

A Teacher's Right to Know: Epistemological Controversy and the Preparation of Educational Professionals

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In his essay, "Toward a Re-evaluation of the Role of Educational Epistemology in the Professional Education of Teachers," David Carr compellingly concludes that educational professionals "must learn to ask for themselves and continue to ask" questions about knowledge and truth, rather than cede such territory to epistemologists. Philosophical questions are intrinsic to the practice of good teaching, and as such demand a "more radical practical" role for philosophy in addressing both "theoretical educational studies on the one hand and subject or methods courses on the other."

This is a particularly noteworthy stance and follows well from Carr's arguments. It would be disingenuous of me to argue against his conclusions, since I agree quite strongly with them. I, too, protest the movement in many educational quarters toward an uncritical development of learning and teaching skills. Why does this type of movement occur? It strikes me that this question itself involves many important epistemological elements: From what context does one make and/or act upon knowledge (including theories of knowledge)? What constitutes "good" or valid knowledge? What do conceptions of knowledge serve, and what are their effects?

With the intent of extending and, at times, challenging Carr's analysis, let us return these questions to the foundationalist conceptions of Paul Hirst and their postmodern oppositions. According to Carr in conversation, Hirst and Peters "developed a basically traditionalist account of education [in the U.K.] which saw education as a matter of rational *initiation* into the knowledge and values of received culture...(my emphasis)." Hirst's "forms of knowledge," ("logically discrete forms of rational understanding," including logico-mathematical, scientific, moral, historical, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical) comprised the epistemological component. E.D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy" would provide an approximate American analogue. Whether it be "forms of knowledge" or the list of "What Literate Americans Know," the epistemological emphasis is placed upon reproduction of "necessary" knowledge, in order that people may legitimately and successfully learn for themselves.¹

This "reproduction of necessary knowledge" conception has two main drawbacks. The first is touched upon by Carr. Whether such a conception "serves" curriculum policy makers and planners, is it appropriate for the "education and training of *teachers*?" The answer appears to be a resounding no. What counts as "good" knowledge for policymakers and planners involves the formulation of propositions that *eliminate* doubt, and hence the appeal of forms of knowledge. As Carr again said in conversation, "Forms of knowledge just seemed to describe the way knowledge uncontroversially *was*...There didn't seem to be much room for doubt." On the other hand, what counts as "good" knowledge for teachers involves

the development of reflective habits which *invite* doubt, because it better prepares them for the endless contingencies and extraordinary richness of the learning process.

Elliot Eisner calls the former “elimination of doubt” approach, the “verificationist conception of knowledge — something that can be tested, packaged, imparted, and sent like bricks across the country to build knowledge structures,” and in another article indicates that verificationists “employ models [like those of the natural sciences] that are designed to deal with other than educational phenomena.”² The worth of verificationist knowledge essentially rests anti-philosophically upon its ability to repel any questioning which does not fit its forms — in other words, all but technical questioning.

The second drawback to the “reproduction of necessary knowledge” proceeding from the first involves its unexamined context, specifically the failure of policy makers and theoreticians both to consider the effects of their dominant locations in deciding upon what necessary knowledge is and secondarily to problematize the function it serves, namely an assimilationist one of reproducing and unifying not merely “knowledge,” but specific knowledge largely reflecting and benefitting those in power. This project opposes what many consider to be the more democratic and pluralist one of diversifying, articulating, and legitimating various knowledges, especially subordinated ones.

It is often from this latter position that postmodern challenges embark, using multiple, and often contradictory, “rival” knowledges to break up the authority of any one knowledge. Rather than producing a “settled,” “epistemological account upon which a given curriculum model” could be based, thus reflectively deskilling teachers, postmodernists often tend toward an *endlessly unsettled* account. This is where my interpretation differs from Carr. Rather than denying the possibility of an epistemological account at all, postmodernists deny any *definitive* account, often unfortunately undermining the possibility of even provisional accounts in the process, and giving rise the charge of incoherent (from the point of teaching) or “anything goes” relativism.

“Good” knowledge for many postmodernists seems to mean that which is either purely descriptive or infinitely skeptical. Hence, problematic postmodernism centers not upon undermining epistemological questions, but quite the opposite — undermining epistemological *answers*, especially those with any normative content, in an attempt to do away with the hegemonic possibility supposedly inherent in defined accounts. Many postmodern theorists proceed from a context where questions themselves are sufficiently productive, especially of critical strategies. This presents a unique quandary for teachers. Even reflective practitioners cannot afford endless critique. They need to form answers — not *the* answer, but *some* answers. They have to teach *something*.

The division between a foundationalist one-and-only account and a postmodern anti-account has the practical effect of encouraging Carr’s “fatal theory-practice dichotomy” in teacher education. Foundationalist epistemological practice discourages habits of philosophical questioning because, for teachers, the answers have

already been decided. Postmodern commitment to endless contention among questions and suspicion of answers ironically and unwittingly inspires a radical relativism where any answer is as good as the next when an answer is indeed needed. In my instruction of teachers I notice this dichotomy manifested as a reliance upon presented information (especially textbooks) as inviolable fact, on the one hand, and an "it's just my opinion; it can't be right or wrong" attitude on the other. Neither leads to reflection.

An educational epistemology for teacher education must provide an ultimately open, yet reasoned, framework for both questioning and answering, if one is to construe education broadly as having both a pluralist/transformational and assimilationist/reproductive requirement. Feminist Sandra Harding does an excellent job detailing one such example:

The standpoint epistemologies call for recognition of a (sic) historical or sociological relativism — but not for a judgmental or epistemological relativism. They call for the acknowledgement that all human beliefs — including our best scientific beliefs — are socially situated, but they also require a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims. They require, as judgmental relativism does not, a scientific account of the relationships between historically located belief and maximally objective belief.³

Harding's standpoint epistemology does include, as Carr says, "rational criteria for preferring one human perspective or narrative to another," but such criteria are open to overhaul and expansion through socio-historically situated critique by teachers. This serves to challenge not only "facts" but "opinion." In tune with this epistemological understanding, I have had my teachers critique, using their own cultural and personal positions, self-esteem evaluations written by experts, for instance. Yet I also feel justified in saying, "When you hold a racist opinion, and that opinion affects how you teach, it *is* wrong" (that is, it is not "maximally objective" since it does not take into account other viewpoints, because its criteria are too constrained).

In fact, in my experience, the tension itself between assimilationist and pluralist tendencies in education inspires a robust reflection even upon questions of epistemology. As a student in my Education in a Pluralistic Society class commented:

In examining the personal priorities and perceptions in the class, one of the tensions between the differing demands of assimilationism and pluralism...has its roots in the fact that individuals may not have ever understood what they believed prior to the question being raised within the context of the class....The struggling within then can occur only to the degree that the question is rightly understood, and to the quality of interaction that the other players in the conversation contribute to the overall discussion.

So maybe it is time for educational epistemologists to turn toward teachers, especially with regard to curricular concerns, for sources of questions. Is it not teachers' skeptical/creative struggles, at the border between theory and practice, to find *some* answers to be taught, confronted, and experimented with, which provide the strongest direct challenges to theories of knowledge, and indeed the most interesting questions?

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1. E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 152-215.
 2. Elliot W. Eisner, "The Promise and Perils of Alternative Forms of Data Representation," *Educational Researcher* 26, no. 6 (1997): 7 and Elliot W. Eisner, "Can Educational Research Inform Educational Practice?" *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1984): 450.
 3. Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 142.