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Epistemology.pdf

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I was fortunate to have the opportunity to ask children, ranging in age from five to twelve, what it means to learn, and how they know when they have learned something. Some of the children defined learning as – listening to what the teacher tells you, and then remembering it. These same children explained that they know when they have learned when they are - able to repeat the information back, or pass the test. Other children explained learning and knowing differently. For example, an eleven year-old girl explained, “we’re living in it, so we know what it is about. There are things we don’t know, and we wonder about, so we’re going to find out.” She continued, “If we’re going to learn and have fun, then we need to study and learn what we’re interested in.” She emphasized the importance of “hand-on activities,” and “connection to the community.” She also lamented that adults seldom notice nor take children seriously, and often do not believe that they can reason and generate knowledge.

You might interpret the above paragraph as writing about child agency, which is an important topic, in and of itself. However, what the previous paragraph has been designed to exemplify is epistemology. The examples presented above are of children’s ways of knowing, which is called epistemology. The epistemology, or in other words, perspective on how they know, of the first group of children is passive and secondary. The knowing adults pass the important information on to the children, and they memorise and demonstration their ability to recite this information. The second epistemology, or way of knowing, is active and primary. The children use their senses to experience the world and construct their own understandings of what matters and how to use and apply the information. It is interesting to me to consider how these epistemologies were shaped and evolved, and whether they will develop and change throughout each of these children’s lives. For example, do you believe that we have defined children’s epistemologies through the way in which we have designed schooling and the relationship between teacher and student? What makes the difference for the children with the second type of epistemology?
Continuing in the context of children, let us explore another example. I was asked to write a chapter for an education textbook. I made what I consider to be a transformative decision, to co-author this chapter with my 9 year-old daughter. She is the first author and I am the second. You see, I believe that children have deep and important ways of knowing, for which we do not give them credit, and thereby miss out on important knowledge. While my daughter and I were writing this chapter, a colleague of mine found the idea and the process irresistible. He kept popping in and out of my uni office with ideas and quotes from books. We have numerous conversations throughout the day. After each of these conversations, my daughter’s ideas creatively flowed. She characterised this process as “mind-melding.” Without knowing that she was speaking about epistemology, she explained that through conversation she is able to get in touch with her own ideas, and then put these ideas into her own words. She elaborated that without these conversations, the writing (i.e. the knowledge) would not be possible. On the way home, a concern struck my daughter. She queried, “I don’t think I have anything original to say. I’m not sure that I really wrote my parts of the chapter. All I did was listen to what we were talking about and then put it in my own words.” I found this worry very profound. Her comment reflects a deep epistemological understanding. I challenge you to ask yourself, do any of us have original thoughts? Do we sometimes just tell more compelling stories? Is it possible for humans to know without being and conversing in the world?

We started this exploration by looking at children’s epistemologies, or their ways of knowing. Epistemology, however, is not a concept confined to children, or for that matter to academics. Perhaps it is only academics who use the term – epistemology, but all of us, whether we have ever thought about it before or not, have an epistemological stance, or in other words, beliefs about how it is that we come to know. In fact, if you have ever felt held back, or incapable of further education and lifelong learning, it may be your epistemology rather than your intellect and/or training that is the barrier. For example, here is a quote from a mature student, who is coming to uni to begin a second career. This is a direct quote from a concern she sent to her education lecturer about completing her assigned essay.

I suppose life experience is what I can offer this essay. But who cares about that? How do I make it sound professional and move it towards educational research? The ethical and political dimensions of educational research I have seen from working in childcare and as a parent of primary school aged children, but can that be taken seriously at this level? Is being a mum and a dissatisfied childcare worker enough? Do I just use the research project I am working on now? I have been looking through some of the previous assignments and these people have so much educational experience behind them, I feel extremely underqualified to put forward my views.

This rich and honest email evokes numerous questions in the epistemological domain. I encourage you to consider each of these
As we work our way through these questions, three final topics come to mind. The first is **power imbalance**. As you likely noted throughout our first discussion of children’s ways of knowing, and then throughout our questions posed to the troubled student, there is an acknowledgement that we have a ranked society. Some people count as knowing, and the knowing of others is discounted. To use a rather extreme example (extreme in the sense of stigma or misinformation), did you know that most of the literature and practitioner guidelines consider children who are blind to be developmentally delayed? To me, this is shocking. I know a number of children who are blind, and they are anything but developmentally delayed. Do you know what prompts this diagnosis? This conclusion is drawn because children who cannot see have a different way of coming to know the world around them. In other words, blind children’s ways of knowing are inconsistent with the sighted majority’s epistemology. I believe that children have pure and natural ways of knowing that are sometimes left untainted by our adult conventions. We have a lot to learn from those who “just know.” How is it that they know what they know, and how do we encourage people to be proud of that knowledge?
The final concept is constructivism. Before we define this concept, let us consider some metaphors of knowing and learning.

- Children are empty vessels waiting to be filled up. The teacher’s job is to pour in the information, and the children’s job is to demonstrate that they know it.

- The eyes are like cameras. We take a snapshot of the world before us and thereby know about that world.

- The communication consists of sender-message-receiver. If there are problems in communication, we can rectify the problem in four ways: 1) the sender becomes clearer, 2) the message is reworked, 3) the receiver dedicates more energy to listening, and 4) we clear-up noise in the communication channels.

As you probably guessed, each of these metaphors defines the opposite of constructivism, and yet, these are the unconscious, unarticulated dominant metaphors grounding our education system.

Educators who take a constructivist stance believe that people build, or in other words construct their understandings based on what they have previously experienced. We do not construct these understandings in isolation. We construct them together as a society and culture. We have “mindsets of the age” that shape how we perceive the world around us. To me, this resonates with a great deal of the discussion we have held above. A stance of constructivism reminds me that, Yes! The children’s sensory, hands-on ways of exploring the world, and thereby knowing it, matter, and that, Yes! The troubled student’s lecturer does indeed want to know about the student’s experiences as they inform her understandings.

It is vital that educators consider ways of knowing and explore their student’s conceptualizations. Let me give you a humorous example from my own childhood. We were driving from our city to visit my grandmother living in another city approximately three hours away. Between the two cities was farmland. I asked my dad what country we were in. I will never forget his stunned and appalled reaction, as he thought I did not know that I lived in the country of Canada. My mum, who was a teacher, pursued my question and the construction of my understanding. You see, one of my favourite children’s story books was The Country Mouse and the City Mouse. I believed that if the cities had names, then so too should the farmland between those cities.

The final concept that we are going to examine within the context of epistemology is reflexivity. Researchers believe that our place in the world
moves beyond constructing our understandings of that world. In other words, we are more than photographers photographing and then interpreting those images. Many philosophers and researchers believe that our perceptions of the world simultaneously reflect and shape the world around us. In other words, our ways of knowing determine our ways of being in the world, thereby recursively impacting our knowing. The implication is that our ways of knowing are so powerful that they come to change the world. This philosophy is complex. Let us consider the example of the troubled student presented above. She discounts her experiential ways of knowing. Her response may be to either: 1) drop the course, or 2) exclude her experiential accounts from her essay. Either way, she is sending the message to the lecturer, and to society at large that experience does not count as ways of knowing and students do not measure up. Conversely, this student has taken the brave step of consulting her lecturer, who subsequently acknowledged her experience as important as it connects with the course themes. Returning to the example of writing with my daughter, my search of the literature leads me to know that children are not honoured as education textbook authors. Writing with my daughter leads her to know that her voice matters. Publishing the chapter reflexively constructs the message that children’s ways of knowing count, thereby opening the doorway for other children to author their accounts of the world.

*Epistemology* is a paradoxical concept in that the philosophy seems so complex, and yet ways of knowing are such a natural part of our everyday life. In fact *epistemology* is one of the key defining characteristics of what it means to be human. My hope is that these reflections with respect to epistemology will help you to become conscious of your ways of knowing, and reinforce your confidence in that knowledge.