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Synthesis Paper: My Way of Knowing-Then and Now
 David Blaiklock
 George Mason University

Before the Class

Prior to taking this class, I believed that the only way that knowledge was gained was through either empirical study that included proper research methodology and statistical analysis or through a lecture or publication by an authority in a field. There were no criteria for what constituted an authority figure but part of what established one in my mind was a person who cited empirical research as they attempted to convey their message. I was skeptical of information that came from other types of sources such as television, magazines, and particularly the Internet. The Internet was an unreliable source of knowledge because anyone could post anything and there was no accountability for whether or not that information had been verified. As a classroom teacher, I found Internet research from my students to be very frustrating, as they seemed to accept anything they read as truth. While experience played a part as a way of knowing for an individual, the knowledge gained would not be something that could be appropriately conveyed to someone else. Different personalities interact with the world in various ways and it would be impossible to replicate the same context for one person to be able to effectively relay their experience to someone else.

Personal History

My ways of knowing have been influenced by my experience in military school, my undergraduate education, and my life experiences. I spent the eighth through twelfth grades in a rigid and structured military environment. The only way to do anything was to do it the way you were told by an authority figure. There was never any questioning of the rules or how things were supposed to be done and new ideas were strongly discouraged. I believe this experience made a strong contribution to my positivist view of the world. While I learned to overtly question authority after this experience there was always doubt about the impact of that sort of

behavior and the consequences it may bring. The military school experience made me rigid in my thinking and I had difficulty accepting new ideas. Initially, I would typically reject change or new ideas until I have had some time to think about them and determine whether or not they make sense. When I engage in this behavior, there was no logic for why I may be rejecting it other than my instinct.

While working on an undergraduate degree in psychology, I learned about the importance of empirical practices and research methodology. Until the about the middle of the twentieth century, psychology struggled to establish itself as a legitimate science. The natural sciences had concrete evidence to confirm their findings as truth whereas the social sciences were challenged with confirming abstract concepts as truth. To accomplish this task, psychology developed a protocol for research and statistical analysis to establish the results of their research as truth. These procedures were consistent with the positivist outlook I had developed while in military school and I regarded them as the only mechanism through which valid research could be conducted. The publication of these findings in peer-reviewed journals was the only appropriate way to disseminate this knowledge and I was skeptical of any research findings that were communicated through other mediums. My belief for other mediums was that the research methodology had not been properly followed and therefore the results may not be valid.

Throughout my life I have had many different experiences to draw from in the way that I know things. The cultural experiences I have had as a Caucasian male from a middle-class background have taught me to view the world from that perspective. Chinua Achebe changed that perspective when I read *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's book taught me that different cultures focus on different values and what one culture may value as important, another may view as trivial (Achebe, 1959). This lesson was very valuable when I became a special education teacher

where I worked in a classroom of students with whom I did not share any cultural background. I was quickly able to recognize that I needed to learn about the culture of my students in order to teach them in a manner that was meaningful to them. Beyond the cultural issues, I have had other life experiences that have contributed to my knowledge base as I approach the world. I have spent the last ten years working in the special education field and the experience has taught me different ways to effectively help students who face different challenges. Some of this knowledge came from books while some of it came from trial and error. In addition to my work in special education, I have worked in many positions in the food service industry and I have worked on an assembly line manufacturing brake pads. All of these experiences have provided me with knowledge about how the world works and the most effective ways to interact with it based on the circumstances.

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Impact of Course on Way of Knowing

The Romeo & Juliet helped me realize the importance of prior knowledge in either evaluating or critiquing anything. Each review of the Romeo & Juliet movie used some reference point for comparison. Without that prior knowledge, we have no context or reference point to which we can compare things. This point was discussed in Eisner's article on how to be a critic where he mentions one must have prior experience with something in order to evaluate it or you will have no point of reference for comparison. However, different people will potentially use different points of reference for comparison. In evaluating Secretary Bennett's lecture Eisner, Shuy, Rosenthal, & Peterson et. al. evaluated it from different perspectives. Each person used either a formal assessment or model to determine if it was an effective teaching process while I used my own experience as a classroom teacher to critique Secretary Bennett's lecture. Even though everyone had viewed the same lecture, the different points of reference led

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each person to draw different conclusions about the effectiveness of Secretary Bennett's teaching style. The lesson learned was that while prior experience creates a point of reference, different points of reference can be applied to the same event that will produce different conclusions.

Descartes contended that once something was established as truth, it was known and therefore required no further study. This positivistic perspective creates knowledge that cannot be questioned. The work of Kuhn is contrary to this in that knowledge is constantly tested to make it more refined and precise. There are occasions where an event will occur that that cannot be explained by the accepted scientific model of a field and a new model must be developed in order to account for this issue. From Kuhn's perspective, scientific models will always change to accommodate what is known though there is no ultimate goal or end result where a field will cease to study its principles. This approach is the opposite of Descartes in that knowledge must always be questioned. The lesson learned was that knowledge is always evolving and there is no absolute truth, as research endeavors will constantly change what is known in a particular field of study.

Bruner discussed how knowledge could be socially constructed amongst a group of people. People view the world from a perspective that is created by their sociocultural experiences. Being that everyone has a different sociocultural experience, everyone has a unique perspective on the world. In this sense, there is no absolute truth and reality exists in the eye of the beholder. However, people can come together to share their experiences and perspective to construct knowledge together. If people from varying backgrounds share their perspective, they can work together to develop knowledge with which they can all agree. Since everyone has their own unique perspective, then everyone will have their own understanding of what that constructed knowledge means. One of the vehicles that can be used to engage in this process is

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the methods of narrative inquiry outline by Lyons, LaBoskey, & Kubler. In this method, an individual writes about their experience, reflects on their writing, and then shares both in discussion with other people. The group has the ability to reach a consensus about the meaning of the experience and the knowledge that can be gained from it. This strategy is particularly useful for more contextualized situations such as a classroom environment. It is challenging to conduct empirical research in a classroom environment but the methods of narrative inquiry provide a method through which knowledge can be gained. The lesson learned is that knowledge can be constructed by a group of individuals based on their experiences to develop contextualized practices.

Current Way of Knowing

Over the course of the semester my way of knowing has evolved. In terms of empirical research I have come to realize there is no absolute truth and that scientific models will always change as phenomena are discovered that do not fit within the current model. These phenomena are discovered through the process of normal science during which a field attempts to refine its models to make them more precise. Prior experience is necessary in order to know anything as it serves as the reference point to which everything else is experienced is compared. We are able to make meaning of reality based on this prior experience. These experiences can be shared in a group setting to construct knowledge amongst a group of people. Each member of the group will have had different prior experiences and therefore will have their own perspective from which to make meaning of something. Knowledge that is gained in one situation may not necessarily be applicable in another. It is important to focus on the context of situations, as there is no exact replication of any given set of circumstances even within a controlled research environment. Experience is important in establishing knowledge and there are methods available to do that

through collective discussion. It is important to recognize that different people will view things through different lenses based on their sociocultural background. I have abandoned my positivist perspective and come to realize the importance of social constructivism as outlined by Bruner. Finally, I have learned there is no absolute truth and there are many ways to establish something as knowledge.

Implications for Personal and Professional Growth

The lessons I have learned and my new way of knowing have set the tone for me as I embark on the rest of my journey as a doctoral student and for my professional career. I feel as I have grown in many ways over the course of the semester. The shift from a positivist viewpoint to a broader perspective will allow me to utilize different research strategies including qualitative and case study methodology. I will be open to different perspectives and will look for the context of research questions. The idea that there is no absolute truth means that I no longer have to accept previous knowledge but should look to question it in regards to its accuracy. This idea will allow me to refine different models to make them more precise or to discover anomalies that may be innovative in the field. Finally, the changes in my way of knowing have taught me the importance of working with other doctoral students and professionals in constructing and refining models to continue to develop the knowledge of the field.

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References

Achebe, C. (1959). *Things Fall Apart*. New York, NY: Doubleday.