

Book Review

Catching the Knowledge Wave? The knowledge society and the future of education

Jane Gilbert

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Reviewed by Roger Openshaw

To ride or not to ride?

Over the past decade one particularly powerful catch-cry - 'the knowledge society' - has become a popular refrain amongst politicians, policymakers and the educational bureaucracy, not only in New Zealand, but in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia as well as in an increasing number of European and Asian states. Just what lies behind the words, however, is considerably more problematic. Jane Gilbert's very readable introductory book attempts to clarify the various shades of meaning suggested by this enigmatic epithet, and to provide some answers to the problems and issues it poses for schools, teachers, parents, and the general reader.

Gilbert begins the book in an engagingly provocative manner, drawing upon a 2001 book by American journalist Michael Lewis provocatively titled, *The Future Just Happened*. In his book, Lewis presents two case studies of boys who used the internet to cross the boundaries of learner and teacher, thereby challenging existing forms of educational authority.

Citing these two case studies, Gilbert introduces what becomes in effect the central thesis of her book. This thesis has it that we are now in the midst of a major social and intellectual revolution typical of post-industrial

societies. Gilbert contends that New Zealand educators should see the changes encapsulated in this and in other events, not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to rethink what we currently attempt to do in our schools. She is particularly attracted to postmodernism, a world view that has been described as a response to the apparent erosion of traditional oppositions between such formerly well-defined entities of left and right, local and global, private and public, high and low cultures. Moreover, as an educator and former teacher of wide experience, Gilbert is particularly receptive to the view that different ways of thinking are both challenging and replacing older, seemingly more rigid ways of thinking, with potentially huge ramifications for schools. For educators not to acknowledge all this, she asserts, is to repeat much of the history of educational development in New Zealand and elsewhere. For those who care to heed the lessons, this history is replete with examples of how well-intentioned policy initiatives failed because they did not take account of what the world beyond the school thought and acted upon.

Noting that much of what French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard predicted about knowledge becoming a commodity has since eventuated,

Gilbert contends that what distinguishes contemporary knowledge societies from those that simply value knowledge in the traditional sense is that, in the former people, tend to see knowledge in economic terms as the main source of future economic growth. Noting that many educators have resisted this development, often seeing it as an assault on more traditional assumptions about what schools do, Gilbert argues that the education system needs to respond more positively to the challenges confronting it. This need not be done uncritically but through ensuring that we retain the original key purpose of state-funded mass education – the provision of equal opportunity and access. She supports inclusion but correctly in my view, resists the tendency of some postmodernist educators to uncritically embrace cultural relativism. Gilbert is also critical of those who argue that education is primarily an individual benefit to be funded by families, holding instead that an educated population is a public good.

Moreover, in advocating a fresh approach to educational problems, Gilbert astutely acknowledges the complexity of New Zealand's educational past. As she notes, much of the impetus for a publicly funded mass primary education system in

New Zealand came from decidedly mixed motives, including the need for an educated workforce respectful of hierarchy and authority. Mass secondary education came later and was initially preoccupied with the long-running debate over whether institutions should be differentiated along social efficiency lines, or whether they might better adopt a common core of subjects.

As Gilbert also observes, this debate was often conducted along class lines. Incidentally, one reason for the eventual dominance of the common core approach to curriculum reform was the impact of educational consumers themselves – specifically, the power and perception of many parents, students, teachers and community leaders, who were determined that their children would have an education at least as good as their neighbours – and who would not be satisfied with what they regarded as an inferior, if supposedly more practical, type of education (McKenzie, Lee & Lee, 1996). Of course, as Gilbert also correctly points out, many secondary schools continued to practise a *de facto* curriculum differentiation through so-called ability streaming and by providing judicious career guidance, so that social class, gender and race still helped to determine destinations outside the school.

Moving on to more contemporary matters, Gilbert contends that the reforms of the 1980s have given us a more accountable education system. Despite these reforms, she argues that we still largely have a production-line education system, based on industrial models. In the light of this somewhat chequered history, Gilbert calls for an embrace of new ways of knowledge and of learning by New Zealand schools. As evidence of what might be achieved, she cites British educationalist Guy Claxton's concept of developing students' learning power, linking this with American educator Carl Bereiter's notion of schools as knowledge-creating institutions, dedicated to the radical restructuring of student activities so that they come to resemble the workings of multi-disciplinary research groups, setting their own agenda and questions.

If these are the problems, issues and challenges facing our schools in the

early twenty-first century, what then can teachers do about it? Gilbert suggests in her final chapter that teachers work together more in syndicates and cross-disciplinary teams to develop their strengths. She advocates more creative timetabling to include student activities, developing skills to help students work in small groups, encouraging 'real-world' research projects, and developing databases of community contacts to provide comprehensive networks. She also sees a need for the development of a systems-level understanding of subjects that in turn would lead to a better appreciation of how a particular body of knowledge works both internally on its own terms and externally in relation to other bodies of knowledge. The intention here is that students will be encouraged to see themselves as real practitioners, be the subject art, history, or science.

There is much that is praiseworthy in this book. It is well written and clearly structured in a way that allows the writer to raise thought-provoking questions about our current education system, what it is doing and where it might be headed. There are also, however, some significant limitations. Some of these are inevitable in that the book was not written primarily for an academic audience, but rather for those who work both within education and for those outside it, who remain perplexed by the multiplicity of views about schools that exist in contemporary New Zealand society. As Gilbert concedes, this book is necessarily something of a hybrid, drawing upon selected concepts from post-modernism, popular culture and the media, as well as upon published New Zealand Ministry of Education sources. It is to Gilbert's credit that there is a degree of perceptive critique threaded throughout her argument. Whilst particular issues are rarely taken up in depth, this deficiency is partially offset by the informative notes which are appended to each chapter allowing readers seeking further information to locate its sources.

I should emphasise, however, that critiques of many of the main concepts presented in this book have been not only many, but also frequently profound. Hence, readers should be made aware of them, particularly if they wish to maintain a position of informed

scepticism concerning educational problems.

Post-modernism, for instance, has been criticised from a variety of perspectives, including its embracement of relativism and its tendency to accept, sometimes even endorse, some of the more significant structural contradictions of modern post-industrial societies. Whilst as a post-modernist Gilbert advocates the necessity of understanding and deconstructing discourses as a key to social change, she does not always take up the opportunity to do this. Thus, she somewhat uncritically accepts the view that New Zealand now has a more accountable education system as a result of the 1980s reforms ushered in by the Picot Report and by *Tomorrow's Schools*. Judging by commentary both at the time and subsequently, this conclusion is highly debatable. Simon Smelt from the Treasury certainly hailed the reforms as 'a unique and bold attempt to counter the perceived problems of the previous structure by abolishing layers of administration and empowering parents' (Smelt, 1988). A decade later a book commissioned by the Ministry of Education viewed the reforms as the logical and natural outcome of a growing public demand for devolution and parent power, although they reserved their judgement over whether all this would turn out for better or for worse (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998).

Left-liberal commentators, however, have been more trenchant in their criticism. In 1988, an influential two-part *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* article critiqued the New Zealand Treasury document, *Government management: Brief to the incoming government* (1987), contending that it initiated a 'Third Wave' of key reforms that effectively reversed the century-old expansion of universal education (Boston, 1988; Lauder, 1988). Three years later, a collection of papers by critics writing largely from within the education system argued that the Picot Report and the subsequent implementation of *Tomorrow's Schools* had transformed the public education system for the worse (Gordon & Codd, 1990).

A more recent book has critically examined the various ways in which

knowledge and learning have been fundamentally reshaped in the 1990s and beyond by neo-liberalism and associated ideologies following the implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (O'Neill, et al 2004). Seeking to modify these essentially oppositional viewpoints, education historian Gary McCulloch argued that single-cause explanations that centre exclusively on the impact of imported neo-liberal ideals tend to ignore the cumulative impact of indigenous historical factors (McCulloch, 1991). My own published work thus far contends that, in the desire to either praise or condemn the Picot reforms, the complex interplay of left and right-wing ideologies at the policy making level has been largely neglected (Openshaw, 1995; 2003).

Be this as it may, a problem for this book is that by not fully recognising the more problematic aspects of current educational pressures and trends, it reinforces an existing tendency for policymakers and others to slide into the trap of seeing the ideal New Zealand education of the future largely as a matter of blending the successful teaching of key skills and attitudes with improved equal opportunity policies in order to increase the nation's ability to compete on the world economic stage as a high-skills, high-wage economy. Indeed, the title of the book itself is strongly suggestive of such a mindset; *Catching the Knowledge Wave*. The analogy here is with the expectant, eager surfer, arms outstretched, board poised as the great wave comes on, higher and higher. We, the readers, are awaiting the ride of a lifetime - once we 'catch' the knowledge wave, all we have to do is ride it -- the future can take care of itself. In fact, the only real danger is to miss the wave altogether, because we may never have a further opportunity *quite* like the one we just failed to take.

This danger is apparent when Gilbert speaks approvingly of the paradigm shift in the way knowledge is viewed in the world outside education. There is some evidence, however, that this apparent change for the better has resulted in some managers of both schools and tertiary institutions not just to follow, but actively lead an abject retreat back into the Fordism of an earlier generation,

as Lee and Hill (1996) made clear in a perceptive paper published a decade ago, when the full ramifications of curriculum reform via the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* were beginning to be recognised. The current pressure to further quantify and control tertiary learning outcomes is a further potent reminder that this dated way of viewing both knowledge and those who are responsible for disseminating it, is far from dead. Hence, the differences between some business and IT leaders on one hand and some educators and academics on the other, may not be easily resolved by a little give and take on both sides simply because they start with fundamentally different assumptions about society and about human nature.

There are some other views presented in this book with which I would take issue. One suspects that few educators would disagree with the ideals espoused by Gilbert about the need for knowledge to be seen as less of a product and more as a process. However, several qualifications should be made here. The first is that the mental models of knowledge and learning Gilbert critiques are not as all-pervasive in our education system as is generally supposed. Neither have they gone unchallenged. Gilbert claims that the type of knowledge taught in many schools and universities treats knowledge as an object, views the mind as a container, and holds that facts are fixed and immutable. The validity of this last claim, however, depends on which 'facts' we are singling out - some 'facts' surely *are* fixed and immutable.

Furthermore, many schools and universities have modified traditional viewpoints considerably. As far as primary education is concerned, for instance, the re-convening of the New Education Fellowship Conference in various New Zealand urban centres in 1937 saw many of the international presenters espousing remarkably modern-sounding views about knowledge and about schooling (Campbell, 1938). The influence of these ideas, seconded by the reformism of the post-Second World War Department of Education under C.E. Beeby, was to have a lasting if uneven influence on the previously examination-dominated primary school curriculum, as Beeby's own auto-biography makes clear

(Beeby, 1992). Even in the generally more conservative, subject-discipline centred secondary schools, traditional disciplinary boundaries have long been questioned even if the results have been rather mixed.

It should be appreciated that many educators both before Dewey and since, in New Zealand and elsewhere, have made very similar points to both Claxton and Bereiter. During the interwar era, innovative New Zealand educators such as H.E. Strachan were attempting to reconcile the sharp differences they perceived between the knowledge and pedagogy of the school, and that of the community (Strachan, 1938). The Thomas Report (1943), and later still, the PPTA series of booklets such as *Education in Change* (1969) and *Teachers in Change* (1974), built to some extent on this earlier tradition. Furthermore, the considerable educational innovation that characterised this latter period was exemplified in radical curriculum experiments such as the new mathematics, with its innovative pedagogy and its central aim of getting students to discover underlying principles and concepts. In social studies likewise, there were curriculum projects such as that developed by Hungarian-American educator, Hilda Taba, which envisaged students as questioners and discoverers - ideals which were to profoundly influence the New Zealand F1-4 social studies curriculum.

Once these past innovations are acknowledged, the question then becomes not why has no one attempted to put them into practice but rather: why have these concepts not always been successfully incorporated into daily school routines and structures? The current publicity over the place of middle schools is but one sign that this complex question is still being debated, while the issue of how integrated curricula might look in schools of the future is the subject of a forthcoming doctoral thesis I am involved with as co-supervisor.

Finally, the advice offered to teachers in the last chapter of this book is arguably along the right lines, having been suggested many times before by various sources. It still, however, seems inadequate given the book's thesis, and might be regarded by some teachers

as rather patronising, especially given the paradigm shifts and monumental increases in workloads that educators at all levels are experiencing. I would not, however, want to end this review on a carping note. Whilst I believe that the qualifications I have made above should be seriously borne in mind by critical readers, it is also undoubtedly true that Gilbert has produced a praiseworthy volume that will satisfy a considerable number of people who have been looking for just such a book. Hence, it can be recommended as a good introductory text for those both inside and outside the education system, and especially for those who want to appreciate some of the current challenges and tensions facing New Zealand education at the beginning of a new century.

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