They pay a tuition fee of about 5,500 Euros. They don’t get a diploma. They do their own dishes and have their own keys to the building. And what they design depends on what the world brings them.

Pieter Spinder, Initiator & Storyteller at Knowmads and Lecturer University of Applied Science Amsterdam
How Knowmads Are Changing the Face of Education

by Pieter Spinder

“The world is facing huge challenges, and they are growing daily in severity, scale, and complexity. It is no exaggeration to say that they are not going to go away. Indeed, they will get worse, unless we start to find solutions, and we find them soon.

“If we are going to survive, we desperately need the next generation to be smarter, more adaptable, and better prepared than any that has gone before. Our only chance is to improve the way we teach our young, to equip our young people with the skills and the attitudes that might steer this world of ours to a far safer place than at present looks likely. The question is: Is that what our current education system does?”

—from the film We Are the People We’ve Been Waiting For

What if we are the people we’ve been waiting for? We think that would mean changing the game of education, helping young people to follow their passion and make things happen. Things that will bring smiles to their own faces and to the faces of the people they work with, while adding in beautiful and meaningful ways to the environment in which we live.

We agree with creativity and education expert Sir Ken Robinson when he says that most schools kill creativity. And they kill independent thinking and the entrepreneurial spirit too. Demanding the “right” answers to tests does not encourage people to be adventurous in finding
new ways to do things, or to question existing systems.

... and what is a Knowmad?

A Knowmad is a nomadic knowledge worker—a creative, imaginative, and innovative person who can work with almost anybody, anytime, and anywhere. And our program is a platform and school for such people.

The concept of Knowmads was born in June 2009 out of the experiences of some colleagues who had worked in the field of education and were hoping to do something different—something more along the lines of the quote above. With combined experience in traditional education (University of Utrecht, Copenhagen Business School, and the University of Applied Science, Amsterdam) and in less-traditional programs (the KaosPilots “alternative” business school), we had some ideas about what that might be.

The word Knowmads was coined by John Moravec. He’s what you would call an education futurist and teaches at the University of Minnesota. He loved the idea of a school that was not based on a place or a building but was instead located wherever the student could and would like to contribute to a process or to a project. Knowmads are international pioneers who want to challenge themselves and the (smaller or bigger) outside world. People who want to change the game.

And our students do.

The Knowmads Business School started on the February 15, 2010, when 12 young people came to our first admission workshop in Amsterdam. They came from the US, Brazil, South Korea, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. They found us through our website, Facebook, Twitter, and informational meetings. They had to tell their friends and parents they were going to a school in Amsterdam for which they had to pay an entrance fee of €4,500; that this school currently did not yet have a building or a clear program; that they wouldn’t receive a diploma, since the Knowmads Business School operates outside the Dutch education system.

Signing up for an idea, a dream, an adventure: the Knowmads tribe.
They signed up for an idea, a dream, an adventure. They were exactly the kind of students we wanted.

Why we want to change the educational system

We shape the world through the paradigms we use to describe it. Only when we observe with new consciousness can we find different answers and fresh solutions to problems. Columbus couldn’t go and discover the Americas until he could believe the earth was round—and was willing to bet his life on it. On today’s earth, we see huge ecological, financial, social, and economic transformations taking place. We believe the current system of education does not educate young people in a way that would help them take on the challenges they face. To educate young people in the old, industrial way (that is, with learning factories that talk about students as output targets) only prepares them to work in “old” industrial jobs. The output targets our current system turns out grow up to bust banks, pollute oceans, and support sweatshops. As Albert Einstein once commented, “You can’t change the world with the same kind of consciousness that created most of those challenges in the first place.”

Educations should offer more than framed professional knowledge. They should also train awareness of the global context in which these professionals will operate and give them the capabilities to do so. Consider, for example, how many art and design institutions teach the craft brilliantly and then forget to offer the students the entrepreneurial skills they need to get a job.

Why work with case studies in books? Why not work with real challenges, in real-life assignments with real companies, NGOs, and government institutions? “Knowing about” is different from “being able to” and “having experience with.”

We designed our school around a set of core values and beliefs:

• We need to develop global awareness in our students.
• We want to help students to discover their personal passions and how to address them. Everyone has a talent that can be at the core of his or her professional life. Encouraging that talent may require a different approach for each person.
• We believe “action” learning within the real world is the most integrated and the strongest form of learning.
• We believe entrepreneurship is about training people to come up with their own ideas and answers. The risk of failure should be embraced and accepted.
• Learning together as a team makes far stronger learning than competitive individual education.

But how does the school work?

Knowmads is a one-year program. Once a student enrolls in the school through participating in our application workshop, he or she forms a “tribe” with the other students starting at the same moment. New tribes form every six months. After a phase of team-forming, students often need to unlearn old patterns and expectations. No, there aren’t demands. No, there aren’t “correct answers.” No, you don’t get ahead by reproducing a certain amount of knowledge. And yes, you do need to initiate projects yourself. You do need to contribute to your tribe and to the school to make it work. You don’t receive an education—you have to shape the heart of it yourself.

We frame this journey based on four questions:

1. In what kind of world do I (want to) live?
   Subjects: Sustainability & social innovation
2. What do I want to contribute/change?
   Subject: Personal leadership
3. How do I create the organization to get it done?
Subjects: Entrepreneurship & new-business design

4. How do I bring it into the world?
Subjects: Marketing & creativity

These are the same questions we began with in our first year, and with each new tribe we ask them again. We are mindful of these questions and of the values and beliefs listed above. We approach our students as young professionals.

Throughout the year, students work on assignments for our partners—corporate organizations, as well as governmental and non-governmental associations. To do so, the students form a cooperative—Knowmads U.A.,—which they use as the legal vehicle with which to earn money. Knowmads staff bring in four assignments per year; other assignments are brought in by our students or by organizations that ask us for help. Together with the students, we decide which assignments they want to work on, and when. When it is the company that pitches the assignment, our students create a proposal that contains a creative plan and a financial proposal. Once these are negotiated and accepted, the tribe (as they by now have started calling themselves) starts working, coached by the staff. Students work on these assignments together with one or more of the client organization’s members. The aim is to create a win-win-win situation—for the students, for the company, and for society. As we work on a project, we make sure various stages in the process connect to the four questions above, as we explore issues like corporate social

Knowmads are typically between 20 and 35 years old. Some have a bachelor’s or a master’s degree. Some have already spent 10 years working. Some have traveled all over the world.
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responsibility, marketing, project management, and entrepreneurship.

As the staff, we shape the program to the proposals and needs of the students, or tie in to real-world assignments from clients. Our guest lecturers are always experts in their field. Our program offers a few basic workshops and tools; the other workshops support the assignments or group process of the moment. When our students need a particular kind of skill or knowledge, they let us know and, together with them, we arrange the necessary workshop or class.

We got a lot of international press and our projects are on our websites, so we get a lot of calls from companies interested in becoming clients. We also have a network of about 1,500 “friends” and fans of Knowmads. Our marketing strategy is to “whisper” to them instead of shouting to everybody, so they know what is needed and bring us into contact with the most appropriate partner companies and coaches.

The municipality of Amsterdam provided the building we rent. Students have to find their own lodgings (our staff and Knowmads’s friends and fans help them with that). The projects do not provide enough money for the students to live on, so most work, at least to some extent, outside the school. Our students are between 20 and 35 years old. Some have a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Some have already spent 10 years or so in the workplace. Some have traveled and worked all over the world.

Knowmads does not have permanent teachers. We do have five staff members; they and the workshop leaders are paid out of tuition fees and the programs we do for the University of Applied Sciences, as well as from client projects. (Fifty percent of client money goes to the tribe, the rest to the school.) All the actual teaching is done by outsiders who respond to the specific subjects needed for the projects that are in play. The starting point is that we work in our educational program and with the real-life assignments with our heads (knowledge), with our hearts (feeling), and with our hands (doing/action). We try to connect this work with idealism (or dreams) and with talents and discipline, and vice versa. We also try to stimulate our students to develop their own projects. Every student is matched with a coach—a member of the Knowmads network—and works with that person throughout the year.

While working on the real-world assignments, students attend personal development workshops. Through self-reflection on favorite roles they have taken in projects and in their tribe, they often discover their personal passions and possibilities. From this, they often frame a personal plan or even start a company, often with other students at the school. In this way, transformation starts with personal transformation. When one has a connection with him or herself, then one can make a connection with the outside world. We expect them to share that responsibility with the people they work with, and with the rest of the outside world. In other words, the network, the students, and the partner companies co-create an education.

Students present what they’ve learned twice a year—halfway through, and then again at the end of the education. The first presentation is about what they learned, as connected to the four questions and subjects, and about what they want to learn more of in the second half of the year. The

“Knowmads understands that who you are as a person directly relates to who you are as a professional.”

— Liza Rubinstein Malamud, Knowmads ambassador and friend
our school. We are still small and we are learning along with the students. Therefore dialogue, as well as such values as openness and trust, are key to our working together in this education.

There are, however, some principles and aspects of a Knowmads education that are fixed and unchanging.

**Peer-to-peer learning**

Entering students immediately become part of a tribe. You learn within
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assignments all kinds of outcomes are possible. Take, for example, the project Knowmads did with KLM. At first, the results seemed less than astonishing, but at the same time KLM loved the culture and processes our students brought with them. They wanted more of that. Eventually, our students’ ideas led to a neat little innovation that KLM is developing right now—Meet and Seat, which allows travelers to find compatible travel mates for their KLM flights via Facebook and LinkedIn.

Real-world assignments
Our students take on real-world assignments from companies, NGOs, socially and sustainably based foundations, such as Triodos and DOEN, and governmental organizations, such as the municipality of Amsterdam. And our students don’t work for clients, they work with them. Unlike in most exams, in real-world assignments the learning, however, was enormous.

At Knowmads we pride ourselves on the fluidity in our environment, people, and organization. Our school is in service 24/7. Students have their own keys. They Facebook with staff at night and regularly organize Lazy Sunday Concerts at the school. All of these experiences help them develop different ways of learning and communicating.

They need and mostly have a very open mindset to change behavior, thoughts, and patterns within themselves. They are flexible and adaptable, and have a strong social bond. They form a community of learning together. They are each other’s most important teachers.

No testing
Knowmads works from the principle that our students have an intrinsic motivation to learn, and that they will find the right content when they want and need it. Entrepreneurial students

your tribe. You work with the school as a whole and share the responsibility of sustaining it. The first challenge for our first tribe was furnishing the school and making it our own. There was essentially no budget, but those students accumulated used materials, paint, and furniture and created our space. Staff and students clean up, do the dishes, and so on. We find it’s sometimes tough; it’s messy and often frustrating. The learning, however, was enormous.

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We adapt our curriculum to the needs of the students. We offer them customized workshops to help prepare them for business assignments.
should not have to learn to comply, so we don’t test, and we have no exams. (We do have so-called Green Zones, where staff and students discuss needs, behavior, and progress, and this is done for everyone almost every week so that we know where the students are in their work and any needs they might have, as well as any problems that may come up.)

A flexible program
The staff of the school is in constant dialogue with the students about the program. We adapt our curriculum to their needs and offer customized workshops to help prepare them for business assignments or global trends. Why do we have a financial crisis? How did we arrive at our current environmental situation? How do social issues fit into these considerations? (We actually try to think of these challenges as opportunities for transformation—transformation we can work on for the long term, for the better.) No standard education can tell us where the new Facebook will come from, or how we might be influenced by a storm in global politics.

There are topics that return each year, though. “Deep democracy” and “nonviolent communication” help our tribes with their peer-to-peer learning and will continue to help them in their future careers and lives. Our Sustainable Business Design workshop is meant to help prepare them to meet global needs as an entrepreneur. The Start-Up Wheel, a tool for business plan doing (rather than business plan writing), helps to develop a business. Personal coaching, personal development workshops, and recently a Nature Quest leadership retreat help students become more aware of their identities, purpose, and the gifts they have to offer the world.

Workshops
Our workshops are about discovering one’s own answers—especially the personal development workshops. Teaching at Knowmads is mostly a process of facilitating enriching and revealing processes—all connected to the subjects of the four questions. When there is a decision-making problem, we might bring in deep democracy (a workshop for decision-making tools) or a crash course in nonviolent communication. When a project involves social media, we might prepare a social-media workshop.

Often, especially when we have special guest lecturers—for example, when we featured Itay Talgam, a renowned conductor and former TED speaker, and also Seth Godin—we’ll frame these as WTF (What The F#ck) Lectures. They are open to the general public. This supports our marketing and exposes our students to different sets of opinions and people. WTF lectures are meant to challenge paradigms and explore new territory outside the core curriculum.

Social media
As the world becomes more accessible through online tools, we try to choose the most useful to co-create with our partners and the community around Knowmads—Facebook groups for particular projects, livestreaming a lecture, looking for a workshop leader on Twitter, sending out newsletters with information about our open lectures.

What it all leads to
As of this writing (February 2012), Knowmads comprises 24 current students and 30 graduates, most of whom have started a business, either alone or with other former students. With the help of the DOEN Foundation (which invests in socially oriented companies and programs), we have nearly reached a breakeven point financially, although our staff is still surviving on the bare minimum of salaries. Indeed, our staff members are nearly as pioneering as our students. Most of them need to earn quite a bit of money on the side to cover their daily living.
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We have discovered that when we put students at the center of their own education, they teach us what they really need and want to learn.”

Learning is constant, and a lot of it is invisible.

Knowmads at Work

Here are a few projects that Knowmads tribes have taken on:

• **Fairtrade Shops.** In the Netherlands, there are about 350 Wereldwinkel (“world shop”) retail stores, which sell “fair-trade” coffee, tea, chocolate, and handcrafted items. Knowmads started a project with Wereldwinkel to get more youth between 16 and 25 years old interested in fair-trade products. Together with shop owners as well as marketers, the “Fairminds” group now meets once a month to expand the reach of the fair-trade movement.

• **T-Mobile.** The human resources department of T-Mobile International in Germany spent three days in Amsterdam with the Knowmads, who organized teambuilding exercises for them.

• **Royal Haskoning SMC.** For this international architecture firm, Knowmads designed and carried out a survey among “generation Y” employees to see what they thought about sustainability and how they implemented it in their daily work.

• **Solidaridad and Top Marketeers Network.** For Solidaridad, a worldwide network for sustainability within the supply chain, and TMN, a network of 40 international marketers, Knowmads instigated a project to increase consciousness of sustainability issues in corporate marketers. Knowmads is now designing a magazine for marketers including best practices, and will be running a conference in February 2013 to help marketers implement sustainability in their companies.

• **Picnic 2010, 2011, and 2012.** Amsterdam’s Picnic conferences have become a leading European platform for innovation and creativity—an incubator and accelerator for game-changing ideas, concepts, products and services. Knowmads has been involved with Picnic for three years, contributing speakers as well as help with workshops, demonstrations, and entertainment—addressing the mega-trends of our time and exploring how to creatively apply technology in order to meet business, social, and environmental challenges.
At the same time, you could say we are a success. This October, Knowmads will go into a new and larger building in Amsterdam to accommodate more students. And our concept, whether fully or partially, is being embraced by other institutions and has started to spread around the world. There is a Knowmads-like startup in Israel, and we are currently talking with an education partner in India that is considering something similar in that country. The University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam recently instituted a Knowmadic Learning Lab program. However, we don’t believe in copy-pasting our model. None of these will be exactly like our own.

What do you get when you train for the capability to deal with radical change and real-world challenges? What do you get when you consciously aim students toward meaningful work, work that makes a difference?

We find that all of our graduates now look for ways in which they can use their individual qualities (talents, capabilities, and even weaknesses) professionally. We have discovered that when we put students at the center of their own education, they teach us what they really need and want to learn. They learn to create their own lives and work in a way a thousand pre-programmed tests never will teach them.

We learn a lot during our lives. Learning is constant, and a lot of it is invisible. When one can catch his or her passion and find a way to get the knowledge and the skills to share it with other people, young and old, that is a good starting point. As one student confided, “Never before have I felt so much at home as I have at Knowmads. I used to see so few options; now I feel I have an enormous sea of possibilities in front of me.” Our students often feel this way—that after a year at Knowmads they can pick any area, step into it, and create a place for themselves there. I repeat: A lot of learning is invisible. Our education is so integrated that it’s sometimes hard for students to comprehend what they have learned. One former student thought he knew very little—until he joined Warriors without Weapons in Brazil. He was amazed at how easily he was able to participate in many aspects of their work in community building.

We are a learning organization and we shape ourselves, as we must in life, through adapting to needs and possibilities. We are as much designing as following opportunity into unexpected directions. This is possible when you have a strong core of shared values and shared purpose—when you want to make a positive, even a beautiful, difference. You can do this when you feel free to play with the possibilities—because “playing” liberates us from the old frozen paradigms. This is the attitude we need to renew if we want to serve our planet and society.

Here’s an image we love: the fire everyone has in himself or herself. However big or small this fire—even if it is seemingly not there—we try to blow some air into it. Then the unbelievable can happen. Whoosh.

Knowmads, Welcome Home!