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Why Wisdom?

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Why Wisdom?

Abstract

To be wise I think it is important for educators to at least have some conceptualization of the roles both *gnosis* and *episteme* have played in human history and further consider a wisdom context broad enough to contain both. Current definitions of wisdom range from advanced practical “know how” (Sternberg, 1990) to “cosmic enlightenment” (Alexander & Langer, 1990). I suggest that to have a deep understanding of “wisdom” (or for that matter, any field of study) it is “wise” to define the “space” bracketed by its contrastingly extreme positions. This dialectic process could establish a context within which wisdom might reside. Applying this process then, can a definition of wisdom be inclusive enough for the “down-to-earth” as well as the lofty extremes of meanings people have assigned to this term? Also, what is the relevance of such a potential definition to education?

Keywords

Gnosis, Episteme, Mysticism, Wisdom, Enlightenment

Author Statement

Dr. Ashcroft taught for 25 years at CSUSB, and during that time published and taught courses ranging from Special Education, to Research, Foundations, and Communication in the Graduate program. When not focusing on the content of those academic topics, he is interested in Prehistory, the Evolution of Communication, and the History and Prehistory of Spirituality.



Emergent Life as Learning

Education is younger than learning. For billions of years, life forms have “learned” through natural selection. Some of the earliest life forms on the planet formed colonies of single cells where the outer perimeter cells, hundreds of generations removed from the “parent” cells at the core of the society, had already changed from those parent cells. In a sense, they had “learned” and the kind of learning that had occurred could and would affect future generations of that species (Bloom, 2000).

Once life forms had become complex enough to have some kind of nervous system that could function as a *personal* storage and retrieval system for experiential data (starting perhaps with a bony stickle fish), *individual* members of a species could “learn” in an individual lifetime in a way that altered their individual future behavior (i.e., “Do I eat this or does this eat me?” A timely answer increased chances of staying in the gene pool, [Pert, 1997]).

Once mammals arrived on the scene, life forms got really smart, really fast. Mammals developed a system during the period of nurture (a hallmark of mammal behavior) where the more experienced members and care-givers could pass on not only the instinctual “wisdom” of their species through behavior encoded in their DNA through natural selection, but also bits of knowledge and learned behavior acquired during the individual lifetimes of the nurture providers. Complex mammals have been observed “teaching.” Chimpanzees in the wild have been observed 1) leaving tools

(anvils, termite “fishing” sticks) in the presence of the young, 2) placing the young in the presence of such “cultural tools,” and 3) modeling tool use in slow motion in the presence of the young. These three kinds of interactions between experienced and less experienced members of a community could be called “teaching” (King, 1994).

Orality versus Literacy

For our own species, with the longest period of nurture of any other species, both in length of time and proportion of the life span, the potential for “teaching” is greatly expanded by this extended period of nurture. What we have chosen collectively to teach our young has varied across time and been influenced by cultural tools like writing. Pre-literate societies relied on an oral/aural tradition to conduct teaching. Since writing has been invented the potential for transmission of cultural data has been expanded. “I will build you monuments more durable than stone,” wrote Homer, acknowledging the power of print to preserve cultural data against the evanescence of time.

In some of the earliest samples of written text, we have samples of “orality written down.” Homer’s writings are a good example of this because the Iliad and the Odyssey preserved in writing, elements of an earlier oral tradition. Another sample is the Judeo-Christian scriptures, where scripture scholars can identify key differences between text that was derived from the earlier oral tradition and finally written down, versus text that was created *as* text. In the latter literate

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tradition of text created originally as text, there are no talking bushes or talking serpents and the notion of deity itself shifts from an energy present in the now (JHWH is originally an ancient Hebrew *verb* describing a state of *continual emergence into beingness*) to an abstract *Being* (a *noun*) existing in some other dimension. This apparent shift in perspective could be highly relevant to contextualizing wisdom (Ong, 1982; Jaynes, 1976).

The suggestion of Marshall McLuhan (1964), that we shape tools, and then the tools shape us, could apply to the effects of using our primary cultural tool – print – over multiple generations, upon the way we think and process information. It does appear that our preliterate ancestors thought differently from us. An important component of the oral tradition was the “mystery schools,” an educational tradition that spread throughout the ancient Middle East, and which was viewed as a wisdom tradition. Art from Turkey, as early as 10,000 years ago, depicts individuals in ritual dance sharing a beverage and a ritual meal and there appear to be echoes of this very early tradition in later Greek mythology and ritual. There has been much speculation regarding the possible ingredients of the beverage, but the meal is typically depicted as an entire animal, sometimes a wild bull in the oldest of these depictions and in some cultures the meal depicted was a single loaf of bread. Some scholars have identified the symbolism of this meal, the tearing apart and consuming as a group, a single animal or loaf of bread, as the reenactment of our individual selves being “torn” apart from a collective self, the ritual or initiation being depicted serving as a reminder to initiates of their belonging to a larger collective self (Settegast, 1987).

Gnosis versus Episteme

Certainly this notion that our individual selves are part of a larger composite “self” has been present in many traditions and cultures throughout prehistory and the historic period and serves as what may be a common source for all “cosmic enlightenment” traditions. The Greeks themselves, with a “mystery” tradition largely inherited from Egypt, acknowledged two kinds of wisdom, “gnosis” and “episteme,” both words that are translated into English as the single word “knowledge.” The Greeks apparently were comfortable with the notion that wisdom had two aspects, *episteme*, everyday practical and scientific knowledge, and *gnosis*, representing intuitive knowing and “cosmic enlightenment.” The educated and “cosmopolitan” Greek was both learned in episteme, but also in gnosis as an initiate into the “mysteries,” a citizen (*polis*) of the “cosmos,” thus *cosmopolitan*. These two aspects of wisdom were seen as complementary, gnosis conceived as being more concerned with the meanings behind things (intuitive knowing, enlightenment, mystical union) and episteme concerned more with the practical functioning of things in the world (science). Gnosis was once seen as primary because of its concern for the origins of life, the eternal and universal aspects of existence. More recently there has been a great tension between the two, when in the 1600s of the common era, a new philosophical paradigm emerged that pitted them one against the other. Episteme won (Davis, 2004).

The Modern Era

Prior to the so-called Enlightenment in Europe people seemed to have less difficulty integrating mystico-religious beliefs with logico-rational modes of thought than post-enlightenment and our current era. Indeed, many of the heroes of the enlightenment era themselves held very non-scientific beliefs along with their support of the emerging scientific world

view. Gnosis had historically pointed towards spiritual wisdom, episteme to rational and pragmatic competencies. Gnosis looks at the mysteries of existence and the transcendent experience. It relies on figurative devices and the arts for expression. The narrative devices and analogues of gnosis were once seen to complement the causal structures and logic of epistemic thought. The breach between the two was probably articulated most clearly by Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who is often cited as the key figure in the development of modern philosophy. Not only was epistemic thought seen as out of balance with gnosis, it began to be seen as sufficient in and of itself (Davis, 2004).

It may be that the objectifying potential of literacy has also influenced literate societies to move away from gnosis, a preliterate tradition that might seem primitive and superstitious, towards episteme, a tradition of rational logical thought, that in our era has essentially displaced gnosis entirely. However, traditions still exist, East and West, which acknowledge the idea of a gnostic “collective self.” Certainly Jung’s (Jung, 1959; Jakobi, 1959) notions of the collective unconscious and of archetypes are related to this tradition, the Buddhist “big mind” and “little mind” are expressions of that tradition (Suzuki), and the American Transcendentalist poets of the 19th century embraced the construct of a shared “oversoul.” Those American poets (ie, Emerson, Thoreau) had steeped themselves in Eastern thought, most notably Advaita (A-“not”, dvai-“two”, ta-“things), the non-dualistic philosophy of the Indian Vedas (Waite, 2003). From this monistic (non-dual) perspective, the universe is one thing, and that one thing is awareness. This perspective is commonly called mysticism.

Mysticism versus Rationality

Mysticism in the Abrahamic traditions is largely marginalized. There is

some tolerance in Islam of Sufism, a mystical wisdom tradition that is likely pre Islamic and Hasidic Kabbalists are accepted somewhat within Judaism. However, there are active fears of cultism regarding mysticism prevalent among many western Christians. Mysticism generally hold to some form of immanence with a focus on direct realization of deity. This obviates many concerns about the afterlife and conflicts with conventional religious doctrines. Mystical teachings traditionally were passed down through oral transmission from teacher to student. One reason for this is that an aspect of mystical initiation is not just the passing of information but also the influence of the presence of the already initiated upon the initiate. Relationship was always part of this mystical or “mystery” tradition. As rational thought displaced the more intuitive mode of teaching, the medium of print rose in importance. Epistemic knowledge lends itself to preservation in print more readily than the deeper mysteries of gnosis that were conveyed through personal relationship, teacher to student.

Gnosis and Creativity

The intuitive and creative aspects of human being (gnosis) seem to function best when rational thought is relaxed or even absent. History is replete with stories of “aha” moments that seem to occur when an individual has *stopped thinking* about a vexing problem. Many activities that require a kind of “flow” in order to excel can be interfered with by thought. Savvy competitors in individual sports (ie, tennis, golf) will attempt to engage their opponents in conversations that encourage the opponent to describe a particular technique they use in their game in order to get them *thinking* about their performance and thus hope to throw them off their game. Jazz great Miles

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Davis was quoted as having told a visiting musician to “play like you don’t know how to play” in an attempt to get them past their “patterned” way of playing their instrument. *Depatterning* could be a description of a technique to achieve gnosis. In traditions from the ancient Greeks and Egyptians to contemporary gurus and artists, the path to gnosis, enlightenment and creativity is one that involves recognizing our automaticity, our patterned way of behaving. We can become so automatic in our way of

perceiving and reacting that we no longer recognize our own automaticity. Many aspects of our individual selves have been culturally conditioned, and have become so much a part of who we perceive ourselves to be that we are entirely unaware of the degree of automaticity with which they function in us. For example, before you turn the page, prepare yourself to *not* read the single word that appears on the next page. Look at it, but don’t read it. Ready? OK, turn the page.

BLUE

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Were you able to look at it but not *read* it? Of course you weren't, because reading text is so automatic for you that you cannot *not* do it. And just like the acculturated skill of reading, we have many social behaviors: facial expressions; body postures; emotional reactions; ways of perceiving and attending, which are just as automatic. Because they are automatic, we are not conscious of them.

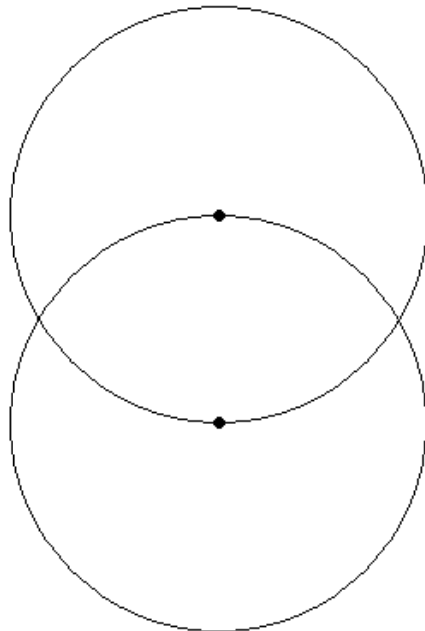
Deikman (1982), a psychotherapist and researcher described a depatterning process of *deautomatization* as a pathway to creativity and enlightenment. His view is that we have a conditioned self we've *identified* with, that functions largely automatically, yet few of us have awareness of just how automatically we function as a result of this identification. In his view we also have an observing self of which we are less aware, a self that is unconditioned, our true self. The unconditioned self can become an observer of our automaticity and we can gradually shift our identification from the conditioned self to the observing self.

This is not unlike the view of the *gnostikoi* described by Plato, the initiates into the mysteries.

According to what we know of these initiates, their view was that the nature of a human being consists of two elements, the eidolon and the Daemon. The Daemon, in contemporary language would probably be referred to as soul, higher self, spirit, or Self. In the Gnostic view, the purpose of initiation, or the most important lesson in life, is to experience a joining or union of the eidolon (lower self, ego, personality: that with which most people identify as being their self), with the Daemon, or higher self. This was represented symbolically by joining two circles with equal radii, so that the circumference of each passes through the center of each (see Figure 1). The resulting figure is like a Venn diagram and the overlapping area represents this joining of the higher and lower selves or "gnosis." Achieving this state was their view of wisdom.

Figure 1.

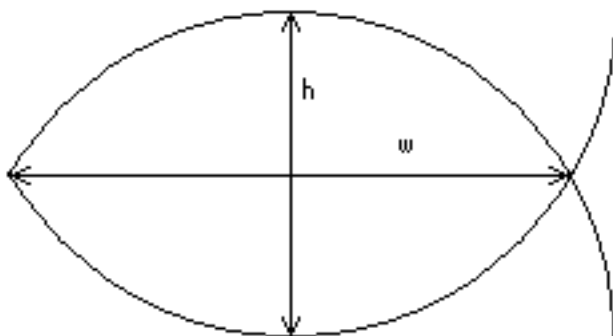
Symbolic circles with equal radii, so that the circumference passing through center of each.



The upper circle represents the Daemon; the lower circle is the eidolon. The figure represents the joining of the two, thus “enlightening” the lower self by its union with the higher self. The purpose of the mystery schools and later of Gnosticism was to engage in initiatory acts that would awaken the individual who has “identified with” their lower self or eidolon, to the experience of themselves as something much larger. The figure then was re-imagined into the icon that appears below (see Figure 2), a symbol of enlightenment or “gnosis.” But this figure also had special significance to the Pythagoreans, followers of Pythagoras (Socrates and Plato among them) who introduced these ideas to the Greeks from the 22 years he spent in Egypt, Persia and India. The integration of spirit and matter was achieved through number. The almond-shaped area formed by the overlapping circles has an interesting mathematical function and was important to the Pythagoreans, the tradition of

Socrates. The ratio of the width and height ($265/153$) is the closest whole number approximation of the square root of 3, a number sacred to Pythagoreans. The number 153 also has special properties. Mathematically, 153 is a triangular number. More precisely it is the sum of the integer numbers from 1 to 17 inclusive. More significantly, 153 also has the rare property that it is the sum of the cubes of its own digits (i.e. $153 = 1 \times 1 \times 1 + 5 \times 5 \times 5 + 3 \times 3 \times 3$). In the time of Pythagoras, 153 was most significant for being one of the two numbers in the closest fraction known, at the time, to the true value of the square root of 3, the fraction in question being $265/153$ (the difference between this and the square root of 3 is merely 0.000025.....). The ratio of 153:265 was consequently known throughout the Hellenic world as the “measure of the fish” (Freke & Gandy, 2001)

Figure 2.
Symbol of enlightenment or “gnosis”



This symbol represented gnosis or enlightenment. According to this ancient tradition, education was a kind of self-remembering, educating from within, that which is already known but forgotten, and achieved by depatterning one’s

identification with the lower self and experiencing union with the collective self.

The Tools of Teaching

Humanity has entered the cusp of yet another transitional age regarding our primary cultural tools, where electronic

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media are in many ways displacing print. One of the key features of the manipulation of print as a cultural tool is the length of time required to master it. In a sense, the notion of childhood as a construct arose symbiotically with our increased dependence upon print as a primary cultural tool. It requires childhood and a portion of young adulthood to truly master it as a means for advanced learning and teaching. By contrast, a young child can operate a television or other electronic media with little to no instruction and achieve access to information that would previously have been inaccessible to them if it were available only in print. This relative ease of access to information that previously could have been kept secret by adults may serve to erode traditional concepts of childhood (Postman, 1982).

We at the university have been encouraged to put increasing numbers of courses on line. This process can cause us to attempt to distinguish between the kinds of information that is appropriate for a more abstract electronic media relationship with students, versus what information is best contextualized within the interpersonal relationship that can exist between teacher and students. Part of the latter relationship potential is the fact that the teacher and student can be “present” with each other in the same moment in time. For most of the time we have existed as a species, this was the only way we could acquire knowledge from the more experienced: to truly be “present” in the moment that was actually occurring in order to experience what was being said or what event was unfolding. Certainly the quality of listening was likely superior in such a society.

Several years ago I worked on a six-year project that required me to be on airplanes several times a week. Like many of my fellow travelers I hardly “listened” at all to the flight attendant’s instructions

about seat belts and oxygen devices that preceded each flight. Once though, I was on a plane that actually had a sudden drop in cabin pressure and the oxygen devices dropped down from above. The flight attendant stood to speak and demonstrated the proper procedure for getting oxygen from the devices. I can attest to the fact that the quality of listening my fellow passengers I and exhibited was markedly improved under those conditions. We were all truly “present” with that flight attendant and with each other. I liken that to the conditions that must have existed for us as a species during our long preliterate period. We needed to be truly “present” in the moment we were actually living in order to benefit from it. Orality/aurality was the principal medium for exchanging data. The stakes were higher moment to moment and it supported us in being more fully awake and present in the moments we were actually experiencing. These were the conditions for humanity for most of our existence and our brains developed under those pressures. The better “listeners” had a better chance to become our ancestors.

To be truly wise educators I think it is important for us to teach from the broadest possible context. We should not be chauvinistic about the present moment. We have been around as a species for a long time and wise people have come before us. In all human cultures we have studied there is evidence for a drive for gnosis as well as episteme. Learning occurs in a social context and the relationships of students to teachers can be an important part of individual development. In Werner’s (1989) 34-year-long study of a birth cohort (n=698) from Hawaii, she identified having a bonded relationship with a teacher as the most powerful protective factor among those individuals in her study born at the highest risk.

So again, why wisdom? It is my view that in terms of wisdom broadly contextualized, episteme is insufficient. In fact, our scientific knowledge (episteme) has brought us to a place in physics, the “hardest” of the so-called hard sciences, where epistemic descriptions fall short. A number of noted physicists have “gone mystical” in seeking explanations for the mysterious behavior of subatomic particles. Phenomena such as nonlocality and entanglement are unexplainable by the standard model. This is the phenomenon where particles that have become “entangled” influence each other instantaneously (not constrained by the speed of light but instantaneously) at a considerable distance, and theoretically, across the universe. As an explanation, physicist David Bohm spoke of consciousness itself expressing as matter and/or energy (Bohm & Hiley, 1993). In other words, Bohm and other physicists (Goswami, 1993; Kafatos & Nadeau, 1990) have expressed a conceptualization of the universe itself being alive and conscious. This construction could be completely understood by the mystic, whatever his cultural or religious heritage.

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