

CIEA 2002

The responsible handling of knowledge

**Juerg Schuepbach, Secondary Education Department,
University of Berne, Switzerland**

Friday, 30 August 2002

**23RD INTERNATIONAL COURSE ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TEACHING IN AGRICULTURE**

The following thoughts and examples are to enable you to prepare and familiarise yourselves with my presentation. You will yourselves acquire new knowledge, with a possible change to and a broadening of existing knowledge, through further education events, various visits and encounters during the CIEA Seminar 2002. You will have been occupied in-depth and from various viewpoints with "knowledge management", knowledge networks and the important points regarding education and consultancy.

And now: How do you handle this knowledge? How do you use it?

The title of the lecture, formulated by the organisers, reads:
"The responsible handling of knowledge".

This title refers to a very special aspect regarding the handling of knowledge, i.e. to the fact that mankind of today, through their knowledge, possesses a potential that is not so harmless. The means by which knowledge is handled could possibly become a question of survival for mankind...

Obviously the organisers of the CIEA Seminar wish to resume and broaden the last thought of my lecture presented in the Seminar 2000 (with the subject "*Developing agricultural training: A person-centred development*"). At that time, at the end of the summary, I wrote:

"Persons at the centre must act responsibly on an ethical basis

The history of the past century, developments during the past decades and most diverse occurrences during the last years, should and must open our eyes to the fact that firstly, we humans have really moved into the focal point of interest due to the worldwide effects of our behaviour and secondly that this position obliges us compellingly to act with caution, consideration and with a sense of responsibly. Likewise, this applies to the "agricultural education at the threshold of the next millennium ". The understanding that, overall, we humans can both beneficially and non-beneficially act and work, must lead to the conclusion that our action and work in our everyday working life are founded on an ethical basis.

Persons as living beings with their impulses and needs, their desires and dreams, their capacity to think and act, must become conscious of their central position and from an overall viewpoint must act responsibly."

The new subject is not simple and not without problems:

- It is not a subject that can be made clear and clarified objectively through science. Science makes knowledge available, but thoughts about handling knowledge – if they occur – are of a philosophical nature; they strive to ascertain and, if necessary, to justify the alignment of our thinking and action in a certain direction.
- Responsibility and responsible handling of knowledge are not subjects one should primarily speak about; one should do it! Action, however, and the nature of action can occur based on deeper reaching or higher realisations and our thoughts can possibly contribute somewhat towards such actions...

- The context of the subject presented and above all the so-called global connections and effects of what we do or do not do with our knowledge, compellingly require a viewpoint that is comprehensive and international, encompassing the planet earth and its whole biosphere.
- The formulation of the subject has a characteristic requesting response. Accordingly, the lecturer runs a risk of giving the impression of being or being perceived as a moralist, preacher or prophet.
- And last but not least, we cannot avoid talking about values and taking a personal position on this subject. My statements and my selected examples are subjective and personal; they should initiate thought and provoke discussion. They are not aimed, however, at offending anybody.

Presently, we cannot give final and valid answers to the most crucial questions, which have occupied mankind since the earliest of times and which have been discussed by many renowned philosophers. The best known of these philosophers is certainly IMMANUEL KANT (1724 - 1804) and his three famous fundamental questions:

- What can I know?
- What am I to do?
- What may I hope for?

Our subject is situated within the area of the second question: What am I to do with my knowledge? How am I to behave concerning my knowledge? Since Kant, during the last two hundred years, the world has changed enormously. Subsequent philosophers took up and further developed KANT's thoughts or contradicted them. I find it interesting that one still tries to come to terms with these same questions – like in this Seminar too. Obviously the *questions* are more outlasting and more valid over the long-term than the *answers* to them...

Does it all make sense?

Sense of responsibility – it does not provide pleasure, wealth or power. Totally the opposite applies: Innumerable examples from ancient and recent history and current times show that not the sense of responsibility, but ruthlessness, corruption and lies have led and lead many politicians and industrial leaders to the top. The so-called "responsible" commander of a butchering and violating troop becomes a repressive and aggressive head of state. A religious freedom hero liberates people from colonialism, only to then suppress them and drive them into economical disaster due to lust for power. Top managers and boards of directors receive millions, although in their company hundreds and thousands of workers are being made redundant or the company itself goes into bankruptcy. It is not the sense of responsibility, but "creative accountancy", monopolistic price-fixing arrangements and broken promises which accompany a negligent endangerment to mankind and the environment. To name a single and impacting (and naturally very complex) example in particular: Argentina, the "silver country", was until some decades ago the fifth-richest country in the world. We hear, read and see, what this country looks like now (June 2002). This disastrous development is obviously still continuing. According to available figures, an average of 3500 people in this country are becoming impoverished each day and unemployment is at an approximate level of 25%. An estimated 20% of the children are malnourished, and 10% of the population have no longer sufficient funds to buy their daily food – in a country, which still exports large quantities of grain and meat. Is knowledge being responsibly handled? What is the action of the influential people who should be role models? On listening to the news and

considering the world situation, one could really doubt and despair... Does it make sense at all to think about it?

Two exemplary examples:

1) Ocean fish stocks are being exhausted, even with knowledge of the consequences.

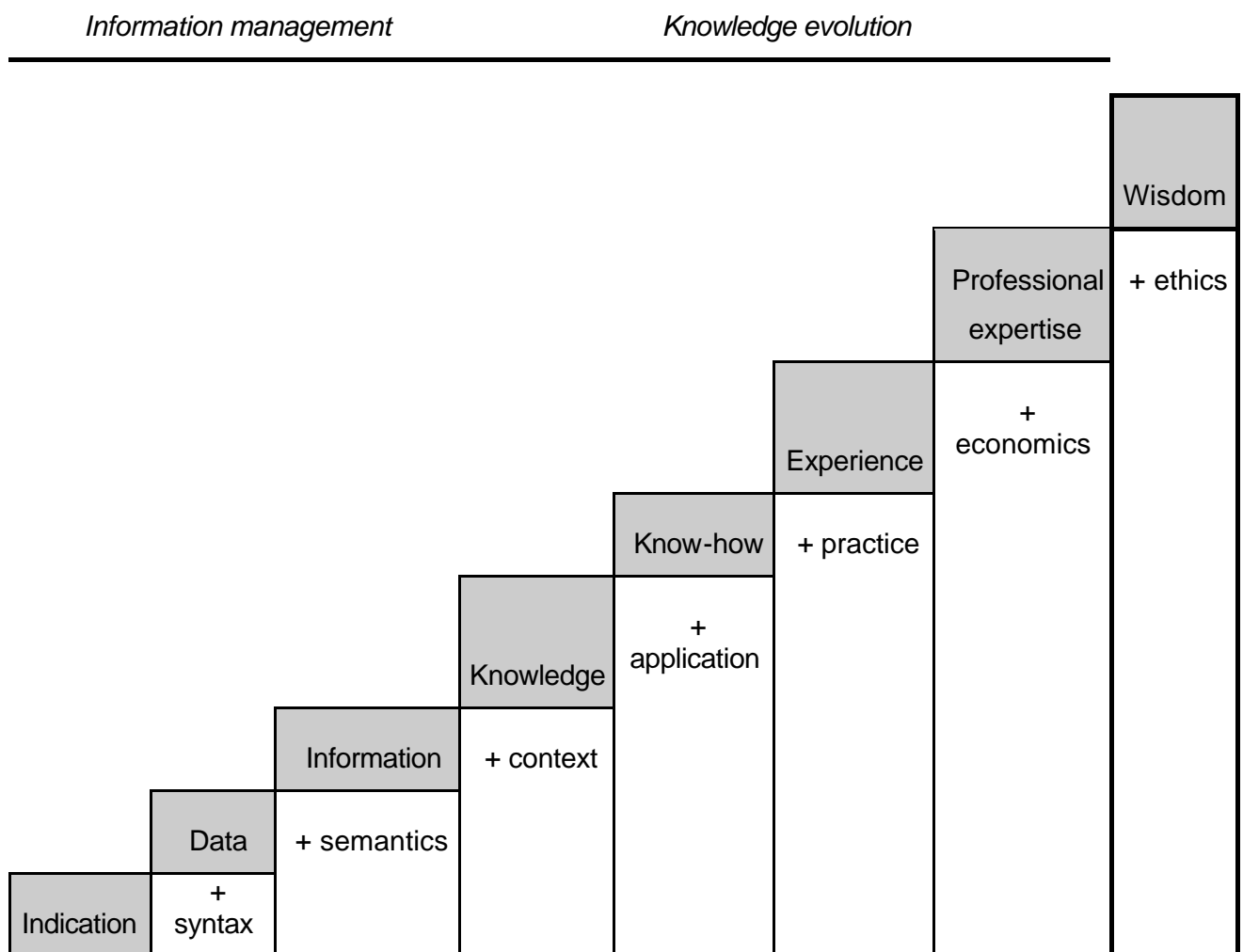
Scientists, politicians and environmental protection organisations agree that the fishing industry is threatened with worldwide collapse. It is known that new catching techniques (themselves developed due to knowledge) have led to a "dramatically excessive use" (quotation, EU-agricultural commissioner Franz Fischler) of the worldwide fishing grounds. Moreover, it is also known that if current fishing practices continue, there will be nothing left to catch in approximately ten years time. Naturally, the same is applicable here too: The problem is extremely multi-layered and complex. Does it, however, interest the fish or the large-scale enterprises and multinational companies, which have more-or-less displaced independent fishermen and smaller businesses since a long time. Those who are supposed to be responsible in these companies are only interested in their current profits. One has the impression that everyone thinks about themselves and about their money, and indeed about nothing else. A few years ago in Norway we saw a large, modern fish processing installation, which was only five years old, standing quiet and empty. There is nothing left there to process, because people have exhausted the fishing ground. You must be made aware that the problem and the elementary connections were both known. The necessary knowledge concerning catching methods and the consequences of these catching methods being applied were well known. Nevertheless, excessive fishing continued – up to the bitter end. Knowledge alone is insufficient, and mishandling of knowledge can lead to ruin.

2) "To adapt to the inevitable" instead of acting responsibly

"A US Government study confirms that the climatic change could have catastrophic consequences, also in the USA. Nevertheless, Washington does not wish to take counter measures, but only wants to 'adapt to the inevitable'. (...) The main reason for the negative development is said to be human activities, in particular the consumption of fossil fuels. One should think that nowadays this is part of the standard knowledge of every secondary school pupil, but the U.S. Climate Action Report 2002 represents fresh evidence. In it for the first time, the US Government agrees with the worldwide-accepted realisations of climatic research, which Washington had rejected so far as being imprecise, doubtful or scientifically disputed. The environmental protection authority even concedes that the climatic change will mainly have negative consequences and will destroy things, which can only be replaceable at huge expense or are irreplaceable." (Daily Newspaper <Der Bund>, 5 June 2002, page 3). Those responsible in the Super Power USA know about the enormous problems and about the catastrophic consequences of certain behaviours. Moreover, without any doubt, they know what could be done and what must be carried out immediately without fail. They do not take any action, because as a consequence own behaviours would have to change. Different priorities would have to be set. One would at last have to deal responsibly with knowledge.

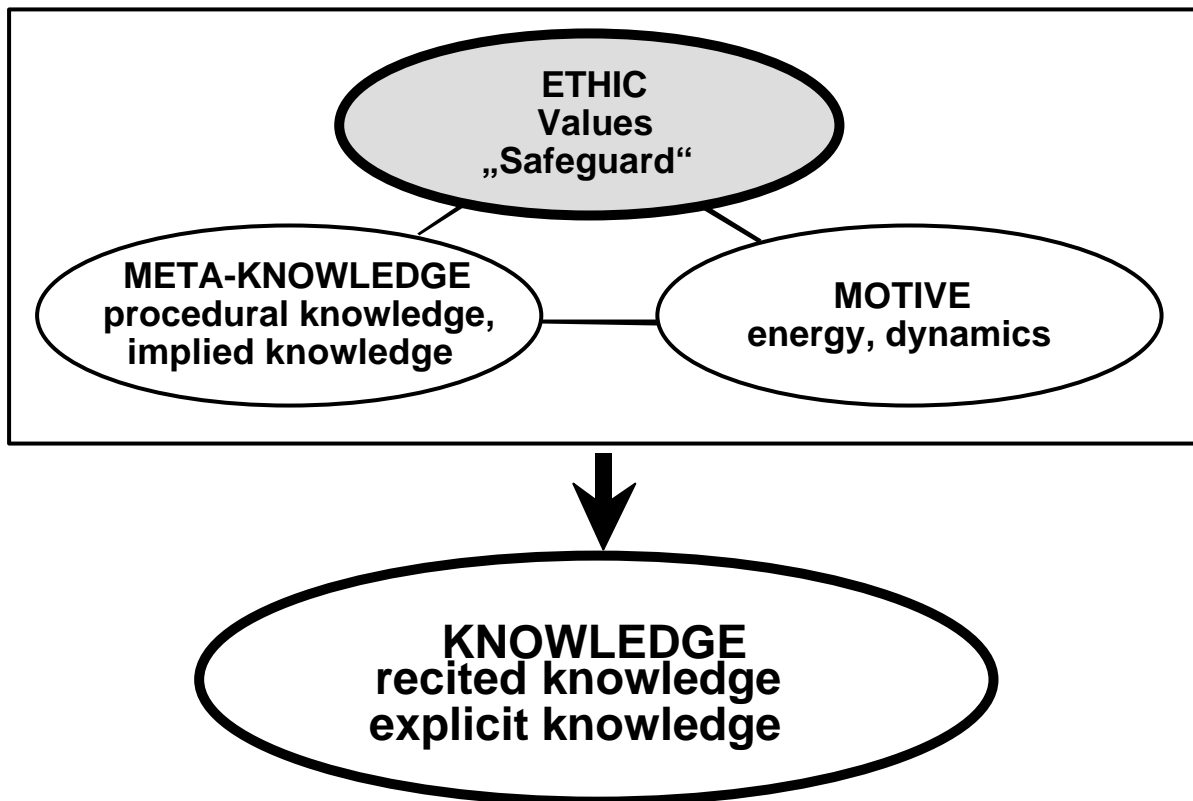
From information through knowledge to wisdom

There are different kinds and categories of "knowledge". In the above examples it is information, numbers, facts and reports, which describe a certain condition or a situation. In addition to this *recited* knowledge there is need for a superior knowledge (a Meta knowledge) if the recited knowledge is to be applied. This *procedural* knowledge enables us to apply our knowledge in certain situations and under certain conditions. (There is also a so-called inert knowledge, where something is known but this knowledge does not become effective action.) AUER (2002) shows a step-like structure of the "knowledge evolution", represented by his "knowledge stairs". However, he stops at the professional expertise step – and as a consequence, the step that is decisive for our subject, is missing. In addition to information, knowledge and know-how, experience and professional expertise, there must be an *ethical dimension* if we are speaking of responsible handling of knowledge. I would name this step a form of wisdom: an ethically based, responsible behaviour.

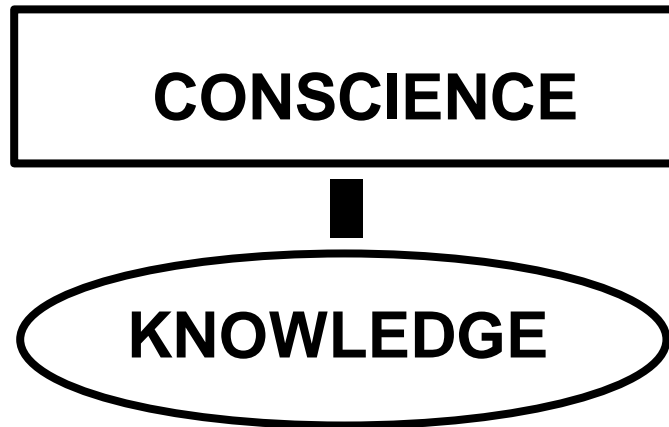


Knowledge alone is static, dry, ineffective and "inert". Therefore, other factors are of crucial importance in relation and connection to knowledge. On one hand there is the superior Meta knowledge, which "knowingly" regulates the application of knowledge, comprising economic aspects (profit, efficiency and effectiveness etc.) or didactics (knowledge concerning knowledge transfer in class). On the other hand, I would include all that moves knowledge "into motion", allowing knowledge to become full of energy, alive, effective and dynamic. These are the motives / reasons for our behaviour, our action and inaction. A further step above is the area, which is at the centre of our subject, i.e. the ethically based values, which

should function like a safeguard. Decisive, permitting or preventative behaviour control should occur here.



The language demonstrates the connection: In German, WISSEN (knowledge) and GEWISSEN (conscience) are very closely related (French and English *science – conscience*; whereby there is an additional special aspect: In both languages, the adjective *conscient / conscious* means "consciously", the origin of which, however, refers to "relating-to-conscience, conscience-awareness" or simply, conscious). In addition to nuclear knowledge, there must be a nuclear conscience. In other words, in addition to the knowledge on nuclear fission (or about fishing methods or the burning of fossil fuels in an engine), there must be conscious handling of nuclear fission, fishing methods or combustion engines. The continuous development of knowledge within all spheres really demands a parallel development of conscience within these areas. The knowledge acquired by mankind to date in the areas of medicine, physics, biochemistry and biotechnology or more tangible areas, such as road construction, weapons technology, agriculture, has had the potential since a long time to substantially influence, affect, damage or destroy, not only individual fields or forests, certain landscapes or countries but continents, oceans and the entire biosphere. In principle, conscience should be the actual safeguard in preventing this.



In many situations dogs possess a natural inhibition to biting, for example, to puppies or to people who have good intentions towards them. Such an "inhibition" or a conscious control of action should determine our behaviour, if our wish is not to be more "animal-like" than animals... (From this viewpoint, is it really correct that the term >animal-like< is devaluating and negative and >humane< implies good and positive?)

This understanding should lead mankind to a comprehensive and general *consciousness* regarding responsibility, and to substitute natural inhibitions, healthy instincts vital for survival and *feelings* of responsibility, which have to some degree been lost and / or covered by science (*Homo sapiens!*).

Knowledge - freedom - responsibility

To take over and carry responsibility demands for knowledge concerning our actions and inactions and resulting consequences, as well as the freedom to say >yes< or >no< to particular actions or inactions. Persons who do not know the resulting consequences of their actions or inactions cannot carry responsibility for their behaviour. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke, Chapter 23, Verse 34). Jesus was subjected to the worst possible tortures and was crucified. Despite this, he asked for forgiveness to be given to his torturers, because they neither knew what they were doing nor who he was. Those who know and do not adjust their behaviour accordingly will not be forgiven.

Responsibility must not remain an empty phrase

The term "responsible" is too general and non-committal, and is, therefore, misused and misconstrued. It must be more clearly, distinctly and piercingly defined. I would like to formulate the following visualisation in the shape of a proposition (and hopefully initiate thought):

- **Responsibility signifies: "to be accountable"**

From its word origin, "responsibility" means that we must give account to someone. This someone or this "other" is not just another person. He is not identical to us and he/it is totally and ultimately incorruptible. It is a court of justice superior to individual persons and is independent from them; on the other hand mankind depends on it.

- **Responsibility signifies: Solidarity**

Currently, "responsibility" must also mean "solidarity", and not selfishness and egoism, but solidarity in handling knowledge. Knowledge must not only lead to profit for the privileged that are in possession of knowledge, but must be beneficial to the well being of every individual. Non-solidarity in the handling of knowledge leads to intensifying the contrasts between rich and poor, those possessing and not possessing materials and the overfed and starving. Such intensification can reach worldwide dimensions and lead to a global disaster.

"Humanity does not inhabit this planet, but human beings. The majority is the law of the earth." (HANNAH ARENDT: On the life of the spirit)

The commandment is age-old and reads: "You are to love your neighbour like yourself." (Leviticus, Chapter 19, Verse 18; Matthew, Chapter 22, Verse 39).

- **Responsibility signifies: Respect**

"Responsibility" includes "respectfulness" and not being ruthless in the handling of knowledge (also in refusing the desire to know and turning a blind eye). It involves respecting other persons, animals and plants, the fertile soil, the water etc. and respecting all that is alive, the whole of creation (or whatever your expression is for this). (The word "respect" stems from Latin "re-spicere" / to look back, to be considerate; in the German language, equivalent terms are for example, Ehrfucht, Achtung.

- **Responsibility signifies: Humbleness**

"Responsibility" also means "humble". Today the term "humble" is hardly ever used anymore. One does not necessarily get to the top through being humble and being humble does not earn large sums of money. Responsible handling of knowledge should lead to a cessation in the desire for "more and more" (at the expense of others or at the expense of nature), and to us taking seriously the knowledge concerning the vital meaning of the dynamic, living equilibrium. This signifies that we must restrict and limit ourselves. If we do not want to deprive ourselves medium- to long-term of the basis on which we both live and are dependent, then we have no other choice. (The corresponding metamorphoses: "one saws off the tree branch, on which one sits.")

- **Responsibility signifies: Love**

"Responsibility" also means affection. This concept is very far reaching and has many different aspects. Nevertheless, we all know of the strength and the vital significance of love. Responsibility, therefore, must be shaped by love. AUGUSTINUS (354 - 430) wrote a sentence to which I have often given much and lengthy thought: "DILIGE ET FAC QUOD VIS / Love and do what you want (Ref. epistulam Joannis VII, 8). In this case, "dilige" does not mean blind love, but rather a rated, decisive, known and conscientious love. I am of the opinion that an in-depth discussion on this thought could be worthwhile.

These last thoughts have led us to definitions and areas outside being "reasonable" and rational - I know this. We also know, however, that reason and knowledge alone are insufficient. Despite our intelligence, mankind acts unreasonably and against better judgement. It, therefore, needs more. It needs people in crucial positions and places that handle their knowledge respectfully and with a sense of responsibility.

GR

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Juerg Schuepbach

School education and basic teacher training in the Canton Bern (Switzerland). Studied educational psychology, educational theory, general didactics and German philosophy at the University of Bern and in 1980 graduated as teacher and expert in education and educational science. Lecturer in general didactics, educational psychology and practical occupational studies, initially at the National Teacher Training College, Bern (basic training of primary education teachers). Employed at the University of Bern since 1980 (basic training of teachers for the secondary school levels 1 and 2); cooperation in further education for college lecturers in the subjects of didactics and educational psychology.
