

Rediscovering the value of WISDOM

Seminar paper for A New Capability for a New Millennium:
HEC conference, Aston University 31.3.2000

Stan Lester

Introduction

This background paper is presented as a set of **notes** to accompany a short presentation and discussion of 'wisdom' as a central part of the 'New Capability.'

It is structured into three main areas:

- a background section on the rise, decline, re-emergence and importance of wisdom
- a summary of different facets and characteristics of wisdom
- a section on developing wisdom - and whether this is an area for higher education.

The selection of papers and ideas which are quoted are inevitably personal - while on balance they agree with the author's view that wisdom is critical and can (and needs to be) fostered through appropriate forms of education and training, they are offered as a starting-point for dialogue.

1 Background: rise, decline and re-emergence

1.1 Origins

Wisdom as a folk concept dates back over 3500 years, with philosophical / religious and administrative / secular facets.

Main traditions influencing Western thought are

Hellenic - emphasis on harmony)	spectrum of 'wisdom' traditions in Christianity
Hebraic - revealed truth)	

Also strongly present in many Eastern religions and philosophies, notably Buddhism

1.2 Decline of 'wisdom'

Rise of positivism and empiricism from the Enlightenment: wisdom increasingly equated with knowledge and expertise, or rejected as folk / religious to be replaced by scientific knowledge

- Marcel (1951) *The Decline of Wisdom* - due to the rise of science coupled with the abandonment of earlier methods of knowing
- Habermas (1970) - modernity as antagonistic to wisdom

Tendency for philosophy to move away from 'philo-sophia' - wisdom is too problematic a concept? (Cochrane 1995)

Similar tendency for psychology to ignore or disparage the idea of wisdom - not in keeping with the normative tradition in which much (most?) 20th-century psychology is based? (Robinson 1990, Roszak 1992).

1.3 **Re-emergence**

Several sources:

Practical wisdom - e.g. Cunningham (1994), de Bono (1996), Claxton (1999) - wisdom is more than intelligence or cleverness

Systems theory and emphasis on interconnected systems - e.g. Bateson (1972), Capra (1997), Deming's 'system of profound knowledge' (Deming 1993), systems thinking in business (Senge 1990), Goldratt's 'theory of constraints' (Goldratt 1994)

As topic for psychological study - see for instance Sternberg (1990), the 'Berlin school' e.g. Dixon & Baltes (1986) - but limitations of methodology critical?

Ecopsychology and related fields (Roszak 1992) - mind / nature connection, beyond individualistic focus of traditional psychology

Spirituality, particularly influence of Buddhism and other beliefs (in all major religions and outside of religion) which emphasise unity or Being (e.g. Macdonald 1993).

1.4 **Why is wisdom important?**

Problems are less often bounded and subject to technical solution, and more often divergent (Schumacher 1977), messy (Ackoff 1984) or 'wicked' problems (Rittel & Webber 1984) - require judgements of value, not amenable to intelligence, knowledge or cleverness alone

Increasing choice available to many people today means that we are often not working within patterns laid down by others, and need to make judgements of value - for personal self-actualisation, relationships, communities and societies

Increasing capacity of people for self-destruction through environmental degradation, war, unintentionally or irresponsibly destructive use of technology

Key problem of industrial nations no longer one of resourcefulness in fighting against hunger, disease, the elements, hostile aggressors, but one of wisdom in exercising our resourcefulness for peaceful and sustainable existence? (Macdonald 1993, suggests the dominant force of evolution is no longer Phase 1, natural selection, but Phase 2, designed evolution - but we are still using Phase 1 thinking to drive Phase 2 change).

2. Wisdom: some facets

A problem with using the concept 'wisdom' is that it is a construct - so it has a 'know it when you see it' property, but no clear definition or basis for empirical investigation. (Other concepts such as capability, creativity, competence and intelligence are similar, although there are normative notions for the latter two in particular). If wisdom differs from related concepts such as expertise and intelligence, this will be in the way people construct it. Sternberg (1990) suggests "we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of it" (p3). The following five sections identify some facets and characteristics of wisdom; they do not attempt a definition.

2.1 Wisdom or intelligence?

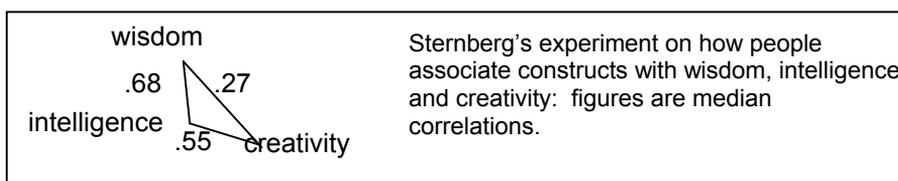
Hellenic concept of wisdom includes

- sophia - contemplative / practical wisdom
- phronesis - practical wisdom
- episteme - knowledge of nature of things, patterns, principles

Plato (Republic) - contrasts wisdom with intelligence / cleverness and with skills e.g. literacy, oratory

Kant: differentiation of *phenomena* which can be studied empirically and *noumena* which are transcendent, known 'as they are;' v empiricist conception which appear to leave no room for wisdom as distinct from knowledge and intelligence

Sternberg's investigation into perceptions of constructs underpinning wisdom, intelligence and creativity: wisdom emerged as having some correlation with intelligence, but sufficiently distinct (Sternberg 1986) - and see overleaf



Comparison of characteristics and corollaries of wisdom and cleverness (drawing on Meeker 1981)

Wisdom

- concerned with wholeness
- humility, 'transhuman otherness of world'
- complex view of society: intrinsically (self) organised, resilient
- concern with diversity / change, novelty

Cleverness

- concerned with specialisation
- self-identity, ego
- complicated view of society: intrinsically chaotic, fragile
- concern with order / rules, planning / managing

Sternberg's comparison of wisdom, intelligence and creativity (Sternberg 1990, p152)

Aspect	Construct		
	Wisdom	Intelligence	Creativity
Knowledge	Understanding of its presuppositions and meaning as well as its limitations	Recall, analysis and use	Going beyond what is available
Processes	Understanding of what is automatic and why	Automatization of procedures	Applied to novel tasks
Primary intellectual style	Judicial	Executive	Legislative
Personality	Understanding of ambiguity and obstacles	Eliminating ambiguity and overcoming obstacles within conventional framework	Tolerance of ambiguity and redefinition of obstacles
Motivation	To understand what is known and what it means	To know and to use what is known	To go beyond what is known
Environmental context	Appreciation in environment of depth of understanding	of extent and breadth of understanding	of going beyond what is currently understood

Intelligence concerned with solving formal, well-structured problems?

Wisdom concerned with framing and resolving problems of real life - ill-structured, uncertain, involving conflicts of value?

2.2 Epistemological facets

Wisdom involves:

- recognition of the relative, transient nature of knowledge and of formal systems ('seeker' rather than 'believer' - remain open to new and different possibilities)
- reality-seeking (maps that work) but appreciate 'map is not (never) the territory'
- appreciation of systems and interrelationships
- "an awareness of wholeness that does not lose sight of particularity or concreteness, or the intricacies of interrelationships" (Meeker 1981)
- profound understanding and deep insight - *gnome* or ability to see through things, transcendent perspective (St Thomas Aquinas)

Wisdom about integration of opposites, transcendence of subject-object dualisms, balance through moving to higher level of thought:

- inevitability of change / transformation and concern with enduring truths; choice and commitment (Cziksentmihalyi & Rathunde 1990)
- balance between knowing and doubting
- knowing in the face of uncertainty
- reflective judgement and dialectic thought (Kitchener & Brenner 1990)

Epistemology moves from 'either / or' to 'both / and'.

Integration of *mythos* (narrative, dialogue, plot) and *logos* (word, reason, concept) (Labouvie-Vief 1990).

Wisdom as embodying 'post-formal operational thought' (Kramer 1983) - at once more practical and concrete, and more detached and abstract, than formal thought. See also Kitchener & Brenner's epistemic development in s3

2.3 Wisdom as judgement and working with problems

Wisdom concerned with -

- wider benefits, whole systems - 'make world a better place' (Macdonald)
- highest-order value - local *and* global, present *and* future
- consequences which are distant in time and space
- multiple points of view - empathic / subjective and simultaneously detached / objective
- ethical imperatives

Listen / take advice - but make own judgement

Give advice in the spirit that others make their own judgements - and to help them do so

Wisdom concerned with judgement and action in the face of -

- paradoxes and contradictions - 'beyond the horns of the dilemma' (Kitchener & Brenner)
- ill-structured, divergent or 'wicked' problems, 'messes'
- 'problematique' - problems seen as part of a complex of problems (Macdonald 1993)
- uncertainty, gaps in knowledge
- problems that are of fundamental importance - getting beyond trivia (Arlin 1990)

Wise action involves -

- reflection - create space rather than respond instantly to emotions
- problem-seeking: detect asymmetry / inconsistencies that suggest conventional approach is unsatisfactory (Arlin)
- solution-seeking - sound judgements in the face of uncertainty
- solutions beyond compromise - higher level of thinking integrates values which seem to be in tension (Schmookler)

2.4 Personal and spiritual facets

Wisdom as involving self-actualisation and ego-transcendence (Maslow 1968): includes inner direction, focus on concerns beyond self, a creative approach to the world, appreciating it with a sense of awe and wonder; tendency towards 'Being-values' (see Unity below)

Wisdom as self-transcendence: move towards more collective / universal values and issues (Erikson) - capacity for mature love, self-extension, insight and humour, developing a unifying philosophy of life; integration of opposing forces within self (v projection) (Macdonald)

Jung / Erikson - wisdom as the ultimate possible achievement of a normal person's growth - an inner journey when other needs are met?

Unity / Being - identification with Being / Whole rather than body / mind - realisation and living of self as part of greater whole - spiritual traditions e.g. within Buddhism; Aldous Huxley's 'perennial philosophy'; quantum-influenced view e.g. Zohar 1990, Reaney 1995

Wisdom as including capacity for profound joy and awe (Cziksenti-mihalyi & Rathunde 1990): peak / flow / transformational experiences, enjoyment of experience for its own sake ('childlike but not childish').

2.5 Systemic wisdom - a personal synthesis

The idea of wisdom as relating to systems and wholes permeates practical, spiritual, epistemological and ecopsychological views of wisdom. The concept of systemic wisdom is also used by Pór (1995) in a sense which connects individual and collective wisdom, and suggests an intuitive level of wisdom (see 2.6 below).

My version sees systemic wisdom as the final (unattainable?) stage in an epistemic conception of wisdom. The first stage on this 'journey' is the realisation that knowledge, as opposed to information, is personal - wise knowing requires ownership of knowledge (on its own this is similar to stages 5/6 of Kitchener & King's epistemic development model, see 3.1, and reflects Korzybski's idea that 'the map is not the territory'). On its own this is not enough because it is purely relativistic: there is a need to validate knowledge in terms of its value (seek, or make, maps which work - and seek to refine maps to make them more accurate or of greater value, cf stage 7). At a pragmatic level this can be conceptualised as fitness for purpose - is it useful, does it work? Beyond this is fitness of purpose - what are the impacts of the purpose and of working off that particular map? Moving towards systemic wisdom refines the map in terms of its best approximation to what we can know as the widest system or whole. Systemic wisdom is related to Being / Unity; in my incomplete view it is a journey with (for humans, anyway) no end point.

I find this conception useful because it is pragmatically relevant while also building connections to spiritual and deeply personal notions of wisdom, and to deep ecology (Capra). I have used it among other things to discuss assessment, self-managed learning (Lester 1999) and professionalism.

2.6 Can organisations, communities and societies be wise?

Externally - can consider communities as acting wisely, e.g. in treatment of people both inside and outside the community, effects on the environment, sustainability (now *and* future), local and distant impact of activities (e.g. trade, waste disposal), immediate and long-term consequences of actions.

"Collective wisdom can be seen in the balance of nature's ecosystems. It is also present in the potential of your organization or community to anticipate its next crisis" (Pór 1995)

Internally - how create / sustain wise communities?

- Wise leaders?
- Critical mass of wise people? (Macdonald)
- Inherent propensity for wisdom in structures of community, e.g. in decision-making processes, means for allocating resources etc (cf. Raven 1995).

3. Developing wisdom

“No educational system knows how to create wisdom and no science can make wilderness. We do know how to damage and destroy both of them however” (J W Meeker 1981, “Wisdom and Wilderness”).

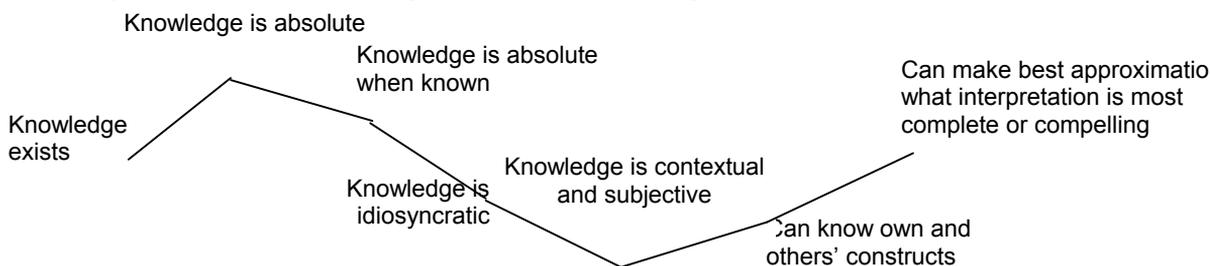
3.1 How is wisdom developed?

Traditionally related to age? But examples of wisdom in youth - Biblical refs e.g. Job 32, Solomon - Meacham (1990) quotes Anne Frank, Martin Buber. Maslow's 'self-actualisers' all aged over 50.

Related to maturity? Labouvie-Vief (1990) cites development of intelligence in young people, able to solve well-structured problems; development of wisdom in mature people, capacity to work with ill-structured problems, develop a 'both-and' epistemology

'Post-formal development' (Cziksenti-mihalyi & Rathunde 1990) - not necessarily 'after formal development,' but does imply exposure through life-experience, needing to deal effectively with uncertainty and where there are no neat solutions; cf working in Schön's 'swampy lowland' (Schön 1987)

7 stage model of epistemic cognition (Kitchener & King 1981, paraphrased):



Seventh stage 'rarely developed below age 30', appears to require exposure to ill-structured problems, though also appears to be assisted by contexts in which epistemological issues are discussed. (See also my notion of systemic wisdom in 2.6).

3.2 Barriers to the development of wisdom

Meacham (1990) postulates loss of wisdom with age ('though profound wisdom is often associated with age'). Why?

Education - accumulating knowledge, not evaluating, challenging, seeking new

Experience - (a) leads to dogmatism / overconfidence in own knowledge

(b) excessive caution / paralysis as become overwhelmed by doubts

Macdonald (1993) - barriers include

- emotion-based reactivity - fight / flight etc
- not paying attention, lack of openness

ignorance of assumptions - failure to appreciate relativity (from a territorial

- insufficient perspectives leading to partial or distorted maps
- seeking separation rather than unity
- identity delusion / ego-seeking: personal self at expense of oneness

Others may include

- jumping to conclusions (intellectual parallel of emotion-based reactivity)
- dominance of survival, esteem and other concerns
- dominant paradigms and cultural beliefs.

3.3 **Developing wisdom and the role of higher education**

My quick answer to this is yes - I believe the development of wisdom can be assisted (v taught), and there is a (vital) role for higher education.

It may be useful to consider 'acting wisely' (action level) rather than 'being wise' (identity level). This might move us away from the idea that wisdom is confined to a few wise people, to a conception where everyone can demonstrate some wisdom.

Previous sections suggest that we might consider helping people to:

- Engage in divergent, ill-defined problems which require personal involvement and judgements of value - and reflect on them including in terms of ethics and epistemology.
- Question, enquire into, evaluate and challenge knowledge and method as a matter of course - and develop new ideas and knowledge.
- Reflect on their assumptions and standpoints, and consider the long-term and distant (as well as immediate) consequences of their actions and beliefs.
- Challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and paradigms in a way which is respectful but nevertheless does not shy away from 'difficult' issues.
- Look beyond specialisms and complicatedness to empathy (with people and contexts), appreciation of systems, and gaining an intuitive grasp of wholeness.
- Draw on intuition and inner values, and bring them into the open to check out.

The spiritual aspects of wisdom may be more difficult to work with at present in most educational contexts, but there does appear to be scope to assist people to develop reverence, an appreciation of wholeness, and a systemic perspective into any field of endeavour.

The factors above are likely to challenge some of the underlying theories-in-use present in formal education, including those which guide curricular structures and assessment.

As a personal endnote, if higher education has a wider responsibility than to assist people to develop their knowledge and skills - a responsibility to wider society and to people as individuals rather than only to employers and to people as job-seekers or job-holders - then it would appear to have an obligation to create conditions in which people can develop their wisdom.

References

- Ackoff, R L (1974) *Redesigning the Future: a systems approach to societal problems* New York, John Wiley
- Arlin, P K (1990) "Wisdom: the art of problem-finding" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Bateson, G (1972) *Mind and nature: a necessary unity* New York, Bantam
- Capra, F (1997) *The web of life* New York, Anchor
- Claxton, G (1999) *Wise up* London, Bloomsbury
- Cochrane, D (1995) "Wisdom: a first approximation," address to Association for Moral Education, New York 15-18 November
- Cunningham, I (1994) *The wisdom of strategic learning: the self-managed learning solution* Maidenhead, McGraw-Hill
- Czikszentmihalyi, M & Rathunde, C (1990) "The psychology of wisdom: an evolutionary perspective" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- De Bono, E (1996) *Edward de Bono's Textbook of Wisdom* London, Penguin
- Deming, W E (1993) *The new economics* Cambridge Ma., Center for Advanced Engineering Technology
- Dixon, R A & Baltes, P B (1986) "Toward life-span research on the functions and pragmatics of intelligence" in R J Sternberg & R K Wagner (eds) *Practical intelligence: nature and origins of competence in the everyday world* New York, Cambridge University Press
- Goldratt, E M (1994) *It's Not Luck* Aldershot, Gower
- Habermas, J (1970) *Knowledge and human interests* Boston, Beacon Press
- Kitchener, K S & Brenner, H (1990) "Wisdom and reflective judgement: knowing in the face of uncertainty" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Kitchener, K S & King, P M (1981) "Reflective Judgment: concepts of justification and their relationship to age and education," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 2, 89-116
- Korzybski, A (1958) *Science and Sanity* 4th edition, Lakeville Conn., The International Non-Aristotelian Publishing Company
- Kramer, D (1983) "Post-formal operations? a need for further conceptualization," *Human Development* 26, 91-105
- Labouvie-Vief, G (1990) "Wisdom as integrated thought: historical and developmental perspectives" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Lester, S (1999) "Assessing the self-managing learner: a contradiction in terms" in D O'Reilly, L Cunningham & S Lester (eds) *Developing the capable practitioner* London, Kogan Page

- Macdonald, C (1993) *Toward wisdom* Charlottesville VA, Hampton Roads
- Marcel, G (1951) *The decline of wisdom* London, Harvill Press
- Maslow, A (1968) *Toward a psychology of being* New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold
- Meacham, J A (1990) "The loss of wisdom" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Meeker, J W (1981) "Wisdom and wilderness," *Landscape* 25 (1)
- Pór, G (1995) "The Quest for Collective Intelligence" in Gozdz, K (ed) *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business* Pleasanton CA, New Leaders Press
- Raven, J (1995) *A new Wealth of Nations* Sudbury, Bloomfield Books
- Reaney, D (1995) *Music of the Mind: an adventure into consciousness* London, Souvenir Press
- Rittel, H J W & Webber, M M (1984) "Planning problems are wicked problems" in N Cross (ed) *Developments in Design Methodology* New York, John Wiley
- Robinson, D N (1990) "Wisdom through the ages" in Sternberg, R J (ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Roszak, T (1992) *The Voice of the Earth: an exploration of ecopsychology* New York, Simon & Schuster
- Schmookler, A B (undated) "The dance of polarization and the next step beyond," www.cop.com/info/abs-essa.html
- Schön, D A (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* London, Jossey-Bass
- Schumacher, E F (1977) *A guide for the perplexed* New York, Harper & Row
- Senge, P M (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* New York, Doubleday
- Sternberg, R J (1986) "Implicit theories of intelligence, creativity and wisdom," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49, 607-627
- Sternberg, R J (1990) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Zohar, D (1990) *The Quantum Self* London, Harper Collins

Copyright © Stan Lester 2000

Stan Lester is an independent consultant and researcher based in Taunton, and a visiting academic at Middlesex University. He can be contacted on [initial.lastname]@devmts.co.uk.