

Philosophies of knowledge in education

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Education is a curious discipline. It does not belong with the hard sciences, but neither is it entirely received by the social sciences. As such, it often stands alone, attempting to justify its place as a science while also maintaining a firm grounding in everyday practices. Education as a field is not content-driven, in the way that the natural or physical sciences are, although the current push for data-driven policies might suggest otherwise. Nor is education considered a social science in the way that sociology, political science, or anthropology are, although most, if not all, innovations in the ways that educational philosophers and thinkers understand and apply knowledge in education come from those and other like disciplines. Instead, education is largely concerned with *process*, and the various ways that philosophical notions of knowledge, epistemology (how we know what we know) and pedagogy (how we teach and learn) both inform those processes and are in turn shaped by them.

The earliest approaches to knowledge in the Western tradition stem at least from Plato and his writings on the teachings of Socrates (5th century BC). Indeed, the Socratic method may be the most enduring pedagogical technique still widely employed in educational settings today. Simply put, it is a method in which a teacher (in the original iteration, Socrates) poses questions to a student, and directs a student to effectively discover knowledge through her/his formulation of responses to the questions. In this way, knowledge from a philosophical standpoint is something that is uncovered and discovered through dialogue between a student and a teacher, and it is this relationship that forms the basis of what the West has come to call education.

Indigenous forms of knowledge-making and transmission have also been employed for at least as long as the Socratic method, and have recently come to the fore in decolonising contexts as viable pedagogical tools for contemporary students and teachers. While it is not possible to generalise every indigenous epistemology, it can be said that, in a context such as Oceania, much of the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge within societies was stratified (often along gender and hierarchical lines) and specialised (navigators, healers, spiritual leaders, etc.), both so that a community could survive in often trying environmental and ecological conditions, and so that the transmission of particular forms of knowledge would be ensured through the generations. In the present age, while the idea that knowledge is the exclusive purview of a particular family or other social unit is no longer viable or necessary, the resurgence in indigenous ways of knowing has proven vital to legitimising and normalising the way non-Western societies and groups make meaning and understand reality, and has begun to inform more conventional Western epistemology in turn.

Another enduring and essential impact of philosophies of knowledge in education has been the role of the state in educating its citizens, as well as defining the relationship between citizen and state. There are references to this arrangement in Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who saw children as inherently sinful and therefore in need of management and control by the state, and in John Locke (1632-1704), who asserted that children were blank slates (*tabula rasa*) who required direction from civil society in terms of what and how to think. Perhaps the most influential, and complete, treatise on this notion of the child and the state came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) in his novel *Emile*, in which he struggled with the inherent conflict between the naïve and natural beauty of 'unspoiled' childhood and the demands of the state, which was corrupt, for informed and education citizenry. Rousseau argues for a deliberate intervention into the nature of childhood that keeps the corrupting influence of the collectivity of the state at a minimum, and offers what can arguably be considered the first philosophical theory of child development in terms of how knowledge is taught and learned. It is also important to keep in mind, however, the explicitly gendered rendering of knowledge presented here by Rousseau, and that *Emile* is about and for the education of boys. His unfinished sequel, *Sophie*, about Emile's betrothed, came under fire from feminist thinkers shortly thereafter, including Mary Wollstonecraft, who criticised it for its portrayal of women and girls as intellectually dependent upon men. Yet, *Emile* served as the basis for France's first national system of education, and its tenets regarding the purposes and transmission of knowledge in terms of citizen and state are still deliberated.

Of lesser impact at the time of their publication, although of much greater interest today, are the theories of knowledge in education by influential Western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Kant's *On Education*, published the year before his death, is notable for his argument that knowledge in education needs to address the idea that developmentally children are not simply uneducated adults, but that they have their own forms of epistemology and learning. While teaching at the University of Basel, Nietzsche delivered a series of five lectures that have recently been collected and published in English with the title *Anti-Education*. In these lectures, Nietzsche returns to the perennial debate over the aims of education and the role of knowledge in the educative process, drawing his attention to the role of state institutions of higher education and their focus on learning for purposes of economic growth. This state approach to linking higher education with economic viability, it may come as no surprise, comes under direct fire from Nietzsche, who saw the role of higher education as serving a greater purpose than simply to get a better job or a raise.

Indeed, the question of how knowledge should be used in education is one that continues to confront us today, and thrives in political debates regarding the function of educational knowledge as the preferred path, for example, to getting a better job. Whitehead, a British mathematician writing a few short decades after Nietzsche, gave a series of lectures ostensibly on the teaching of math, but his real target was education and pedagogy in general. In these lectures, published as *Aims of Education*, Whitehead spoke to the need to teach knowledge based on student interest, as well as the ways in which knowledge in education is 'living' rather than fixed and immutable. While he predated the poststructural shift to come later in the 20th century, Whitehead's lectures have more recently garnered interest because of his radical conception of how philosophical notions of knowledge are in fact produced, and contrast with Platonic ideas of 'discovering' knowledge.

A contemporary of Whitehead's, John Dewey (1859-1952), remains the most influential, if not the most important, educational theorist in the United States, and his understanding of how knowledge operates in educational settings continues to serve as the basis upon which much of contemporary Western educational philosophy is considered today. Dewey was associated with a number of intellectual and political movements, notably progressivism and pragmatism, and his works on the role and function of the teacher, the student, the school and society comprise some of the most comprehensive renderings of modern-day notions of philosophical knowledge in the field of education. Dewey's focus on the need for democratic societies to educate their children in deliberate ways, the ways students construct knowledge for the aim of intellectual and social growth, and the idea that such growth is its own end endure, even as some of his developmental theories are attracting closer critical scrutiny.

To be sure, the most significant development in terms of theories of knowledge in the social sciences came in the aftermath of the May 1968 student protests in Paris, and the intellectual space that was created by such philosophers as Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998). These scholars ushered in a radical new way of conceptualising not just how we think and how we learn, but how we make sense of reality. Emerging theoretical fields made great use of this new space, and in the 1970s and 1980s disciplines such as anthropology and political theory saw the establishment and development of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, feminist theory, queer theory and more recently afro-futurism and new materialism, to name a few.

Because of its unique position as a discipline, however, the field of education came more slowly to the post-1968 philosophical turn. It was not until the 1980s and early 1990s that poststructural thinking made its way into educational philosophy over the past thirty years, notably with the work of Michael Peters, James Marshall and Stephen Ball. Since that time, there has been a flourishing of new approaches to philosophical knowledge in education – one striking example is the work of Bernadette Baker and the ways that she asks us to question our historical assumptions around philosophies of knowledge and learning – focused largely around issues of power and the production of knowledge itself. These intellectual positions have not only married themselves to indigenous epistemologies, but have sparked a critical questioning of conventional educational philosophies of knowledge, such as the role of Dewey in the postmodern age, as well as what reconsiderations of such thinkers as Nietzsche and Whitehead can now offer. It is exciting to imagine how educational approaches to the philosophy of knowledge will continue to evolve and shift our thinking about how students and teachers interact in educational settings. And while we can be sure that our understanding of knowledge itself remains unsettled, we would do well to appreciate the role of philosophies of knowledge in education in explaining what it is we are doing pedagogically, and why we are doing it.

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