

Reflection on Wisdom that Responds to Market Logic of David G. Smith

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Introduction

This paper illustrates the tension between market logic vs. wisdom, written about by David G. Smith (2014) in “Wisdom responses to Globalization”. From Smith’s points of views, market logic turns students into clients and teachers into accountants and managers. With the market mindset, human values thus find themselves framed into an external surface where the activities of life are commoditized, or defined as sales and purchases, rather than residing in the inner world of self-awareness. Education vision has then been greatly reduced human experience to production that serves toward economic god. Smith suggests us, as educators, to refuse “cheaper way” of teaching and learning that market logic leads to. Meanwhile, Smith calls to consider the practice of wisdom in education as to nurture and sustain humane life in its most notable, and unified sense with the true nature of the world.

I find that Smith’s article of “Wisdom responses to Globalization” is fascinating as it speaks to crisis in today’s pedagogy and opens to new possibilities of self-understanding and finding oneself at “home” or truth in the world. As a person who lived/learned/engaged in a mixed traditional wisdom of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, of which Smith discusses about, I find myself understand Smith’s implication deeply as well as be able to interpret and extend Smith’s insights with clarity. Against this background, I am framing this paper as a comparison to craft the opposition between *market logic* and *wisdom* that is evident in Smith’s work. I will focus on three central themes: 1) *identity vs. self*; 2) *the object vs. the objectless*; 3) *success in society vs. attunement with nature*. I will then bring the discussions to education and curriculum inquiry for a more relevance view. I will also include my personal thoughts about the needs of balancing internal life and external life so as to develop Smith’s arguments further in the field of curriculum studies.

Wisdom responds to Market Logic

Intuitively, market logic and ancient wisdom both appear to present three basic principles of *self-knowing*, *human resources* and *fulfilment of human aspiration*. However, they hold up these notions to incompatible degrees and for apparently irreconcilable reasons.

Identity vs. Self

According to Smith, market logic formulates identity as outward-oriented, whereas wisdom cultivates self-realizing in our inner world. In this condition, identity



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serves toward knowledge-economy, while the Self dwells in a more-holistic reality. The following advance more detailed illustrations of Smith's arguments.

Market Logic formulates identity:

Relating to his professional life, Smith criticizes an educational system, which "has inspired a certain crisis of identity, since having something to *profess*" (p. 48) is superfluous. Smith states that instead of making essential difference to the "I" that knows, the system encourages the formation of an 'I' that simply needs to keep in track with some predetermined criteria in order to achieve a predetermined self-identity. In this way, Smith sees *self-identity* as an "end" or *goal* that stands apart from a knower. Smith then argues that "preoccupations with goal-setting and objectives are not ill-advised in themselves but quickly become so if they evolve into blinkered constraints against fullness of life's beckoning" (p. 56).

Smith also points out that the identity then fixes itself into an external surface as some sort of public face. In order to fashion identity in a knowledge economy, one puts up a front as a seemingly "tough, self-interested, competitive and paranoid person" in public; while one might be "gentle, sweet, and supportive" at home or in the classroom (p. 46). The author considers market logic as a setting that creates new forms of behavioral conflicts or dichotomous understanding of the world. Market logic tends to move people to act in the world that separates from the 'I'. Smith points out that "Western tradition's self- definition is nothing but a grand illusion" (p. 49). Smith then suggests presenting a truer sense of self based on ancient wisdom.

Wisdom cultivates self-realizing:

Smith indicates that different traditional wisdoms have different expressions or ways to convey the real sense of self. However, they all point to commonalities. In Hinduism, the self is referred-to as 'Brahma' or Ultimate Consciousness. Besides, Smith refers to the Greek concept of *nous*, or "knowledge of God", as the highest of all intellectual human faculties. It follows that wisdom means "naming the wisdom of God" (p. 54). Therefore, in simple words, I would translate 'God'² as the universal Self. In Eastern traditions, there is no name for 'God', but we see references to Existence, Truth, Consciousness, Tao or "*the Way*", Essence, Transcendence and so on. In my opinion, these 'terms' are not at all different in meaning.

Smith states that the concept of ego or identity is the highest problematic hindrance to the self-realization. As Smith puts it, the awareness of our true nature of self is "possible only to the degree that each of us has relinquished our I" (p. 49). This is akin to a Buddhist perspective where the notion of ego refers to "the illusory belief in a solid, concrete separate entity, that is independent and disconnected" (Moacanin, 2003, p. 84). Relating to identity, ancient wisdom suggests a detached approach to the temporary as commonly defined by society. Rather, we should open to the possibility of a truer sense of self within the ever-lasting. Therefore, Smith tells us, it is wiser not to bind ourselves to ego and identity.

Reflection on Identity vs. self:

In line with Smith's discussion, I see that 'identity' somehow refers to an individual or a single sense of entity, whereas the 'self' relates to the quality of the wholeness. Much different from 'identity' that is built up in public place, the 'self' is purely an essential human being within existence. As such, while 'identity' relies on other people to find its role, the 'self' has no separation between 'I' and 'the other'; but, instead, 'I' and 'the other' are inter-connected as the "We". In this relationship,



‘identity’ is synonymous to *I – It and* subject-object; while the ‘self’ is more like *I-Thou*, subject-to-subject as represented by Martin Buber (1958).

Heidegger (1962) considers identity as “they-self” which is inauthentic. The “they-self” is influenced by the crowd rather than its own unique characteristic. When directing one’s identity as an external existence, people lose their individuality and become more dependent on others. Marx (1992) indicates that “by thus acting on the external world and changing it, he [the human] at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway” (p. 198). In this way, human beings gradually lose control of their lives. Echoing with Smith, Aoki (1987/2005) advises us not to reduce ourselves to merely identity as it restrains our possibilities for experiencing a fuller life.

Ancient wisdom implies our comprehension of what intellectuality is most worth in curriculum inquiry. Phelan (2015) states “insight always involves some self-knowledge; it is something we come to as human beings” (p. 25). Subjectively, it is ultimate to bring about the question of *who we really are* at the very core of curriculum studies. Jardine (1997) notes “the self is here at the home-ground of all things. This must be a standpoint where one sees one’s own self in all things” (p. 221). By locating ourselves in situation “as a group”, we could then recover ourselves wholly, deeply and “awake from the nightmare we are living” (Pinar, 2004, p. 5). In such way, curriculum studies with self-understanding gains its meaning for the fulfillment of human existence (Sartre, 1973).

The object vs. the objectless

In contrast to market logic, which encourages a living framed in material objects, the wisdom in Eastern traditions relates to objectless-ness or nothingness as this is the origin of the expressed world. Smith says that, whereas the market mindset is distracting in the sense of ‘destroying’ human life-awareness, traditional wisdom is embedded into a nurturing manifestation of life.

Market Logic thirsts material objects

As stated by Smith, market logic in the Western tradition follows “material practices rather than more elevated work that involves mind and spirit” (p. 47). Smith sees, profit taking and wealth accumulation as the very heart of Western capitalism. When “economic determination is deferred as god”, everything becomes the object for sale (Smith, p. 47). Through the lens of capitalism, people have no relationship with humanity and a sense of a dedicated existence; but, instead, are seen as mere *means* of production that serves an economic god. Smith tells us that within the promise of the economic paradigm, children are “invested” for future economy; education is transformed into an industrialized knowledge enterprise; and human values become subservient to one’s own material wealth.

Smith notes that the market logic operates by creating disturbance to people’s psychology as a crucial “requirement for product innovation and production” (p. 51). With this intention, market logic finds ways to keep people continuously dissatisfied with their lives, and in search for promised ephemeral fulfillments with “either a romantic love-object or a brute object that requires domestication, exploitation, or both” (Smith, p. 57). As such, human values are formed on external layers where the activities of life are commoditized, or defined as sales and purchases. In concord with McMurtry (2002), Smith states that with the desire and greed to possess more, people become victims of the market logic, as people destroy life to gain it and lose touch of the real world.



Accordingly, Smith recommends reflecting on ancient wisdom traditions as they “could be made to speak directly to the practice of education in today’s secular, materialist and technocratic environment” (p. 45).

Wisdom is objectless:

Ancient wisdom advises us not to fix ourselves to the surface form of object. In a Buddhist perspective, there is no concept of prayer or ‘God’. It is said that “if you meet Buddha, kill him” (Smith, p. 50). The reason is that the teachings of the Buddha take away the overall possibility of a spiritual object segregated from the self. The Buddha also regards ego as an illusion because it is entirely made up by mind. When there is nothing to cling to, one has nothing left to stand on but self’s existence. This is the state that Smith features as “losing oneself in the fullness of Being” (p. 51). Smith then states “Being” is the “source of nourishment” from which we all arise; and that when we become forgetful of Being, the ensuing states could lead to ignorance and darkness of people.

In Eastern Yoga, the object is mobility³ and the objectless is the possibility of mobility. It is said that all possibility is hidden in the objectless or nothingness. For example, if we break a seed, we will see nothing like a “plant” in its center. Still, that nothingness contains the possibility for the seed to become a beautiful plant; a beautiful and fragrant flower; and then a delicious fruit. Smith explains that “emptiness does not mean void or vacuum, but indeed full potentiality, the certainties of Western science notwithstanding” (p. 51). In the *Tao Te Ching*, Laotzu also values objectless-ness or nothingness:

The usefulness of the vessel lies in the space where there is nothing.
A room is created by cutting out doors and windows; the usefulness of the room lies in the space where there is nothing.
Therefore, the benefit of things lies in the usefulness of nothing. (Kimura, 2004, p.33)

Reflection on the object vs. the objectless

Within market logic, human resources are greatly reduced to the pursuit of material objects. In this way, the market logic does not foster human resources but, instead, leads to block and exploit humankind. According to Aoki (1987/2005), people that are transformed into “*thing beings*” or means of productivity for a market-oriented existence, are no longer human. The only humane approach regards students as “*being*” in the present, and “*becoming*” into the world of possibilities (p. 358). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (2000) also argues that training students toward external, concrete objects such as material texts, objectives, technical design, standardized evaluation fragment the multi-dimensional experience of learning. So, instead of moving toward such *thingness*, the educational approach should cultivate students’ voices, ideas, insights, intellectual for better understanding human’s values.

The notion of the objectless is also another point for reflection. Eastern Yoga explains that nothingness is the “pure energy” that flows through all forms of life. When we only work with objects and leave out the objectless, it is like trying to understand the workings of a lightbulb while omitting the light inside the bulb. Describing the objectless as zero, Wang (2014) says:



Zero is more fundamental than one in symbolizing the unity of life; zero is difficult to speak about, we designate it as nothingness, yet, from nothingness, everything is born. (p. 166)

Thus, in order to preserve life, we need to be mindful of the objectless hidden beneath all forms of life. In this way, we see no difference between “our nothingness” and “other’s nothingness”. Bai (2006) mentions that the most-stubborn dogmatism is to view the reality that is “out there” objectively; the experience of objectless awareness can help remove separation of the subject and object (p. 19). I, thus, imagine an education that is more geared toward a meditative, peaceful and contemplative practice oriented toward genuine humanity and unity; rather than “a task” oriented toward material prospects.

Success in society vs. attunement with Nature

In direct opposition to the market logic, which strives to secure one’s interests in society, ancient wisdoms appeal to our sheltering within Nature with its rhythms and mysteries.

Market Logic aims for success in society:

Smith (2014) notices that the existential questions of capitalism are mainly focused on how to be rich; how to gain competitive advantage over others; how to maintain the benefits thus “earned”; and how to secure material resources before others. The Market logic acts as if society is split into discrete camps of losers and winners. People tend to think that “the losers can never be allowed to win” (Smith, p.47). With social Darwinist’s mindset that defines society as the survival of the strongest, the market logic operates while framed in hyper-competitive attitudes that lead to success in society. Smith calls this determination as “mental illness” and “a decayed worldview”.

The author is thus concerned with this sense of delusion or ignorance intent on narrowing people’s understanding to the point where they could not imagine life differently. As a result, they then let the market define life as framed on a sense of success. For that reason, the market and the media find their places in orienting people toward “successful images” that only serve to grow people’s desires. For example, Smith tells us that he received a magazine celebrating the “good life”, where people are seen in the finest clothes, having luxury cars, and enjoying splendid vacations. All of these are “put together as something to be desired by anyone who might wish to call themselves successful in life” (Smith, p. 53). Instead, Smith suggests that we embrace wisdom in its relation to nature as a source for pedagogical, social and cultural insights.

Wisdom means being in tune with nature:

Traditional wisdoms have different ways to inform our attunement with nature as the true sense of life. Smith figures that “to be natural means to ‘be born’, so in a sense every human being is part of nature” (p. 57). In a Buddhist perspective, being “born”⁴ is related to *wakefulness* or enlightenment. In Hinduism, human nature is understood in its unified sense, or a process of full recovery of “oneself in deeper unity with the essential nature of the world” (Smith, p. 51). This is the state whereby self-consciousness dissolves into an Ultimate Consciousness. The real sense of human life is then to become single self with the Divine Essence. Based on the story of Genesis, Smith also alludes to the nature of experience, where life is traced back to the origin of all things. Smith calls this nature of experience a “journey to return home”, or the “myth of eternal return” (p. 56).



Wisdom means cooperation with our inner nature⁵ and allowing life to flow *through*. According to Eastern Yoga, human beings shine in their original nature which is the constant evolution toward the Infinite. The more we identify ourselves as true nature, the more possibility for self-transformation towards a supreme beatitude. It is like a caterpillar becoming a pretty butterfly. Hence, a call to wisdom is the path or pilgrimage toward a “more comprehensively, more wholly, indeed holy, and more attuned to a deeper truth of things (Smith, p. 46). In other words, the call to wisdom is a natural attraction to the beautiful; the natural; the inner essence; the truest sense of life. Focusing on having nature as our guild, Rousseau (1911) says “fix your eye on nature, follow the path traced by her” (p. 14).

Reflection on success in society vs. attunement with nature:

The Market logic favors success so that it mostly reflects values of the ‘winners’ who best fit the ideals the market designs. This “fanatic value-set” bear life destructive effects as people structure themselves to successful models and misrepresent their meanings of life (McMurtry, 2002). In this way, people lose their sense of self-awareness in search of promised ephemeral fulfillment. When educational practice celebrates only successes, learners are spookily pushed to become participants in speedy races that are irrelevant to one’s pace, one’s dream and one’s life. Educational settings might then lead to suffocating oppression, and toward achievements rather than nurturing students and assisting them to ground their values in life.

It is also thought that market logic is infatuated with gaining more quantity, but less equity or quality. This could bring society to huge “risk”, as it fosters a strong sense of self-interest, greed and avarice for its own sake (Beck, 1992). Moreover, an education that solely engages activities that cater to the privileged excludes marginalized groups who have less opportunity to achieve success. This will lead to a widening of social-economic, cultural and educational gaps between the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities, those living in rural areas, those coming from different social backgrounds or ethnic minorities. In such market supremacy, education fail its role in building a more just, humane and sustainable world.

Eastern wisdom does not address the concepts of being successful. As a Zen proverb tells us “when spring comes, grass grows all by itself” (Watts, 1985). This means that one should find oneself within “Nature” first and foremost. Any attainment gained will happen naturally as a result; as part of the inner law of existence, but never become an ideal end for any effort. Relating to education, Egan (2007) argues that educating children with distinct ends in view is a shaping and narrowing way toward uniformity. This directs to demolish a sense of distinctiveness and uniqueness of each individual. Thus, Egan says, we must first understand “internal development processes”; and study the “nature of students’ development, learning, and motivation” (p. 6). This helps students develop their fullest potentials, imagination and creativity without pre-determined-end.

In closing

For me, Smith’s notions on how wisdom responds to market logic, lead onto interesting discussions that convey distinct themes between the outward and inward; the expressed and the hidden; and the mundane and the sacred. By grounding ourselves solely in material world, we gradually lose our sensitivity with the existence and mysteries of life. The article leaves a significant message for educators to contemplate the voice of wisdom regarding self-knowledge, the nature of human beings and deeper



truth of life as a source for education insights. In this vision, school is not an enterprise that responds to social, economic interests. Rather, school should embrace meditative, dedicated environment for learning events to happen, oriented toward inner development of individuals, and equity, humanity of society.

Working on this paper, I break the issues into dichotomous portions for the sake of more-comprehensible analysis, but I find it is hard to make such a clear line in real life as things are all interconnected. Personally, I am not inclined to the market logic; but neither am I totally against the market logic as Smith appears to be. Indeed, we do not live off the grid of society, and everyone needs to have a healthy, sustainable, and happy life. Life should be a chiasma between the inner outerness as well as the outer innerness. Pinar et al. (2000) notes strong curriculum needs both import and export components. Curriculum will then be represented as the process of obtaining understandings from external, cultivating internal insights for self-realization, and servicing to humanity as a circle. Life could fall to one side and lack sustainability when ignoring the social factors we live in. Conversely, life will lose all of its meanings, colors and poetry when it is left to others to design within a concept of the material world.

I imagine that good wines need to be seasoned in good vessels. Ideally, there is no reason not to reach out for the highest standards in all spheres of living. The motive is that how we can nurture our innate creativity; and how we can contribute to, rather than just consume and exploit like the process of market logic. I am thinking of a curriculum that includes skills (physical), knowledges (intellectual), love and care (compassion), and insight wisdoms (spiritual) are all integrated as grace essence for the blossom of the self. However, we cannot assume that we will always be in good physical condition, and able to do whatever we want. Our physical and intellectual faculties can be withdrawn by nature at any time; even before we get old. Instead of wasting our life in the service of the acquisition of the temporary, we could make better choices so as to nurture our sense of identification within the Infinite at foremost.

As Smith notes, we cannot escape our circumstances, we need to “find new life in the middle of our circumstances” (p. 50). I am imagining a curriculum that is deeply rooted in very real life, grows far beyond mundane thinking, and immerses within the realms of the Divine. Lehrer (1954) illustrates, “life is like a piano. What we get out of it depends on how you play it”. In this view, wisdom is more like an art of living; something that harmonizes all sounds made with the black and white keys we activate so as to get in tune with the melody as a whole. As everyone was born and lives in a different situation, there can be no complete, uniform answers for all. Rather, each person finds a different way or art to perform one’s own life. Then, it is the role of education to enable students to recognize the self-awareness and to explore “new life” in daily living experience. Loy (2000) tells us, “that which you seek, you already are” (p. 228). There is no way or art that is dually-separated from us because we are already within it. Indeed, we are the Art; and this Art is our very true nature.

Notes

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² I do not think Smith means “God” as the shape of a man.

³ Some objects seem to look immobile, but there are always electrons and protons moving inside the structure with centrifugal and centripetal force.



⁴“Being born” regards to the soul, not the physical level.

⁵ In the discussion, “nature” means the inner force or energy, not the physical world.

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