Knowledge in Practice: The Role of *Aula Vivas* in Environmental Engagement

I had the pleasure of working with *Guaches y Guariches* in UPZ80, a neighbourhood in Techotiba (Kennedy), where our focus was on rebuilding policy around education, employment and food deserts. Upon arriving in the territory on our first day of field research with my team of UCL peers, it became abundantly clear that the academic definitions and language we had brought with us from London would not carry the same weight in the field.

Guaches y Guariches quickly helped us realise that our understanding of policy development needed to be reshaped by the lived experience of the territory and the local communities we would be engaging with over the following two weeks. As we immersed ourselves in the context, we began to reinterpret familiar academic terms through the lens of both Spanish and the Indigenous language of the Muisca people, who historically inhabited the area before Bogotá's expansion.

Key concepts were redefined: "bio-urban health" became *salud colectiva*, and structured interviews evolved into *círculos de diálogo* (circles of dialogue). These shifts were more than linguistic; they reflected a broader transformation in how knowledge was generated and shared. Moving away from rigid academic restraints allowed us to engage in a more participatory and inclusive process of understanding, one rooted in dialogue and mutual exchange.

This shift in language became central to my field research and therefore this paper will explore the concept known as *Aula Viva*, or "living classroom", as a framework for co-creating knowledge. This paper examines how this approach reshaped my understanding of what it means to learn from and with a community.

Reframing dialogue co-creation

On our second day of field research, we entered the North La Vaca Wetlands in UPZ80, guided by *Guaches y Guariches*. We were taken to their *aula viva*, pictured in Figure 1, where we began to co-create dialogue around the food injustices faced by the local community. *Aula viva*, or "living classroom," refers to a pedagogical approach grounded in experiential learning and collaborative knowledge production (Villadiego et al., 2024). However, as we engaged more deeply with *Guaches y Guariches*, I came to understand the *aula viva* not just as a physical space, but as a broader conceptual and embodied practice, one that extends beyond the people in the classroom to include the surrounding territory and the communities who inhabit it.

Figure 1: The 'Aula Viva' in the La Vaca Wetlands Norte.

Source: Crawford, 2025.

Las aulas vivas create space to question how knowledge is produced, with particular attention to the role of territory in shaping understanding. This resonates with broader debates in research ethics, which challenge practitioners to ask: how ought we create knowledge in the field? In hoping to answer this question, Western researchers tend to look to human interactions, which often leaves out the environment as a third actor in building dialogue.

Working with *Guaches y Guariches*, prompted me to re-evaluate this Western-centric perspective. Western research ethics frequently constructs a hyper-separation between humans and nature, framing ethical relationships solely in terms of human subjects, and neglecting the environment as a co-constitutive presence (Cross, 2018). In contrast, my experiences in the *aula viva* allowed me to begin reconstructing my understanding of the field as a dynamic body that hopes to encapsulate the environment and nature alongside human interactions (Smyth, Koleth, and Paeke, 2025).

As researchers, we must begin to see the field not merely as a physical site of data collection, but as a living, contested space shaped by the people who inhabit it and who struggle daily to defend it. This insight is echoed in feminist scholarship and embodied

by *Guaches y Guariches*, who emphasise that territory and the body are inextricably linked. Yet, as Western researchers, we often overlook this environmental interconnection, resulting in an incomplete understanding of knowledge and storytelling.

Experiences in spaces like the *aula viva* serve as a powerful reminder of the environment's integral role in shaping education, not only in Bogotá but throughout Colombia. They challenge us to engage more ethically and holistically with space and to reimagine the field as a co-creative space that embraces both human and non-human actors.

Lessons from *In Situ* knowledge

As *aula vivas* critically incorporate the environment into education models and teaching practices, they begin to emphasise *in situ* knowledge. This concept highlights the importance of learning that is rooted in the natural environment and local context. The value of co-creating grassroots knowledge has been widely explored by key thinkers such as Freire and Fals Borda, who argue that participatory approaches to dialogue are essential for challenging dominant cultures and narratives (Freire, 1970). Through co-creating dialogue within the territory, members of *Guaches y Guariches* can develop a critical consciousness that supports alternative models of education and contributes to the broader goal of liberating the wetlands (Freire, 1970; Fals Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003). Within *aulas vivas*, *in situ* and co-created knowledge together offer a pathway away from oppressive Western frameworks, providing the tools needed for transformative environmental education.

At its core, *in situ* knowledge means understanding and learning *within* nature and the environment. For *Guaches y Guariches*, this currently means learning *within* the wetlands, a central site in their struggle in the UPZ80 locality. For years, they have been fighting to reclaim these wetlands, which were previously damaged and polluted by the nearby Corabastos Market. For them, La Vaca Wetlands are far more than just a green space; they are a place of memory, storytelling, and care. Today, they represent a living space of resistance and liberation. As practitioners, it is essential to acknowledge the historical injustices inflicted on the area and to recognise the ongoing struggle to protect and restore these vital ecological spaces.

Ecofeminist scholars further expand on this concern with the environment, offering a vision of ecological consciousness that breaks down the Western dichotomy between nature and culture, and instead centres their mutual interdependence (Cross, 2018; Haraway, 2008). As I listened to Gaby, one of the leaders of *Guaches y Guariches*, speak in the *aula viva* about the fight to protect the wetlands, I began to better understand the

power of *in situ* knowledge and the importance of building dialogue directly within the natural environment. We need to critically reflect on how this type of learning can lead towards a new ethics of care, one that not only challenges environmental oppression but also rebuilds our relationship with nature (Haraway, 2008).

What makes these *aulas vivas* so important, especially when situated in sanctuaries of care like the North Wetlands, is that they allow us to rethink our relationship with the environment. This form of learning helps move us away from unequal power dynamics and towards an appreciation of nature and ecology as a third actor in ethical and educational processes. We must change the narrative and recognise that learning is place-based and locally developed and remain conscious of the risk of extracting knowledge from the communities and environments we study.

Implications for planners and practitioners

For practitioners and researchers, *aula vivas* highlight the power of embracing nature and the surrounding territory in education. When thinking about how knowledge is created and the ethics of that process, we must be willing to adapt to local contexts. Doing so allows us to move beyond rigid academic frameworks and engage meaningfully with the biocultural experience embedded in the territory. During my time in the wetlands with *Guaches y Guariches*, I learned that flexibility is key, academic approaches to biodiversity education and conservation are far more impactful when they align with local ecological and Indigenous knowledge systems.

In situ education revealed that direct experience in the territory is essential for co-developing both dialogue and language. This grounded engagement opens up new channels for knowledge sharing and practical insight. As researchers, acknowledging the value of *in situ* knowledge is critical to moving beyond Eurocentric hierarchies that separate nature and human activity, and towards relationships built on mutual co-development. My experience in the *aula viva* also demonstrated how education models and policies developed without connection to the natural environment, based on *ex situ* knowledge, often result in a disconnection from local realities and can be culturally inappropriate when applied to grassroots initiatives (Sterling et al., 2017). Conservation efforts and policy development must therefore be tailored to specific local contexts to avoid extractive research practices and ensure that existing local drivers and knowledge systems are respected and preserved.

Ultimately, *aula vivas* offer a space for synthesising knowledge and generating policy recommendations that are culturally grounded, socially informed, and environmentally

conscious. Not only do they contribute to building ecological resilience, but they also foster a new form of praxis, one that addresses the ethical concerns of all actors involved and challenges Eurocentric, reductionist approaches to education and policymaking. As practitioners, we must be prepared to embrace these alternative learning environments and create educational spaces that are open to, and shaped by, the natural world.

Conclusion

After two weeks working in the territory, I developed a deep appreciation for the *Guaches y Guariches* education model and its emphasis on recognising the agency of the wetlands and the natural environment. The *aula viva* in the North La Vaca Wetlands offered a powerful space for co-creation, one that contrasts sharply with the more rigid knowledge production processes often found in Western academia. It enabled a different way of building knowledge, one that understands the fight for the environment as fundamentally intertwined with human relationships and educational practice.

In conclusion, as researchers conducting fieldwork, we must remain open to engaging with local dialogue and approaches. Failing to recognise the connection between the human body and the natural environment can lead to a profound misrepresentation of cultural knowledge and lived experience. True collaboration requires us to rethink our frameworks and embrace more inclusive, context-driven models of learning and research.

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