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## Wyrd Questions: Re-framing Adult/ Community Education

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# Wyrd Questions: Re-framing Adult/Community Education

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**Abstract:** *There is a growing body of popular literature associated with ‘new paradigm’ research, the development of the Gaia hypothesis, and the meaning of ‘spirituality’ in today’s society. This paper suggests why adult/ community education should be re-framed within this context; and looks at some implications for model-building.*

## What’s Wyrd?

In the fifth century BC, Lao Tzu spoke of a ripple effect extending from each individual through family, community and nation into the cosmos (Heider, 1991, p. 107). Holistic principles of this nature underpin most of the world’s great wisdom traditions. These evolved out of the desire of humankind to understand its place in the cosmos and, in Huxley’s (1946, p. 8) terms, “to know the spiritual Ground of things.” In the ancient Hindu text, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the “spiritual Ground” is *Brahman*, that which contains and sustains everything that is manifest and known in the world (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1953). Similarly, in the old Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrð*, the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds was understood as a vast web of invisible fibres: any event, anywhere in the web, would ultimately affect every other part of the web (Bates, 1996).

Recent research, such as that on ‘the participatory mind’ (Skolimowski, 1994), in co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996), and within deep ecology (Capra, 1997), points to the need for a re-conceptualisation of education founded in the notion of interconnectedness rather than, as is so often the case at present, of separation. This will require educational practice to be envisaged and researched in the context of the farthest reaches of the ripples that it generates. I suggest that imagery associated with the wisdom traditions, together with an emerging new world-view that is linked to them, may help in framing the right questions to ask in such a context. Adult/ community education (ACE) is well-placed to ask them but existing discourses seem largely inadequate for the purpose. If, as adult/ community educators, we are to keep pace with new understandings being developed elsewhere, we may need to ‘think *wyrð*’ and collectively consider the concept and place of spirituality

in relation to our work.

## Why Now?

To date, the wisdom traditions have largely been packaged into the creeds and rituals of particular religions. The ripples spreading outwards from these to create the diversity of the world’s civilizations and cultures have often clashed, and either obliterated or absorbed one another in the process, but they have moved comparatively slowly. Now that global communication is almost instantaneous, and the possibility of destroying the planet an ever-present threat, it seems more important than ever before for humankind to recognise the potential consequences of the ripples of thought and action that emanate from different belief systems.

Western science has been one of the most influential belief systems of the past two centuries. Originating in the need for ideas to develop unfettered by primitive superstition or religious doctrine, this has sought to separate the study of matter from that of spirit. It owes much to the work of Descartes and Newton. The associated world-view, of a clockwork universe governed by mechanistic principles, gave rise to the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution and underpins the present economic and political world order. It relies upon the imagery of power and control – and of society itself as a vast machine where people are little more than cogs to be moulded, used, or discarded in the machine’s service. With a few notable exceptions, education has traditionally been utilised as a moulding tool.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, new scientific developments challenged the governing principles of the clockwork universe (and, by extension, of the ‘society machine’). In particular, the exploration and findings of (sub)atomic physics required consideration of a reality that appears to

have more in common with Eastern concepts of a continuous cosmic dance than with Newtonian building-blocks. An alternative world-view has now begun to emerge. It has been heavily influenced by Lovelock's (1979) "*Gaia hypothesis*" which, shaped by ecological and systemic principles, also challenges many of the old scientific orthodoxies about relationships between processes, people, and planet.

Lovelock's juxtaposition of modern science with ancient belief through the invocation of the name of the once-revered Earth Goddess has had wide appeal. Attention has been paid not just to the scientific implications of his work but to its more 'mystical' interpretations (see Joseph, 1990; Russell, 1991; Thompson, 1987). It has subsequently become associated with so-called 'New Age' literature, much of which is giving deliberate impetus to the emerging world-view.

A basic tenet of such literature is that people should be enabled to break free of the impositions of 'machine-think' in order to develop their true potential. The success of texts ranging from Ferguson's (1988) classic *The Aquarian Conspiracy* to Redfield's (1999) current best-sellers in *The Celestine Prophecy* series testifies to an increasingly wide demand for, and resonance with, ideas about the possibility of personal and social transformation. Such ideas often seem, as in the two texts just cited, to be couched in terms of an understanding of spirituality as a deep interconnectedness between individuals, and between people and the cosmos.

The imagery used to envision these connections has changed from the naturalistic *wyrd* web to a more modern depiction, long familiar in science-fiction, of a shared, all-encompassing, energy field. Nevertheless, the understanding of how the con-

nections work remains much the same: individual thoughts and actions cause ripples of further thought and action to extend, *ad infinitum*, beyond the boundaries of what superficially appear to be separate encounters; and they are, in turn, affected by ripples initiated in other parts of the web or energy field. In Skolimowski's (1994) terms, we live in a truly "participatory universe." Adherents of the new world-view seek to make this participation a conscious process.

Because ACE has such potential for creating ripples of thought and action in the lives of individuals and their communities, it seems particularly important to be able to locate it within, and to examine its consequences for, the emerging world-view. A theoretical framework is thus required which will admit a spiritual discourse into debate and practice in ACE.

### **Such As?**

#### *Extending a Typology*

Martin's (1987) three-model typology of ACE in the UK was designed to show how distinct philosophies about the relationship between education and community were translated into different kinds of practice. These were based on different premises about society being, respectively, consensual, pluralist or rooted in conflict. It was subsequently extended to incorporate radical feminist and black perspectives. Using the same format, it is possible to construct another extension in which the implicit model of society is essentially holistic. It draws on ideas and educational activities that have become popular outside the formal education system and which are associated with developing understandings of spirituality (see Figure 1).

<i>Implicit model of society/ community</i>	Unity within diversity.
<i>Premise</i>	Interconnectedness at a subtle (spiritual) level.
<i>Strategy</i>	Awareness/consciousness-raising groups and techniques; encouraging articulation of 'felt-realities.' Honouring full spectrum of human experience and consciousness. Holistic approaches, with celebration of difference. Acknowledgement and understanding of inter-relationships between group/social processes and individual learning
<i>Initial focus</i>	Personal development groups (including T-groups, Encounter groups <i>etc.</i> ).
<i>Key influences</i>	Aldous Huxley ('Perennial Philosophy') James Lovelock ( <i>Gaia</i> ). M. Scott Peck ('Community making'). John Heron (Research into the human condition) James Redfield ('Insight' work)
<i>Twentieth-century origins</i>	Ecology movement: interdependence of living systems. Popularising of Eastern philosophical traditions/practices, esp. meditation. 1960s: 'youth culture,' including experimentation with hallucinogens; esp. development of shared language to describe associated inner experiences.
<i>Dominant themes</i>	'Whole-person' growth ('Know Thyself') Global village ('Think global, Act local') Recognition of personal and group responsibility ('As within, so without')

**Figure 1.** A model of community education incorporating ideas and activities associated with the development and understanding of spirituality (*in the style of Martin, 1987*).

### *Combining Typologies*

Although this model extends the typology in a way that allows discussion of spirituality to be incorporated, there is something of a contradiction in considering a separate model if spirituality is to be understood as an appreciation of interconnectedness. My recent research draws on five major typologies of ACE in England. It suggests that, though none of these, individually, encourages debate about spirituality, when they are brought together to form a composite model they can be understood in the context both of the 'Great Chain of Being', which underpins the perennial philosophy of the wisdom traditions, and of new ideas about a participatory universe.

The typologies were developed in the 1980s in an attempt to theorise the complexity of practice that was then subsumed under the umbrella of ACE. Developed, respectively, by Martin (*op.cit*); O'Hagan (1987); Fletcher (1987); Clark (1985); and Lovett, Clarke and Kilmurray (1983), each typology

has a different starting point and contains between three and five separate models.

As in Martin's initial typology, O'Hagan also proposes three models which he labels 'Efficiency', 'Enrichment' and 'Empowerment': reflected in the names, he claims, is the purpose envisaged for education. Fletcher's three models are concerned with the nature of the relationship between community educators and the local community. Clark's analysis of practice revealed five 'levels' of interpretation of community education's purpose. These range from the pragmatic, cost-effective use of plant, to overtly political education and social action. Lovett's four models cover similar ground but focus on the differences between, and advantages/ disadvantages of, community "organisation," "development," "action" and "social action."

Despite their distinctive nature, when these typologies/ models are set next to one another, it is possible to discern within them three quite distinct discourses which have clearly informed the practice

and analysis of community education. I will not try to illustrate the parallels between the typologies diagrammatically here - but picture, if you will, a summary of the five different analyses placed one below the other. Since Clark's five levels can be reduced to three without losing much in the process, and Lovett's community and social action can be merged for the purposes of discussion, all five typologies can be depicted in three columns. Each of these columns represents a discrete model comprising very particular ideas and approaches to practice.

Those in the first column are largely concerned with *economics*, *individuals* and *specific places*. For example, education is seen as an economic tool and the cost-effective use of buildings and services is an important consideration. Provision, generally in the form of traditional classes, is made for individuals and often shaped by the Enlightenment tradition of developing intellectual capacity in order to create a better-informed citizenry. Activities are generally located within a specific place such as a school or community centre.

Key ideas underpinning the second model are of *social justice*, *individuals-in-communities*, and *place linked to lifestyle*. Education is viewed largely as a means of redressing imbalances in society by "compensating" groups of individuals who have been forced to adopt particular lifestyles because of an apparent lack of earlier or current opportunities. The purpose of community education is to address the perceived needs of deprived or alienated groups by helping them to adjust better to life in the wider society. The possibility that the wider society itself might need "adjustment" is not addressed.

By contrast, the possibility (and often deliberate encouragement) of *political challenge* is an important feature of the third model. Additionally, the locus of control moves from 'providers' of education to members of local communities who, acting collectively and drawing on the expertise of community education facilitators, are expected to be able to effect change in the conditions, including the educational awareness and opportunities, of their own communities. Such *communities* are not necessarily (though they could be) located in a specific place but may be representative of shared interests, orientations or cultures within a single country, or even across the world. The term "*Unplace*" is useful to indicate the non-specific location of some of the communities - such as "working

class," gay or black - most often associated with this approach.

Three underpinning discourses can be identified by reading across the columns. In the preceding description I have italicised the key dimensions of these discourses. They seem to me to become progressively wider in terms of the social perspective they encompass, and increasingly dynamic in their *modus operandi*. I have termed the discourses "Economic-Political," "Psychological-Sociological" and "Geographical-Ecological."

The first opens out from discussion of cost-effectiveness in what is regarded as an essentially homogenous society to encompass the notion of social justice in, and the 'enrichment' of, a plural society; it culminates in an overtly political interpretation of community education as a means of challenging and changing existing social structures. The field of consideration within the Psychological-Sociological discourse also expands as emphasis shifts from the individual as a consumer of educational provision to the impact of community action on educational and social structures. The third discourse, rooted in the specifics of place, moves into the more abstract notion of lifestyle, and ultimately encompasses the "unplace" of the symbolic dimensions of community.

#### *Associating Imagery*

Within the wisdom traditions, there is an assumed hierarchy, commonly referred to as the 'Great Chain of Being' (Wilber, 1998). In descending order, the links of the chain represent spirit, mind, body and matter. The discourses I have identified can be represented diagrammatically to correspond to the lower four links: the Economic-Political discourse at the level of mind; Psychological-Sociological at "body;" and Geographical-Ecological at "matter." Such a theoretical representation clearly begs the questions of how the spiritual link has been severed, with what consequences, and how it might be reinstated.

The "opening out" of the discourses, as described above, can also be mapped onto Skolimowski's imagery of a participatory universe as a cone opening outwards. The walls of the cone represent the sum total of knowledge. Knowledge itself is represented by a spiral inside, and sustaining, the walls of the cone. The walls "become adjusted, re-assembled, rebuilt, reconstructed" as the spiral of knowledge expands (Skolimowski, 1994, p. 82).

The discourses described above may be depicted as the outer walls of ACE's own "universe," sustained by a developing "spiral" of what is known in practice and articulated through theory.

We can then ask whether the spiral of existing practice and theory is likely to expand of its own accord to incorporate an understanding and articulation of spirituality. My feeling at present is that there is an important expansion taking place under the aegis of the "popular education" movement. However, this seems to be couched primarily in terms of social reform and global politics. Instead of leading to a society transformed because it consciously understands and works with its deep interconnectedness, there is a danger that, like some of the old radical forms of community education, it could simply perpetuate the ideas of separation, power and control that have shaped the Western world-view for so long.

### So What?

To consider the full extent and potential consequences of the ripples from our practice, we need to be able to see and ask questions in a way that the clockwork universe has not permitted. Thus:

We need to reassemble our world-view in a new way. We need to create new perspectives and visions to comprehend afresh this fabulous universe of ours. We need a deeper and better understanding of the subtle expanses of our inner selves, of our complex relationships with all other forms of creation in this cosmos (Skolimowski, 1994, p. xi).

If our questions are to guide us in the creation of such a wonderful new world, I invite you to consider whether we also need, and how we can help ourselves and others to gain, a new theoretical and practical understanding of the *wyrd*.

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