

Exercise on the Development of Epistemological Beliefs / Conceptions of Knowledge / Epistemological Development (after Baxter Magolda)

Exercise developed by Jenny Moon

The exercise is based on material taken from Baxter Magolda, M (1992) *Knowing and Reasoning in College*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. Some of the quotations are slightly modified to make better sense.

Stage of Absolute Knowing . This is the least developed stage in Baxter Magolda's scheme. Knowledge is seen as certain or absolute. Learners believe that absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. When there is uncertainty it is because there is not yet access to the 'right' answers. Such learners may recognise that opinions can differ between experts but this is in differences of detail, opinion or misinformation. Formal learning is seen as a matter of absorption of the knowledge of the experts (e.g. teachers). Learning methods are seen as those that concern absorption and good memory of fact. Assessment is simply checking what the learner has 'acquired'. Knowledge is a commodity and learners are there to 'get' it and teachers 'pass it over'.

Transitional stage: Here there is partial certainty and partial uncertainty. Baxter Magolda describes the transitional knowing stage as one in which there are doubts about the certainty of knowledge and learners accept that there is some uncertainty. Authorities may differ in view because there is uncertainty. Learners see themselves as needing to understand rather than just acquire knowledge so that they may make judgements as to how best to apply it. Teachers are seen as facilitating the understanding and the application of knowledge and assessment concerns these qualities, and not just acquisition.

Independent knowing:. Independent knowers recognise the uncertainty of knowledge, and feel that everyone has her own opinion or beliefs. They seem to be at an embryonic form of the more sophisticated stage of contextual knowing. The learning processes are changed by this new view because now learners can now expect to have an opinion of their own and can begin to think through issues and to express themselves in a valid manner. They have to make judgements and they also regard their peers as having useful contributions to make in helping them to make up their minds. They will expect teachers to support the development of independent views, and to provide a context for exploration. However 'In the excitement over independent thinking, the idea of judging some perspectives as better or worse is overlooked' (Baxter Magolda 1992:55). In other words, they do not sufficiently contextualise their understanding and cannot yet see the role of context as having a bearing on the judgement.

Contextual knowing: Knowledge is understood to be constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the evidence in that context. The way in which knowledge is constructed is understood to relate to the consideration of the quality of knowledge claims in the given context. Opinions must now be supported by evidence and recognition of contextual influence. The knower herself and the reader / receiver of the knowledge are both seen as relevant to the process of knowing. The view of the teacher is of a partner in the development of appropriate knowledge. The learner sees herself as a constructor of knowledge

Absolutist –knowledge is certain or absolute;

I just like to listen – just sit and take notes from an overhead. The material is right there. And if you have a problem, you can ask the teacher and he can explain it to you. You hear it, you see it and then you can write it down (p 73)

I like getting involved with the class – by answering questions and asking questions. Even if you think you know everything, there are still questions you can ask. When the lecturer asks questions, you can try to answer them to your best ability. Don't just let the lecturer talk to you, have him present questions to you (p 73)

I have to see what I'm learning, and I have to know why. I have a good memory and it's very easy for me to memorise facts. The advantage is that it's kind of cut and dried. The information is there – all you have to do is to soak it up in your brain (p77).

I like teachers who will give you as much as you need and not just leave you with a little small idea and have you talk it out. I like it when they give you a lot of information. Then you can discuss it (p31)

In my opinion, the best way to learn is to listen in class and not be distracted (p34)

Transitional knowing – There is partial certainty and partial uncertainty

My French teacher is getting away from the book exercises because everyone falls asleep. She's started getting us into group discussions using our reading, but she corrects our tenses and sentence structure. It's much more real, much more practical and I think that's what we need. People are glad to be learning something that we can actually use (p 39)

When you've got fifty other people in the room challenging your views every ten seconds, you learn to assimilate everything. You try to piece out what you think is the best out of a conglomerate whole. That's the best (p105)

I had a different teacher in the sophomore level of the subject, and I learned to interpret things differently. When you have someone else give you a different interpretation of the same subject, you're forced to go back and do comparisons. And I thought, well, why would this person teach this subject this way and be successful and at the same time there's a person teaching it in a different way but still being successful? It begins to change you a bit (p103).

We'd start a class having read the material and then the lecturer would walk in and say something completely wrong. A shout would break out from the back of the class and we'd just start knocking at each other going back and forth at the same topic for the entire class period. Doing that just ingrains in your mind that no matter how right you think you are, you've got to hear somebody else out because they're to some extent right too (p105)

I have a tutor this semester who puts an outline on the board, of things he's going to cover. That way, even if I don't have the clearest notes – at least I know what he intended to cover.

Independent knowing – Learning is uncertain – everyone has her own beliefs

I've decided that the only person that you can really depend on is yourself. Each individual has their own truth. No-one has the right to decide 'this has to be your truth too' (p136)

I don't set anything that I feel in cement, which is what I did before. I've found that my foundations completely crumbled out from under me when I went on that exchange programme. I had to rebuild them for myself, which is the best thing that ever happened to me (p 137)

I want to be challenged. I am in a gender theory course that has a lot of women's studies students in it. There I feel challenged. My own politics are closely like theirs, but I don't have the background that they have. When I speak up, I have to really concentrate on what I think, communicate it effectively, and then when there's a discrepancy between what I think and what someone else thinks then I feel I can grow (p53)

It's funny. You read the same thing yet people see three different stories or three different meanings or interpretations. It helps you to reaffirm your own opinion, modify it or whatever is necessary (p50)

I guess I take everything in and then I go home at night and kind of sort out what I want and what I don't want. Some things, I guess – maybe because of my morals and values – will sit better with me and will seem like fact for me. And other things, I'm just like "I don't really think so". And I throw them out (p141)

Contextual knowing — Knowledge is constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the evidence in that context.

As you hear other people's opinions, you piece together what you really think. Who has the valid point? Whose point is not valid in your opinion? And (you) come to some other new understanding. Even if it's the same basic belief, maybe (you will be) able to look at it from a more (multi)dimensional perspective (p173).

I spent time getting a general feel for the topic as a whole before I made any generalisations. And then, after that, I started piecing together any general ideas that I believed in or general principles that I then tried to defend....And if it seemed like I was going against that principle too often or disagreeing with it too often, then I would sit down and reevaluate. Like maybe I'd learned something new that changed my way of thinking. So then I'd have to sit down and reevaluate that and then possibly change my mind accordingly (p174)

It's super-subjective. It is largely a matter of weighing other people's opinions and their facts against what you, yourself, have previously processed (p59)

In some classes, particularly when you're talking politics, you have people that are super-fired up on the left and on the right. Those people who are totally impassioned by their thoughts and feelings help to offset each other, so you can kind of arrive at something in the middle. You have then to take it in and let it process before you form a reaction (p59)

You can look at an issue from both sides and it's still history and you're still getting those facts and those different opinions about things and that's a kind of basis. But now you're taking that and working with it to come up with some sort of conclusion, or maybe not a conclusion and that's the conclusion in itself (p177)