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Preparing Learners for a Knowledge Society

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How do we educate people for a Knowledge Society – a society that depends on the continual creation of a new knowledge? Education systems everywhere are trying to answer this question. In most of North America, the answer involves boosting standards and content requirements. In Japan and Singapore, by contrast, it has meant reducing content requirements in order to free up time for inquiry. The truth is, no one really knows how to educate people to be knowledge producers, but one approach is showing promise. It's called "knowledge building". It originated in Canada, but is now being pursued by innovative educators in more than a dozen countries.

Knowledge building is simply producing knowledge of value to others and working continually to improve it. It already goes on in knowledge-based businesses, in research laboratories, and in the more progressive professions. It is a novelty in education before graduate school level, but we have seen impressive examples of knowledge building in children as early as grade 1. If continued across the elementary school grades, it becomes what Peter Drucker said innovation should be in the Knowledge Age – "part and parcel of the ordinary…"

Students enter school with naive ideas about how the world works, and many leave school – even university – with those naive ideas intact. In knowledge building the name of the game is idea improvement. Students collaborate to produce new understandings, analyze and criticize, experiment and consult authoritative sources. They build coherent scientific explanations, historical accounts, literary interpretations, and so on. In the process they learn subject matter and they improve their reading and quantitative skills; but above all they learn to be active contributors to a Knowledge Society by actually living the lives of creative knowledge workers.

Knowledge building requires a distinctive technology that keeps ideas at the centre and helps improve them without micromanaging the process. Knowledge Forum®, developed at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, does just that. It is used successfully in knowledge building at every level, from kindergarten to

graduate school and professional knowledge work, as a knowledge management tool, as a distance education forum, and as an e-learning environment. This is no accident. Knowledge Forum grows out of research on learning and expertise spanning that whole range.

"Learning to learn" and "learning to think" are much in the wind these days, but effort to teach them directly have had limited success and produce skills that fail to transfer to new situations. Knowledge building offers a new perspective on learning to learn and think. Grade 5 students in one knowledge building classroom were asked how they would know when they have learned.

One girl responded:

> *"I think that I can tell if I've learned something when I'm able to form substantial theories that seem to fit in with the information that I've already got; so it's not necessarily that I have everything, that I have all the information, but that I'm able to piece things in that make sense and then to form theories on the questions that would all fit together."*

That's what we would call a Knowledge Age answer. We have shown that quotation to university instructors whose reaction is that they wish their students could think at that level!