

Global knowledge convergence: Socrates and the historical loss and (projected) 21st recovery of ‘dialogue’ in human thought.

Excerpts from Words, ideas, and optimal knowledge-building

As Walter Ong pointed out in his book *Orality and Literacy: The technologizing of the word* (1982), Socrates did not just live at a pivotal time in human history when Greek alphabetic literacy (and the written word it enabled) was overtaking ‘traditional orality’. According to his student Plato (or, as represented in Plato’s *Phaedrus*), Socrates personally embodied this conflict by refusing to put down (or ‘fix’) his ideas in written words. He argued that this would encourage ‘forgetfulness’ (i.e. the loss of understanding and even ‘wisdom’ as well as ‘memory’).¹

In other words, a key deficiency of writing (it was generally argued by Socrates - with this being ambivalently reported by the younger Plato) was its related tendency to lose the transformative capacity of ‘dialogue’ for capturing and communicating ‘deep learning’. This makes it all the more ironic that Socrates is remembered as the ‘father of Western philosophy’. It was as much for his influence on Plato and Aristotle (as a recognized founder of Western traditions of logic, ethics and rhetoric) as for how his elenchus method - which is generally regarded as the initial or original (if largely misunderstood) prototype of the much later emerging ‘modern scientific method’. This method was rigorous in its ‘thread of inquiry’ approach to reasoning as some kind of ‘dialectical’ process investigating the internal consistency and coherence of views, positions and beliefs held by others.

Ong cites other scholars of this transition (including Milman Parry and Eric Havelock) for their related evidence of how the ancient Greek transition to writing encouraged not just abstract thought but also further tendencies to linear, mechanical and fixed or ‘decontextualized’ thinking – the key indicator of a transition from (predominantly) ‘sound-based oral cultures’ to ‘sight based literate cultures’ of the West. In an earlier book *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958), Ong had focused on the new method of representing knowledge also through ‘diagrams, lists and summaries’ developed by the French educator-philosopher Peter Ramus. Ramus redefined logic as the “*art of correctly discussing or analyzing something*” (*ars bene disserendi*) – the ‘top-down’ approach of organising and classifying not just thinking but communication in terms of attempting to always proceed from the general to the specific.

Such a controversial repudiation of the scholastic adaptation in medieval universities of Aristotelian models of knowledge was apparently or perhaps linked in some way to the political and religious ‘assassination’ of Ramus in 1572). These events were directly attributed by Ong to the change in human consciousness brought about by the typographic literacy linked to the revolutionary implications of the printing press to freeze human thought and language-use in mass-produced books. Ong also recognized how this was an apparently inevitable further historical development of the chirographic literacy revolution in ancient Greece that so concerned Socrates because of its associated tendency to the kind of ‘forgetfulness’ also characterized by related notions of surface learning and descriptive knowledge.

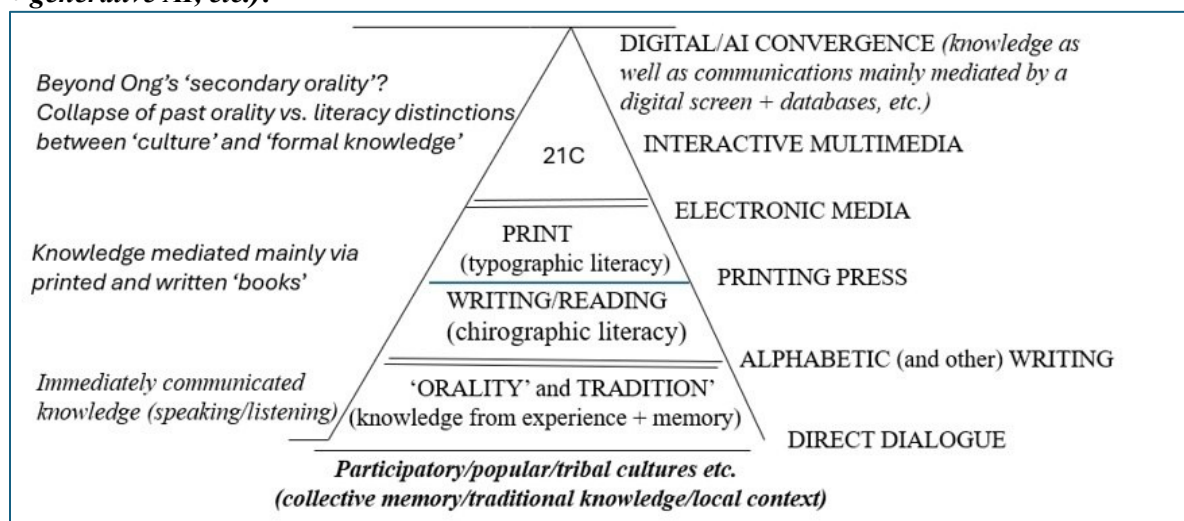
But like Plato with his teacher Socrates, Ong was somewhat ‘balanced’ (if ambivalently) about the subsequent historical effects of Ramus’s 16th Century pedagogical innovations in human

1 Ricoeur (1991:130) quoting Plato’s *Phaedrus*: ‘*An intelligent word is accompanied by wisdom and, being ‘graven in the soul of the learner’, can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent. “You mean” Phaedrus asked, “the living word of knowledge has a soul, and of which the written word is properly no more than an image?”*’, “Yes”, replied Socrates, “Of course that is what I mean”’

thought and related ‘logical’ approach to modern knowledge building (e.g. he is generally recognized as the inventor of ‘the modern textbook’ as well as arguably also the originator of regular ‘graphic organizer’ usage). So, whilst he recognized that the transition to ‘print literacy’ was a pivotal event linked to the emergence of a dominant yet selective notion of ‘modern science’, Ong understood that this involved both the negative as well as positive implications of various reductionist frameworks of knowledge and thought (rationalism, objectivism, etc.). In other words, the ‘ability to forget’ because ideas are recorded in written or printed words did selectively allow for thinking and knowledge-building informed by greater complexity, logical abstraction, and reflective rigor in various ways. Ong’s ambivalence did not just involve both negative and positive perspectives on the transition from oral to literate societies. Ong thought that a key related effect of this was a certain limited ‘scientific’ view of the world that ignored or repressed the ‘lost’ positive elements of orality – including respect for nature, empathy for others, and related cultural dimensions such as religious or ‘faith-based’ beliefs and practices (Ong remained a committed Jesuit Catholic priest throughout his eminent, innovative and productive scholarly career).

This all helps explain how the key emergent concept of Ong’s later writings is that of ‘*secondary orality*’ (see Figure 1). Applied to modern society generally, this term refers to the peculiar condition of the late 20th century producing young people around the world within basically literate societies who have arguably become more ‘tribal’, more ‘oral’, and more ‘environmentally-aware’ in their thinking as part of an emerging global condition. In some ways at least, this is a condition relevantly described by the sociologist Bauman’s (2000) related concept of ‘*liquid modernity*’ (i.e. a ‘fluid and unstable’ new cultural world of constant uncertainty, change and demoralization, etc.). Whilst ‘secondary orality’ has some negative characteristics in its manifestation as the ‘new tribalism’ (often without the positives), it is arguably the positive possibilities of literate people who re-acquire aspects of ‘natural systems thinking’ (including capacities for sustainability, resilience, and complex problem-solving).

Fig 1. The 21st Century knowledge builder (in the related ages of ‘liquid modernity’ + digital convergence + generative AI, etc.)?



Ong was not around to see the emergence of generative AI as a function of *Large Language Models* (derived from inherently unreliable ‘past digital content’) in recent years. But we might generally predict what might have been his likely view of this development in terms of how it arguably involves related functions of a certain kind of ‘secondary orality’. But it is a kind of

‘secondary orality’ which, unlike writing and print literacy, involves language-use arbitrarily detached from human experience and understanding (and thus of related processes of ‘deep learning’ and dialogical engagement with the natural world and others). We can further guess his likely prescription for the growing problem of how AI ‘slop’ and co-writing chatbots have amplified what in this book we have described as the ‘descriptive research’ and related ‘surface learning’ tendencies of ‘the lost PhD dissertation’ model.

Through or across all the subsequent historical developments of human thought beyond the dominant orality of ‘traditional societies’ generally (i.e. right up to the current ‘modernity’), Walter Ong generally recognized the positive ‘dialogical’ functions of a particular kind of ‘secondary orality’. He likewise understood the trepidation felt by Socrates to the then new paradigm of written knowledge, yet also the lessons of how Socrates’ educational and philosophical methods represented a very focused and constructive kind of thought and language-use that can and should also inform that new paradigm and its further developments. Ong constantly maintained that neither writing nor the printing press eliminated the dialogical functions of ‘orality’. So, when it comes to the general and related functions of human language-use, thought and ‘knowledge-building’, ‘orality’ (at least in the sense that someone like Paul Ricoeur regularly used the related term ‘dialogical’) remains powerfully relevant - or at least potentially so.

This is a view that we think converges with our own argument below that many if not most of the more innovative and productive modern scientists (and others) have gone beyond the reductionist or ‘descriptive research’ tendencies of modern science to achieve transformative knowledge outcomes through a basic and effective yet often unacknowledged problem-solving and/or inquiry-based thread of investigation – that is, to practice or achieve a significant degree or variation of ‘optimal knowledge building practice as also some kind of ‘deep learning’ process. In addition to this, many have likewise implicitly retained some of the related qualities of ‘orality’ typically ignored or denied by later literacy perspectives - the relevance of memory, empathy, social or collective values, cultural contexts of communication, situational analysis, local context or environments, the complexity of natural systems, etc

Another important clue to the 21st Century relevance of Socrates’ embodiment of applied wisdom is provided by Ong (1982) whose focus on new literacies was referred to above. As indicated, Ong’s work generally describes ‘*the decay of dialogue*’ in the emerging modern society of the West - the progressive ‘literalization’, spatialization, formalization, ‘bureaucratization’, and especially ‘interiorization’ of human thinking as part of the historical process of ‘*the technologizing of the word*’ (the process of going from *orality* to various new stages and aspects of *literacy* including writing, print and mass communications). Ong’s model also describes the paradoxical emergence of a new and ‘secondary’ form of orality in the global context of humanity increasingly defined by new communication technologies building on the ‘chirographic conditioning’ of modern peoples (pp.175-179). It is perhaps Ong better than anyone else who recognized that Socrates’ famous resistance to writing (for ‘*destroying memory... and weakening the mind*’, etc.) represents a kind of anticipatory antidote for the ‘*decay of dialogue*’, loss of memory, and passive literalism of written and print technologies in the historical emergence of modern society in the West which he himself is indirectly responsible for (via the ‘idealistic’ writings of Plato). We might also propose that it represents and remains the crucial antidote to the negative aspects of ‘secondary orality’ and, in this way, a key to the most effective 21st Century knowledge building.

In his well-known work *On the Concept of Irony*, the 19th Century philosopher Kierkegaard described Socrates as “*the first of the moderns*”. This was in light of the very ‘self-aware irony’

which informed Socrates' use of the elenchus method with (according to Kirkegaard) an 'infinite absolute negativity;'. But this was a selective and not wholly accurate projection. As Gadamer (1977) further clarifies, such references to Socratic irony typically describe Socrates' repeated claims of 'personal ignorance' when engaging with 'clever people'. But as indicated above (and as Kierkegaard later realized), there are consistent and solid grounds for distinguishing between a retrospectively imposed modern (or even post-modern) irony and what Kenneth Burke called 'consubstantial irony'. In the words of Ricoeur, this distinct kind of irony involves an *egalitarian* perspective (as distinct from a merely *condescending* one) of viewing 'oneself as another' (and vice versa). The elusive universals sought in Western thinking – even inversely in the 'absolute negativity' of modern forms of irony – are referenced in *Socratic (dialogical) thinking* by the very elements discarded by Plato, Aristotle and the whole western tradition of *either/or thinking* (idealism vs realism, rationalism vs. empiricism, objectivism vs. relativism, etc.). In other words, universality lies inherent in the very process of either implicit or explicit dialogue itself, and the ethical as well as knowledge 'reference-point' of an organizing or sustainable sense of 'self-knowledge'.

The pivotal distinction made by Socrates between the *ignorance of close-minded arrogance* and the *wisdom of open-minded ignorance* inform a consistent thread linking his particular philosophical ideas, educational methods, and rhetorical techniques into a consistent and powerful framework of knowledge building. In particular, Socrates used his questioning method to provisionally 'open up' and guide not just old, inaccurate, and simply lazy structures of thinking to a more dynamically relevant and universal reference point or perspective. In short, this method was conceived to *produce* and not just *reproduce* various forms of new or innovative knowledge in the sense of also providing practical and applied understandings. In this way, the elenchus method was not only a rigorously disciplined and uncompromising model of critical thinking but also a productive and innovative method of producing in others new insights, understandings, and knowledge in a convergent sense.

There are many connections between the ideas of Socrates and the dialogical framework of the humanistic philosopher Paul Ricoeur. One such connection exemplifies and frames the notion of a potential global convergence of the human knowledge building of various kinds (e.g. ranging from the non-formal to the formal, and inclusive of social as well as cognitive aspects). In one of his final major works *Oneself As Another* (1992), Ricoeur outlined a *philosophical ethics* for the 21st Century which through a strategic interplay of *appropriation* and *critical distanciation* engaged with and went beyond the characteristically modern 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (i.e. the critical opposition between objectivism and relativism). In this way, it outlined the vision of a truly global and 'reconstructive' human knowledge convergence.

In contrast to nearly all his modern contemporaries Ricoeur viewed 'critical thinking' as a *provisional* phase (not just a fixed position) in the dialogical and emergent process of knowledge building as transformation. Ricoeur's debt here and elsewhere to Socrates is acknowledged in a short, related paper 'Life in Quest of Narrative' (1992) [also quoted at the beginning of this book] which argues that the dialogical mediation between man and himself (the '*irreducible dimension of self-understanding*') remains a key to the *social* (communicative) and *natural* (referential) orders of human knowledge building. The apparently endless process of past 'sedimentations' (e.g. social traditions or ideologies) are ever transformed by the infinite human possibilities associated with the principle of 'innovation'. In such terms Ricoeur (1986:235) identified how the greatest challenge for humanity lies in the growing disconnection between past and future: "*the entire*

present is in crisis when expectancy takes refuge in utopia and tradition congeals into a dead residue”.

One of the central ideas in Ricoeur’s work is that the human capacity for *innovation* needed to redeem (or continue to transform) the *sedimentations* of ‘past innovations’ (and thus the central crisis of the modern age) lies in the function and ‘perpetual new literacy’ of *productive imagination*. In similar fashion to Socrates’ linking of self-knowledge to a theory of knowledge building through a related process of ‘recollection’, Ricoeur viewed *self-knowledge* as the truly sustainable basis for human ‘innovation’ - as the dialogical or emergent antithesis of knowledge building viewed fundamentally (or even antithetically) as the objective accumulation and ‘sedimentation’ of information.

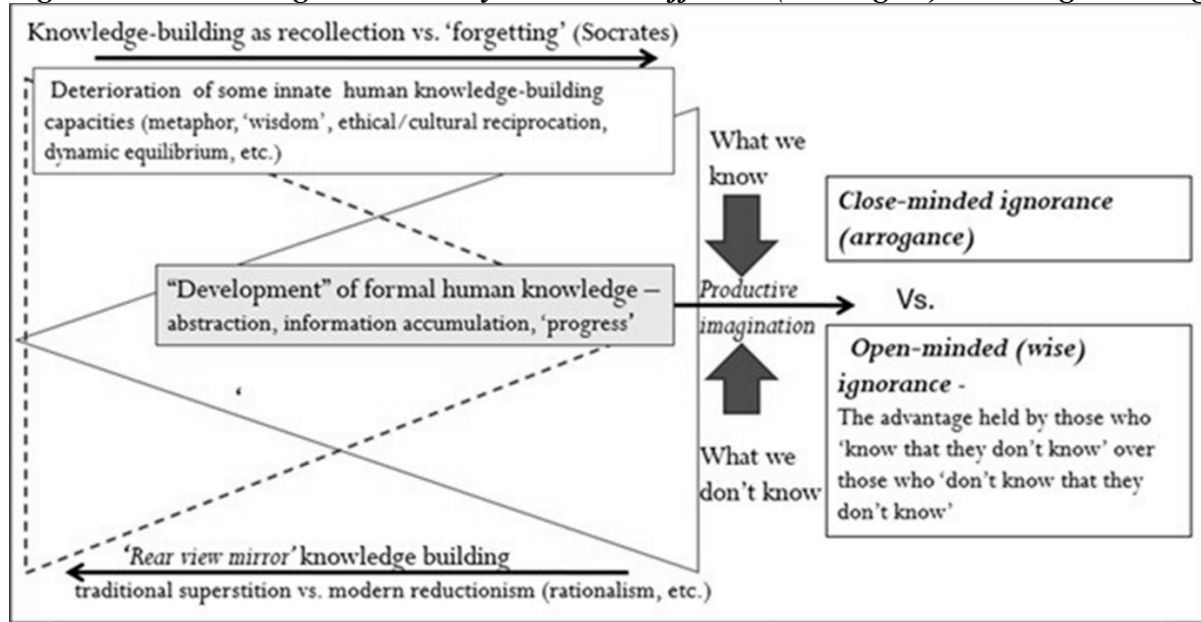
The capacity for *innovation* is exemplified by the ever-present potential for human actors and language-users to generate a ‘*surplus of meaning*’ in a particular event or text as an exemplification of some whole context. The opportunities for human innovation thus extend from the specific genres of typical individual or social patterns of interaction to more universal aspects and elements of knowing. This is especially so when guided by teachers or leaders who serve as ‘mid-wives’ to emergent human possibility. Also, in terms of the alternately *linguistic* and *cognitive* functions of verbal ‘predication’ (especially in the posing of relevant questions), Ricoeur (1981) recognized that the innate human capacity for metaphorical thinking and language-use is a pivotal key to more effective knowledge building. This is so not just in the learning of children but in all human endeavors - including the formalization of the most abstract concepts and scientific modeling. In other words, the key to the emergent interplay between the alternately *horizontal* aspect of associative thinking and the *vertical* notion of abstractly linear or ‘logically’ hierarchical thinking lies primarily with the former rather than the latter.

Ricoeur’s pivotal related concept of ‘*productive imagination*’ is to be distinguished from all variations of what he referred to as a merely ‘*reproductive imagination*’. Such a concept includes but goes beyond a reflective or empirical notion of visualization (the reception of external images) on one hand, and various ‘passive’ models and paradigms of learning and knowledge building on the other to embrace what we earlier referred to as retrospective notion of both causality and classification. In terms of a *new literacy perspective*, productive imagination thus provides an integrating focus for not only reconciling but transforming both basic and critical modes of literacy on one hand, and the connection between verbal and multimodal dimensions of textuality and communication in a human world increasingly mediated by new digital technologies. We adapt this concept here as the required element to overcome what might be called the *threshold of temporary versus perpetual confusion* (and/or frustration) in human knowledge building. For instance, the most productive thinking and learning requires an active response to overcoming (the *virtuous vs. vicious circles* of) inevitable obstacles, challenges and restraints in order to sustainably achieve and apply some practical or conceptual *vision of possibility* in terms of a related *thread of resilience*. Such knowledge building represents an alternately disciplined and innovative convergence of thinking and doing on one hand, and content and process on the other.

As a model of essential human knowledge building, the crossing of this ‘threshold of human possibility’ represents a further convergence between Ricoeur’s dialogical notion of how applied knowledge integrates and transforms both *naïve understanding* and *critical explanation* on one hand, and Socrates’ similarly productive negotiation of the gap between ‘what we know’ and ‘what we don’t know’. For both men, the endless *aporia* (i.e. the retrospective, ad hoc, and/or reductionist perceptions of seemingly impossible predicaments and apparently un-solvable or

inevitable problems) of the human condition can begin to be more productively engaged or transformed at either the individual or global levels if addressed with the strategic indirectness of a simple question or insight.

Fig 2. Productive imagination: A key to the most effective (convergent) knowledge building



The model suggested by Figure 2 provides an outline of how a projected future knowledge convergence represents alternately the *culmination* of formal human knowledge building on one hand, and on the other the *recovery* of what Socrates understood as the (perpetually *forgotten*) innate human capacities for wisdom and universal recollection or remembrance. In terms of the crucial obstacles to the global need for greater and more 'egalitarian' intercultural and interpersonal understanding and communication, it represents a sustainable means of arguing that: (a) in the larger scheme of things every individual and every community in the world (past as well as present) is not just 'oneself as another', but (b) *really* is fundamentally and potentially no 'better' than anyone else.

Whilst we can *often* learn some useful new information from other people if we are prepared to listen, we can *always* learn that our own perspectives are inevitably partial and incomplete in various senses. We can *ever* be 'humbled' (for Socrates, humility being a key prerequisite for the most effective learning and knowledge building) by the insights or alternative perspectives of others. For these are a constant potential reminder of our own inevitably limited and inadequate efforts to directly negotiate the gap between 'what we know' and 'what we don't know'.

The diagram suggests the modern emergence of what Walter Ong called '*human interiorization*' (the social and cultural externalization of 'egotistical individualism'). Blind adherence to related notions of 'progress for its own sake' epitomize other similarly passive, reproductive, and merely *externalized* social and personal ideologies of 'growth' or development in conflict with related notions of nature's 'dynamic equilibrium'. This is perhaps the hidden side of privileged, elitist, and condescending notions of achieving a 'formal knowledge' pyramid in terms of a merely cumulative notion of information linked to time similarly viewed as mere chronology. The price of such progress has arguably been the historical *deterioration* or *forgetting*

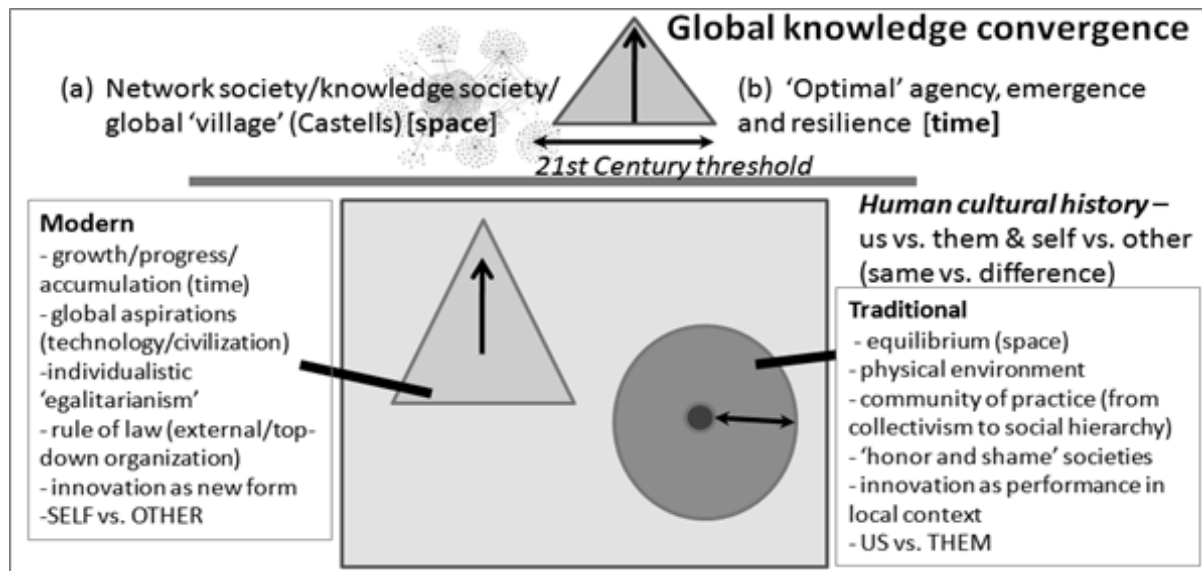
of early childhood, traditional, and generally ‘innate’ human capacities for thinking metaphorically, reciprocally, and ecologically. Or, to put this in terms of the renewed (i.e. 21st Century) relevance of Socrates’ pedagogical efforts to reconcile *innate* human ‘recollection’ and the *universal* requirements of self-knowledge, those who suffer from close-minded arrogance might realize that they are not really superior to those who are prepared to acknowledge ‘*wise or open-minded ignorance*’.

Global knowledge convergence and the far-reaching implications of an emerging 21st Century network society

The very concept of a *global knowledge convergence* implies that an effectively universal concept of human society will either reflect or be the product of a sufficiently *critical mass* of reciprocal knowledge sharing and/or collaborative knowledge building. However, on the face of it, modern developed societies would seem to be so advanced and ‘information rich’ and other societies so ‘information poor’ that there could be no real basis for any meaningful sharing, reciprocation or comparative ‘equilibrium’ of knowledge sharing or building. What if a case could be made that much of this ‘superiority’ is selective distortion and self-defeating arrogance in the grand scheme of things or from a more universal perspective? We will thus introduce here several related proposals: (a) that the only real and sustainable remedy for cultural exclusion and ‘knowledge arrogance’ lies in the humility to be gained from realizing that we have something valuable to learn *from another*; (b) however, its barely possible to either learn from or recognize we can learn from others if we are ‘looking down’ upon them; (c) all forms of modern and traditional culture and society have much to learn from others (if we/they only realized it); (d) that what we have most to learn from others lies in their particular ‘configurations’ of universal insights and specific differences in relation to own such configurations; and (e) that the prerequisite ‘literacy’ of being able to effectively tell the difference (i.e. between enduring aspects of universality or commonality and transitory elements of ‘cultural difference’) requires an ‘active knowledge building’ approach.

There is an additional related idea which we propose to investigate in this section: that there is perhaps a connection between the cultural tendency to ‘look down’ on others and the historical dominance of a ‘rear-view mirror’ model of knowledge building. By the latter we refer to a view of human knowledge as basically a process of mere information accumulation on one hand, but also on the other the top-down or positivistic reductionism and retrospective ‘rationalizations’ of viewing both human and physical nature as either a necessarily determined (objectivist) or ad hoc and contingent (relativist) process (e.g. Bernstein, 1981). In this view, the twin pillars of knowledge building (vis-à-vis representations of *causality* and *classification*) tend to be seen separately except in retrospect and in terms of viewing any particular ‘whole’ in a de-contextualized way (as distinct from a ‘systems’ view) or reducible to the mere sum of its ostensible parts. As an antidote to how such a view tends to reinforce notions of ‘vicious cycles’ of apparent inevitability in human affairs and in nature more generally, we will further outline a dialogical and productive (as distinct from ‘reproductive’) model of knowledge building in terms of the self-sufficient principle of *emergent possibility*. T

Fig 3. Global knowledge convergence and the far-reaching implications of an emerging 21st Century network society



The emerging digital technologies of a 'network society' have profound and significant implications for recognizing a fundamental paradigm shift in both human social organization and paradigms of knowledge building, many of which are still to be understood or explored. As Castells outlines in his influential work, the nodes of human networking encouraged and extended by new technologies can include both individuals and social groups of various sizes who communicate, express themselves, and share information in a way which cuts across the historical human tendency in both traditional and modern forms of society to delineate: (a) socially hierarchical as well as culturally networked notions of *us* vs. *them* (traditional) or *self* vs. *other* (modern); and (b) *dialogical* rather than *oppositional* views of the interplay between local contexts and global imperatives of the human condition. This larger notion of a networked global society provides a sustainable, interactive, and imaginative corrective or antidote to relativist, postmodernist and technologically determinist emphases rather on transient or specific interactions between concrete things and abstract concepts. However, there are certain versions of this model which blur or even ignore the distinction between technological and human agency on one hand, and social and individual agency on the other (e.g. as described by Bruno Latour and others, actor-network theory's notion of *material-semiotic networks*).

In other words, the internet and related digital technologies have been a critical factor in encouraging the global extension or convergence of personal and shared imagination: (a) beyond the 'separateness' of both modern individualism and traditional senses of local community; and (b) in light of greater educational and other awareness of the potentially endless and unlimited human possibility common to all societies and individuals. In this way Marshall McLuhan's prediction of an emerging *global village* builds on the anticipation of Walter Ong (1982) that digital technologies would productively converge with the history or social evolution of human knowledge and communications. Such a notion describes the possibility and knowledge building perspective of a shared human consciousness and conscience which goes beyond merely the instantaneous and endless information accessible via the internet and related technologies. Thus, as Figure 3 outlines, an emerging network society is encouraged by, but not reducible to, the 'technological extensions' *in space* of greater information-sharing, communication, and interactive dialogue between people around the world. Although this is not sufficient by itself for achieving a greater global convergence of human knowledge building, it is a crucial and paradigm-

altering foundation for both a more constructive, egalitarian, and reciprocal sharing of knowledge *in time* between humans in general, and for a recognition that even the richest, most technologically developed and educationally sophisticated people have much to learn from those that seem to have little worth sharing.

A related note on 21st Century knowledge building and ‘global knowledge convergence’

The very concept of a *global knowledge convergence* implies that an effectively universal concept of human society will either reflect or be the product of a sufficiently *critical mass* of reciprocal knowledge sharing and/or collaborative knowledge building. However, on the face of it, modern developed societies would seem to be so advanced and ‘information rich’ and other societies so ‘information poor’ that there could be no real basis for any meaningful sharing, reciprocation or comparative ‘equilibrium’ of knowledge sharing or building. What if a case could be made that much of this ‘superiority’ is selective distortion and self-defeating arrogance in the grand scheme of things or from a more universal perspective?

We will thus introduce here several related proposals: (a) that the only real and sustainable remedy for cultural exclusion and ‘arrogance ignorance’ lies in the humility (or ‘wise ignorance’) to be gained from realizing that we have something valuable to learn *from another*; (b) however, its barely possible to either learn from or recognize we can learn from others if we are ‘looking down’ upon them; (c) all forms of modern and traditional culture and society have much to learn from ‘the others’ (but like ‘artificial intelligence’, modernity tends to think it has nothing to learn from tradition – and how and why this is ‘so untrue’); (d) that what we have most to learn from others lies in their particular ‘configurations’ of universal insights and the specific differences of ‘local knowledge’ in relation to own such configurations; and (e) that the prerequisite ‘literacy’ of being able to effectively tell the difference (i.e. between enduring aspects of universality or commonality and transitory elements of ‘cultural difference’) requires an active ‘21C knowledge building’ approach – also ever a transformative not artificial ‘deep learning process’ of convergent understandings grounded in the experiential, reflective, and ‘inner wisdom’ domains of every human lifecycle.

A convergent notion of social knowledge systems past and present therefore includes and goes beyond the post-Enlightenment dichotomy or conflict between *tradition* and *modernity* – the view that only modern Western knowledge counts. The idea of ‘global knowledge convergence’ thus likewise lies at the *intersection* between the typically Western ‘either/or’ perspectives of Huntington’s (1996) notion of a clash of civilizations determined by the past on one hand, and on the other Castell’s (e.g. 2000, 2010) future projections of a global network society. It therefore further refers to an inclusive model of different yet ultimately convergent kinds of ‘knowledge systems’ informing every kind of social construction of individual human agency, cognition, and performance. The related foundation a possible global knowledge convergence also between Western and non-Western models likewise links the different social, personal, and actual as well as abstract and formal functions of knowledge.’
