Broadening Conceptions of What Constitutes Knowledge and Evidence in SoTL

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Abstract

In the two decades since the publication of Boyer's (1990) seminal work, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has earned an increasingly venerable reputation as a legitimate area of scholarship. What remains contentious, however, is the form that such scholarship takes. Despite the publication of numerous books and articles lauding alternative epistemologies, SoTL advocates regularly have to defend their approaches. The purpose of this essay is to encourage higher education practitioners to broaden their conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and evidence in SoTL. An epistemological discussion, it aims to provide a strong theoretical framework within which SoTL practitioners can argue a case for alternative epistemologies.

Keywords: SoTL, epistemology, knowledge, higher education

Introduction

I practise and teach the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). I am also a narrative researcher. This essay marries these two parts of my professional life; its purpose is to encourage higher education practitioners to broaden their conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and evidence in SoTL.

Two recent experiences, in particular, have prompted the writing of this essay. The first experience involved me consoling an experienced colleague on the feedback he had received on his (unsuccessful) teaching and learning award application. The feedback suggested that he would do well to move away from the narrative style he had adopted in his application and include, instead, in future applications, tables, graphs and statistics – in other words, 'real facts' or hard data. I wasn't surprised to discover that the selection committee had consisted primarily of academics from the "hard, pure" disciplines (Biglan, 1973, p. 207). The second experience involved an email exchange with a colleague from the Science Faculty. She was negotiating the submission of an abstract for a teaching and learning conference. Her concern was that she really wanted to write a personal perspective on her university teaching experiences across four continents, but suspected that this wouldn't be considered an acceptable approach for a formal conference paper.

In the two decades since the publication of Boyer's (1990) seminal work, SoTL has earned an increasingly venerable reputation as a legitimate area of scholarship. What remains contentious, however, is the *form* that such scholarship takes. Despite the publication of numerous books and articles lauding alternative epistemologies (see, for example, Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Gerhard & Mayer-Smith, 2008; Schön, 1995; Weimer, 2006) we continue to find ourselves, as SoTL advocates, having to defend such alternative approaches. As Schön (1995) suggests, "a nagging sense of inferiority" often afflicts those

who speak of "experience, trial and error or intuition" as their methods of inquiry (p. 28). Similarly, McWilliam (2004) refers to critics' perceptions of alternative approaches as "a blot on the landscape of inquiry" (p. 113). The continued existence of such perspectives is illustrated clearly by the above two examples. This situation is compounded by the fact that academics new to SoTL are often unaware of, or are challenged by, approaches that are disparate to those employed in their own disciplines (O'Brien, 2008).

This essay is an epistemological discussion that aims to provide a strong theoretical framework within which SoTL practitioners can argue a case for alternative epistemologies. It considers the following questions: What counts as knowledge? Who decides what counts as knowledge? What are alternative ways of thinking about knowledge production?

Knowledge Claims

A legacy from the Enlightenment, Western intellectual thought has long been dominated by the belief that knowledge corresponds with accuracy of representation – representation of things 'as they really are'. In other words, as the neo-pragmatist Rorty (1979) points out, knowledge claims have been traditionally judged by their capacity to mirror reality or nature. This positioning is predicated on a belief that there is indeed a 'truth' or reality out there waiting to be captured. Moreover, those processes employed to capture that 'truth' or reality are so " 'privileged' and 'foundational'" that they have not required justification (Rorty, 1979, p. 318); they have become culturally institutionalised. Such traditional approaches to knowledge make no distinction between the natural sciences and human sciences**.**

Lack of distinction between ways of knowing in the natural sciences and human sciences, through the broad application of traditional approaches, is problematic. First, there is an assumption that humans can be treated as objects. Second, traditional scientific approaches are reductive and atomistic; they bypass the opportunity to capture the holistic nature of human experience. Third, the notion that nothing other than the natural sciences can ever be truly objective is reinforced through these traditional scientific approaches; there is a belief that "…people are somehow always going to be so slimy and slippery…that they will escape 'objective' explanation" (Rorty, 1979, p. 346). These traditional positivist beliefs have served to intensify the objective-subjective dichotomy, and in doing so, have cast a shadow over the validity of non-traditional social science inquiry. Exploration of people's experiences can and should, however, be "unapologetically subjective" (Ayers, cited in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 118), and, I believe, valid. Justifying this belief leads to a deeper consideration of the nature of 'objectivity'.

Is it possible to claim any knowledge as purely objective? Is it possible to mirror reality? Barone and Eisner (1997) suggest that, "selection and construal always occur" in any representation of the world (p. 89). Indeed, it was this very notion that caused such vociferous outrage in sections of the intellectual community when Kuhn (1962) dared to suggest that our understanding of science could be influenced by social and political forces – that the emergence of new paradigms illustrated, unequivocally, that there were competing ideas about 'reality' and what counted as knowledge. The idea that knowledge could never be independent of the human mind was nothing less than revolutionary.

Geertz (1973) similarly questioned the capacity of ethnographic work to represent things 'as they really are'. Knowledge claims traditionally equated with "possessing justified true

beliefs" (Rorty, 1979, p. 366) have been challenged by Geertz's (1973) assertion that all anthropological data are "constructions of other people's constructions" (p. 9), "…and second and third order ones to boot" (p. 15). All anthropological writings are then, according to Geertz (1973), "fictions" as they are "something made", "something fashioned" (p. 15). If knowledge claims can be considered 'fiction' and not based on accuracy of representation, then on what are they based? On what basis can participants in our teaching and learning research, sharing their experiences, claim to 'know' anything?

The answer to this question is best encapsulated by the notion of reality as a *creation* rather than a *discovery*. This, according to Tierney (1997), is the basis of the social construction of knowledge. Polkinghorne (1997) reinforces this belief by suggesting that no longer are knowledge claims considered a reflection of reality or logical certainty, but rather "…they are human constructions of models or maps of reality…"(p. 7). And, when the notion of knowledge as a reflection of reality moves to one of knowledge as a social construction, the emphasis moves from a "commensurable discourse" to an "incommensurable discourse" (Rorty, 1979, p. 347), with a focus on negotiated and interpreted meaning of the social world (Kvale, 1996).

What Tierney, Polkinghorne and Rorty, *inter alia*, are alluding to is that not all knowledge needs to be commensurable in the traditional sense – that methods for acquiring knowledge in the sciences must be different from methods for acquiring knowledge in the human sciences. As Bochner (2001) suggests, "knowledge isn't something that's tested only against the standards of scientific inquiry" (p. 135). It was then, a "decline of faith in brute fact, set procedures, and unsituated knowledge" (Geertz, 1988, pp. 131-132) that led human science scholars in the last half of last century to reconsider just how knowledge is created.

According to a number of eminent scholars, it is through *conversation* that knowledge is created. Rorty (1979) claims that we understand knowledge when we "understand the social justification of belief" (p. 170). In other words, knowledge need not have an "essence", but rather should be conceived as a "right…to believe", and in doing so, conversation can be understood as "the ultimate context within which knowledge is understood" (Rorty, 1979, p. 389). Kvale (1996) goes so far as to suggest that "conversation may be conceived of as a *basic mode of knowing*" (p. 37, emphasis in original). Polkinghorne (1997) concurs, claiming that "knowledge is understood as an agreement reached by a community of scholars" (p. 7). Knowledge, then, need not be conceived as accuracy of representation. We need not expect research participants' knowledge of their experiences to be mimetic; their knowledge could be constructed through their conversation with researchers (Thomas, 2009).

Researching human experience requires a methodology quite removed from traditional scientific approaches.

Alternative Approaches to the Human Sciences

The dichotomy between science and humanities is, according to Bruner (1986), "an ancient topic, even a tired one" (p. 44). Much of the tension surrounding this dichotomy relates to the apparent desire of many to prove the ascendency of one over the other. Yet, as Richardson (2000) reminds us, there is more than one way that we might come to know something. Moreover, Rorty (1979) suggests that people aren't more difficult to understand than things, they just need different approaches and these approaches need not compete,

but rather complement each other. Polkinghorne (1988) concurs, suggesting that we need "approaches that are especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence", not more varied applications of traditional methods (p. x). So, the issue seems not to be so much about the ascendancy of one approach over another, or of objectivity over subjectivity, but rather an acknowledgement of differences in purposes of human inquiry and differences in modes of cognition. Geertz (1973) captures this duality aptly in his claim that ethnographic research is "not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 5). So, what are the differences between searching for a 'law' and searching for 'meaning'?

Fundamental Purposes of Human Inquiry

According to Barone (2001, 2007), there are two fundamental purposes of human inquiry. One of those purposes he terms *enhancement of certainty*, developed from, and reflective of Cronbach's (1982) notion that traditional social science aims to reduce uncertainty*.* That is, it is concerned with reducing doubt, and a desire to understand the world with certainty. Laws help explain and predict that certainty. From this perspective, a literal truth is sought.

The second fundamental purpose of human inquiry, according to Barone (2001, 2007), is *enhancement of meaning*, or more specifically, enhancement of *multiple* meanings (personal communication, June 25, 2002). The core aim of such inquiry is not to 'prove' or 'disprove' anything, but rather question the notion of truth. 'Truth' is considered to be relative – partial, situated and tentative. Considered this way, researchers seeking enhancement of multiple meanings are "truth-makers" rather than "truth-seekers" (Barone, 2000, p. 149).

Paradigmatic and Narrative Modes of Cognition

Bruner (1986) presents a perspective on cognition that complements Barone's (2001, 2007) perspective on the fundamental purposes of human inquiry. Bruner (1986) claims that there are two modes of cognition, each distinctive in the way they construct reality: the *paradigmatic* (or logico-scientific) and the *narrative*. These modes of cognition essentially represent different ways of knowing. The *paradigmatic* way of knowing is illustrative of the Western scientific tradition. Hypotheses are advanced, ideas are categorised into concepts, evidence is reported and conclusions drawn. The focus is a reductionist one; items are defined as instances of a category. It is the paradigmatic mode of cognition, according to Rorty (1979), which has dominated Western intellectual thought to the exclusion of alternative ways of knowing – a situation Rorty clearly felt was in need of revision.

The *narrative* way of knowing, on the other hand, is concerned with human action, with difference and diversity, and with the idiosyncratics of the particular (Barone, personal communication, June 25, 2002), somewhat akin to Aristotle's 'practical knowledge' – that is, contingent knowledge, a way of knowing which depends on context and which is inextricably tied to human action (Eisner, 1997, p. 261). This difference and diversity between humans' experience should not be seen as a complication or a problem, but rather, as Barone and Eisner (1997) claim, "rich sources from which we can learn to experience qualities of the world that we might not otherwise encounter" (p. 88). Bowman (2006) captures this uniqueness of narrative when reflecting on Rorty's undergirding argument: "narrative opens up what grand theory tends to shut down" (p. 14).

These two ways of knowing are, according to Bruner (1986), "irreducible to one another" and any attempt to reduce one to the other or ignore one in favour of the other "inevitably fail[s] to capture the rich diversity of thought" (p. 11).

Conclusion

Knowledge need not be commensurable in the traditional sense. Knowledge is a social construction and methods for inquiring about knowledge in the natural and the human sciences ought to differ – and not compete – as they serve fundamentally different purposes (Thomas, 2009). As Barone and Eisner (1997) suggest,

> *the question that needs to be asked, therefore, is not one pertaining to the mimetic features of the work, but whether the work advances understanding, whether it illuminates important qualities, whether it deepens our comprehension of the factors, forces and conditions that animate human beings.* (p. 89)

We should, as SoTL practitioners, feel confident in our approach if it meets the criteria outlined by Barone and Eisner, above. As McWilliam reminds us, "we should know as academics that we do not have a monopoly on knowledge production, including knowledge production about what ought to count as valid inquiry into practice" (p. 120).

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