

# “Decluttered” and/or “Knowledge-rich”?: integrating the way of heritage and the way of achievement in curriculum

David de Carvalho’s address to the ResearchED Curriculum Forum

Ascham School, Sydney - Saturday 27 March 2021

Note to the reader: This published version of the address given on 27 March 2021 includes material that was not included in the delivered address. Some material was omitted for reasons of brevity (so as to ensure the speech kept to time). Other material has been incorporated later to reflect the need to clarify some aspects of the address which the subsequent panel discussion highlighted as in need of clarification. Material that was not included in the delivered address has been presented in grey text. References have been included, as well as a long footnote reflecting on the nature of much debate about education.

## INTRODUCTION

I always enjoy talking with teachers, the people who are doing the practical work of educating our students. And because you are practical, it helps if you have a theory - some might prefer the word “philosophy” - of education that helps you understand your practice and see it in a broader context. So I would like to offer a theory or philosophy of education that may help you to reflect on your pedagogy, because ultimately, whether a curriculum is knowledge-rich or overcrowded and in need of “decluttering”, neither or both, it all comes down to the way it is taught.

The fundamental question at the heart of any philosophy of education can be stated in a preliminary way by the extreme positions on two sides of a recurring argument, of which this question of whether a decluttered curriculum can be a knowledge-rich curriculum is just one manifestation that happens to be getting some current attention. It involves the age-old distinction between knowing and doing, with some education reform advocates arguing that less emphasis on factual knowledge will free up time to focus on skills and capabilities.

We can restate the question in the following over-simplified way: should education be a kind of banking procedure in which the teacher hands over parcels of information that the pupil duly stores in the safety deposit box of the mind, and draws out as occasion demands, especially the occasion of examinations? Or should education be a freely developing evolution of inner resources, where the pupil is put in a sandbox and left to grow in self-realisation with the expectation that he or she will advance steadily from sandbox to, say, a laboratory for nuclear physics?<sup>1</sup>

Extreme positions are caricatures, enabling us to define the issue, but only through distortion of its salient features. For purposes of rational discussion – as opposed to exchanges on twitter - we need a more sober statement. So let me give the two sides as Dewey stated them:

To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality;

To external discipline is opposed free activity;

To learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience;

To acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal;

To preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life;

To static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Crowe, 1985, Old Things and New: a strategy for education, Atlanta: Scholars Press, p.x

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, 1938, Experience and Education

The question, then, on the basis of this lineup, is twofold: are these opposed positions mutually exclusive, or are they complementary to one another? And, if the latter, by what means can we unite them in one productive process?

I opt for the complementarity of the two. Indeed, that position is so evidently sensible that it is hardly worth spending very much time defending it; none of us believes in trying to clap with one hand.

So it is the second question that is the really challenging one: on what basis can we unite tradition and innovation, gift and achievement, heritage and development, docility and personal creativity? What is the underlying structure of such a process?

The barest outline of an answer to that question is what I hope to offer, drawing heavily on the work of the Canadian Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan.<sup>3</sup> So let's begin!

## **DEFINING THE TERMS: DECLUTTERING AND KNOWLEDGE**

In 2014, the then Chairman of the ACARA Board, Barry McGaw, prepared a statement for the first Review of the Australian Curriculum that was being undertaken by two independent reviewers, Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire. The opening sentences of that statement are as follows:

What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passions – and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress.

I expect we will see a stirring of the passions when the draft revisions to the Australian Curriculum are released for public consultation in a few weeks. No doubt some will argue the proposed revisions don't go far enough, while others will say they go too far, and this is likely to vary from learning area to learning area.

Ministers have given ACARA the task of improving the Australian Curriculum by refining, updating and decluttering the curriculum to make it more helpful for teachers, which then makes it more accessible for students. There seems to have been a lot of focus on the decluttering, and not so much on the "improving".

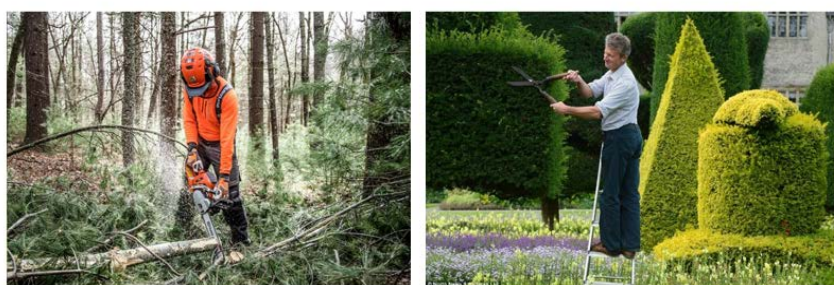
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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Lonergan, 1904-1984, is less well-known than he should be, despite being described by Time Magazine as one of the twentieth century's most important thinkers. He wrote only two major published works, "Insight: a study of human understanding" (1957) and "Method in Theology" (1972). The former, in which he lays out his key ideas in epistemology and cognitional theory, is intimidating in its scale and ambition. The second is essentially a further elaboration on these ideas. In addition he wrote many articles and gave many seminars, including a series of lectures on education in Cincinnati in 1959. The ideas presented in this address to ResearchED, in particular the framework for integrating "the way of heritage" with "the way of achievement", is the work of one of Lonergan's chief interpreters, Frederick Crowe, in his book Old Things and New: a strategy for education (1985). For an initial introduction to Lonergan's thought, see Peter Beer, 2010, An Introduction to Bernard Lonergan: exploring Lonergan's approach to the great philosophical questions, Glen Waverley: Sid Harta Publications; and Terry J. Tekippe, 2003, Bernard Lonergan: an introductory guide to *Insight*, New York: Paulist Press.

## DECLUTTERING

But what do we mean by decluttering? In any debate, one must define the terms. Obviously, it will entail some reduction in content, but that is not the only focus, and arguably not the main one. I've heard some stakeholders say that we should be "taking a chainsaw to the curriculum", but chainsaws are not particularly subtle and can leave an awful mess behind. I prefer to use the analogy of a hedge-trimmer and pruning secateurs, which not only cut back, but also tidy up, reshape and clear out old and redundant branches to make room for new growth or the grafting on of new elements.

Hedge-trimmer, not a chainsaw



Another way to describe what are hoping to achieve is that we want to give the Australian Curriculum the Marie Kondo treatment, so that – regardless of how much content is left in the curriculum at the end of the process – it is properly organised, logical in its presentation and sequence, coherent, clear and easily accessible. We are hoping that teachers will 'find joy' when they see the new curriculum, and will be very interested in providing their feedback through the consultation process which opens on 29 April and runs through to 8 July.

**Before**



**After**

As part of the review, we want to clarify the relationship between the three dimensions of the curriculum; that is, the learning areas, the cross-curriculum priorities, and the general capabilities. We need to be clear that learning areas have primacy of place in the curriculum and that the

cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities are best taught in the context of the learning areas, not separately.

Furthermore, not every cross-curriculum priority and general capability can be addressed in every learning area. Some learning areas are better suited to the development of particular general capabilities than others, and each of the three cross-curriculum priorities find more natural homes in certain learning areas.

Clearer expectations will give back time to teachers – so they don't have to spend so much time planning and trying to interpret the curriculum to work out exactly what they are expected to teach. We want them to have more time to linger longer on topics, to make sure students understand what they are taught and are given the opportunity to deepen their understanding of core concepts.

The review has highlighted that some learning areas need more revision than others. Maths is a classic example of an area in need of more improvement and updating than some other areas of the curriculum, and this is supported by the history of our PISA results.

What analysis of the PISA results tells us is that when it comes to Mathematics, while Australian students are not bad at knowing the “what”, we are not so good at the “why” of mathematics, that is, being able to think mathematically so as to be able to see how mathematical concepts can be applied in different situations. We are good at knowing the rules of Mathematics, but not good at understanding the reasons for those rules.

In terms of Civics and Citizenship, the Australian Curriculum exemplifies a shared commitment to respectful and rational discussion of different perspectives, values and beliefs, and to democratic processes as the means of promoting the common good of all. This is particularly important in our current context. Our democratic way of life is underpinned by a belief in the dignity of each person, bequeathed to us by the heritage of Western civilisation. Grasping this, apprehending this, requires a deeper understanding of our history and is in no way at odds with the importance of deepening our understanding of the histories and cultures of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the history of the interaction between those two traditions.



As Senior Australian of the Year, Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, stated in her acceptance speech, “We learnt to speak your English fluently, walked on a one-way street to learn the white people’s way. Now is the time [for you] to come closer to understand us and to understand how we live and to listen to what needs are in our communities.”

And only last week in a speech at the National Museum of Australia Noel Pearson noted that as long as Indigenous peoples remain unrecognised then Australia would be “an absurdity.” He said:

“Repudiation is the enemy of recognition. In fighting against the repudiation of the country’s Indigenous heritage, no answer lies in the repudiation of its British heritage.”

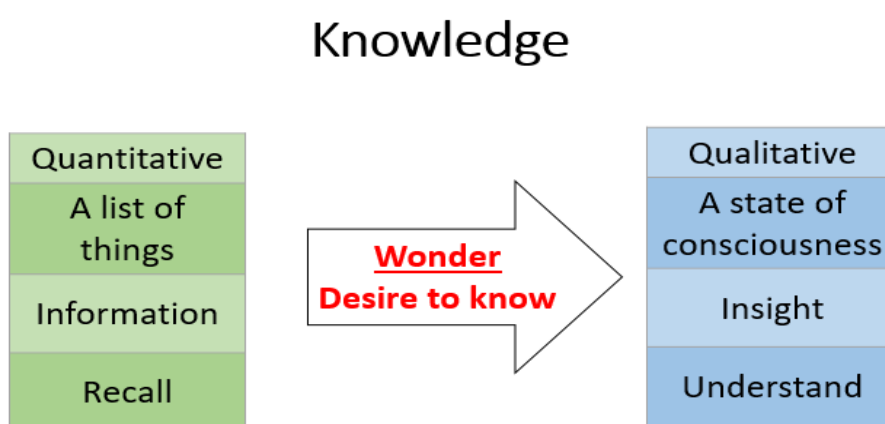


## KNOWLEDGE

As well as considering what “decluttering” means, we need to consider what “knowledge” means.

I suspect that many people, when one sees the way they use the term “knowledge-rich” in the context of discussions about curriculum, are mainly thinking about knowledge as a body of content, an amount of facts, some quantity of things that are true and can be written down in words on a list. On this view, a knowledge-rich curriculum would essentially be a very long list, with lots of facts, and the more things on that list, in the minds of some, the better. “Long list, good; short list, bad” as Orwell may have put it.

But of course there is another meaning of knowledge which must be considered, and that is a qualitative conception of knowledge, which we can approach by asking the following question: What is that we are doing when we know something? What does it actually mean for us to say we genuinely “know” something? Knowledge here is not a list of things, but a state of consciousness in which the meaning of reality is grasped intellectually.

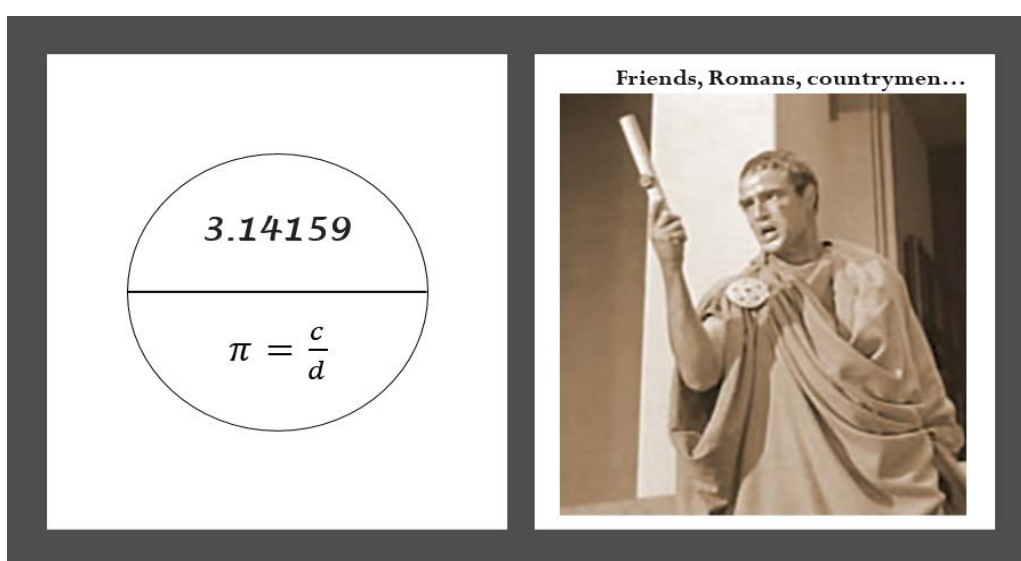


Now one might argue that if you can recall something, then you know it. At a superficial level this is true. But this just highlights the crucial role played by understanding in how we come to know things, when we arrive at knowledge as state of consciousness. To make my point clearer, I would ask you to consider this question: what if, instead of talking about a “knowledge-rich”

curriculum in the quantitative sense just referred to, we were talking about an “understanding-rich” curriculum?

An understanding-rich curriculum is one where, as a result of the teaching process, a student can not only tell you the value of Pi to five decimal places, but can explain why the ratio of diameter to circumference is the same for any circle and can then apply that understanding to solve a range of real world problems.

An understanding-rich curriculum is one where, as a result of the teaching process, a student can not only recite Marc Antony’s speech from Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” by heart, but can explain why that speech was so clever and the role Antony played in the very real-life drama that saw the transition from Republic to Empire.



In other words, to **genuinely** achieve knowledge as a state of consciousness requires us to understand. It is not enough, if we want to have knowledge, just to have a multitude of experiences or to hold a multitude of facts in one’s head, to be able to rattle off that long list from memory. Experiences, data, facts are pre-requisites for knowledge. They are necessary but not sufficient. One must be able to join the dots between them to generate, through a process of inquiry, an intelligible concept that can then be verified by reference back to the real world. Lonergan explains this nicely using the analogy of a detective story...

“In the ideal detective story the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal. He may advert to each clue as it arises. He needs no further clues to solve the mystery. Yet he can remain in the dark for the simple reason that reaching the solution is not to mere apprehension of any clue, not the mere memory of all, but a quite distinct activity of organising intelligence that places the full set of clues in a unique explanatory perspective. By insight, then, is meant not any act of attention or inadvertence or memory, but the supervening act of understanding.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lonergan, Insight



Helping students to join the dots in a way that enables understanding is a pedagogical task, and it takes time. And this suggests that if we are under pressure to cover a long list of facts in curriculum that might be seen as “knowledge-rich” in a quantitative sense, then we may not take the time necessary to help students join the dots between those facts in a way that fosters understanding, that is, knowledge in the qualitative sense.

So a true knowledge-rich curriculum is one in which the information we expect students to learn is organised hierarchically in such a way as to make the pedagogical task of helping students join the dots – to understand - easier for teachers. And when we understand a topic, it is easier to recall the facts because they are no longer just random data but are organised into intelligible ideas.

Then we are able to have sensible and informed conversations about whether a proposition is true or false, whether one idea is better than another, or which of many options for action is best. If we want our young people to be creative and critical thinkers and problem solvers, then it is crucial that factual knowledge about a topic is taught in ways that promote deep understanding.<sup>5</sup>

#### **FOUR LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THEIR QUESTIONS**

The drive that impels us from simply having a collection of facts or a bank of disconnected experiences in one’s memory towards understanding is our innate human curiosity, the spirit of wonder, the unquenchable desire to know, which is the eros of the human spirit.

As the parent of any three-year-old knows, once you start answering their questions that take the form of “what’s that?” pointing things out to your child, what follows soon after is a series of “why” questions. We naturally want understanding, we want intelligibility, we want meaning, like the child in the TV commercial who asks his father about why the Chinese built the Great Wall, to which the father replies with an explanation – “to keep the rabbits out”.

Here is an example of a potentially plausible explanation – after all, we had a Rabbit-Proof Fence in Australia - that needs to be tested against other plausible explanations and other data before it can be verified, before we can make a judgement about the truth or falsity of the explanation. So there is yet another type of question, a question for judgement of fact: is that explanation true?

This dynamic ascension through different levels of consciousness, driven by different types of questions, can be set out as follows:

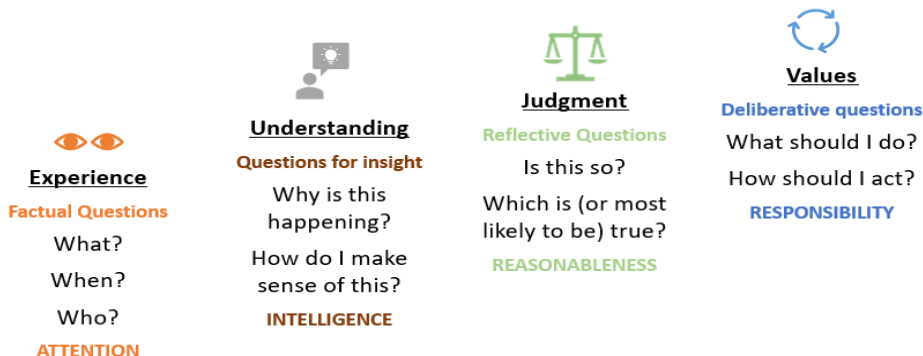
On the first level of experience, we ask “what?” “where?” “when?” Then further questions impel us to the second level of understanding: “why?” and “how?” The answers to these questions yield insights and possible explanations, which then have to be tested through questions for judgement: “Is this true?” Answering this question conclusively requires reference back to the real world to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/education/curriculum-will-let-teachers-focus-on-key-concepts-factual-knowledge-20200126-p53us3.html>

search for further data that either verifies and disproves the proposed explanation. When all the relevant questions have been asked, we can make a judgement and give our assent to the proposed explanation as being true, as representing knowledge, notwithstanding that this judgement may need to be revised later as more evidence comes to light. This is how knowledge grows over time.

## Four levels of consciousness



And then there is the question of what to do with the knowledge one has. “What should I do?” is a question that goes to judgements, not of fact, but of value. I’ll come back to this question of value and responsible action shortly.

But is this the only way we attain knowledge, building upwards from a position of ignorance by reflecting on the data of experience, asking relevant questions for understanding, then for judgement? If we had to follow that process for everything we know, it would take us a very long time to truly come to know very little.

So the answer is “Of course not”. We also build up knowledge by taking things on faith and believing people whom we trust. Even scientists do this, take things on faith. That might sound odd, but it’s true. This is one way of interpreting Isaac Newton’s saying, that knowledge progresses by standing on the shoulders of giants, that is, those who have gone before.

For example, the scientists who discovered the Higgs-Boson particle did not first run all the experiments that had been run by all the atomic physicists who had preceded them, to verify the results for themselves. They took the current state of knowledge on trust, because this is what the values and the culture of the scientific community of which they were members, led them to do.

They accepted the judgements of others as authoritative starting points for their own experiments and reflections.

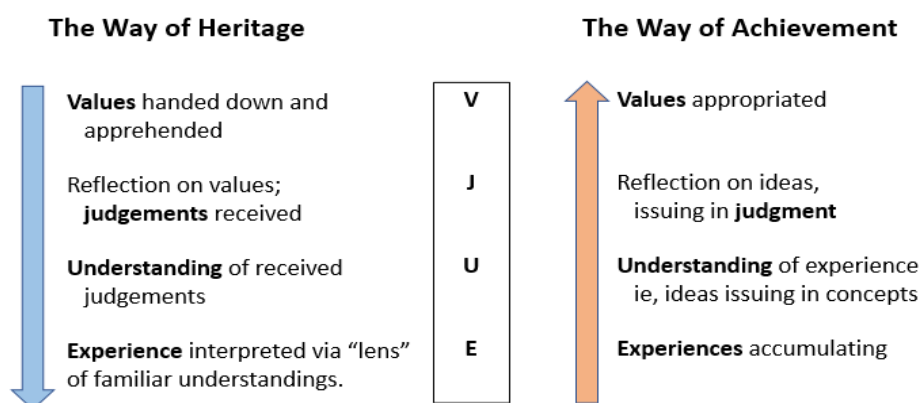
Those accepted judgements informed their understanding of the domain they were studying, which in turn helped them ask relevant questions of the data of experience, or the data of experiments, when they came to developing new insights and knowledge that built on what came before.



## THE WAY OF HERITAGE AND THE WAY OF ACHIEVEMENT

So where is all this going in relation to the issue of knowledge-rich v decluttered curriculum? Let me attempt to bring it together in a way that helps you as teachers think about your role, to develop your own philosophy of education.

What I have attempted to trace here in outline is the complementary action of two movements in education, and in human development more broadly: a movement upwards from experience through understanding to verified judgements; and a movement downwards from previous verified judgements, through understandings that influence the way we filter and sort data and experience into what is relevant and what is irrelevant for the purposes of building up new knowledge.



Let us call these two vectors “the way of heritage” on the one hand, and “the way of achievement” on the other.<sup>6</sup>

These two ways are not competitors, but are complementary, and education involves the integration of these vectors of development “from above downward” - the “way of heritage”, the handing on of tradition in community - with development “from below upward”, the “way of achievement” that builds on and transcends that tradition to create something new.

These two vectors of human development operate together in a dynamic interplay that allows the individual to constitute her world as a world of meaning and value. The human person is “both a constituted and constituting subject”.

Development “downward” represents the human person as self-transcended. In other words, the human person is embedded in a larger world of meaning and value that constitutes their given horizon. The human subject is thus “constituted” by his or her socio-cultural location, which forms the person as a historical subject in relation to community, tradition, and place.

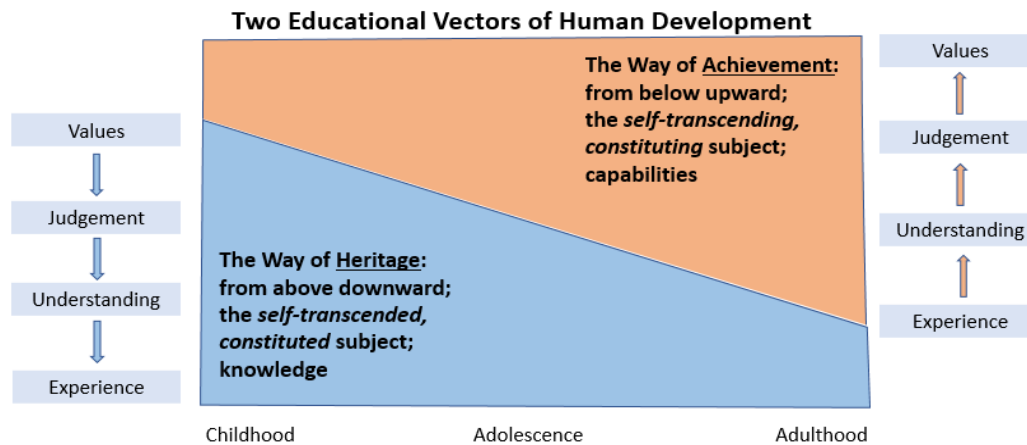
Through development “upward,” the human person is self-transcending, insofar as she develops the capacity to experience, understand, judge, and decide for herself. The student is not held

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Crowe (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) Old Things and New: a strategy for education

captive to inherited knowledge, values, and beliefs, but rather is free to appropriate, adopt, accept, reject, critique, or adapt inherited knowledge, values, and beliefs from tradition to make them alive, vibrant, and life-giving in the present and into the future.

The purposeful integration of these two vectors of human development is the goal of education.



So the downward vector involves the handing on of disciplinary knowledge that is important for students to understand the world into which they have been born, and the upwards vector empowers students with the capabilities they need to apply that knowledge in new situations and to create for themselves and their generation a new reality that builds on the past and provides them with meaning for their lives. These two functions are carried out concurrently in the educational process. The separation of knowledge and capabilities, of knowing and doing, is impossible.

Yet, unfortunately, the human tendency for dualist thinking and the temptation to indulge in “win/lose” debate has seen the creation of bifurcated camps: “I’m for knowledge”, cries one; “I’m for capabilities”, cries the other. It makes as much sense as trying to fly a plane that has only one wing.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The education sector seems peculiarly and particularly prone to this phenomenon, which is somewhat ironic: people who are theoretically interested in learning seem less open in practice to learning from others with whom they disagree and to consider what might be beneficial in someone else’s approach. We have pitched battles between “progressives” and “traditionalists”. Each tribe “follows” their heroes as they do combat on twitter, adopting cheap shots and attack as the best means of defence in what appears at times to be more a psychological response than an intellectual one. Many protagonists seem to have their whole personal and professional identity invested in being right all the time and at all costs, and unable to entertain the thought that an alternative view might have some merit. On this point Richard Rohr has this to say: ‘The human preference for binary thinking has kept us from seeing that when history evolves with a new idea, cultural mood, or consciousness, we need not (dare not, actually!) completely exclude the previous idea, mood, or consciousness. We grow best by including what was good and lasting in the previous stage and avoiding the overreaction and rebellious spirit that have characterized most revolutions up to now. This demands both humility and the capacity for non-dual thinking, qualities that are rare in most zealots, reformers, and revolutionaries. Slash-and-burn only creates a whole new set of things to correct or rebel against in the long haul. Either-or thinking creates disjunction and mistrust immediately. Both-and thinking creates continuity and trust over time. This way forward can most simply be stated as “include and transcend”. It is at the core of what we mean by wisdom.’ This is not to suggest that on any one issue the weight of evidence does not favour one argument over the other.

However, this is not to say that that one does not have priority over the other. I use the term “priority” in both the temporal sense – as in coming before or first, in time – and in the sense of importance.

The way of heritage comes first in a temporal sense because it is the dominant way of development early in the life a child as they begin their learning journey.

The way of achievement, the development of their capabilities and capacities to critique and evaluate what they have been handed and come to their own judgements about how to act responsibly in the world, is there also, but it becomes more dominant as the child grows to adulthood.

But the way of heritage also has priority for another reason, and here the argument is more contentious. When it comes to the attitude students should take to knowledge of the world they have inherited, knowledge that is mediated by a whole social and cultural milieu and offered to them in the institution of schooling and its curriculum, should they be more credulous or more sceptical, in the spirit of Cartesian doubt, questioning everything, accepting nothing?

In response to that question, I refer to John Henry Newman. In his 1870 magnum opus, “A Grammar of Assent”, Newman makes a case for “reasonable scepticism”, but then immediately puts that case into perspective, in the following way:

Of the two [credulity and scepticism], I would rather have to maintain that we begin by believing everything that is offered for our acceptance than that it is our duty to doubt everything. The former, indeed, seems the true way of learning. In that case, we soon discover and discard what is contradictory to itself; and error, having always some portion of truth in it, and the truth having reality which error has not, we may expect that, when there is an honest purpose and fair talents, we shall somehow make our way forward, with error falling off from the mind, and the truth developing and occupying it.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, teachers should first do what is necessary to help students acquire a set of values, beliefs and a body of knowledge (including procedural knowledge), however contingent it may be.

Then, as students mature, teachers guide them in applying their critical faculties to values, beliefs and knowledge, in order to further refine and deepen their understanding of what that body of knowledge means and their appreciation of the values and cultural dispositions they have inherited through the institution of school, so that they may be able to critique them and adapt them all the more successfully for their own living.

This is why, in the diagram, the way of heritage predominates in the early years of school, while the way of achievement dominates in the later years, as young people emerge from adolescence

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<sup>8</sup> John Henry Newman An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), p.377, cited in Crowe, op.cit. p.28.

into adulthood and face the existential reality that they must appropriate values for themselves and take responsibility for their lives.

This is why it is wrong to see knowledge and capabilities as competitors for curriculum real estate. They only become competitors if we fail to understand that education is the integration of the way of heritage and the way of achievement in human development.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORETICAL, ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE**

Now I want to go sideways and talk about the kind of factual knowledge that should be the focus of the way of heritage. I want to make a case for the importance of theoretical, decontextualised, esoteric knowledge. These are words that have a bad press, but this kind of knowledge is crucial when it comes to developing capabilities for problem-solving and critical and creative thinking.

Today we find ourselves in the midst of a paradox. The primary purpose of schooling, many would argue, is to prepare students to take their place in the knowledge economy, yet many contemporary advocates for curriculum reform seem to place less and less emphasis on knowledge, particularly theoretical, decontextualised, esoteric knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The reasons for this are complex, but at root its because of the combination of two related developments.

The first is that the utilitarian or “pragmatic” view of education as preparing people for the workforce has come to dominate our thinking about the purpose of schooling as at the service of national productivity. This itself is the result of five centuries of cultural change that have seen the rise of individualism, consumerism and the acquisition of material goods or services as the goal of life itself.

The second, related development, is that in this educational worldview, all we really need to know about relates to our immediate context and how to “get on” in that limited world. The smaller that world is, the easier it is to gain control over it and to shape it to our own benefit.

This is why the cry of “relevance” is so influential in education today. Our individualist culture encourages our students to repeatedly ask “How is this going to be relevant to me getting a job?” This question cannot be ignored, but we need to help students transcend, or rise above, that limited question to ask bigger questions about how is what I am learning relevant for my soul, or my community, my country, my world.

Here again the work of Bernard Lonergan is very helpful. He uses the image of the horizon as a way of referring to our current context, our limited range of interests, the extent of what we can see

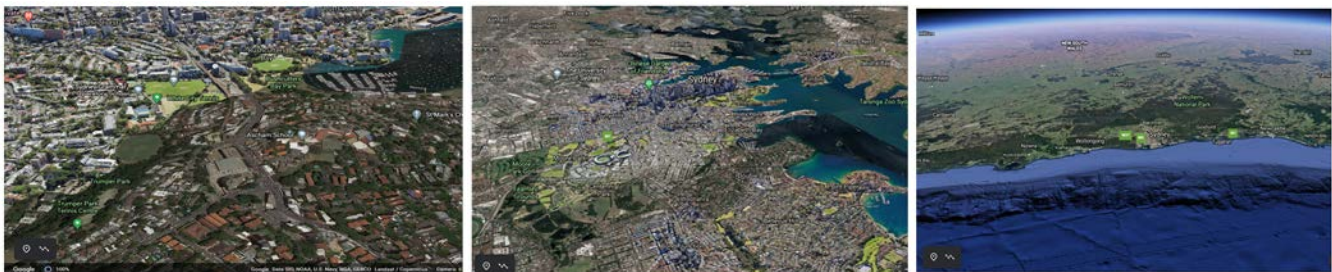
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<sup>9</sup> See Leesa Wheelahan Why Knowledge Matter in Curriculum: a social realist argument (New York: Routledge, 2010). I had originally intended to include, alongside discussion of Lonergan, Wheelahan’s exposition of the work of Basil Bernstein and Michael Young (a student of Bernstein’s), but length prevented me from doing so. In particular, Bernstein’s notion of “horizontal” and “vertical” discourse has much in common with Lonergan’s use of “horizon” (see below). Wheelahan’s defence of giving access to disadvantaged students to theoretical, decontextualised and esoteric knowledge, is excellent.

and know from where we stand at any particular moment. We can exercise horizontal liberty in moving around that horizon, such that as we move horizontally in one direction, our horizon expands in that direction while receding behind us as we move away from where we started. We have some memory of that previous horizon, which we can incorporate into our set of experiences, but essentially all we have done is move to another context, another set of immediate concerns, a different range of interests.



But Lonergan also refers to “vertical liberty”, and a vertical move expands our horizon by taking us up to give “the birds eye view”.<sup>10</sup> The higher we go, the more we can see in every direction. We begin to see our original context as situated in a bigger picture, and the contextualised “common sense” knowledge that was pragmatic and useful within a particular horizon is now sublated or carried up into more generalised understandings of the multiple interactions across the boundaries of those limited, ground-level horizons. As the minutiae of detail at ground level give way to the perception of bigger patterns, understanding is enriched.



Lonergan draws on the example of well-travelled sailors, used by Newman in another of his books, “The Idea of a University”. Newman stated that

Seafaring men...range from one end of the earth to the other; but the multiplicity of external objects, which they have encountered, forms no symmetrical and consistent picture upon their imagination. They see the tapestry of human life, as it were on the wrong side, and it tells no story.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Lonergan, Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, second edition revised and augmented, first published by Herder and Herder, New York, 1972) p.41, draws on the work of Joseph de Finance who distinguished between horizontal and vertical liberty. Lonergan states that “horizontal liberty is the exercise of liberty within a determinate horizon and from the basis of a corresponding existential stance. Vertical liberty is the exercise of liberty that selects that stance and the corresponding horizon.” Empowering young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the capacity to exercise such “vertical freedom” is a key goal of education.

<sup>11</sup> John Henry Newman, The Idea of a University, Discourse 6.5.

In other words, all that moving about horizontally might add to the stock of one's experiences of different contexts, but it does not involve development of understanding; it does not involve education. For that, one needs that higher viewpoint that allows the grasping of patterns and concepts that integrate experiences into intelligible and meaningful knowledge that can then be applied in practical ways once we come back to ground level, in a range of different contexts.

This is why, if education is to have broader purposes than simply "getting on in the world", students – and especially those from disadvantaged communities - have to be given access to the theoretical, decontextualised knowledge that will allow them to become people who drive social change as opposed to being driven by forces manipulated by others.

We need to offer them access to a world beyond their own horizon and beyond their immediate context. This means offering them epistemic and social access to what Michael Young refers to as "powerful knowledge"<sup>12</sup> in the form of theoretical, abstract and decontextualised disciplinary knowledge. We need to reclaim those terms – theoretical, abstract and decontextualised – as valuable things when it comes to curriculum.

This kind of knowledge is powerful, because of its capacity to challenge the social distribution of power such that anyone, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can engage meaningfully with - and influence - the public conversations that shape our community. It empowers them with the capacity to think critically and creatively about their context, rather than to merely "get on in the world" that is bound by that context.

So we must not water down the curriculum for students from disadvantaged backgrounds on the basis that they cannot cope with abstract, decontextualised or esoteric knowledge and we would do better to give them "practical" skills that enabled them to "get on" inside a small world of local context. This is to perpetuate what Noel Pearson – echoing George W. Bush – has called out as "soft bigotry of low expectations."

"It is the most powerful cultural and ideological barrier to social progress. If the hard bigotry of prejudice and discrimination is a wall that keeps the marginalised out of the opportunities of the social and economic mainstream, then the soft bigotry of low expectations is a prison. A prison maintained by people who think they are socially progressive. It is the compassionista's prison, having nothing to do with true social progress."<sup>13</sup>

The soft bigotry of low expectations is on show whenever it is argued that students from disadvantaged communities are not sufficiently academically able to take on a curriculum that expands their horizons in this way, so we need to box them into their own context and make learning "relevant" to them by only exposing them to things they are already familiar with, or only things that they are interested in learning about, for the sake of "engagement".

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<sup>12</sup> Knowledge and the Future School Curriculum and Social Justice (2014)

<sup>13</sup> <https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/speeches/noel-pearson-the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations/>



In saying this, I risk being misinterpreted as saying that vocational education is not academically rigorous. I do not believe this for a second, and if you want to read more on the intellectual challenges involved in working with one's hands on practical problems, I recommend the work of Matthew B. Crawford in his brilliant book, "The World Beyond Your Head: on becoming an individual in the age of distraction". Crawford is both an academic and a motor-cycle mechanic.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, there is no tension between a decluttered curriculum and a knowledge-rich curriculum if we define decluttering as not simply removal of content, but also better organisation of content to facilitate understanding, and if we define knowledge as not simply a long list of data, facts and experiences, but as the state of consciousness that has grasped the meaning and significance of those things through understanding.

And understanding is enhanced by exposure to the bigger picture, the broader horizon afforded by theoretical, decontextualised knowledge that can then be applied in a variety of different contexts. This is particularly important for our most disadvantaged students, and if our system is going the promote, in the aspirations of the Mparntwe Declaration, both excellence and equity.

Human development through education is the integration of the downward way of heritage and upward way of achievement. Both are part of a dynamic process that cannot be bifurcated and separated into competing silos of knowledge and capabilities.



But at the end of the day, it is the professional relationships you have as teachers with your students that will make the difference. This is my grand-daughter, Emma. In a few years' time, she could be in your classroom. How will you approach the task of teaching her the way of heritage and the way of achievement in an integrated process of human development? It is the pedagogy that counts. The intended curriculum is one thing – the delivered curriculum is quite

another. And by pedagogy I don't just mean the important discipline-specific teaching methods, but also the way you as teachers manifest in your demeanour, commitment, authority and humility, your belief in your own efficacy and in the ability of ALL students to succeed. So, over to you! Thank you.