



Excerpt from the manuscript:

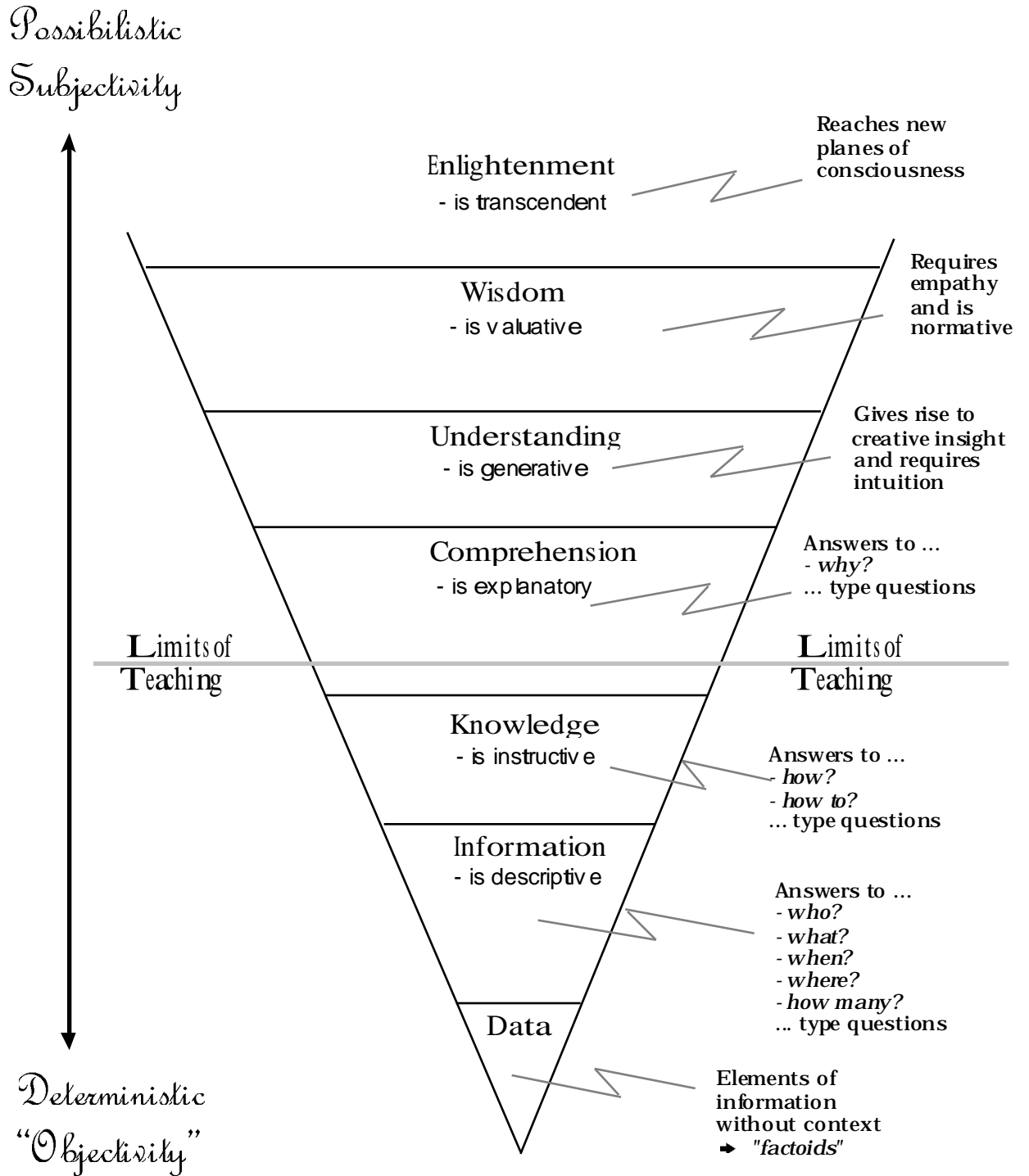
The Syntony Quest: Evolutionary vision for change in your world, 2002.

On the **Pyramid of *Meaning***

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I created the Pyramid of Meaning in 1994 when I was working as Research Director at the Center for Knowledge Systems in Mexico. I was interested in ‘understanding’ how it is that human beings create meaning — both individually and collectively. You see, I was working on a definition of *community* as two or more people with a common identity and a shared sense of purpose who are committed to the joint creation of meaning. Now, if you look at the diagram of the Pyramid below, you will notice that in the left-hand margin there is a scale running from Deterministic “Objectivity” to Possibilistic Subjectivity. Let me quickly clarify that what I mean by “objective” is actually only our interpersonally agreed upon subjective appreciation — there really is no such thing as “objectivity” other than that. The ‘deterministic’ part means that the answers to questions about meaning follow inevitably and conclusively from the “evidence” presented toward the bottom of the pyramid, whereas ‘possibilistic’ alludes to the open-ended nature of the search for answers toward the top. For example, questions on the lower rungs can be answered fairly precisely (“who built the Golden Gate Bridge?” “When was Einstein born?” etc.), while questions on the upper rungs become less and less unambiguous (“how do you get to the Golden Gate Bridge” depends on if you’re in a rush, if you want to go by bicycle or helicopter, etc., and “why is the bridge important” becomes even more subjective). I associate this progression with limits to teaching (since teachers tend to need to agree on “The answers”), although it also implies that there are no limits to learning since, as Malcolm Knowles once said, “learning is a process of active inquiry with the initiative residing in the learner” (that’s the possibilistic part!).

The Pyramid of *Meaning*



As you consider these various levels and how they relate to your syntony quest, think about that gray area where you are cognizant of some phenomenon or event without processing its implications. Since this part of the book is about drawing on various conceptual tools and heuristics and perspectives to facilitate change by tuning and aligning creative processes of adaptation with the dynamics of our environments, the issue of jumping out of meaning frameworks that limit us to awareness (without conscious recognition of the relative importance of that which is comprehended) becomes a crucial one.

The idea of creating this Pyramid of Meaning emerged when I was reading Laozi's *Daode jing* and came across the following passage:

*Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.*
– Chapter 33

This led me to consider the relationship between wisdom and enlightenment in relation to the notion of syntony. I took the notion of the embedded order of learning content mentioned by Bela H. Banathy in his *Systems Design of Education* and used it to express this relation in terms of transcendent levels of meaning. His order classifies the substance of learning provided as data, information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. To which I added the rungs of comprehension and enlightenment and represented the relations in the diagram I shared with you above.

Now, you can use the Pyramid as a way to grasp the differences between levels of analysis (such as are involved on the rungs of data, information, and knowledge), systems thinking (where analysis is combined with synthesis on the rungs of comprehension and understanding), and syntonious appreciation (which leads to the rungs of wisdom and enlightenment). When you are in a conversation, listening to the news, reading an article or essay, you can think about the level on which meaning is being created. Doing this can help you see how to move the discourse to a higher level by considering different sorts of questions and engaging additional aspects of your syntony sense (perhaps drawing on your feelings *as well as* on the intellectual bases of rational reasoning in your contemplation of a given issue).

So what does the diagram say about the famous “information age” in which we still live? Hmm... It’s not very reassuring, is it? The sheer bulk of information that inundates our lives clogs the channels to higher rungs of meaning and gives the illusion of being further up the pyramid than we are. However, by using the Pyramid of Meaning as a lens through which to focus your syntony sense you can quickly quell such hubris and actively promote higher meaning as you continue with your syntony quest.