



# Knowledge, skills and beliefs

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*'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'*  
T.S. Eliot, from 'Choruses from the Rock'

The Dutch Department of Foreign Affairs' knowledge policy proposal has provoked a number of valuable reactions. Some responses target the government's broader knowledge policy or the proposed knowledge platforms, whereas others zoom in on a specific topic such as what kind of knowledge should be developed and applied. In this short reaction I'd like to make a few remarks on different types of knowledge and the importance of the person dealing with knowledge.

### Three approaches

There are three approaches to knowledge and knowledge transfer. The first is a positivistic understanding of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. This approach sees knowledge as a set of established facts, theories and insights that one can find in textbooks, encyclopaedias and other academic publications. This 'body of knowledge' is taught to students who will work with it in their profession and add to it in further scientific research. This could be called the instructivist approach to knowledge.

This approach is still being used in some educational systems around the world, including in many 'developing countries'. It has its benefits. People need to have some basic knowledge of a field to be able to discuss issues in that field and work on expanding that particular body of knowledge. Policy making in development cooperation needs to be based as much as possible on correct data – which, admittedly, is a problematic term. Various types of (scientific) research are needed to reach such an informed understanding of specific situations in countries.

One very important question raised by this approach is the issue of implementing available knowledge. It is obvious that in many countries – as much in the Netherlands as elsewhere – there is a lot of 'available' knowledge that is not being used. What can be done to rectify this? This leads us to the second approach.

### Competences

The second, the constructivist approach, is related to social constructivism. This has found expression in competence-based learning. This approach views knowledge as something based on experience rather than on cognition. Knowledge is considered a construction of the individual learner, as opposed to the idea that people memorize a body of established data. Here, knowledge is acquired through project learning, problem-solving methods, and agological skills in dealing with peers and professionals. Students are actors of their own learning process, and the educational model resembles an apprenticeship in which the novice learns knowledge, skills and attitudes as part of a community rather than receiving only theoretical instruction.

This approach believes there is useful knowledge embodied in a variety of social practices, for example in professions or crafts. This type of knowledge is rarely formalized – rather, it is tacitly acquired by new participants in a given field; knowledge, as it were, that is embodied in performing in a particular field.

Think, for example, of the work done by farmers and pastoralists in developing countries. Careful study of this work can identify the tacit knowledge being acquired by practitioners and formalize it. This makes it easier to understand the rationale of those practitioners and also helps agricultural specialists to enter into dialogue with them to discuss what they are doing and how their work can be improved or changed because of changing circumstances. This kind of dialogue, based on equality and respect, can yield new insights in agronomy, for example, which can be integrated into farmers' and pastoralists' work. This leads us to the third approach to knowledge, which can be called the reflectivist approach.

### **Reflection**

The root of this approach is in the old European concept of 'Bildung', or self-cultivation, which sought the integral education of people. In this view, professionalism is not just a matter of knowledge and skills but of cultivating character. As such, acquired knowledge and skills are harmonized to create a virtuous personality, and this knowledge and these skills would be used responsibly and for the common good. This approach views knowledge not just as a matter of cognition or experience. Rather, it stresses that it is a person who is acquiring knowledge, and that the whole of the person is an integral part of that process.

Today, this approach can be seen in educational practices that focus primarily on reflection, such as the act of supervision or peer-review sessions. In this context, I would like to draw attention to reflection in the form of triple-loop learning.

The first loop entails reflecting on how we do things: are we doing them well? This kind of reflection has become common in many professional practices. It is meant to help professionals become aware of what they have been doing in certain situations, share that with colleagues, get feedback and reflect on it together.

The second loop entails reflecting on what we are doing: are we doing the right things? The fact that we meet all the standards in the things we do does not guarantee that we are doing the right things. To answer this question we need to consider the context in which we work and who we are working with. For example, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy's report, *Less pretension, more ambition*, rightly argues that all development cooperation needs to be context specific.

The third loop asks the question: what are my criteria for evaluating whether I am doing my work in an effective way? In the first two loops, the basic values and beliefs that serve as standards are presupposed and silently accepted or adapted to become norms. This reflection does not require supervisors and participants to draw on their personal motivations and beliefs. However, if we want to understand why people do their work the way they are doing it, our reflection needs to address precisely these questions. Deep reflection means reflecting on the normative beliefs and stances that often are taken for granted during the first loop of reflection.

A real integration of this knowledge can only occur when these more personal, spiritual beliefs can be expressed and discussed with respect to the consequences for the practice, and when those beliefs can be linked to new insights and knowledge put forward by experts. In other words, in the context of development cooperation, there needs to be a place for interacting with the people with whom we are working.

Knowledge needs to be put into the broader context of both individual self-understanding and an understanding of the world if it is to become effective in a socially and ethically responsible way. This need not always be done in formal reflection sessions; situations differ, and so will the ways in which this kind of reflection is achieved. But these moments of reflection are essential in our effort to change the world for the better. Reflection sessions with policy makers and experts in donor countries may also reveal that lack of knowledge is not the only and maybe not even the major problem in development – as important and helpful as adequate knowledge may be. This will undoubtedly lead to better insight into the role our own value systems play in international cooperation and development.

For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' knowledge management policy these considerations advocate focusing on the processes through which knowledge can become a fruitful tool for the positive development of societies marked by poverty and inequality.