



Journey from Knowledge to Entrustment for Innovative Education in 21st Century Bhutan

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Every generation is a trustee of the collective wisdom of preceding generations, even as it seeks to discover ever newer frontiers of knowledge and challenge the limits of human curiosity against the infinite possibilities of the universe that beckon the seeker and the dreamer. The progress of humanity is, thus, a function of the creative interplay between the gift and goodwill of our predecessors in diverse fields of human endeavour and the fruit of innovation and enterprise offered by the inquisitive genius of our successors. The quality and integrity of the relationship between the legacy of time-tested wisdom traditions and the contributions of novel experiments, explorations, inventions, and discoveries will determine the success and sustainability of the human race against the backdrop of active social, scientific, philosophical, ethical, and planetary boundaries.

The founding of societies, raising of families, building of nations, launch of satellites, floating of ocean-liners, conventions of signs and symbols, agreement on weights and measures, as indeed the setting up of the United Nations Organisation and signing of international agreements, for instance, are all a tribute to the marvels of human genius and symbols of goodwill and trust. The Code of Zhabdrung, the Genja of 1907, launch of development plans, introduction of internet and television, proclamation of democracy and the building of GMC are among the most consequential actions built on trust.

“Knowledge has to be taken with a pinch of the proverbial salt! We may have Faustian science and Faustian technology, but could merrily miss the Faustian music.”

The farsighted monarchs of Bhutan have been our best educators and bold reformers, guiding a deeply inward-looking, reclusive country out of the shadows of self-chosen isolation and equipping it with the requisite wherewithal of a dynamic, modern nation-state prepared to play its role as an important member of the global community of nations. The introduction of a modern, western-style English medium education system, setting up of schools and institutions across the country from extended classrooms to universities and providing free education to all children and youth from pre-primary to higher education levels, at home and beyond,

has been a true index of the royal affirmation of the power of knowledge and a mark of infinite trust.

Affirmation, entrustment, and wise counsel have been the hallmark of our sovereigns’ relationship with their citizens throughout their reigns. A royal message from His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck on the occasion of Sherubtse’s Silver Jubilee celebration in 1993, to cite an example, speaks directly to the youth:

The destiny of our country lies in the hands of our younger generation, and as the cream of our youth, the students of Sherubtse College must play a progressive role and shoulder the responsibility of shaping the destiny of our country. I place my full faith in all of you and have the highest expectations that each and every one of you will serve your country with love, loyalty and dedication.

With full knowledge of the pitfalls attendant upon the introduction of the internet in 1999, as indeed the system of democracy in 2008, Drukgyal Zhip still trusted His citizens to exercise wisdom and choose well. Bhutanese children and youth have the benefit of being educated at state cost for extended periods of time to enable them to acquire knowledge in various fields at home and abroad. The knowledge of science and mathematics, humanities and social studies, IT and AI, sports and music, commerce and business, among a vast array of subjects, is with us. And, the gains to the society have been clearly visible as the proud products of the country’s efforts have been at the forefront of nation-building at all levels. Bhutan is now largely a knowledge-society.

But, knowledge has to be taken with a pinch of the proverbial salt! We may have Faustian science and Faustian technology, but could merrily miss the Faustian music. We need to be mindful of some of the misdirections of contemporary education. Well-known author and educator, Parker Palmer (1998) points out what he calls the paradoxes in modern education: separation of head from heart, facts from feelings, theory from practice, and teaching from learning. I add: undue emphasis on sharpening of brains and skills and neglect of the need to build faith and character, heightened focus on competition over cooperation, and the un-nerving gap between the amount of information and knowledge vis-à-vis the depth of insight and wisdom which together constitute what may be called the seven blunders of modern education!

We are familiar with Ronald Dore's unsettling warning in his well-known book "The Diploma Disease" (1997) that highlights our obsession with qualification over competency, while Powdyel (2014) hazards the concept of Diplomania to express his anguish over the preponderance of certificates and credentials, degrees and diplomas that do not always measure up to the expected level of proficiency and depth.

These concerns explain why it is important to emphasise the need for integrity in academic pursuits and research outputs. Reinforcing a vital, often ignored, mission of education, Richhart (2002) provides a compelling rationale for cultivating intellectual character – "the overarching conglomeration of habits of mind, patterns of thought, and general dispositions toward thinking that not only direct but also motivate one's thinking-oriented pursuits" in his seminal work of that name. This is a valid reason for institutions of learning to come into being.

There is more! Vandana Shiva (2022) argues that "Education for life has to cultivate our real intelligence which co-creates with the intelligence of other beings and the Earth. Nature becomes our teacher and through Nature, we learn how to cultivate living intelligence, ecological intelligence, co-operative intelligence, compassionate intelligence, and emotional intelligence". This framework recalls Powdyel's eight levels of consciousness as represented in The Sherig Mandala (2014).

The hallowed tradition of higher education and research is built on the essential match between the integrity of the objective world and the steady standard of the subjective ideal. Therefore, credentials and their referents ought to harmonise to support research and learning to be purposeful and worthwhile.

I commend the excellent efforts made by the contributors to this edition of the Bhutan Insights Journal to address some of the consequential gaps in the selected fields of their investigation. For aspiring researchers, I urge them to examine their themes through the well-known Socratic Sieves: Is it true? Is it good? Is it necessary?

With the onslaught of mass media and the relentless call for pragmatism, Bhutan's education system will do well to remain faithful to the country's unique integral self even as we navigate the challenges unleashed by the likes of AI and allied developments. A golden mean ought to be the goal.

On a deeply personal level, I am still under the magical spell of the most powerful expression of entrustment addressed directly to me and my fellow-parliamentarians with extraordinary clarity and regal profundity. It was May 10, 2008, the inaugural day of the historic First Session of the First Parliament of Bhutan. His Majesty Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck addressed the Parliament and made the most poignant and historic proclamation to mark the country's new journey:

...from this day forth, we place in your hands our unique nation, our greatest treasure in this world...

This is supreme entrustment unprecedented in history and addressed not only to the law-makers gathered in the august Gyalyong Tshokhang but to all Bhutanese citizens, lay and learned, present and future, sovereign to citizens, at home and

beyond in faith and hope.

May we all be worthy of this sacred trust...

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