Mälardalen University

This is a submitted version of a paper published in *On the Horizon*.

Citation for the published paper:

Hoppe, M. (2011)

"The enormous significance of new and expanding Bas"

On the Horizon, 19(2): 134-139

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748121111138335>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mdh:diva-13398>

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The enormous significance of new and expanding Bas

Magnus Hoppe

First draft for *On The Horizons Special Issue on "Complexity and the Future of Education"*

Abstract

Purpose

This article aims at disclosing a perspective on knowledge that carries with it a most urgent challenge for educational actors to engage in personal knowledge processes wherever they take place.

Design/methodology/approach

The purpose is met through the use of philosophical argumentation and theoretical ideas developed for understanding knowledge creation. Central concepts are *Ba* and *knowledge activists* but also *personal insights* in relation to *technical knowledge*.

Findings

The author argues that educational actors who don't want to be marginalized must step forward as knowledge activists, gaining access to and influencing all sorts of places (Bas), whether they are physical, virtual or mental, where information is interpreted to become knowledge.

Practical implications

Educational actors, who want to play an important societal role onwards, better leave the idea of knowledge as something to be handled mainly in physical places. Instead they have to search for a position in the world of virtual Bas forming today.

Social implications

With the introduction of the Internet and the emergence of *a cloud*, civil society is in desperate need of educational actors who can interlink the disparate Bas now forming, thus generating common ideas that can keep us together as a society and defending basic democratic ideals.

Originality/value

Through the use of a few well-established theoretical concepts the article shows we're in desperate need to rethink education from being something limited in time and place to something ever present in all sorts of knowledge processes.

Keywords

Education, Universities, Knowledge society, Knowledging, Knowledge activism, Ba

Article type

Conceptual paper

Introduction

Our educational institutions of today look in some central aspects a lot like educational institutions of yesterday. Picturing education I guess most of us envision either elementary schools with playgrounds or campus areas with both students and staff strolling along nicely cut lawns, discussing recent developments of diverse fields. Envisioning this, the physical houses stand out as the essential nucleus. It's in buildings our most precious knowledge processes are supposed to be harbored and nurtured. It gives knowledge an air of something special and also an impression of stability and security.

With these pictures, and the ideas that goes with them, we are led to believe that knowledge can be defined and controlled by the formal educational institutions we have learned are the back bone of our society, and without reflection also automatically springs forward as natural core institutions for education in the *knowledge society*. But is this really true? Are these old institutions up to the task of meeting the demands of today or do they have to change, and if so how? Or to put it another way; aren't there already other institutions establishing themselves as educational backbones right now, as we speak?

These questions are the starting point of this article that aim at disclosing a perspective on knowledge that carries with it a most urgent challenge for educational actors to engage in personal knowledge processes wherever they take place. It's a challenge that I argue our old institutions must take on if not to be marginalized as outdated actors in the knowledge society now forming around us.

The emergence of a cloud

To start my reasoning, I'd like to point out a vital distinction between *research-based knowledge* organized in peer-reviewed communities aimed at the few in contrast to *self-organized actionable human knowledge* open for anyone. In this article I focus on the latter. Our educational systems has traditionally encompassed both, but with great emphasis on the first category. Now, I argue, it's time to change.

Although the Internet has provided a fantastic infrastructure for *research-based knowledge*, Internet's impact on traditional academia is nothing compared to the importance for *actionable human knowledge*. The introduction of tools and services like wikis, Face book, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs, Second Life etcetera has created a whole new universe for both creating and spreading ideas, that is to say the knowledge that people in general use in defining the world and the knowledge that aim their attention.

In these relatively new forums and through these services people constantly develop their knowledge about the everyday problems they are facing, building their own ideas of the world, which eventually guide their actions. It's a universe of knowledge that is neither stable nor controllable, thus represent-

ing a central aspect of the complexity that characterizes our society. It's also a mobile knowledge that is reproduced, changed and developed as the knowledge creators, that are we, live our lives.

Now, the Internet is transforming into a cloud, an all-embracing informative and communicative infrastructure for almost any sort of human action, and henceforth knowledge.

The enormous significance of new and expanding Bas

According to Polanyi (1959) knowledge, or more precise *personal knowledge*, is something continuous and involuntary, where Tsoukas (2003) points out that this personal knowledge should be regarded as *insights* that cannot be shared, compared to *technical knowledge* that instead is possible to share.

Unfortunately western thinking has up till now paid a lot of emphasis on knowledge as a physical product, i.e. technical knowledge, which in turn hinders us from seeing the more encompassing impact of knowledge in today's economy, not to mention how knowledge processes work and how we can work with these processes (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka *et al.*, 2000, Nonaka *et al.*, 2006). It's an everlasting task of moving from *being* to *becoming* (Nonaka *et al.*, 2000), a process that can be noted and studied in the actions we take (Cook and Brown, 1999), where some actions like physical movement and speak can be observed but others like thought cannot. Hence knowledge is created and used everywhere humans are to be found.

In this line of reasoning personal knowledge becomes a central core for understanding the world but also a base for organizing the world. This is all very well, but where more precise do we as humans turn for making sense of the world? Where do we turn to reach the fundamental insights that govern our lives? In answer to this question Nonaka *et al.* (2000) suggests we use the idea of *Ba*, which in their description "[...] is a place where information is interpreted to become knowledge", where a *Ba* can be *physical*, *virtual* or *mental* (ibid.).

Now, add the last decades of development in the world. What has happened with the introduction of Internet and other technical platforms is that we have created new virtual Bas - a new array of places where information can be interpreted to become knowledge. It's an enormous expansion of Bas, where we suddenly have an almost unlimited access to interpretative places, as long as we're connected to the cloud and possess some sort of communicative device. This expansion has given each individual (with a communicative device) a freedom to develop a personal knowledge of his or her own liking, without censorship. The drawback is that the knowledge thus created is focused on the individual, not on the collective, where we lack mechanisms that help us construct ideas that will build mutual understanding of each individuals' societal liabilities. So, even though much of Internet is hyperlinked and possible to reach through search engines, it is not automatically and intuitive linked. There is a lack of connections, a grid or glue, which creates common insights from dispersed Bas.

Complexity - a matter of interpretation

This reasoning also suggests a fundamental reinterpretation of the complexity we experience today. If we free ourselves from the current ideas of complexity theory and just use the term complexity in a more general sense we might agree on that there has never been a single point on this earth where one have been able to comprehend everything that's going on at a single moment. But due to the limitations and design of traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, books etc.) the amount of information available for the ordinary man has up until now not only been circumscribed but also interpreted by journalists, experts, editors and other institutional actors. The information that thus has reached us has at least to some extent been fitted into the bigger stories of the world, creating common insights. Certain reference points has been added, lending the stories we confront a familiar cast of being interconnected and in some respects controlled. A grid or glue has been present.

As discussed above, media as we know them have changed rapidly. The intermediaries are still there to some extent, but more and more information is created and shared without intermediaries and thus without given interpretations and reference points. Furthermore information is now a day more searched for than given, turning the power balance away from the intermediaries to the users. And without interpretation (no glue), and without intermediaries (no grid) but with an abundance of sources and places to turn for information – a sense of complexity is bound to arise; especially if we do not share the same sources nor share our ideas with our follow men. In this perspective *complexity* is a description for how we in common *interpret* the world, and in some respects a more correct interpretation of the world than we had earlier with a more limited media structure.

A need for new knowledge institutions

So, is this a satisfactory situation? I would argue no. Of course we have gained personal freedom to create our own knowledge structures and connect to people who share the same ideas as we do ourselves. But at the same time we tend to disconnect from the civil society where we live our physical lives. Without common reference points and critical voices that can challenge misconceptions (that are bound to arise in disperse and isolated communities) the civil society will wither and fall apart where we no longer share a common ground and a language that will help build a mutual understanding of ourselves as a society.

And here, at this point in my reasoning, a new role for educative institutions is emerging. With the tradition of nurturing and building collective ideas based on the ideals of the enlightenment and Humboldt, educational institutions can engage themselves in the Bas now forming, closing the gap between technical knowledge and insights but also between personal knowledge and collective knowledge. Doing this, these institutions will also bring some sort of order to the complexity we experience on a personal level, thus reducing societal anxiety through providing a sense of belonging to a collective knowledge tradition that transcends isolated Bas. Whether these knowledge institutions will be completely new gatherings of individuals or hybrids of

already established institutions, we still don't know. Probably it will be a combination of both.

A word of caution is also called for. If freestanding knowledge institutions fail to emerge and engage in this task, other actors with other agendas will probably fill the void; offering easily digested solutions that might subdue any anxiety arising. And if these actors' agendas are dominated by the dogmas of religion, politics, economy or some other obscure ideology we're in trouble.

To press on, if old educational institutions do not take part in this development, gaining access to and participate in the building of dispersed Bas, they will most likely be marginalized. To make this point clear, we can turn to Schumpeter's ([1942]1992) idea of *creative destruction*, where the formation of new ideas and structures also encompasses the destruction of old ideas and structures. We can from this deduct that when new Bas are forming rapidly old Bas are becoming obsolete, loosing their earlier positions as favored places for knowledge formation. Maybe not consciously or willingly destructed, but fading away into the mist of outdated pasts. Building on this we might fear that the industrial decline we have observed in the west during the 1900:s might very well be followed by a decline in the physical representations of educational institutions, a liquidation of traditional schools, colleges and universities in the 2000:s. A possible, but uncalled for, paradox of the knowledge society.

A challenge to rethink education

So where does this situation leave us? As I see it, it leaves us with a challenge of rethinking how we as a society in general, but our schools and universities in particular, relate to knowledge. Schools and universities are no longer (if they ever where) to be regarded as containers of technical knowledge. Instead a more feasible position are as gatherings of societal actors with a responsibility of infusing all sorts of knowledge processes with quality and criticism, thus enhancing our mutual benefit of developing a better world through the insights these processes create, i.e. their task is to educate our society. They should be ever present, not locked up in houses just because we're used to view them in that way. To achieve this transformation, our most precious educational institutions must step forward as *knowledge activists* (cf. von Krogh *et al.*, 1997) in order to influence all sorts of Bas where knowledge is constantly recreated. If formal institutions for education are present in these Bas they are still viable, if not - they might as well end up as obsolete containers of technical knowledge, easily emptied of any worth.

To understand who these knowledge activists might be and what these activists can do, we can once again turn to von Krogh *et al.* (1997). They use this term in a particular setting, focusing on organizations. But as it is a theoretical concept there are no real limitations of applying it on a societal level. Hence I invite the reader to reconstruct the following description of knowledge activist (ibid., p. 475) to fit into his or her own context (changing "corporation" to "world" and "department" to "institution" might help a bit).

"The knowledge activist is someone, some group or department that takes on particular responsibility for energizing and coordinating knowledge creation efforts throughout the corporation. We believe that such activism will have three purpos-

es, the first of which is to initiate and focus knowledge creation, the second to reduce the time and cost needed for knowledge creation, and the third to leverage knowledge creation initiatives throughout the corporation. Knowledge activism can reside in a particular department or with a particular person, but it can also be situated in already existing departments and functions, or it can be taken up as a special assignment by individuals or departments."

Those old institutions and new actors who take on the role as knowledge activists, with a mission of influencing the Bas that are forming today, will also contribute to creating a grid and a glue that can leverage knowledge creation initiatives. Thus fulfilling a societal need for reducing complexity, coordinating human actions and become a force for sustaining a functioning civil society.

A final word

According to the myth ancient Greek scholars met in the arches of lyceums and academia, strolling along discussing the state of the world. In the knowledge society the strolling is not longer the exclusive privilege of a chosen few on elicit marble slabs. Instead it's an everyday thing not bound to the physical world (although I guess Plato would say that knowledge newer has been bound to the physical). Everyone with an communicative device are now invited to stroll around elicit electronic slabs of their own liking. For those who want to influence today's knowledge processes that form our society, this situation calls for action, where we have to realize that we have to earn our presence in each individual's unique knowledge universe whether it's physical, virtual or mental.

Turning attention away from technical knowledge to the personal insights that build our society, one might also reflect upon the idea that we're moving away from something illusive stable to a multidimensional (i.e. complex) society in motion. It's an everlasting task of moving from *being* to *becoming*, as Nonaka *et al.* (2000) points out, where one might speculate if not *knowledging* is of far more interest than knowledge itself?

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