



INTELLECTUAL VERSUS WISDOM-RELATED KNOWLEDGE: THE CASE FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEARNING IN THE LATER YEARS OF LIFE

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Lifelong learning and continued education are essential for older people who want to stay involved in a rapidly changing world. However, in the later years of life, it may be even more important to acquire the timeless and universal knowledge of wisdom. Whereas intellectual knowledge enables elderly people to stay involved in worldly affairs, wisdom-related knowledge helps them to prepare for the physical and social decline of old age and ultimately their own death. Moreover, while intellectual knowledge tends to decrease with advancing age, the relationship between wisdom and aging is potentially positive, provided that cognitive deterioration does not become pathological. By illustrating the difference between intellectual and wisdom-related knowledge in the areas of goals, approach, range, acquisition, effects on the knower, and relation to aging, it is argued that wisdom rather than intellectual knowledge is crucial for aging well.

You have learned great pyramids of knowledge. But if that learning is not exercised through experience, it cannot be realized. . . . Like most people, you don't experience with your whole self. That is the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

Agnes Whistling Elk, cited in
Flight of the Seventh Moon,
Lynn V. Andrews, 1984, p. 190.

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TABLE 1 Differences Between Intellectual Knowledge and Wisdom-Related Knowledge

Domain	Intellectual Knowledge	Wisdom-Related Knowledge
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quantitative: accumulation of knowledge and information • discovery of new truths • descriptive knowledge • <i>how</i> to do certain things • mastery of the outside world through liberation from outside forces • change of reality • striving for certainty, regularity, and predictability to plan for the future • knowing how to deal with the expected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • qualitative: deeper understanding of salient phenomena and events • rediscovery of the <i>significance</i> of old truths • interpretative knowledge • <i>should I</i> do certain things? • mastery of the inner world through liberation from inner forces
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scientific • theoretical • abstract, detached • separation of form from content • distinction between subject and object • linear: final stage of formal operations • logos • impersonal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acceptance of reality • acceptance of uncertainty, irregularity, unpredictability, and impermanence • knowing how to deal with the unexpected and the unknown • spiritual • applied • concrete, involved • integration of form and content • synthesis of subject and object • dialectic: beyond formal operations • myths
Range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time-bound: subject to political and historical fluctuations • narrow, particularistic • limited, domain-related • fragmented, specialized, selective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal: intrapersonal and interpersonal • timeless: independent of political and historical fluctuations
Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intelligence/cognition • detached experience, i.e., studying books, listen to lectures, conducting experiments, objective observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • broad, holistic • unlimited, universal • comprehensive, integrated • combination of cognition and self-reflection • personal life experiences together with self-awareness, determination, and constancy to transcend subjectivity and projections

TABLE 1 continued

Domain	Intellectual Knowledge	Type of Knowledge	Wisdom-Related Knowledge
Effects on the knower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manipulation and control of phenomena and events • belief that knowledge is potentially limitless • tendency to believe in existing knowledge if it is scientifically arrived • increased self-centeredness because one believes that one knows • pride and a feeling of superiority towards people with less intellectual knowledge • concerned about individualistic and particularistic issues • negative feelings if manipulation and control fails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • openness to experience including the experience of negativity, irregularity, unpredictability, contradictions, and ambiguity through the development of equanimity • acceptance of the limits of knowledge for human beings • tendency to doubt existing beliefs, values, knowledge, and information • diminished self-centeredness because one knows that one does not know • sympathy and compassion for others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concerned about collective and universal issues • satisfaction and peacefulness in spite of life's vicissitudes and uncertainties • potentially positive • influenced by openness to experience, self-reflection, self-awareness, determination, and constancy • important at all stages of the life course
Relation to aging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reversed u-shaped pattern • influenced by cognitive decline • may become outdated and obsolete with time 		