on education

inspiration from the Vedic tradition

A Cranmore Paper

”The present curriculum considers things that must be taught, rather than the individuals who are to be educated; Our current way of teaching results in a split between body and mind within the individual that does not allow the development of the whole being.”

Luce Irigaray – *New challenges in education*

”I need an education that teaches me how to live—not just pass exams.”

Luke (*14 yr old English student*)

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Introduction

The challenges to education are many. Enabling new generations to respond effectively to global change requires the creation of new approaches to knowledge, learning and teaching. The phenomenal nature of future events demands a new quality of thought capable of creating innovative solutions that are ecologically, economically and socially sustainable. This paper is an initial attempt to inspire reflection on the type of thinking that can help reframe our approach to learning.

To gain new perspective we considered various wisdom traditions and chose the Vedas of ancient India as a cultural resource that emphasises the importance of reflection as essential to effective action. The Sanskrit word Veda means 'knowledge' and has resonance with the contemporary development of our own 'knowledge-society'. The Sanskrit texts cited in this paper are between two and five thousand years old, yet they speak to modern issues with an unexpected affinity. This intrigued us and made us wonder how we lost touch with such an enduring and relevant wisdom. If this calibre of thinking is readily available on matters of knowledge and education, why then does the Guardian write in August 2009, that "education in the state system in England is a 19th century folly"?[1]

Texts of wisdom

Wisdom tradition texts are ancestral legacies intended to preserve and nurture new generations. Wisdom texts have a special quality that distinguishes them from normal texts: they refer to universal principles and verifiable concepts; their meaning is of deep character and is often layered; and they may be written in a rich language that we don't immediately understand. This is why the possible meaning of such texts has to be developed 'out of the text'.

We did not approach the texts for their historical, philosophical or cultural content. Rather, we were motivated by a concern for current global challenges and wondered whether or not these ancient texts could suggest new directions. We wondered if the principles contained within the deeper meaning of the texts would provide new criteria for developing modern education. Could they help us reinvigorate our knowledge systems, nurture discernment or catalyse critical thinking?

Deep reading

We endeavoured to distil the meaning of these wisdom texts and unlock their inspiration through a process of deep reading. This meant reading the original Sanskrit texts with an open and reflective attitude aimed at cognitive, emotional and spiritual understanding. The process of deep reading has historic use in

1 Yvonne Roberts, SATS results are more than a 'blip', *The Guardian*, Wednesday August 5, 2009.

various cultural traditions and is practiced by scholars, spiritual aspirants and individuals striving for personal development. In deep reading the texts we were taken by their quality, clarity and nuanced meaning. Our initial conclusion is that the Vedic tradition offers new perspectives on education as well as guidelines on creating new methods and approaches to learning. Furthermore, these texts and others like them from other wisdom traditions offer us a rich resource for further study.

Creating inspiration

Wisdom texts are truly inspiring when we apply them to real problems. Achieving a successful application requires that we first understand a traditional text in its own context. This contextual reflection grants insight to the text's transcultural (or transpersonal) meaning, which we can then apply to a specific problem. The stated promise of wisdom texts is that they will deliver the desired result, when consciously applied following the underlying principles within the texts. The traditional idea is that the texts embody self-consistent truths that are universal and provable by their use.

Our effort to deep read the texts in this paper is an initial attempt to test the premise of the Vedic wisdom texts, firstly in regards to education and latterly for possible uses in the economy, social welfare and the environment. Our idea is that by developing this method we can facilitate the creation of new ways of thinking beyond the obvious and the normative.

On society

न ते विदुः स्वार्थगतिं हि विश्णुं
दुराज्ञया ये बहिरर्थमानिनः।
अन्धा यथान्धैरुपनीयमाना–
स्तेह्यपीज्ञतन्ल्यामुरुदाम्नि ब ाः

When there is no tradition or culture of reflection in society, people act blindly and follow leaders who are also blind. Such an aimless, misdirected society of the 'blind leading the blind' endanger themselves and the world by acting disharmoniously with the natural order that sustains all life.[2]

अन्यदेवाहुर्विद्ययाह्यन्यदाहुरविद्यया।
इति ष्ुश्रुम धीराणां ये नस्तद्विचचक्षिरे

The wise have explained that one result is derived from the culture of knowledge and that a different result is obtained of the culture of ignorance.[3]

2 *Shrimad-Bhagavatam*, 7.5.31.
3 *Ishopanishad*, 10.

On society

These five thousand year old verses warn that a society lacking a culture of reflection is a danger to itself and the world. The texts make a causal link between a society in crisis and the absence of reflective thought. In this sense they are remarkable for their prescience of the current state of affairs.

Elsewhere in the Vedas its authors distinguish between a ‘culture of knowledge’ and a ‘culture of ignorance’. It seems that both ignorance and knowledge are central concepts in Vedic culture that deserve equal consideration. Vedic culture states its aim as the acquisition of knowledge that leads to wisdom or ‘realised knowledge’ through reflection. The question is whether modern society’s accumulation of knowledge has resulted in a culture of wisdom?

When Vedic authors see that the absence of reflection results in disharmonious action they give prominence to thinking over action. It is the quality of thinking and reflection that determines the quality of our actions. At first glance that may seem obvious, but in practice it isn’t the reality we live. Ours is a culture of action, with little time given to reflection. Of course we set goals, consider criteria, assess results and make adjustments where we must. While this may count in some sense as reflection, it often results in unexpected consequences, however knowledgeable or factual our choices.

Why then are we not more reflective? Even if we choose to reflect, do we have the ability or know-how for deep reflection? We wonder what role education can play in creating and fostering a culture of reflection? And what latent potential could be realised by adding reflection to our accumulated fund of knowledge?

The verse claims that a lack of reflection results in ‘disharmonious action with the natural order that sustains all life’. Vedic wisdom thinks of the natural order as a finely tuned integrative harmony. The implication is that one should consider the quality of one’s thought and actions and how they align to the underlying principles in nature that are conducive to life and collective wellbeing. It also implies consideration of the long-term. Our reading highlighted that the Vedic tradition doesn’t treat the concept of a ‘natural order’ as an abstraction, as we might do in Western thinking. The tradition suggests that linking the power of the mind, of consciousness, in reflection to these underlying principles helps us act in a way that provides a quality life that is sustainable in the long run.

Such a quality of action has considerable importance at a time when companies recognise the need for sustainable business practice and strive for corporate social responsibility. Of course companies are principally concerned with realising their business goals and targets and not with cultivating notions of ‘natural order’. And yet, there is a need to research ‘natural order’ and ‘sustaining all life’ so that they become practical and accessible principles for people, organisations and societies. Practical in a way that they can apply them as best practice in daily life. What kind of education and research would that be and who would do it?

On ignorance

इदमद्य मया लब्धमिदं प्राप्स्ये मनोरथम्।
इदमस्तीदम" मे भविश्यति पुनर्धनम्
असौ मया हतः ष्टात्रुर्हनिश्ये चापरान"।
ईश्ववरोह्यहमहं भोगी "ोह्यहं बलवान् सुखी
आढ ोह्यभिजनवानस्मि कोह्यन्योह्यस्ति
सदृज्ञो मया।
यक्ष्ये दास्यामि मोदिश्य इत्यज्ञानविमोहिताः

The selfish person thinks: "So much wealth do I have today, and I will gain more because I can. So much is mine now, and it will increase in the future, more and more.

He is my enemy, and I have killed him, and my other enemies will also be killed. I am the lord of everything. I am the enjoyer. I am perfect, powerful and happy. I am the richest man, surrounded by aristocratic relatives.

There is none so powerful and happy as I am. I shall perform sacrifices, I shall give in charity, and thus I shall rejoice." In this way, such persons are deluded by ignorance.[4]

मया लब्धमिदं
मनोरथम्।

4 *Bhagavad-gita*, 16.13–15.

On ignorance

It is remarkable that this ancient description of a ‘selfish person’ so aptly sketches a type of thinking common in modern society. The text is precise in its description of the ambitions and emotions of a particular mindset, yet it stops short of passing a moral judgement. What makes it interesting is its conclusion that such a person is ‘deluded by ignorance’.

Ignorance plays an important role in Vedic thinking. It is the cause of misery. Ignorance is described as the root cause of all that is wrong, ineffective, wasteful and inefficient. Essentially ignorance leads to suffering and makes people unhappy. As such the eradication of ignorance is the main motivation for knowledge and learning in Vedic culture.

The topic of ignorance is interesting, not so much for its prominence in the Vedas, but for its conspicuous absence in our cultural thinking. Although the goal of our educational systems lie in the increase of knowledge through learning, the subject of ignorance and stupidity play no role at all – we just don’t talk about ignorance in any way. In thinking about education we don’t identify a situation to move away from but a situation to strive for. It may be argued that inherent in this positive striving is the implicit negation of ignorance – but the avoidance of ignorance as a subject does not eliminate its presence, influence or effects. While our striving for knowledge tends to be more utilitarian when acquired for application, or of a higher order when it satisfies an intellectual or aesthetic curiosity, it nonetheless remains limited to a fraction of the knowledge spectrum – at least in Vedic thinking which aims for the development of the whole person, including character and virtue. By comparison our thinking about education seems disengaged from the quality of our being.

The use of the concept of ‘ignorance’ and its precise description in Vedic culture defines the antithesis of their notion of a superior quality of existence that can be personally and socially achieved. Maybe we should allow ourselves to give ignorance a place in our cultivation of knowledge.

On knowledge

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृज्ञं पवित्रमिह विद्यते।

In this world, there is nothing equal to (transformative) knowledge/ wisdom.[5]

राजविद्या राजगुप्यं पवित्रमिदमुक्तामम्।
प्रत्यक्षावगमं धर्म्यं सुसुखं कर्क्तुमव्ययम्

This knowledge is the king of education and the most confidential of all knowledge. It is pure, sublime and complete knowledge, and because it gives direct and full realisation of the self it is the perfection of life. One who has realised this knowledge is situated in everlasting joy.[6]

आहारनि=राभयमैथुनानि
सामान्यमेतत्पज्ञुभिर्नराणाम्।
ज्ञानं नराणामधिको विज्ञेशो
ज्ञानेन हीनाः पज्ञुभिः समानाः

Human beings have four actions in common with animal species – eating, sleeping, mating and fearing. Humans excel animals in their ability for discretionary knowledge and ontological self-reflection. Humans who lack knowledge and discernment are therefore considered by the wise to be in the same category as animals.[7]

5 *Bhagavad-gita*, 4.38.
6 *Bhagavad-gita*, 9.2.
7 *Chanakya-niti-darpana*, 17.17.

On knowledge

The word 'Veda' is derived from the root word 'vid', which means 'knowledge' or 'education', making Vedic culture a culture of knowledge by-design. It also suggests why the texts from such a culture can create inspiration when thinking about education and offer us an outstanding resource in an era that defines itself as an information society or a knowledge society.

In Vedic culture the concept of knowledge is rich and varied. It is more than amassing data or acquiring know-how. Reaching beyond mere intellectual understanding, knowledge itself has an existential dimension that manifests in three qualitative conditions related to the natural cycle of creation, stasis and destruction. Each quality of knowledge gives a predictable result consistently throughout the universe, from the lowest dimension to the highest. The effects or results of a particular quality of knowledge is described in Vedic texts and can be recognised in any situation by the careful observer.

Knowledge is therefore seen as an active agent: those who have it are able to live better quality lives. Knowledge improves their being and their relationships. It is in this context that Vedic knowledge is transformative and meant *to be lived* as well as known. Doing so leads to personal fulfilment and social happiness. Vedic knowledge is decidedly practical in its aim, which is no less than to harmonise action with universal principles that sustain and preserve.

The emphasis on the whole being and the realisation of an integrated character distinguishes Vedic wisdom and offers potential solutions to our culture. The texts define a notion of knowledge different to our own, partly because their society and time was different but also because their view of knowledge included both the subjective inner world as well as outer physical world. This approach makes knowledge and learning intimately connected with the development of the individual and his or her quality of life. The text states that being able to cultivate that special kind of knowledge distinguishes humankind from animals.

It could be said that knowledge has become commoditised by our consummer culture. In the Vedic mind, possessing knowledge is not as desirable as realising it, making it wisdom by integrating it as part of ones being. From this perspective the commoditisation of knowledge by our educational system seem limiting. Could the Vedic whole-being model provide inspiration to educational policy makers?

On truth

असतो मा सद्गमय
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय
मृत्योर्मामृतं गमय।

Lead me from the falsehood of illusion; take me to abiding truth.
Lead me from the darkness; take me to the light.
Lead me from death; take me to immortality.[8]

सत्यं वद। धर्मं चर

Speak the truth. Practise righteousness.[9]

सत्यमेव जयते नानृतम्

The Truth alone triumphs and endures.[10]

8 *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, I.3.28.
9 *Taittiriya Upanishad*, I.11.2.
10 *Mundaka Upanishad*, III.1.6.

On truth

The Vedic tradition identifies and describes a set of axiomatic principles called ‘tattvas’ that operate universally. These tattvas or truths can be observed functioning at every level of the universe. The Vedic development of knowledge aspires to deeply understand those universal principles so that one’s actions are in accord with and supported by them.

The Vedic notion of axiomatic truth is more a fundamental principle or existential force than a logical concept or relative moral consideration. The idea of ‘living in accord’ with natural order is based more on self-interest and wellbeing than doctrine or creed.

In fact, choosing to live one’s life according to tattvas has far reaching results. Living according to the truth or ‘satyam’ means that the forces of nature support and nourish the realisation of one’s actions – making desired outcomes more likely. When Mahatma Gandhi launched his ahimsa or non-violent campaign on September 11th, 1906 he called it ‘satyagraha’, symbolising his relentless search for the truth and his desire to teach the truth through non-violent means. ‘Satyagraha’ literally means ‘to hold on to the truth’ in a way that makes it a truth-force – or as Gandhi called it, ‘the soul-force’.

Other examples of the importance of truth in post-Vedic Indian societies can be found in the historic writing of foreign travellers that lauded Indian honesty and truthfulness, including the Greek Megasthenes,[11] the Chinese Hsuan-tsang,[12] and the Venetian Marco Polo.[13]

The concept of ‘tattva’ may prove helpful in rethinking our approach to modern education. Is the number of dropouts in our school systems related to our notion of knowledge and truth? Does the creation of a vital and inspiring educational system depend on a broader notion of knowledge and truth, one that is more easily and intimately connected to the quality of our personal lives?

11 “They embrace truth and virtue equally”: Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, III.C.2, Leiden 1958, 715 F32 (Strabon, *Geography* XV, 1.54).

12 *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels*, trans. T. Watters, vol. I, p. 171: “They do not practice deceit and they keep their sworn obligations.” The now current romanization of the name is Hsuan-tsang; in quotations, the roamnization of the authors is followed.

13 *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, trans. H. Yule, 3rd ed., London 1929 (repr. London 1974), vol. 2, p. 363: “these *Abraiaman* [Brahmins] are the best merchants in the world, and the most truthful, for they would not lie for anything on earth.”

On learning and education

ज्ञानविज्ञानतृप्तात्मा

A person achieves fulfilment and wholeness when knowledge is transformative.[14]

ज्ञानं विज्ञानसहितं यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्ष्यसेह्यज्ञुभात्

Being transformed by the realisation of this knowledge will free you from all misery and chaos.[15]

अक्षण्वन्तः कर्णवन्तः सखायो
मनोजवेश्वसमा बभुवुः।
आदघ्नास उपकक्षास उ त्वे
ट्टदा इवा स्नात्वा उ त्वे ददृश्रे

Classmates with the same education may be equals in sensory ability yet can be unequal in their mental acuity. Some students are like deep tanks in their ability to acquire knowledge and understanding; others who are less able are compared to shallow tanks; some students are thus able to immerse themselves in the subject whereas others are like small basins of limited capacity.[16]

पुस्तकस्या तु या विद्या परहस्तगतं धनम्।
कार्यकाले समुत्पञ्नो न सा विद्या न त नम्

One whose knowledge is confined to books and whose wealth in the possession of others, can use neither his wealth nor knowledge when the need arises.[17]

14 *Bhagavad-gita*, 6.8.
15 *Bhagavad-gita*, 9.1.
16 *Rig Veda*, X.71.7.
17 *Chanakya-niti-darpana*, 16.20.

On learning and education

Knowledge, learning and education were the heart of Vedic society. This was not only evident in the way in which individuals were taught, but equally in the ethos and social structure of learning systems. Those who led the country, the monarchs and the Brahmins, were cultivated men of knowledge thanks to an integrated learning system that was open to all classes – rich and poor. One example of the egalitarian access to learning is the history of Lord Krishna, who as a wealthy member of the agrarian/mercantile class studied side-by-side with his poor Brahmin friend Sudama.

Vedic education was geared to the needs and abilities of the individual in cultivating a vocation, but also for its emphasis on producing a well-rounded character. For this reason Vedic thought and philosophy places more importance on the transformational process of learning than on the informational process or the acquiring of know-how[18]. In Vedic terms the education of a person aims at the development of a higher quality of life achieved through the full realisation of individual potential. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore remark, "Every Indian system seeks truth, not as academic 'knowledge for its own sake', but to learn the truth which shall make all men free"[19] The focus is on cultivating the critical thinking of the student, and which is then ideally aligned with the discernment of a refined inner character.

Ancient Indian thinkers set life-long educational objectives that require life-long effort to achieve and realise.[20] As such the Vedic model advocates perpetual learning for everyone. By setting lofty goals of truth, self-realisation and immortality, students were made aware that there is more to life than personal ego and the smallness of selfish gain. To this end they were taught numerous ways and disciples for advancing the realisation of their higher self.

Organising for excellence is essential for good education. Today our efforts are largely confined to organising intellectual and scientific excellence. Is there a way to organise our educational systems to encourage a broad-spectrum learning that creates integrated characters that can wield knowledge and the power it brings for the health of all society?

18 Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (New York: Pantheon Hooks, 1951), p. 4.
19 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. xxiii.
20 Kireet Joshi.1992. *The Veda and Indian Culture*, New Delhi, Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan, New Delhi.

On the goal of education

Artha (Prosperity & Well-being); Kama (Pleasure, Aesthetics & Sensual Enjoyment); Dharma (Life Purpose, Philosophy & Ethics); Moksha (Redemption, Liberation, Realisation)

भावमिच्छति सर्वस्य नाभावे कुरुते मतिम्।
सत्यवादी मृदुर्दान्तो यः स उक्तामपूरुशः

A man is regarded as superior and the best of his society who desires the prosperity of everyone and who never longs for the misery of others; who is always truthful; humble in all respects and who has his passions under control.[21]

यज्ञो दानमध्ययनं तपज्ञ्च
चत्वार्येतान्यन्ववेतानि सस्त्रिः।
दमः सत्यमार्जवमानृज्ञंस्यं
चत्वार्येतान्यन्ववयन्ति सन्तः

Sacrifice, study, charity, asceticism, truth, forgiveness, mercy, and contentment constitute the eight paths of righteousness. The first four of these may be practised from motives of pride, but the last four exist only in those that are truly noble.[22]

दुःखेश्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेशु विगतस्पृहः।
वीतरागभय ोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते

One who is tranquil and undisturbed even in misery; who is desireless in felicity; who is free from attachment, fear and anger; is described as learned and of steady mind.[23]

विद्या दानं तपः सत्यं धर्मस्येति पदानि च।

Education; charity; self-denial (effort & sacrifice); and truth are said to be the four principles of Dharma.[24]

21 *Mahabharata*, Book 5 (Udyoga-parva), XXXVI.16.
22 *Mahabharata*, Book 5 (Udyoga-parva), XXXV.48.
23 *Bhagavad-gita*, 2.56.
24 *Shrimad-Bhagavatam*, 3.12.41.

On the goal of education

The scope and strategy of the integrated Vedic curriculum reaches beyond that of modern models as it aims to educate the student in four aspects of life: Dharma, Artha and Kama, Moksha.

Dharma is the curriculum that prepares the student to live a life in accord with the underlying order in nature; it imparts a sense of personal and civic duty based on natural order; and instructs on the ethics and moral dimensions of natural order.

Artha educates the students towards wealth, physical wellbeing and security. It refers to the idea of material prosperity, but also encompasses immaterial aspects like the wealth of knowledge, friendship and love. Artha pertains also to one's vocational training.

Kama is the curriculum that teaches students how to enjoy the pleasures of life in a healthy and balanced way.

Moskha educates students in the attainment of spiritual freedom from material life.

The last part of the Vedic curriculum will not easily translate to educational systems that do not have a concept of 'material emancipation' or spiritual freedom as the highest goal for a human being. Nevertheless, the principle aim is to build a well-rounded individual by addressing the inner and outer needs within the curriculum.

Does the goal of a good quality education require a model based on a notion of what is best for the individual? If so what would that be in our modern culture?

The inspiration in the deep reading of Vedic texts lays not so much in what specific detail they contribute, but that they demonstrates a viable system that set explicit goals for personal existence.

On the qualities of a student

अमान्यमत्सरो दक्षो निर्ममो दृढसौ७दः।
असत्वरोह्यर्थजिज्ञासुरनसूयुरमोघ वाक्

A qualified student is humble; free from envy; diligent; free of any false sense of possessiveness; resolute; on friendly terms with his teacher; tranquil; eager to learn; free of hostility; and sweetly soft-spoken.[25]

सुखार्थिनः कुतो विद्या नास्ति विद्यार्थिनः सुखम्।
सुखार्थी वा त्यजेद्विद्यां विद्यार्थी वा सुखं त्यजेत्

The pursuit of pleasure is an obstacle on the path of learning. Genuine students put learning before sense pleasures. Those addicted to pleasure will abjure learning. Those who are devoted to knowledge must avoid indulgence.[26]

अलसा मलिनाः क्लिश्टा
दाम्भिकाः ड्डपणास्तथा।
दरि=ा रोगिणो रुश्टा
रागिणो भोगलालसाः

Persons, who are lazy, unclean, disturbed, proud, miserly, wretched, sickly, angry, attached and greedy for sense enjoyments are unsuitable candidates for education.[27]

तद्विि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रज्नेन सेवया।
उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तक्कवदर्ज्ञिनः।।

Try to learn the truth by studying with a qualified teacher; ask relevant questions of him or her; be useful and reciprocate by rendering service. A self-realised teacher can educate and enlighten you because he or she has seen the truth.[28]

25 *Shrimad-Bhagavatam*, 11.10.6.
26 *Mahabharata*, Book 5 (Udyoga-parva), XL.5.
27 *Agastya-samhita*; quoted in *Shri Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, 1.64.
28 *Bhagavad-gita*, 4.34.

On the qualities of a student

As one would expect from a knowledge-society, Vedic culture gives importance to the character of the student. The descriptive text is not critical or emotional, but a rather precise criteria that emphasises attitude as well as ability. The genuine student must have heart – not only for learning, but also in relationship to his teacher.

It appears that even after thousands of years some things don't change and thus Vedic literature gives specific attention to the negative habits and traits of students. While some of the descriptions may seem impractical and in the face of today's classrooms even amusing, the criteria may prove useful when considering new learning paradigms. In educational thinking the 'quality of the student' has often inspired new approaches and new models of education.

The texts seems almost modern when they suggest that indolence, inattention, wasting time, arrogance, pride etc. are disqualifications for the student, or at least obstacles to a student's progress. Has human nature changed so little? It seems that the pressures we face in today's classrooms have been consistent throughout the ages. And yet the challenges of the modern classroom seem unique by comparison due to the distractions of a media saturated, electronic culture. The data overload of the information society makes our 'continuous partial attention' (as Linda Stone[29] says) a very recent phenomenon that undoubtedly exacerbates the problems of a disinterested student. Modern classrooms are also larger than the village classes of Vedic culture, where students had less distraction and enjoyed more one-on-one tutoring. Regardless of the differences between then and now, the Vedas tellingly describe the attitudes and abilities that either challenge teachers or make them rejoice.

But the question of whether a student is qualified seems a moot point in a modern system aimed at universal education that has little choice in student selection. The sheer numbers of students that have to be accommodated have resulted in a system that measures its effectiveness entirely with performance metrics, a further step away from a holistic model. The drift towards a quantitative versus qualitative evaluation raises doubts about the validity of metrics themselves when observers ask whether an A-grade today is the same quality as it was twenty years ago.[30]

It may be useful to reframe the question of educational excellence to consider the holistic needs of the student as well as his or her responsibilities within a holistic system. Maybe a more immediate need is to talk about the qualities of a student as part of reframing a better educational system? We thought these texts raised important issues that are the daily challenge to teachers but seemingly neglected in the policy making process.

29 http://www.lindastone.net

30 *Sunday Times August 5, 2007 - A-levels have got two grades less difficult by Jack Grimston and Roger Waite*

On the qualities of a teacher

गुकार४चान्धकारो हि रुकारस्तेज उच्यते।
अज्ञानग्रासकं ब्र९ गुरुरेव न संज्ञय:

Guru: Gu means darkness; Ru means light. The genuine teacher dispels the darkness of ignorance.[31]

ड्डपा‘‘न्धु: सुसम्पूर्ण: सर्वसक्कवोपकारक:

The true teacher is an ocean of mercy and compassionate to the sincere student.[32]

गुरवो बहव: सन्ति ञ्जिश्यविक्कापहारका:।
तमेकं दुर्लभं मन्ये ञ्जिश्य५क्कापहारकम्

There are numerous teachers who exploit their students and plunder them for selfish gain; Rare is the teacher who rather than stealing their students wealth, he steals their miseries and in doing so makes them free.[33]

गुरोरप्यवलिप्तस्य कार्याकार्यमजानत:।
उत्पथप्रतिपञ्जास्य परित्यागो विधीयते

One should reject a teacher who is arrogant, who lacks discrimination and is unable to act in harmony with dharma and the truth.[34]

31 Skanda Purana, "The Song of the Teacher", 33.
32 Vishnu-smriti; quoted in Shri Hari-bhakti-vilasa, 1.45.
33 Skanda Purana, "The Song of the Teacher", 162.
34 Mahabharata, Book 5 (Udyoga-parva), CLXXVIII, 24.

On the qualities of a teacher

Teachers uphold Vedic society. There is no other conclusion to be drawn from the body of texts. Of course it may refer to another system of knowledge, truth, learning and education but the statement is all the same: teachers uphold society.

Let's follow that line of thinking and look at today's society. How is the quality of our society related to the quality of its managers, employees and leaders; and how does that relate to the quality of their teachers? In the face of growing challenges and the need for solutions, where do we find teachers who can inspire, stimulate new modes of thinking, and maybe lead the way? Who are your teachers today? To whom are you a teacher?

Our society needs forward thinking solutions. This requires a new quality of thinking that is creative as well as reflective. Does this require an examination of our notion of quality? And how would we as a society develop a new perspective on qualities that sustain and nurture society and the world? These texts use a flowery language to describe the quality of a Vedic teacher. Do such teachers exist? Are these texts realistic in setting a standard for teaching? It would be naïve to think of Vedic society as perfect. Its knowledge system however defines checks and balances aimed at getting the best possible results for a society that has a long-term vision.

Bad teachers are described and students are warned to avoid them. Yet, the reality of our current system is that this may not be possible. Options for change seem limited. Suggesting an overall improvement in our teaching pool maybe too challenging to many people. Nevertheless, the subject seems unavoidable if we want to raise standards. Could it be that our society's approach to its teachers also needs review? Do our teachers need greater support and resource to raise the bar? If so, where will that come from? What seems clear at this point is that excellence will not come from measuring outputs and deliverables. More likely it will come first through reflection on the qualities we aspire to, and efforts needed to culture them, then by degrees establishing those as systematic objectives.

The task of organising for an improvement in educational quality in curriculum, students or teachers, requires a new type of holistic thinking. We hope these texts provide food for thought and inspiration for further dialogue.

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