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Anti-realist Epistemologies in Education

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Abstract

Constructivism and postmodernism endorse and anti-realist metaphysics. Once we abandon the fruitless search for objective reality, so the argument goes, we can devote ourselves to making our beliefs more efficacious than they were before. We can do this because we have given up *truth-as-correspondence*, and have embraced the claim that what makes a belief right is just that experience has taught us that it works. In short, because our claims to truth (and thus knowledge) refer to utter contingent accounts of reality, it follows that they are only contextually true. As such, any claim to an invariant *foundation* (an objectively knowable external world, for example) for knowledge is met with skepticism. Instead, knowledge ought to be concerned with the local and specific (contextual) rather than the context-free and totalizing general.

Introduction

This entry is part of a three-part series on educational epistemologies. Some (perhaps many) readers will be unfamiliar with major philosophers and theoretical frameworks that speak to these issues. The primary aim of this project, however, is situate educational theorizing and philosophizing within the domain of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. Specifically, it aims to provide a categorical framework in which to understand the essential (anti) metaphysical presuppositions and attending epistemological commitments of some the more prominent educational paradigms. A secondary goal of this article is to introduce new concepts to educational scholars, with the hope that doing so will add a new layer of understanding the to work of education scholarship.

Theories and philosophies in education can be classified in terms of how they understand the nature of reality (metaphysics). This turns out to be quite significant for teachers, as well as the work of the educational theorist and/or

researcher. For example, if I (an educational theorist) deny that the external world exists in some objective independent state as a constructivist might, it follows that my knowledge-claims about this or that educational phenomenon will be constrained by this presupposition. It will also have important implications—as the so-called paradigm wars in educational research demonstrate—for the sort of educational research I carry out. Thus, reckoning with one’s metaphysical assumptions plays an important part in the consumption and production of research (e.g., new knowledge).

With this in mind, I explore the first of these metaphysical starting points: anti-realism. I begin by defining anti-realism in terms of two basic premises: (1) a denial that world exists independently and objectively outside human intellection, and (2) the intuition that our mental activity organizes and provides meaning to our experiences. I then trace out the epistemological claims of two particularly influential anti-realist frameworks in education: constructivism and postmodernism.

The term “anti-realist” is far-reaching. One can be an anti-realist about some or all of the following: physical entities, morals, the past, the future, other minds, universals, and so on. Alvin Plantinga (1982) provides the following concise description of anti-realism:

The core of...anti-realism is the idea that objects in the world owe their fundamental structure—and, if they couldn't exist without displaying that structure, their existence—to our creative activity. The world as it is in itself, apart from this structuring activity, doesn't display any of these features. The idea is that if there were no persons (or if there were some and they didn't structure the world in the way in which we do in fact structure it) then there would be no objects in space or time, none displaying object property structure, no *number* of things of any sort, and the like (p. 50).

Plantinga makes two relevant observations here: (1) the mind is responsible for structuring and ordering experience, and (2) without this mental activity these objects would have no fundamental ordering or structure whatsoever. Each position outlined below is (according to its own logic) anti-realist; each is dubious of “objective” knowledge claims about the actual state-of-affairs outside the activity of the mind.

Constructivism

Perhaps the most influential theory of learning in education these days is constructivism. Although

constructivism takes many forms—some quite radical, others relatively moderate—it generally denies the traditional conception of knowledge as justified true belief. Instead, most constructivists endorse an explicitly anti-realist thesis that (1) knowledge is constructed by an individual or society, because (2) there is no shared *reality* to which our beliefs about the world correspond. Put differently, individuals interpret and give meaning to the world around them. A socially constructed reality emerges when persons share their realities with one another. However, both (1) and (2) are subject to multiple interpretations.

Constructivism stresses the subjective nature of experience and the vital contribution of the learner and teacher to the process of acquiring new knowledge (or making meaning). Likewise, the products of constructivist research (e.g., ethnographic research, self-studies, grounded research) are recognized and embraced as systematic subjective *representations* of reality. A representation, of course, is not distinct picture of the world as it is; rather, it is filtered interpretation of how the world manifests itself. As such, findings in a qualitative study might be loosely defined as “knowledge” insofar as they make sense of our shared social experiences. Neither students nor researchers, however, are gaining new knowledge of the world “out there.”

In this way, constructivism clearly parts ways with traditional Anglo/analytic accounts of knowledge as justified true belief. The crux of the issue lies most centrally in the particular account of truth posited by constructivists. Metaphysical realists understand truth as a

correspondence relationship between a mind and world: through our perceptual faculties we perceive the world around us and can then make certain justified claims about it. A true belief, on this account, is one in which a proposition (a statement of fact) matches reality. Anti-realists would counter that we have little reason to believe our minds have access to such a reality. It follows that truth claims gain no force by appealing to the external world *as it really is*. The upshot is that constructivists must reject the traditional articulation of knowledge as justified true belief.

Several important figures in the history of education have endorsed or been associated a variety of moderate forms of constructivism, e.g., Jean Piaget (1954), Jerome Bruner (1973), and Lev Vygotsky (1978). Names most educators will certainly recognize. Piaget, for example, argued that knowledge is internalized by way of assimilation and accommodation (cognitive constructivism). Assimilation refers to the process whereby new experiences are integrated into our existing knowledge framework. Suppose I read a novel by Tolstoy. As I work through the text, I encounter new ideas and interesting passages. These are assimilated into my pre-existing network of knowledge. My mind then takes a further step to accommodate this new knowledge. Thus, accommodation is a re-framing of my mental representations of the external world. It follows that one's mind is always in the process of changing. Here we see the influence of John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of education on constructivist (and postmodern) theories of knowledge construction.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1922) writes, "In schools, those under instruction are too customarily looked upon as acquiring knowledge as theoretical spectators, minds which appropriate knowledge by direct energy of intellect. The very word pupil has almost come to mean one who is engaged not in having fruitful experiences but in absorbing knowledge directly. Something which is called mind or consciousness is severed from the physical organs of activity" (p. 164). Dewey, like constructivists, views the acquisition of knowledge as a constructive and ongoing process. One does not simply *learn*, but one is always *learning*.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism, often used interchangeably with poststructuralism and methodologically tied to deconstructionism, is another anti-realist theory that has garnered considerable attention in education over the past few decades. Two often cited contemporary curriculum theorists—Patrick Slattery (2006) and William Doll (1993)—have endorsed poststructural approaches as modes of inquiry that open new possibilities for understanding the present-day educational landscape. Doll, for example, predicts that a "new sense of educational order will emerge, as will new relations between teachers and students, culminating in a new concept of curriculum" (p. 3). Doll's prediction, made in 1993, may well have come to fruition within the context of curriculum scholarship. New curricular models and frameworks inspired by postmodern thought continue to find purchase in educational thinking.

Offering a concise definition of postmodernism, however, tends to be difficult. According to Usher and Edwards (1994), “There is a sense, anyhow, in which it is impossible to fully define the postmodern since the very attempt to do so confers upon it a status and identity which it must necessarily oppose.” Rather, the terms postmodern, postmodernism, and postmodernity are “loose umbrella term[s] under whose broad cover can be encompassed at one and the same time a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse, an attitude and a mode of analysis” (p. 7). In short, to systematize postmodernism is to miss the point of postmodernism. Thus, the following analysis aims only at approximation—fully aware that codification reifies exactly that which postmodernity repudiates. Nevertheless, if, as its advocates maintain, postmodernism is a new way of thinking about education, what does it have to say about knowledge?

There are, of course, numerous postmodern perspectives in educational theory. Patti Lather (1992) argues for deconstruction when approaching educational issues and research. According to Lather, the goal of deconstruction “is to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal” (p. 96). Knowledge is thus unmoored from any objective (static or fixed) external state of affairs—any singular account of reality. Many, if not all, postmodernists would agree with Lather’s insistence that we deconstruct the binaries and categories that permeate education. Nevertheless, some have called for “constructive” elements in

postmodernism. Patrick Slattery describes his own constructive approach that “seeks to integrate the best features of premodern rural, agrarian societies (such as spirituality, cosmology, and family/tribal community values) in order to construct a more balanced and ecologically sustainable global community” (p. 28). And still others address educational issues through a postmodern reading of scientific development (Tobin, 1993). Likewise, others have focused their attentions on ecological issues. Chet Bowers (1993), for example, works to create a postmodern theory of ecological justice rooted in a sense of generational and biotic connectedness. In sum, there are innumerable positions available to the postmodern theorist. What binds many of them together is a strong sense of *justice*: ecological justice, economic justice, and social justice.

At root postmodernism is deeply suspicious of so-called modernist *meta* or *grand* narratives about knowing and knowledge. It is argued that these narratives describe or frame the world in a fixed language that simply cannot represent the shifting nature of reality. Instead, postmodern thought starts with the assumption that the structures, systems, and relationships that underpin modernist accounts of reality are wholly contingent and fluid. Richard Rorty (1999), for example, presents a postmodern theory of knowledge that denies that we have direct access to reality—that is, the way things are independent of the mind. Rather, he argues that knowledge (and epistemology) ought to be replaced with “hope” in better ways of believing. He warns, “One should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start

worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs" (p. 34).

Discussion: The Upshot

The preceding accounts of constructivism and postmodernism are significant for teachers *and* educational researchers on several fronts. To begin with, I would argue that purveyors of knowledge (teachers) ought to have a strong grasp of what it is they are up to. When a teacher gives a lecture on the process of photosynthesis, for example, is she sharing something true and incontrovertible about the world *as it is*, or should she understand her lectures as representing something contingent and socially constructed? Constructivist thinkers are quite right to emphasize the importance of meaning making and personal learning schemes, especially if organizing the content of experience is so deeply embedded in learners' mental activity.

Suppose, however, an educator has concluded that constructivist and/or postmodern epistemology has missed the mark. Given constructivism's expressed relativism and postmodernism's political/ideological leanings, it is not difficult to imagine some students rejecting their essential epistemological claims in favor of theories that endorse an objectively knowable world (epistemological *realism*). What practical implications would this have on her instructional practices? Do the best practices of constructivism conflict with *realism*? Such questions ought to occupy a central place in the academic training of teachers in teacher education programs.

Likewise, creators of new knowledge (researchers) would do well to consider the epistemological foundations of constructivism and postmodernism. Having discussed these issues with my university colleagues, I have observed that relatively few professors of education have given much attention to the epistemological and metaphysical implications of anti-realist theories. The reason is relatively simple. Few faculty members have extensive background in philosophy, which explains the relative lack of theoretical sophistication when dealing with epistemological claims. One remedy I strongly advocate is the inclusion of two required doctoral-level courses in philosophy of education and educational epistemology. The former would provide a general overview of the major philosophical movements that have influenced the trajectory of contemporary schooling, while the latter provide a space for doctoral students to work through their personal epistemological worldview. The upshot is that greater understanding of these issues would not only improve future academicians' understanding, but would also translate into higher quality work.

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