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Considering the Epistemological Tools of Higher Education



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Reader in Pedagogic Practice
University of Sunderland
Monday 22 January 2018

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As subject disciplinarians the central debate around whether epistemology (ways of knowing) is always and inevitably personal, is endless. As educators and pedagogic researchers, the argument is much less ambiguous. Whilst disciplinarity can ultimately set the scene for our ontological stance, education remains a social science, at the heart of which lie facets of subjectivity, interactive dialogue and relationality-in basic terms we are humans who interact with one another, with evident impact. We can acknowledge our personal stance (our position relative to the research issue), but pedagogic research ultimately has an agenda with a probe into the heart of the researcher (a sentiment echoed far more eloquently by Bateson, 1972).

Shulman's now seminal work on signature pedagogies has provided a wealth of information on what characterises differences and diversity in academic disciplinarity for Higher Education (Shulman, 2005). How we know, and the epistemological tools we adopt in evaluating educational practice, remain connected at a very

How we know, and the epistemological tools we adopt in evaluating educational practice, remain connected at very rudimentary levels

by Shaun Thompson

rudimentary level. As such 'how we know' about what students perceive and internalise is the basis of pedagogic research surrounding the student experience.

The ramifications of this matter much to the metric measures now proposed for adoption in the notion of accountability for Higher Education by the Office for Students. Essentially, whilst the National Student Survey, Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) and Teaching Excellence Frameworks (TEF) ratings are now established epistemological tools for the purposes of data collection, they tell us nothing about what students actually experience. They capture only basic perceptions of what they 'feel' in a given snapshot of time. What this relationship actually constitutes is a prevailing dilemma in the study of epistemology that has been continually extended to incorporate the concept of the personal in epistemic cognition. That dilemma is the notion of perceived versus actual reality.

In pragmatic terms this is fundamental to the central ethos of how knowledge about Higher Education provision is established, articulated and regarded in the wider context of pedagogic, rather than discipline specific research. It raises the central question, in relation to the governance and accountability measures of research and provides a means by which institutions will be graded in relation to how best they operate in relation to prescriptive frameworks rather than accounting for or acknowledging any contextual or situational context of provision.

Providing an insight into the liminal space between what is the basis of 'knowing' and the knower is essential to deconstructing meaning in the context of perception. This insight can then be used to consider how personal epistemology influences choice of philosophical underpinnings in processes of research design and methodology. This is important when

we consider the inherent differences in approaches to research, as those contexts where we are an integral part of the process we are investigating ought to be unashamedly acknowledged as such. The ability to acknowledge personal stance provides a level of authenticity and methodological transparency that would otherwise be impossible.

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Facilitating the consideration of both traditional and contemporary epistemological lenses, using recognised philosophical perspectives it is possible to raise awareness of a wider range of epistemological stances. Making sense is an integral part of being human (Eisner, 2017). It lies at the heart of the fundamental understanding explanation and comprehension. In terms of human need, control of extraneous environments and the emotions that

regulate interaction with them are the pivotal basis of the need to 'make sure'. This has now also become a core characteristic in how tacit knowledge can become 'transferable knowledge' in the context of Higher Education pedagogic praxis. We need to ensure that as both educators and disciplinarians our right for individualised discernment at the expense of structure and agency is not lost for the sake of the students we serve and who ultimately will make very individual and collective contributions to our global societies.

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