

# Educating for a Revitalization of the Cultural Commons

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## **Abstract**

*This article discusses how the cultural commons that exist in every community, both rural and urban, carry forward the intergenerational knowledge and skills that enable people to live more mutually supportive lives that are less dependent upon consumerism and that have a smaller ecological footprint. Also discussed is why public schools and universities have relegated the intergenerational and largely non-monetized knowledge and skills to low status, as well as the different ways in which the traditions of community self-sufficiency are being transformed into new markets that lead to greater dependency upon a money economy. The cultural commons began with the first humans, and will become increasingly important as the industrial/consumer culture continues to collapse.*

## **Résumé**

*Ce texte examine comment les groupes culturels qui existent dans chaque communauté, à la fois rurale et urbaine, transmettent les connaissances intergénérationnelles et le savoir-faire qui rendent les gens capables de vivre en s'appoyant mutuellement un plus grand soutien, en étant moins dépendants de la consommation et en laissant une plus petite empreinte écologique. On discute aussi de pourquoi les écoles publiques et les universités ont relégué les connaissances et les compétences intergénérationnelles et peu monnayables à un statut inférieur, également les différentes façons par lesquelles les traditions de communautés auto suffisantes sont transformées en nouveaux marchés ce qui mène à une plus grande dépendance envers une économie monétaire. Les groupes culturels sont nés avec les premiers humains et deviendront de plus en plus importants alors que la culture industrielle/consommateur continue de s'effondrer.*

**Keywords:** intergenerational knowledge, community self-sufficiency, non-monetized wealth, enclosure, small ecological footprint

The “cultural commons” are not an abstraction, but rather exist in every community: rural, suburban, urban, tribal, wealthy, impoverished, religious, secular, north, and south. Within different communities the cultural commons include activities, knowledge, skills, and patterns of mutual support that do not rely on a monetized economy. In non-Western cultures, where the monetized economy may consist of just a few dollars a day, the cultural commons are what sustain daily life. The cultural commons in communities across North America include the intergenerational knowledge, skills, and activities that

range from how to prepare and share a meal, to healing practices, creative arts, narratives and ceremonies, craft knowledge and skills, games and outdoor activities, and political traditions such as civil liberties and democratic debate. Each of these categories encompasses a depth of embodied knowledge and relationships that would take many papers to fully describe. Clearly there is not a single description that fits the diversity of the world's cultural commons. And while the cultural commons of some communities include traditions of discrimination and violence toward marginalized groups, many aspects of the cultural commons of even these communities may have little adverse ecological impact.

We are caught in Western cultures in a series of double binds. For example, success in expanding the economy is further reducing the viability of natural systems; students who graduate from public schools and universities are becoming increasingly addicted to finding their sense of community in cyberspace instead of in face-to-face, intergenerationally connected communities where they could learn the skills and discover talents that lead to non-material forms of wealth and mutual support; and current foreign policies are directed at Westernizing other cultures, and thus are destroying the diversity of languages and intergenerational knowledge that have been adapted over hundreds and thousands of years of living within the limits and possibilities of local bioregions. Public schools and universities continue to perpetuate these double binds by what they designate as high-status knowledge, and by the silences and prejudices in the curriculum. A key characteristic of high-status knowledge is learning to use various systems of representation that foster abstract, context-free thinking, while a key characteristic of low status knowledge is that it is acquired in face-to-face intergenerational relationships, including mentoring and learning a culture's patterns of moral reciprocity. The way out of these double binds is first to learn about the nature and ecological importance of regenerating the local cultural commons, and secondly, to learn the various ways they are being enclosed by ideologies, market forces, silences, and misconceptions that have their roots in the industrial system of production and consumption.

Enclosure refers to the process of transforming aspects of a culture (broadly understood) that are freely shared by members of the community into what is privately owned—into a commodity or service that has to be purchased. Since the processes of enclosure vary from culture to culture, what will be addressed here are the forms of enclosure that, in the name of progress and growing the economy, are aggressively transforming what remains of the cultural commons into market opportunities. Enclosure has occurred when individuals lack the intergenerational knowledge of how to prepare a meal and instead rely upon industrially produced food, or upon commercially produced artistic performances instead of developing personal talents in a mentoring relationship, or upon the government to determine whether the traditions of habeas corpus and the right to privacy now threaten national security. The farmer who plants genetically modified seeds

that require the purchasing of new seeds for the next year's planting not only has accepted the enclosure of intergenerational knowledge of how to identify which seeds should be saved, but also the enclosure of a complex body of knowledge of soil and weather conditions that in times past were essential to successful farming. Examples of enclosure of intergenerational knowledge and skills are as numerous as daily life is complex.

What needs to be discussed are the educational reforms that are essential if students are to graduate with a knowledge of how the local cultural commons represent alternatives to the consumer dependent lifestyle that further undermines community and degrades the Earth's natural systems. These educational reforms should enable students to recognize the different forms of enclosure, and the consequences they have for the individual, community, and the environment. The initial challenge, however, is to get students to recognize the cultural commons they participate in on a daily basis. There are two problems here that need to be taken into account. First, most of the cultural commons are part of daily experience that is largely taken-for-granted. Examples may include learning the language group's pattern of writing from left to right, how to prepare certain foods, the way in which a guest is greeted, the narratives that are the source of individual and group identity, the differences between private and public space, the right of each individual to express her/his ideas, and so forth. The other major difficulty is becoming explicitly aware that language, which is also part of the cultural commons, serves the same role in connecting generations of individuals as the DNA does in the realm of human biology. The analogy even holds to the point where a metaphor, like a mutated gene, can be seen as reproducing over generations the misconceptions of earlier thinkers. Just as genes influence biological development over many generations, metaphors constituted in the distant past influence thought and behavior over many generations. The major difference is that we can make explicit the analogy that is reproduced in the use of metaphors such as tradition, individualism, intelligence, data, and so forth—and then identify analogies that give the metaphor a more current and ecologically accountable meaning. The shift from thinking of wilderness as wild and in need of human control to thinking of it as a pristine ecology with its own cycles of regeneration represents an example of our ability to change the meaning of words in ways that account for today's realities. The "language is like DNA" metaphor should not be extended to the point of making a linguistic determinism argument.

The way most of the local cultural commons are tacitly learned in context, as well as the way learning the language of one's cultural group reproduces earlier patterns of thinking that are largely taken-for-granted, become critically important in determining whether the educational process makes these taken-for-granted patterns explicit or leaves them below the level of conscious awareness. If the educational process does not enable students to become explicitly aware of the problem of relying upon metaphors whose meanings continue to be framed by analogies settled upon in the distant past,

or of the civil liberties that can be traced back in English history to 1215, or of the differences between developing one's own creative talents and being a consumer of the talents of others, then the enclosure of these and other aspects of the cultural commons may go unnoticed. Indeed, if the analog that equates change with progress is taken for granted, the various forms of enclosure will likely be seen as the latest expression of progress.

The role of the educator then should be that of a mediator whose responsibility is to help students make explicit the embodied and conceptual differences between their experiences in different cultural commons and market/consumer relationships and dependencies. Both students and educator are unlikely to have given sustained attention to these complex differences, such as the difference between food prepared and shared in a family setting or among friends, and food prepared by the industrial system; or between face to face communication and technologically mediated communication; or between participating in the telling of a narrative and reading about it; or between developing a skill and purchasing something ready-made; or between assuming the right of free expression and having it monitored by the government's surveillance technologies, and so on. Given that both the students and educator are engaging in a process of inquiry and clarification that neither is likely to have explored before, the responsibility of the educator is not to give pre-conceived answers. By not privileging one set of experiences over others, the process of helping students become explicitly aware of the benefits and losses may lead in some instances to recognizing that certain aspects of the scientific/technological/industrial culture represent genuine advantages over certain traditions of the cultural commons. Other comparisons between the students' embodied experiences may lead to an awareness that consumerism of certain products and services undermines the traditional patterns of mutual support and self-sufficiency within the community, and the development of personal talents.

While this mediating role does not require, and in fact, precludes giving ready-made answers, public school and university-based educators nevertheless should have special background knowledge, especially if the students are just learning to examine the differences between their experiences of the cultural commons and of industrial/consumer culture. The mediator should possess a knowledge of the layered nature of metaphorical thinking, especially how the root metaphors of a culture continue to frame the process of analogic thinking, as well as how metaphorical language carries forward the moral values of the culture. The mediator also needs to work at being aware of her/his own taken-for-granted assumptions, as well as examining when students are reproducing the taken-for-granted patterns of thinking they acquired in the earlier stages of their primary socialization.

The key to mediating then is the ability to encourage students to become aware of different aspects of their embodied/conceptual experience as they move between the cultural commons and the market/consumer activities and relationships. To cite a simple example that can move to deeper levels of com-

plexity with older students, asking a student to give expression to the differences between face-to-face communication and technologically mediated communication (e.g., email, cell phone, between avatars), would include asking about differences in associated relationships and emotions, including empathy, non-verbal patterns of communication, sense of solidarity, memory, bodily experience, and so on. Questions that students could address in other cultural commons experiences, such as in relation to being mentored in one of the creative arts, would include the above, but also those surrounding whether the experience fosters a sense of mutual support and awareness of moral reciprocity that is different from being a member of an audience.

The mediator's responsibility also includes bringing a historical perspective to discussions of the tensions between the cultural commons and the forces of enclosure. That is, educators can provide students with an understanding of how past cultural forces led to the development of important traditions that are now a taken-for-granted part of the cultural commons in the West, such as habeas corpus (which is now being threatened), as well as how other aspects of the cultural commons were enclosed, such as local traditions of healing (which varied from culture to culture) through the rise of scientific medicine, the marginalization of orality through the emphasis on print-based literacy and now computers, the loss of craft knowledge through the introduction of the industrial system of production, and so forth. Each of these changes also need to be discussed in terms of whether they enrich certain groups while impoverishing others, how they impact natural systems, as well as the different forms of dependency they brought and continue to bring about.

Through recognizing that the local cultural commons represent alternatives to a consumer dependent existence with its associated degradation of natural systems, the process of mediating can lead to enabling students to name aspects of their cultural commons experiences that need to be conserved, as well exploring what might be reformed or eliminated entirely. When students move between their cultural commons and market/consumer culture at a taken-for-granted level of awareness, they often lack the communicative competence necessary for resisting or affirming what contributes to a more community and ecologically sustainable future. Too often they remain mesmerized by the dictates of media and markets. It is only as students can reflect on the ecological and community consequences of what would otherwise be part of their taken-for-granted experience, that local democracy—which has traditionally been part of many cultural commons—can be revitalized.

### Notes on Contributor

**C. A. Bowers** has written 21 books on the cultural roots of the ecological crises. His most recent books and articles are available as part of the cultural commons and can be found by going to <<http://cabowers.net>>. **Contact:** [chetbowers@earthlink.net](mailto:chetbowers@earthlink.net)