Powershift


Alvin Toffler is the author of the book, Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century, published by Bantam Books in 1990. This book focuses on three types of power—physical power/violence, money/wealth, and knowledge. Toffler analyzes businesses, social organizations, and nations on the basis of a change in balance that is occurring among these types of power. Powershift is an exciting book, one that many educators will want to read.

The triatic model of power is used to discuss the decreasing power of medical professionals that has occurred as ordinary people have gained increasing access to medical information. Many doctors struggle with the idea that a patient may know more about a particular disease and its treatment than does the doctor.

The parallel with education is interesting. Elementary school education copes well with some individual students knowing more about dinosaurs than do their teachers. However, many educators struggle with the idea that some of their students far surpass them in knowledge about computer systems and multimedia.

The triatic model of power is used to explain the downfall of socialism and of the USSR. It portrays such changes as inevitable because of the power that knowledge brings to those who have it. The book mentions education only briefly, suggesting that our current Industrial Age education system is obsolete: "Social justice and freedom both now increasingly depend on how each society deals with three issues: education, information technology (including the media); and freedom of expression."

"In the case of education, the reconceptualization now required is so profound, reaching so far beyond questions of budgets, class size, teacher pay, and traditional conflicts over curriculum, that it cannot be dealt with here. Like the Second Wave TV networks (or for that matter all the smokestack industries), our mass education systems are largely obsolete. Exactly as in the case of the media, education will require a proliferation of new channels and a vast expansion of program diversity. A high-choice system will have to replace a low-choice system if schools are to prepare people for a decent life in the new Third Wave society, let alone for economically productive roles."

I find the triatic power model presented by Toffler to be compelling. I agree with him that our educational system, which was designed for an Industrial Age society, is obsolete. An obsolete structure can continue to exist for a long time. However, major change is both necessary and inevitable. What are examples of obsolescence in education?

Our current educational system is completely inadequate to the needs of our society in which knowledge is an increasingly important part of power. Thus, major change is inevitable.

1. We know that each student has a unique set of inherent skills and unique interests. We know that learners construct their own knowledge. However, we have a mass-production, factory model of standard curriculum, standardized testing, standard length classes, knowledge divided into cubbyholes called courses, and so on. For the most part, the learner is given
very little choice on what to learn, when, or how well. The current content and pedagogy of education is increasingly out of tune with its customer (students). As Toffler would put it, we have a mass production system of education in a world that is increasingly becoming demassified.

2. The educational system has a great deal of power because it is authorized to offer credits, certificates, and degrees. Of course, these are only vaguely related to a learner actually being able to perform in the "real world." Being bilingual is useful (among other things, it increases access to information) regardless of whether it appears on a transcript.

3. Our educational system gives almost no power to students and relatively limited power to teachers. Thus, the two most important stakeholder groups in education tend to be ruled by a top-down, Industrial Age, bureaucratic structure that is increasingly ineffective.

4. The content of formal educational systems is slow to change, and thus much of it is obsolete. The emergence of cheap calculators and relatively inexpensive computers in the early 1980s can be considered as the tip of the iceberg. If a calculator or computer can solve or significantly help in solving a type of problem that students currently study in school, what should students be learning about how to solve that type of problem? If calculators and computers make it possible for students to learn new, more relevant topics, what should be dropped from the curriculum, and what should be added? For the most part, our schools are not attempting to answer these questions or implement reasonable answers to them.

5. The system is not designed with the idea that students can easily surpass many of their teachers in very important components of education. However, increasing access to well educated parents, distance education, and computer-assisted learning makes it inevitable that students will surpass their teachers in an increasing number of areas.

The above list is easily extended. The point is, major changes in the system are both needed and inevitable. But, what kind of changes? The following ideas are intended to capture the flavor of Toffler's analysis of changes that the powershift suggest.

1. Learning to learn, being responsible for one's own learning, and just-in-time education, are all of growing importance. This means that students need to learn a great deal about learning and their own particular learning skills and styles. They need a great deal of practice in dealing with new learning situations in an independent, self-sufficient manner.

2. All students need to be information literate. This means that they need to have well honed skills in obtaining and using existing information to help them solve problems and make decisions. Students need to be skilled at assessing the correctness and usefulness of the wide range of information available, as well as aids to processing this information, such as computer models and expert systems.
3. All students need to be creative problem solvers. When placed in new problem-solving situations, people need to be able to analyze the situation, obtain needed information, and make creative use of their knowledge and skills to address the problem.

This list can be extended. Notice the emphasis on meta-knowledge. The shift is away from rote memorization and toward higher order cognitive skills.

The point is clear. Our current educational system is completely inadequate to the needs of our society in which knowledge is an increasingly important part of power. Thus, major change is inevitable.