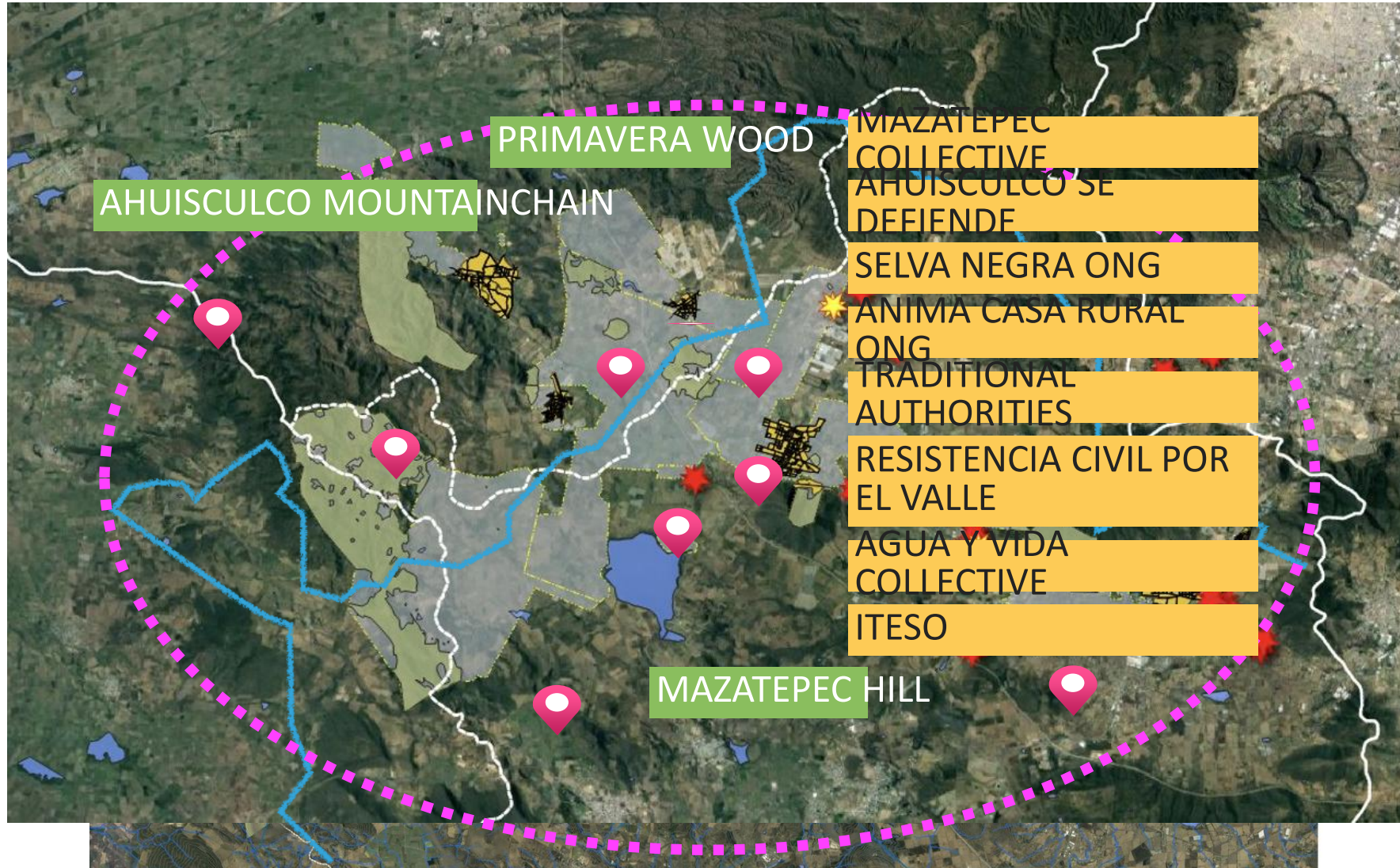


- What began with a group of fishermen addressing a specific socio-environmental crisis due to the pollution of a dam has evolved into a network of community water monitors
- They have been trained and follow up with standardized tools and procedures on water quality in their regions to document results and present them as complaints and legal processes that allow them to reorganize water and territory management, both through state channels and bottom-up social organization
- Expansive learning can be observed in its three dimensions:
 - (1) Socio-spatial expansion: The original group of fishermen broadening the scope of their efforts, both with neighboring communities and other individuals, groups, and institutions
 - (2) Temporal expansion: Sustained organized struggle has lasted over 10 years and continues; the past is used as a source of motivation for acting in the present and projecting into the future
 - (3) Ethical-political expansion: The participants have deepened their understanding of the problems they face and the implications for the region's life; the utopia these communities pursue is to regain clean water and restore territories, managing them by themselves

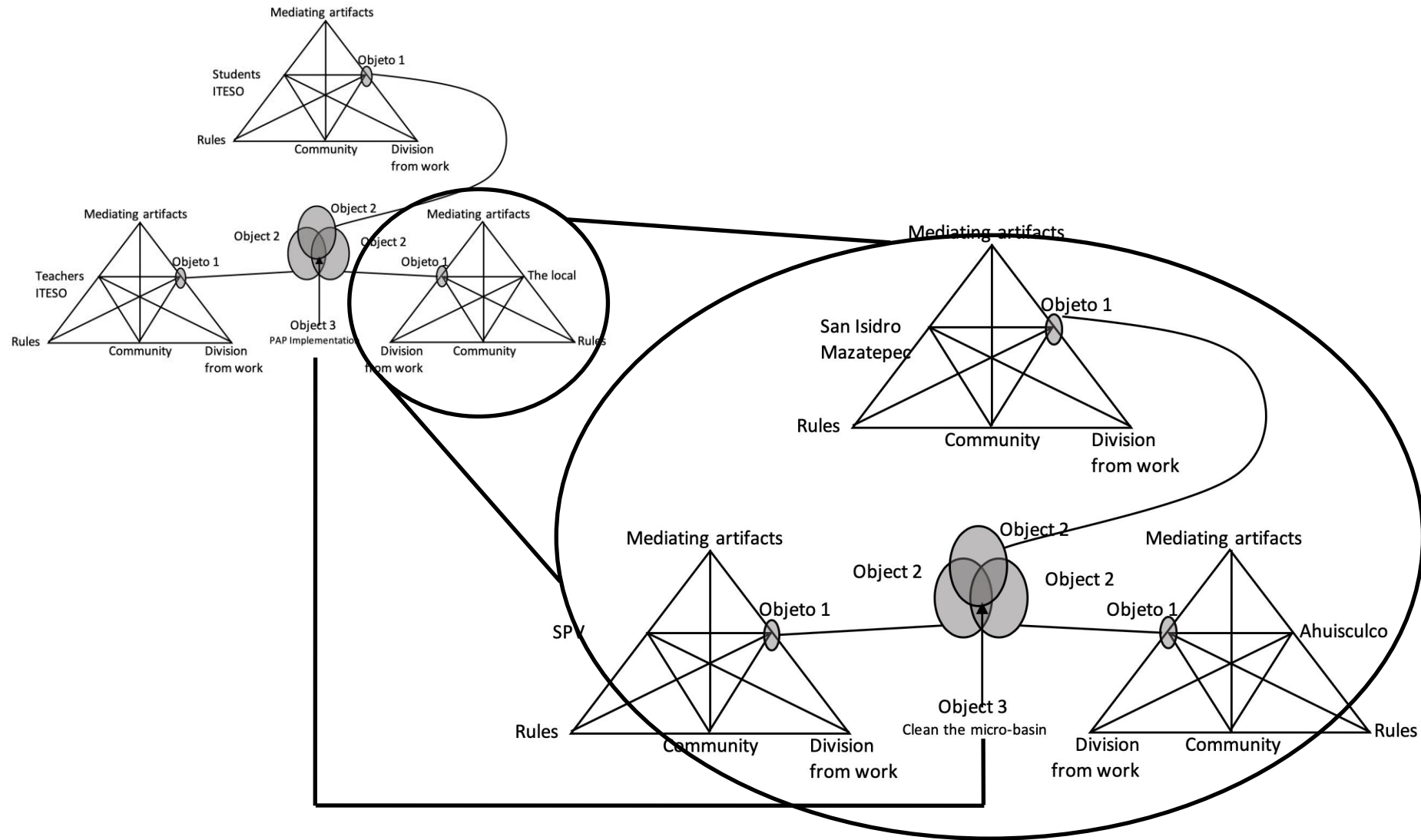
Socio-spatial expansion of the PAP from 2013 to 2024



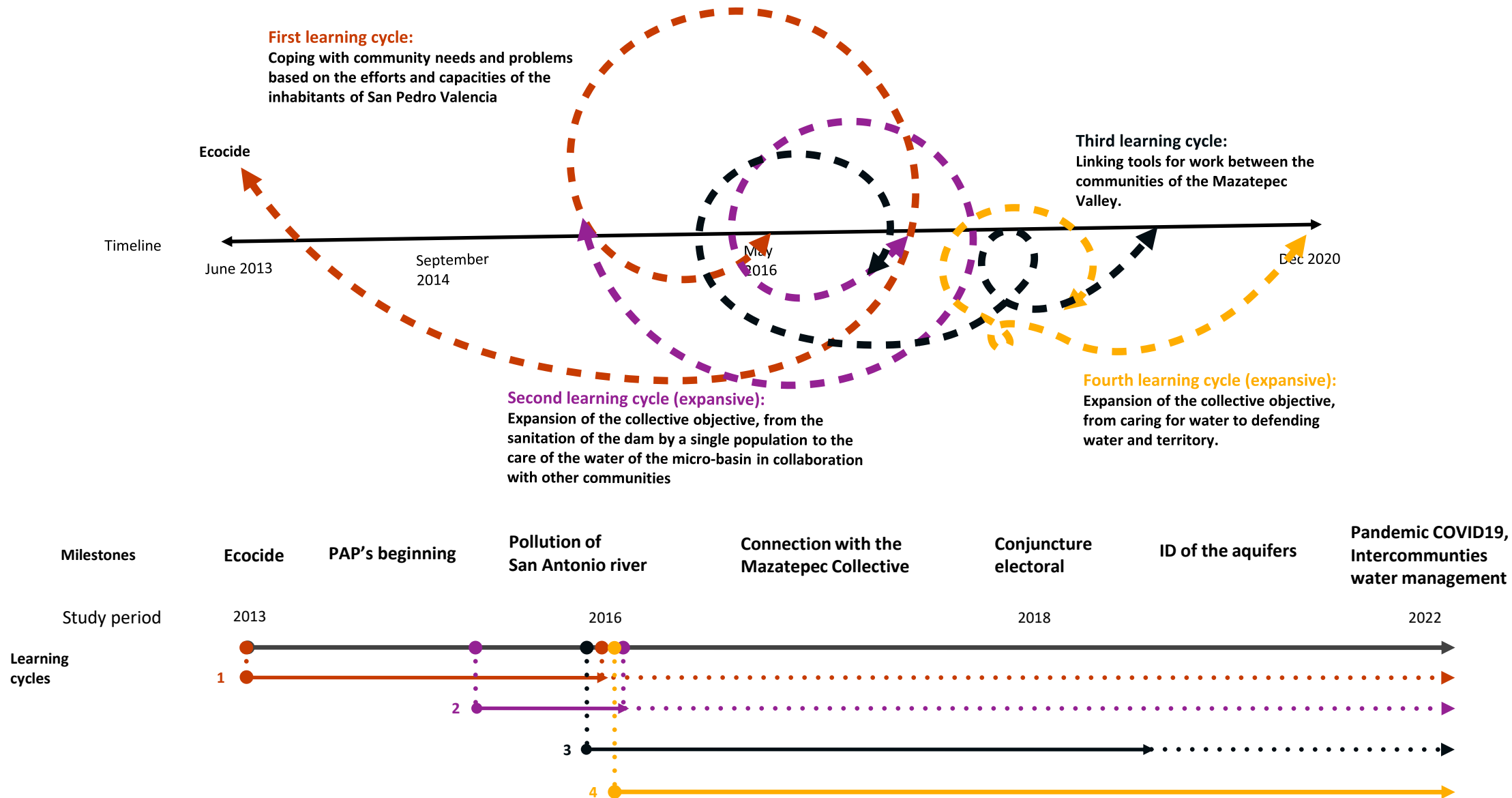
A heterogenous coalition



Interconnected activity systems in the PAP



Four expansive learning cycles



First learning cycle: in this cycle work was done to deal with the crises unleashed by the ecocide, the activity was driven by the inhabitants of the fishing community

Second learning cycle: the activity in this cycle was transformed, since it went from the search for immediate solutions to individual or family problems, to the search for ways to prevent and mitigate threats to a common good, germinating an fugitive activity object and initiating a socio-spatial and ethical-political expansion

Third learning cycle: the activity in this cycle was destined to the fabric of a network of actors to influence and defend the shared territory

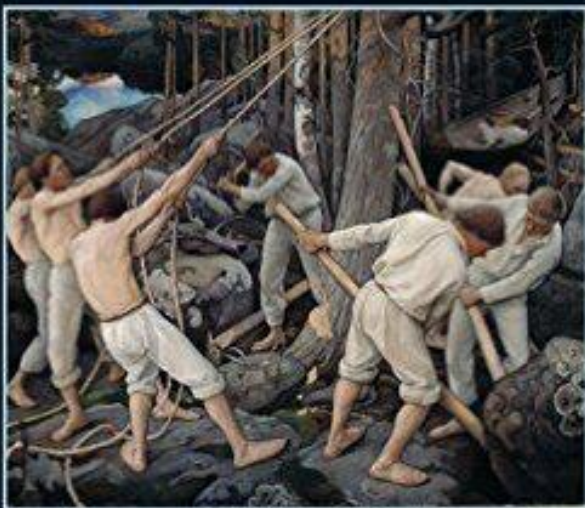
Fourth learning cycle: in this cycle, the activity initiated in the second cycle, oriented by the fugitive activity object, expanded in three dimensions: the temporal, the socio-spatial and the ethical-political

Conclusions

- Service learning makes *the world* the object of learning; thus, it tackles the primary contradiction of all formal education
- Learning needs to serve the common good; *in this sense, all good learning really is service learning*
- Service learning cannot fulfil its transformative potential by remaining an isolated niche and by relying on experience as source learning
- To overcome these limitations, service learning needs to develop a *theoretical understanding of its own approach to learning*; the theory of expansive learning can be helpful in this
- Expansive service learning means that the object of learning expands socio-spatially, temporally and ethico-politically – students and instructors become builders of common good within sustained heterogenous coalitions
- We need solid analyses of advanced examples of service learning; Jesica's study of the ITESO PAP may become one such case

LEARNING BY EXPANDING SECOND EDITION

AN ACTIVITY-THEORETICAL APPROACH
TO DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH



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STUDIES IN EXPANSIVE LEARNING

LEARNING WHAT IS
NOT YET THERE



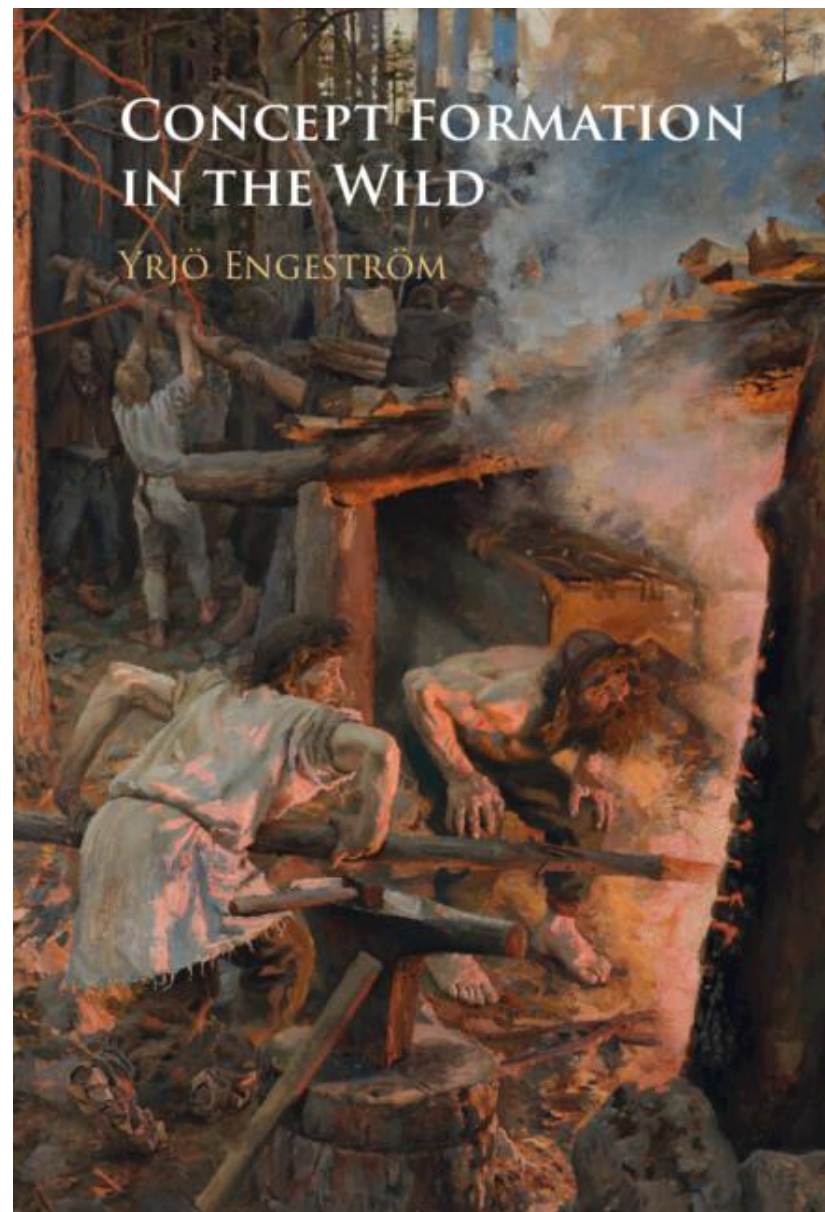
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