

Knowledge Wars and Educational Futures

SHORTENED and adapted version of Julius Nyerere lecture on Lifelong Learning by Professor Tara Fenwick, University of Stirling, Scotland, at University of Western Cape, 12 October 2010

"We are being constipated by knowledge wars, and educators are stuck right in the middle of these," says Professor Tara Fenwick, leading scholar and researcher, who was presenting the 7th Annual Julius Nyerere Lecture on Lifelong Learning at University of Western Cape.

Prof Fenwick from the University of Stirling and an expert in researching work and lifelong learning starts the lecture with a clip from the film, *Working Girl*, a story of a working class woman who dreams of success in the knowledge economy. She learns how to put together mundane bits of knowledge to help big companies acquire little ones. And she 'makes it' with the power and status she dreams of – but then the movie pans back to show her 'imprisoned' in the large office block, working long hours with little time to live fully. She "has been tricked by a promise of liberation, to join millions who are yoked to one narrow view of what counts as useful knowledge."

Fenwick speaks about what is happening in the globalised spaces of the knowledge economy. She highlights the conflicts unfolding in these spaces over what is the most important knowledge. She argues that educators have a crucial role to play in declaring the importance of knowledge that builds healthy, sustainable communities and human beings, and pointing to alternative forms of knowledge that can be developed.

She elaborates on how education in schools, vocational training or higher education, are complicit in the narrow view of 'what knowledge counts'. She highlights three processes in particular. Firstly, the issue of mobility – over 190 million people now live outside their country of birth – the magnitude of today's migration is unprecedented. Migration is very different for the mobile elite in the knowledge economy, from those compelled to move, and for those unable to move. Migration issues are growing: wealthy countries refuse immigrants entry. People struggle in alien lands, separated from families, to find homes, and to have their skills recognised.

The second process she highlights is 'boundary-blurring'. Identities become blended as people move and groups become de-linked from their places of origin as do their values and practices. Youth identities are notoriously eclectic – they slide around feeds from media, family, cultures and commodities. She highlights how 'truths rise and fade like weird fashions'.

The third process is the meeting of local and global. An example is the Fifa World Cup, where local beer had to give way to a German one. However, she points out that many people

reject this logic of domination as 'simplistic and inaccurate'. Imported ideas are never simply imposed – they get melded with local practices, or they co-exist alongside local traditions. She questions how education participates in these flows between local and global.

She says that education is never innocent, for it is embedded at every level – policy, social structures, institutional norms and regulations, curriculum, and local interactions. In this way education has been a critical medium for globalisation. She highlights what is being lost in education, for example, knowledge with no apparent market relevance, like that relating to imagination and the arts. The marketing of education around the world is also re-shaping patterns of knowledge development – the wealthy countries export their knowledge to countries 'who have very different stories'. A small knowledge elite is created in poorer nations, with networks cutting across borders. Migrating students – a small percentage with the means to do so – move to industrialised countries for higher education. Only a few return home.

Of course hybrids form, as imported ideas and practices are reshaped to meld with local traditions. But mostly, educational exports from the West have colonized widespread acceptance that English should be the global language and that scientific western rational knowledge is the ticket to the global knowledge economy. She quotes what is happening in regions of Africa and that following existing trends, 50% of people in low income countries could soon be permanently excluded from employment.

"...educators have a crucial role to play in declaring the importance of knowledge..."

She argues that public education must also challenge these flows, must build resistance to inequity – and promote alternate views of knowledge and the knowledge economy. She recognises that more persons now actually have more possibilities for living than they ever did before. Because of mobility, boundary-blurring, and the meeting of local and global, more cultural resources are flowing – to open new networks, new languages for old problems, new creative solutions. BUT, the problem and the tragedy, is that these possibilities are more often shut down by education than opened up. She argues that we are being constipated by knowledge wars, and that educators are stuck right in the middle of these.

Just about everyone, everywhere agrees that within all these globalised spaces, knowledge is becoming central, and educational purposes have become entwined with economic demands. But as we are aware, there are massive

disagreements about what knowledge means, and how it is produced. This she calls 'knowledge wars'. She has some problems with the use of this term as it creates a 'we-they' narrative. But she agrees that these knowledge wars will define education of the future.

Some of these knowledge wars are played out over the media and the blogosphere, in the many empty discourses offered to people claiming to be the true avenue to success. In education, knowledge is often treated as though it is a sort of package – a thing, a contained substance that can be controlled, measured, and acquired. But knowledge in the knowledge economy does not behave this way. Knowledge can be shared and it actually grows through application – therefore a knowledge economy should not be seen as one of scarcity needing protection but one of abundance. Knowledge is not limited by location – technology creates virtual markets and organisations; knowledge leaks happen where demand is highest and barriers lowest. Knowledge enhanced products command price premiums over products with low embedded knowledge, and the same knowledge has different meaning and value in different contexts.

She identifies that for educators the key question is: what knowledge counts most in a global knowledge society? This is not a new question but forces of globalization have made it urgent. Many of education's key purposes which relate to social cohesion, participating citizenship, global human rights, equity, critical thinking, are directly linked to these wars over knowledge.

She elaborates on the over-riding influence of human capital theory on education which has encouraged a model of individualist human capital formation rather than the development of social citizenship. In this glorified individualist model, especially the 'innovative individual', knowledge is viewed as something a person acquires personally. Important dynamics in knowledge are completely ignored – such as the person's social networks, opportunities, tools, and conflicting commitments. Instead, success depends solely on the knowledge 'she can prove' she has acquired. The bonus for global capitalism is when she actually becomes convinced that she is a lone individual, and that it is her financial responsibility to increase her own knowledge capital to sell her knowledge in global markets.

So, what knowledge counts most in globalised spaces? Judging from government rhetoric, innovation is among the most valued knowledge in a competitive global economy. What counts as innovative knowledge tends to be novel, solves practical problems, and commands market value. But of course all this is determined by very particular interests who can benefit from value placed highest on innovation in technology and science. Of course what are overlooked are other forms of innovation – everyday improvisation, creativity,

innovative approaches to well-being, innovative challenges to the hegemonic discourses of profit, expansion and productivity driving the global economy.

What knowledge counts most in our current economy is the 'technopreneur'. Networking skills, a techno-scientific orientation, entrepreneurial, that which understands national economic needs, meets these through profitable partnerships, and concerned, above all, with material gain through competitive means.

Fenwick highlights 'Google' as an example where knowledge is seen as a representation and its significance is judged by links, not its inherent worth. This is having enormous influence on the organisation of knowledge, and on what is considered relevant and important. Google's algorithms are becoming more and more personalised and localised – so that different individuals get different results that basically echo and amplify what they already believe. She points to other examples in the Arab world and among indigenous communities, which are fighting not to have their knowledge swallowed by powerful institutionalised global scientific knowledges. These scientific knowledges separate subject from object and object from context and use. In contrast, indigenous knowledge emphasises spirit and interconnectiveness in all things.

According to indigenous knowledge, what we know cannot be separated from family, the land, the reciprocity we owe for our knowledge, and the responsibility we must take for it. But this knowledge does not count in the knowledge economy. In her own studies of knowledge experts like consultants, Fenwick found that what passed for high standards and useful knowledge – sometimes commanding very high fees – was highly ambivalent, and usually determined by what the client had decided would count as knowledge. Image impression, rhetoric and connections were the real standards by which knowledge was judged.

However, Fenwick points to contradictions within these knowledge wars. There are few clear boundaries separating each position from another. The 'standards' wars for example, are rooted in predetermined specifications, individual performance, surveillance and distrust. But these directly contradict the conditions for knowledge generation, which depends on open improvisation, collaboration, sharing, and trust. How can collaboration and trust survive the logic of open markets where innovation, even in academic circles, is guarded by proprietary rights and competitive knowledge races. She states that when innovation is the focus, knowledge is increasingly standardised and fragmented. Call centres are an iconic representation of the global economy.

Amidst these knowledge wars, there is growing public sense of crisis – that compulsory school systems and universities cannot generate the knowledge that counts most; cannot develop the skills that count most in getting jobs; and cannot achieve adequate standards. This distrust has fuelled a push for reform in



structure, curriculum, pedagogy and in teacher training.

Educators are stuck right in the middle of these knowledge wars. Some accept this 'us-vs-them' narrative, and fight to take control of knowledge. This just perpetuates the myth that there really is one 'correct knowledge'. She argues that what we have is not a crisis in skills shortages or educational inadequacy, but a crisis of possibilities – of unfulfilled potential. In education for example, there continues to be a seductive search for certainty; a desire 'to iron out the mess', find the solution, simplify the difficulty. We continue to think of teaching in terms of the four walls of the classroom and how we can pack more students, and more content into one hour ... standardise and measure their knowledge.

But education should be a place that promotes 'messy knowledge' and we need new practices 'to embrace the mess'. We might think of unlearning how we understand and judge knowledge, and even think about dwelling in 'a state of unlearning'. Unlearning is about holding open the not known, fighting the urge to explain it. Unlearning is about focusing the margins of experience, things at the edge of the intelligible. These are non-authoritative spaces. They resist our standard containers; things are rarely what they appear to be.

This is a coming-to-know that is about making difference, not making similarity. Knowledge that makes similarities creates hierarchies and exclusions. Un-learning seeks strategies for dwelling in the ambivalence of fundamental difference, different worlds that are non-coherent but that co-exist simultaneously.

We have to unlearn our desire to remake different others, to "develop" them, to be more like us – and instead make space for them to come into presence as unique beings, different to us, but webbed with us.

Two forces may be helpful to shift to new

knowledges. Education needs to focus less on things and their separations, and more on the flows – what goes on between things. Not just between people but between all material things – what flows between us and connects us with telephone lines and sandstorms, banks and viruses, animals, anxieties and longings.

The second force is to focus on imagination. It's about confidence to imagine things other than as they appear. It's about leaping into new spaces beyond what we know.

Imagination works through relationships, appreciating how we are interpenetrated with one another – and how we are interpenetrated with the materials that are all around us. These are difficult knowledges; knowledges not of things, but working in the between, knowledge that is about difference. Education must be open to new possibilities. Imagination defies homogenised categories and linear thinking. Imagination moves across boundaries, across space and time. It makes connections. It attunes to radical new possibilities that are enabled by linking global networks to local priorities.

One example is that of the women's movement, which continually frustrates those who become impatient wishing that thousands of years of patriarchy could be reversed in a few decades. The women's movement has been about unlearning a whole ordering of human beings, women unlearning their fear and naming their oppressions. As it gets taken up by new voices – generations of feminism continue to evolve in ways we could not predict. Social movements continue to be important spaces for unlearning – helping people unlearn their beliefs that multinationals are inevitable and more powerful than themselves, and helping societies unlearn their addiction to profits through unfettered exploitation of natural resources. There are many examples of alternate powerful knowledges that can be found in for example the recent South African book by Linda Cooper and Shirley Walters, *Learning/Work: Turning work and lifelong learning inside out*.

Education should be a space where imagination flourishes, where people experiment and invent, where they play with poetry and upend the familiar.

Education can interrupt the taken-for-granted boundaries that define what counts as human, what counts as object, what counts as knowledge. Education can attune to the possibilities within mess. Make difference – not similarity. This is an education where the 'big is made small' and where the focus is not on control but on expanding the space of the possible.

"Maybe we can envision education as a river. Not as institutions but as a river running – powerful in imaginative energy, flowing through knowledge wars, working in-between people and materialities of everyday life and ideas, flowing across difference, waking the nation. So let's let the river run".

Shirley Walters, Division for Lifelong Learning, UWC