Hargreaves’ Call for Social Ingenuity in the Knowledge Society – Imperatives for Educational Technology and Teaching?

Change is constant in education. If you wonder what terms like “Knowledge Society” and “Market Fundamentalism” really mean in terms of teaching and leading education, this book will capture your interest and it will help you to conceptualize, practically, some complex economic, social and education tensions today.

The solutions to knowledge society change are, according to Hargreaves, both complex and simple:

- a renewed (teacher) focus on long term, deep and sustainable professional relationships;
- lifelong professional development in the profession;
- a deeper inclusion of parents in new learning communities;
- resistance to the “mindless standardization” that is the result of market / competitive economy social systems – so that rich learning communities can sustain in healthy social contexts (p. 206).

Essentially, Dr. Hargreaves – a well known cutting-edge scholar of teaching theory and administrative theory (Fullan, 2003) posits that without meaningfully reconceptualizing new interdependent professional practice in schools, education could become a “place” where unexamined practice leads to a new wave of new teachers without sustainable contributions to children. Without re-culturing professional practice to draw on knowledge found in our relational networks, Hargreaves claims that leagues of new teachers will simply burn out because of the contrasting demand between market efficiency (standards) and the necessary flux required for teaching knowledge must necessarily change quickly. Merely naming relations as communities is not enough.
Designed to be provocative on many levels, Hargreaves’ book is not focused on technology or educational technology per se. However at a high level, the book beckons education professionals of all types to ask ourselves deeper questions about how we teach, practice or lead change in technology-enhanced learning communities or organizations in this knowledge society. In this review, I will summarize Hargreaves’ book in the sequence it is written, and offer related questions for educational technologists based on Hargreaves’ findings and suggestions about teaching in a knowledge society.

In an Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) change paper, Charles Reigeluth (2001) also warned that we must prepare for the tremendous change coming to the educational technology field when he refers to the knowledge society as “the information society” (p. 12). Such changes “will influence whether we as individuals are successful in our careers or find ourselves progressively less effective” (p. 12). Like Hargreaves (2003), Reigeluth asks educational technologists to consider if structural (institutional) change is enough to sustain the educational technology professional in this new age. Managing change in our field is increasingly becoming a mix of instructional design, training, pedagogy and leadership principles (Reigeluth, 2001). Hargreaves’ book focuses on teaching – claiming, as Reigeluth implies, that sustainable changes in the fundamental relationships between professionals will be critical for new directions in our education theory and practice. In essence, the point is that teachers and school leaders (educational technologists) must learn to create flexible, relational systems that can harness the best of the knowledge society, to protect learners, society and the teaching profession from its least positive elements.

From a philosophical perspective, Hargreaves’ book can be interpreted as a classical liberal treatise focused upon the knowledge economy (Moore & Fendler, 2004). Hargreaves’ conclusions are supported by substantial empirical data, echoed in Chapters 4 and 5 (case studies). If we consider Hargreaves’ imperative to generate tight, relational and unstructured professional networks and real (not sect) learning communities, Hargreaves’ book can also be interpreted as a neo-liberal approach – urging professionals to move toward creating flexible, values based systems from which we teach, learn and lead in the future – by generating social capital (Sergiovanni, 2005). As educational technologists, we are not unfamiliar with terms like ‘technological determinism’ and ‘market fundamentalism’ (Kowch, 2003). Readers can also find tips for navigating within an economy-driven context where deep learning and strong, lasting networks of professionals can be developed to take risk while serving learner needs best. The key is to develop meaningful, enduring professional and community networks.

In Chapter 1, Hargreaves merges learning community and knowledge society literature to create a historically grounded definition of the knowledge society. He defines the knowledge society as a three dimensional mixture of:

- expanded scientific, technical and educational spheres;
- complex ways of processing and circulating knowledge in a service-based economy; and
- basic changes to organization functions for the continuous enhancement of products and services by creating systems, teams and cultures that maximize opportunities for mutual, spontaneous learning (p. 17).

Hargreaves posits three capacities that knowledge society, claiming that we need to: outwit competitors; tune in to the desires of consumers; and to change jobs by up-skilling and retraining as the economy shifts (p.3).
In Chapter 2, Hargreaves offers a full-out attack on the liberal constructs of the knowledge economy as a place where there is no time to care for others, where people tend to put their personal interest before the public good and enjoy the buzz of temporary teamwork rather than long term (sustainable teamwork) emotions of perseverance and loyalty. Hargreaves’ solution is that education must respond to embody the principles of a more cosmopolitan identity (where we teach tolerance for diversity) in a globalized knowledge economy. This chapter is a stinging description of the no-parents-at-home two car family caused by market fundamentalism, but it shows optimism about how technology can help link us to these parents in new ways (interactive report cards). The author urges teachers to develop themselves while they develop children to develop networks and trust between each other and not to develop other people’s curriculum, but rather to be more in touch with contemporary developments in a critical way. According to Hargreaves, it is this kind of ingenuity we need to sustain education.

Chapter 3 is a case study of the destruction of education (ingenuity) that occurs when schools are caught in a ‘have not’ market fundamentalist society. The result is insufficient funding and market shifts (students move) where teachers are trapped in an infernal triangle of competing pressures and expectations … they struggle to reach an apex of professional achievement in being both catalysts for a successful knowledge economy and effective counterpoints for some of its socially disruptive effects. As they do so, they are continually dragged down by market fundamentalist reactions to the costs of that same knowledge economy – restricted support for public education, micromanagement, and the disparaging blame and shame that stain teachers’ characters. Hargreaves argues, standards are engines for exclusion and they bind instruction, particularly when professional development (PD) apartheid occurs in systems where teachers can enjoy development (learning communities) compared to systems where teachers can not (afford to) enjoy such development (thereby forced into training-sect work).

Chapters 4 and 5 chronicle the empirical base for the larger suggestions in the book. These are large case studies of New York and Ontario systems. Chapter 5 is an example of an exemplary knowledge society school – but one that befell global policy initiatives that hobble its very sustainability (p. 105). Hargreaves’ evidence argues well that the loss of professional community to labels like “professional learning communities” is, where such work is not possible, creating a painful dissonance in the teaching profession that is resulting in waves of retirement and a credibility problem for those remaining in education. A lack of enduring professional relations and trust is the root of insecurity and limits ingenuity, claims Hargreaves.

Chapters 6 continues to critique the hobbling effects of standardization on the key inputs (from education systems) into the knowledge economy, explaining more of how to go beyond current teacher recruitment crises and performance training sects that are the result of ‘have not’ knowledge economies. Here, a compelling argument is made about how the knowledge economy will create a gulf between affluent, achieving learning contexts where high –achieving communities become the “tourists” of the knowledge society exist in sharp contrast to less affluent, low achieving communities that become the “vagrants” of the knowledge society. The implications for designing new, collaborative training and development scenarios are clear.

Chapter 7 offers an innovative developmental model as a kind of blueprint for the move from performance training sects to professional learning communities – regardless of the ‘have’ or ‘have not’ context of the institution (p. 201).

To reduce insecurity for teachers and leaders in the knowledge society, Hargreaves does not offer the usual policy or structural solutions for professionals in the knowledge society, nor does he include financial
instruments or technology as a solution. Instead, we are presented with an understanding of essential tensions that we must teach ourselves to hold, individually and collectively. He offers us a general guide from which we could ponder how to navigate leading and teaching in a knowledge society, for the benefit of learners (both children and adults) in a burgeoning market fundamentalist economy. If there is one weakness in this book, it may only be that the author sees information technology (IT) and hard technology as part of education, seemingly to offer little sense of educational technology as part of the knowledge society solution. As charges of innovation, this review ends with some inquiry questions for our field – as they are implied by Hargreaves:

- How can educational technologists assist teacher preparation programs to help teachers develop professionally in the knowledge society?

- Given the reminder that deep, enduring trust relations are necessary for institutions (both in education and industry) to exist for professionals to make learning work in the knowledge society, how do we enhance distance/blended learning transactions and environments to sustain such networks?

- How can we move technology fundamentalists (“build it and they will learn”) toward shared professional praxis where technology is part of the knowledge processing solution – and part of the teaching (as it changes) without such a focus on hard technologies?

- How can we develop the understandings and research required to lead heavy investment in technology enhanced educational environments (in government and business) as a more integral part of education systems?

References


