

My Ways of Knowing
Mimi Corcoran
George Mason University
EDUC 800
12 May 2009

When I first started this course, I had no idea what “ways of knowing” meant. I remember driving to class and thinking that the professor would probably ask us how we were sure that we really know what we know. That is not what happened. We were asked how we come to know. At the time, I did not recognize the difference. I thought that I came to know facts, impressions, connections and norms through what my father told me, what the priests and nuns told me, what I read, what my teachers drilled into my head and what I could deduce from what I already knew. I also knew a few things through experience, most notably because of crazy experiments which my brother and I used to conduct. Though we never burned the house down, there were singed fingers from our first flame throwing experiment; a scarred right arm from my attempt at flight over the neighbor’s fence by swinging from a low tree branch; and, a lump on the head from one of our more adventurous experiments in rock velocity. I would have concluded that my way of knowing was based on passed-on knowledge, personal experience and experiments. How else would anyone know anything? But wait, just because something is written in a book, or Sister Mary Margaret says something is true, or the general public believes something, does not translate into my knowing it. There are filters at work here. My view of knowing was equivalent to the accumulation of knowledge, with appropriate quality control on the acceptability and believability factors. I never really thought about it any other way.

Now, several months later, I do not yet feel that I am enlightened, but I certainly now have both an understanding that there are different ways of knowing as well as a much broader appreciation for what ways of knowing are. I must admit, though, that the distinctions between some ways of knowing are not clear enough for me to really distinguish them. On the other hand, I now realize that I have been using the word *empirical* incorrectly for more years than I care to ponder. But, I do not think that it is terribly important at this stage for me to have expertise in all ways of knowing. Just being aware that there are so many, and the frightening thought that there are probably more, yet unnamed, ways, is an eye-opener itself.

Being of scientific ilk, I immediately found considerable common sense and comfort in the logic of Descartes. I realized that much of his nit-picking precision was absolutely necessary for the integrity of his method. Although he was somewhat pompous (assuming that his attitude was properly conveyed in translation), long-winded and, yes, at times, even boring, I found most of his logic impeccable. After all, any knowledge which is based on fallacious *facts* is questionable. That folly can be avoided by employing Descartes’ method. I admire Descartes’ methodical approach of building upon only proven facts, not interpretations, personal feelings, or assumptions. Emotionless, provable facts are the goal. Geometry teachers use this approach in teaching students about proofs. Every step must be recorded and the reason for each step must be a proven fact or accepted theorem. This used to drive some of my students crazy, but they did develop logical thinking despite themselves. Whether or not they could apply it their daily lives is another story. This idea also comes to light when I discuss the ideas of *probability* and *possibility*. Some students are quick to dismiss unlikely events as impossible. They probably grow into adults who do not buy full coverage insurance on their automobiles

I think about a globe-trotting Descartes deciding in which language he would write each of his offerings. Although he was quite the thinker and well-known, I wonder about how he understood the working classes or if he even cared. Although some of his writings were allegedly for the common man (or even women, egad!), Descartes did refer to his intellectual inferiors as *feeble-minded*. I do not know if Descartes thought about the realities of life for working people who had no time to ponder and dig around for provable facts while they were trying to feed their families and scrape out an existence. They did not need proof that the potato existed. They were only interested in earning the money to buy it. My reason for addressing this is that I have begun to think about my own views and if I have, with no malicious intent, unjustifiably viewed some of my students as feeble-minded. I have no delusions about achieving the same status as Descartes; but, neither do I want to sink to the depths of his disregard of those who are less fortunate or intelligent as he, or, at least appear to be so. My brief study of multicultural inquiry opened my eyes on a number of situations in my teaching career. As I look back, although I treated every child with kindness and patience, I can now see that there were more things going on than I had realized. If I now view these scenarios in the light of their situatedness, I can comprehend so much more than I could previously. For an extreme example, a bright, 16 year old student explained to me that she expected to be "out of it" for a few days and asked me to be understanding. I asked her if she was ill. Her reply was that she was fine but her sister was murdered over the weekend and she was upset. Especially, she continued, because her uncle had been murdered about six months earlier. I managed to keep my jaw from dropping to the floor. But, I have never known anyone, especially someone so young, who had a murder, yet alone two, in her family. However, this child lived in a neighborhood where this was not all that uncommon. Her pain was undoubtedly no less than anyone else in the same situation would experience; but, she had learned a different way to deal with it. The situatedness in which she was functioning, her neighborhood and family culture, prescribed that *you get over it and try not to get shot yourself*. (I am happy to report that this young woman is now in her junior year at a prestigious college on a full athletic scholarship. But, her story still sends shivers down my spine.) At the time, I could not understand why she was so cavalier. Some girls at the school burst into tears over the most trivial matters. But, she was not being cavalier; she was responding as was the norm in her culture. I learned not to judge or come to conclusions based only on my own perspective. After researching my multicultural inquiry paper, this is forever burned into my brain.

Bruner explained that the complex phenomenon of culture seems to impose constraints on how mind works and even upon the kinds of problems we are able to solve. This story is an example of a problem which I never would have fathomed, yet alone thought about solving. I am not sure that I would use the word *constraints*; to me, it seems more like lack of exposure or blinders. It is not that my thinking was being held back, it simply was not exposed to situations outside of my culture of learning at the time.

I grew up in a conservative, Irish Catholic family. My parents were very clear that I would be going to college and I never doubted that. I was taught by nuns for twelve years. I went off to Penn State and earned my degree in mathematics. Then, I joined the Navy and served my country for over twenty years. And, I am still a conservative, Irish Catholic. I still believe that good behavior and hard work will earn rewards. Loyalty and honesty are highly valued characteristics. These are the lenses through which I view the world. I also believe in karma; I believe that lazy, mean, selfish, savage, and evil people will get their comeuppance, if not in this world, in the next. As a young child, I had difficulty understanding the phrase "he is good for nothing." Instead of interpreting it as a person having no useful purpose, I thought it meant that a person behaved in a good way for no

reward. I thought we were supposed to be good for the joy of being good, not for rewards. How could anyone possibly be good for no reason. Who needs a reason? I certainly was a product of my culture. I have often thought about some of my childhood friends who, in adulthood, have completely changed their views from the lessons of our youth. I never did drugs because I did not want to harm myself. But, I have former classmates who are lifelong junkies. Same background, same values, same education and yet the results are so different. I am what I am because that is what I want to be. I do not know why they are what they are. I do not know what conclusion to draw. Even if I could, Bruner claims that we cannot judge a conclusion on its own. Rather, we judge its compatibility with the framework of prevailing beliefs. So, there would have to be some differences in beliefs.

Thinking back to my middle school and high school days, which is something I rarely do, I felt the gut-wrenching agonies I felt in the male-dominated school culture in which girls were not supposed to be good at math or be vocal or been controversial. Only boys should be class officers. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) vividly describe the *silence, deafness and dumbness* of women's ways of knowing which I thought I had buried. However, reading their book only made these memories come to the surface. I now see that I was in my own cultural mismatch. My father was supportive and encouraging and was proud of my math abilities since my earliest memories. My school figuratively patted me on the head, said, "isn't that nice" and gave the awards and recognition to the boys. My current actions to keep girls engaged in class, to encourage girls to register for AP math classes and to have girls be just as vocal in class as the boys are, I now see, is not based solely on my desire for equitable education but also on those long-buried feelings of being cheated and disregarded. I cannot imagine telling a girl that she does not need to be good at math because she is going to get married and raise children. I am incredulous that this was said to me. As Belenky et al. explain, women are aware that the powerful become powerful through might not through expertise. I used to study math books on my own because I found my high school math classes exceedingly tedious and boring. However, when the SAT scores were received and it was discovered that I had the highest math SAT score in the school, it was dismissed as a fluke. Some concluded that I must be a very good guesser. However, a boy, the teacher's pet, who scored lower than I did, was praised for his apparently superior abilities. He was clearly angered that he had been outscored by a mere girl. This was not his fault; he was a victim of the culture almost as much as I was. It was at about this time when I became well acquainted with colorful expletives of speech. It was also about this same time when I took on a song titled "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," from the mid-1960s as my mantra.

The lessons of *reap what you sow* are what I preach to my students. If you study and do your homework and come for extra help, you will earn the rewards of understanding the material and passing the course with a good grade. But, the parents do not always see it that way. Some parents complain that they are not paying substantial tuition for grades of C. My response that they are not buying grades never goes over well. There is certainly a *cultural mismatch* here. And, for some students who will never work a day in their lives, except token high-paying positions at the family business, the importance, honor and respectability of hard work is next to impossible to comprehend. In their situatedness, this is not germane. Sad, I think.

Bruner states that knowledge is based on situatedness and how the learner understands things. Lyons and LaBoskey contend that we cannot fully understand human action unless you both consider the meaning making of the people who are involved in it as well as knowing its situatedness. I recognize that my ways of knowing are a function of my

situation and I have concluded that I have many ways of knowing, as I imagine most people do. And, writing this paper has been an emotional roller coaster ride. While I have such fond memories of a loving and supportive father, I have such ugly memories of mistreatment, perhaps educational abuse, at the hands of teachers who thought that girls were of lesser value than boys.

However, my happy beginning of my doctoral studies, for this is certainly no ending, is that I have learned a great deal from studying varying ways of knowing and can see that I employ several of them. I also will be a more broadly minded researcher, not viewing subjects through the restrictive lenses of my own experiences and views. Much like those silly descriptions of people's personalities by astrological signs in which they ALL conform to just about everyone's self-description, I think I can find examples of just about every way of knowing in my arsenal. In addition to women's ways of knowing, I would like to briefly reflect a little more on scientific method and on two other ways of knowing.

My first way of knowing is faith. I do not need any proof for God's existence. I know He exists. No amount of scientific *proof*, if that was possible, would ever sway me from the knowledge of His existence. Descartes' *proof* of God's existence was interesting but not a touchstone. I know God exists; I just know it. And, that is all there is to that. Anything else requires some analysis.

As much as I admire the structure and soundness of Descartes' method, it is not practical for everyday life. Attorneys use a sort of Cartesian logic when trying to establish that their client could not have committed a crime or that there is no proof that the client is the only possible perpetrator. Step-by-step, they will try to show that something other than the client's guilt is possible. Prosecutors, of course, try to show that step-by-step logic can lead the jury to only one reasonable conclusion. Descartes would not be a fan of either *preponderance of the evidence* or *reasonable doubt*. Neither one is irrefutable. A video tape of the incident would be more to his liking. Most daily situations, however, do not require such logical rigor. However, I do use the methods of scientific method when appropriate for the situation. I would like to think of myself as a consistently structured, logical thinker. But that is not true. Sometimes you just have to go with your best information, your best guess, your palette of experiences and your hopes.

I also utilize narrative inquiry, even though I never heard the term before this class. I use it not only to learn myself but also in my teaching. I find it to be an effective technique for garnering student participation. Narratives get the students' attention and they are able to formulate insightful questions. They also recall the lesson with much more ease. As they have become more accustomed to this scenario in the classroom, more students have been relaying their own narratives, most of which are actually appropriate for the lesson's topic. In recent weeks, I have utilized this technique more frequently and have noticed that even the math-phobic students are participating more and comprehending better.

If nothing else, I have learned to be reflective and not so reactive. Pondering the reasons, not just the outcomes, has been a revelation for me, simple though it may seem. It is not as though this idea has escaped me all my life. But, my awareness of it, employment of it and appreciation of it, have all been heightened. This is because I see the usefulness of reflection. Although I am usually seeking that one correct answer, I have come to grasp the ideas the competing ideas, differing ways of knowing and opposing

perspectives can actually coexist. And, these ideas, ways of knowing and perspectives can all belong to one person, me.