

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE FOR THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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Summary

Cultural knowledge is selectively influenced by those who have power and control over the cultural capital and artifacts of a society. Issues of inclusion and exclusion extend to those who are afforded the opportunity to learn the cultural knowledge that is of most worth. Many find that they are barred from full participation in society by the nature of their acquired selective cultural knowledge. What is transmitted in school is purported to be acceptable cultural knowledge but much of that content is noneducative or miseducative. Worse, different groups receive different knowledge, perpetuating cultural liabilities that bar advancement in the dominant society.

In order to meliorate these problems, what is suggested is a reconceptualization of the role education plays in abetting this disparity through its promoting of a western core of knowledge that is exclusive and discriminatory. Part of this reconceptualization is an awareness of the possibilities of full democratic participation in great communities that advance the common good. These humane environments can be responsive to private needs in a social spirit of common betterment where issues of sustainability and global connection are intertwined with the role the individual plays in a redirection of purpose.

A curriculum oriented toward the future is offered as the basis of useful cultural knowledge transmission. The focus of this curriculum is on the change factors of demographic, technological, social innovations and on shifts in cultural-value, ecological, information, and cultural diffusion. In this view, education becomes about change using an organizing schema that is ecologically oriented and focused on ecological reconciliation: the invention, establishment and maintenance of new habitus that conserves species diversity. This reconciles human activity with other species and moderates the use of natural resources in complex settings. Such a curricular content

would prepare students for a future when cultural knowledge is not a fixed entity, but an open, dynamic and changing response to democratic community needs.

1. Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: A teacher, teaching gifted students in Florida, uses thematic units lasting one or more semesters. One year, the focus is on futures. Using exciting materials, like Alvin Toffler's books *Learning for Tomorrow*, and *Future Shock*, and the writings of Elsie Boulding, the class focused on issues facing their community: growth problems, population sources, schools, energy, roads, water and utilities, and recreation. The year ended in a culminating activity with the students simulating a city organization and designing and building a city of the future. Each student was on a committee that had to negotiate their own perspective and needs with other committees. There were students working on transportation, others on recreation, waste management, housing, parks and recreation. They interviewed their counterparts in the city where the school was located to gain information about such things as zoning and land-use. They argued and fought over turf issues, advancing their view in simulated city council meetings, finally building a city of compromise, one that met all their needs, on a 4x8 sheet of plywood that they exhibited and spoke about with pride. What they learned was to be forward looking and future-oriented to meet the needs of their growing and changing community.

There is evidence this is not done now. On Sunday, August 24, 2003 the New York Times Magazine had an article titled "New kind of electricity market strains old wires beyond limits." As so many know, the great blackout of 2003 demonstrated that those in control of the electricity across much of eastern North America were not prepared for a computer shut-down that crippled Toronto for weeks and threatened Air Canada's existence. Those in control also were not prepared for SARS or the West-Nile virus, and most response efforts were aimed at containment of the problem, not meliorating the causes. Other such examples abound.

Turning this scenario back to education and to the future of curriculum and instruction, several questions can be raised. Are people being prepared well for the future? Is the knowledge imparted to students oriented toward the future or the past? What will it take to transform the cultural knowledge deemed most useful in present day schooling toward those questions which are not addressed, but should be addressed, in the contemporary classroom? How can concerned citizens join forces with others in the community to deliver and be responsible for education driven by local community needs?

In responding to these questions, there first must be recognition that as society changes, the knowledge that is necessary for participation in that society has to change. Conversely, as knowledge increases, there should be a like response from societal expectations and from the primary transmitter of such knowledge, the schools. It is clear that there has been a tremendous explosion of knowledge over the past 50 years. The knowledge base of most academic disciplines is expanding. Thus, a responsive school curriculum must decide what knowledge should be taught and how best to teach

it. Not such an easy task. Below, these ideas will be addressed in our exploration of cultural knowledge for the present and the future.

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Biographical Sketch

Judith J. Slater is a Professor of Curriculum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida where she teaches courses in curriculum theory, evaluation and organizational culture. She is author of *Anatomy of a Collaboration*, *Acts of Alignment*, and co-editor of *The Freirean Legacy*, *Pedagogy of Place*, and *Teen Life in Asia*.