

## Knowledges Exchange as a Framework for a Transformational Educational System

**Dr. Elizabeth Wallace,  
Program Director, Learning and Instructional Development Centre,, Simon Fraser  
University**

### Abstract:

*In western society, the so-called traditional education system is based on an Industrial Age model that was developed several hundred years ago. At that time, its purpose was to provide mass education, with a focus on teaching the "3 Rs" to children and youth as preparation for running factory machinery. Society has moved beyond the Industrial Age, yet the same educational paradigms persist. This essay is founded on the proposition that a new framework for education is needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, based on the concept of Knowledges Exchange. By posing a series of questions, and exploring some of the possible answers, it is hoped that educators will be encouraged to re-consider some of the existing norms of the education system, and adopt alternative approaches in their practice. Those who want to engage in discussion about the issues raised here may wish to contribute to Elizabeth's blog at:*

<http://knowledgesexchange.wordpress.com/>

Perelman (1992) says: "The classroom and teachers have as much place in tomorrow's learning enterprise as the horse and buggy have in modern transportation" (p.19). He is just one of the many voices questioning the continuation of the so-called traditional education system, which was introduced centuries ago to meet the needs of the Industrial Age.

The main goal of that system was to teach the general population basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills in preparation for work in factories. Perelman advocates for a change to innovative approaches which are more suited to present and future needs. He argues that the drive for credentials underpinning the existing system is detrimental to growth and development, and should be discarded in favour of a less competitive, more egalitarian paradigm. Like Perelman, I criticize the perpetuation of that out-dated model of factory schooling, and this essay proposes a way forward.

Why do I oppose the ubiquitous Industrial Age model? Pink Floyd (*The Wall*) reflected my position precisely in writing: "*We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control*" and visualizing assembly lines of school children heading toward a meat grinder. For those who find those images extreme, I could point to classrooms with rows of seats facing the teacher's desk at the front, just as it was in great-grandmama's day. I might suggest that symbols of a broken system are evident in school police patrols trying to prevent more student shootings. Or I could question the increasing corporatization of the learning environment, and the grade-obsessed post-secondary students.

I would like nothing better than to spend the rest of this essay justifying my conclusions that all of those examples are the outcome of irrelevant educational

methodologies bolstered by a power elite that has a vested interest in resisting change. However, let me just refer to one set of findings that seems to me to be clear evidence of the failure of the existing education system. In June, 2007, the Conference Board of Canada produced a report card on six domains of achievement (<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/press/2007/report-card.asp>). Included in the awards were an A for Education and a D for Innovation. Based on this, we can conclude that we are doing an outstanding job of educating the population to be followers. That is exactly what the factory owners of the 17th century wanted, but it will not solve the problems of this millennium.

At the core of this reproductionist system is the belief that students must learn a prescribed curriculum, and demonstrate what they know by passing tests. Noise in a modern classroom is often a signal that group work is allowed, or even mandated. But everyone knows that the biggest proportion of a course grade is given for completing assignments independently, with no copying or sharing allowed. No matter how much blogging and wiki-ing is going on, students still earn marks by memorizing and regurgitating facts and figures that faceless curriculum planners have decided are important, just as they have for generations.

When I describe my view of traditional education, I usually hear protests that there are dedicated and creative teachers working with students in ways which are not at all dated. My response is to agree. Yes, many teachers strive mightily to revolutionize the learning experience and to promote what they call critical thinking through innovative assignments, and they should be applauded for that. However, I would argue that those teachers are exhausting themselves trying to humanize a system that is essentially driven by what Paulo Freire (2006) would call an oppressive pedagogy. Those teachers are trying to effect change in an environment that is resistant to change, so results are inevitably limited. I would prefer to see the introduction of a completely different system in which teachers can teach for freedom, not oppression, and I believe a framework of Knowledges Exchange would foster that.

I am using a plural form of the word knowledge, but before talking about that, it's probably necessary to pose the question: What is knowledge? After all, educators refer to it all the time. When I was in teachers' training college many years ago, we were taught that all lessons should promote the acquisition of skills (in the plural) and positive attitudes (in the plural) and knowledge (in the singular). Every politician, parent, scholar and king speaks of the importance of knowledge. Yet, finding a definition of knowledge that everyone can agree upon is actually far from simple.

Some will speak of the Great Books, and the knowledge that comes from reading them. To others, knowledge is a set of scientific facts to be memorized. People of faith have knowledge of a creator which is not understood by those who believe in evolution theories. One definition of knowledge offered by Merriam-Webster Online is: "the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association" ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)). Wikipedia points out Plato's proposition that knowledge is "justified true belief" but goes on to say: "There is however no single agreed definition of knowledge presently, nor any prospect of one, and there remain numerous competing theories" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge>).

Isn't it curious, then, that so many people champion an education system that is built on acquiring something that we can't collectively define? Surely we are not all expected to study the London street atlas for two years, as that city's taxi drivers do, to pass the test that verifies they have The Knowledge? .While Gardner (2006) has convinced vast numbers of people that there are multiple intelligences, it is very difficult to find references to the multiplicity of knowledges. Even Mr. Gates corrects me when I type the plural form knowledges in MS Word (trademark registered).

What evidence is there to support the concept of knowledges in the plural? Peter Worsley, an anthropologist who studied Australian aboriginal peoples, compared their perceived primitive knowledge of plants and natural ways of healing with the knowledge of university trained botanists and medical professionals. He concluded that both forms of knowledge were equally valid, and stated: "Knowledge, then, is necessarily plural: there are knowledges, not simply Knowledge with a capital K" (p.10).

Anyone speaking from a post-modern perspective embraces the proposition there are many diverse knowledges and ways of knowing. Many studies have found that knowledges are gender - or culture-specific. For example, Belenky et al. (1997) have been raising our consciousness of "women's way of knowing" since the 1980s. More recently, at the July, 2007, conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) in Sydney, Australia, Sue Green spoke repeatedly of knowledges in the plural, as she argued for greater respect for the ways of indigenous peoples

I subscribe to the concept of pluralistic knowledges, and am proposing an action framework of Knowledges Exchange. This is the title which I have given to a model that I believe would serve as a replacement for the traditional system which is based on knowledge acquisition. The premise is that, in the societies of the present and future, growth and development are more dependent upon exchanging knowledges than on acquiring and retaining personal knowledge. The notion of knowledge transfer from expert to novice needs to give way to an exchange of knowledges among all individuals, if the globe is to be rescued from its suicide mission.

How can we conceptualize the exchange of knowledges? Although it is not yet fully developed, the framework that I am suggesting begins with four major principles:

1. Knowledges are pluralistic
2. Knowledges Exchange is an alternative approach to the Industrial Age model of teaching and learning
3. The process of Knowledges Exchange is based on mutual respect
4. In an education system that embraces Knowledges Exchange, the learners are evaluated on how effectively they facilitate the exchange with others, not on personal achievement.

The first two principles reflect points made earlier in this essay. The last two suggest a guideline for educators who want to explore ways of promoting the exchange of knowledges.

Principle Three is offered as a response to those who would argue that exchanges are difficult among people who have unequal knowledge bases. For example, in the Industrial Age model, it is assumed that an expert will impart knowledge to a novice, but the novice has little to offer in return. I invoke Griffin's Law to support the idea that everyone has something to offer, no matter how young or inexperienced, because I have discovered that my two-year-old grandson, Griffin, has as much to teach me as I have to teach him. In an environment of mutual respect, our exchanges are remarkable, joyful and beneficial to us both. Whether our knowledges should be valued equally by the larger society is a matter for delicious debate at another time.

Principle Four provides one answer to the question of how individuals might be rewarded for exchanging knowledges. In assembly-line schooling, each student must memorize knowledge and regurgitate it on demand, in order to progress. The result of this in recent years is that students have become obsessed with learning only what will be tested, so that they can gain advantage over others in the job race. Teachers who want to be innovative and introduce ideas beyond what will be tested often receive negative evaluations, so they are motivated to respond to the student demand for "just-in-time" instruction.

An approach to evaluation that removes rewards for individual memorization of a pre-determined knowledge set, and gives recognition for the exchange of knowledges instead, has the potential to overcome the obsession with grades. If learners know that they will be evaluated, not on what they have memorized for themselves, but on the ability to teach what they know to others, then a new paradigm for teaching and learning will emerge. Sharing and helping others learn will be valued, instead of personal mastery and individual success in passing tests. Teachers and administrators need only embrace this idea, and learners will adjust their priorities and their practices.

This essay has argued that the Industrial Age model of factory schooling, based on rewarding the acquisition of knowledge, should be replaced with an approach that favours Knowledges Exchange, for both individual development and the Common Good. If this essay has not succeeded in garnering support for this idea, perhaps Thomas Jefferson can provide a convincing rationale for change:

*I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions changed, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.* Jefferson Memorial, Fourth Panel.

Elizabeth Wallace contact: [ewallace@sfu.ca](mailto:ewallace@sfu.ca)

Dr. Elizabeth Wallace is a Program Director at the Learning and Instructional Development Centre at Simon Fraser University. She is committed to exploring alternative educational paradigms, and works with faculty to develop scholarship in their teaching and learning.

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