

Myths about Knowledge

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"We are drowning in information and starving for knowledge." ~Rutherford D. Roger

The word *knowledge* is central to education. People often assume that everyone "means" the same thing when they use the word. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Beliefs about the nature of knowledge—about what it is, where it comes from, and how people acquire it—abound. Those beliefs are fundamental to the way education works. Therefore, we must question what curriculum designers, teachers, parents, or students really *mean* when they speak of knowledge.

John Dewey⁽¹⁾ suggested the word *knowledge* has several meanings. First, it is the result of one individual's process of inquiry. Assuming the inquiry has been competent and sufficient, the conclusion—the knowledge—is trustworthy. For example, archaeological evidence shows that early man had a sophisticated knowledge of astronomy and its relation to weather. The first human who noticed that connection "created" that knowledge.

A second meaning of *knowledge*—one that often supersedes the first—arises when a significant number of individual inquiries result in the same conclusion. People generally accept such a conclusion as more significant—more "true" than the inquiry of a single person. This *Knowledge* (with a capital K) takes on a life of its own outside of the individual processes of inquiry that generated it. From there, it is a small step to perceiving this Knowledge as true in some absolute way—apart from the minds that conceived it.

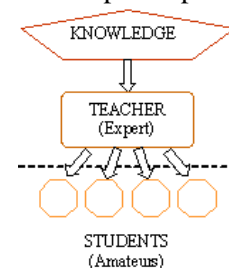
In this view of Knowledge, the cognitive processes—the inquiries—that created the Knowledge are ignored. Rather than viewing Knowledge as a total package—*inquiry plus the products of that inquiry*—the products become answers devoid of questions and removed from the contexts in which they were developed. They become objective "truth."

Objectivist Beliefs about Knowledge

This "objective" truth is what many educators believe they must transmit to students. *Objective* literally means "apart from the human mind." Newton's Laws of Motion and other "laws" of nature, Euclidean Geometry, the rules of grammar, and other items in the content standards identified by many states or in the "essential knowledge" lists identified by some theorists, are Knowledge in this sense. These "knowledge objects" are taught—or more accurately, transmitted—with little concern for where they came from and why.

What effect does this deliberate separation of product from process have on teaching? In *The Courage to Teach*, educator Parker Palmer identifies four elements of what he calls the "objectivist myth of knowing":

- * "Objects of knowledge...reside 'out there' somewhere, pristine in physical or conceptual space, as described by the 'facts' in a given field."
- * "Experts [teachers] are people trained to know these objects in their pristine form without allowing their own subjectivity to slop over onto the purity of the objects themselves."
- * Amateurs [students] are those who do not presently possess these objects. They must depend on experts for objective or pure knowledge of the pristine objects.
- * Baffles allow objective knowledge to flow downstream while preventing the subjectivity of the amateurs to flow back up—possibly contaminating the intellectual purity of the objects.⁽²⁾



Notice the metaphors contained within this view.

- Bits of *Knowledge* are categorized as *objects*.
- Not only are they objects, but like rare antiques, they must be protected against change of any kind lest their value diminish.
- These objects are possessed by some but not by others. In order for a person to come into possession of an object, someone (the experts) must give it to them.

In the school context, the experts decide which of these Knowledge objects the amateurs should possess. They then dispense the chosen objects *whether or not the amateur wants them*.

The *baffles* in Palmer's model represent the efforts of objectivists to keep the knowledge free from subjectivity. Students are not allowed to probe knowledge for weaknesses lest they somehow damage it. They are rarely permitted to engage in the same process of inquiry that yielded the knowledge in the first place. When this activity is permitted, as for example, in a science "experiment," the expert carefully guides the amateurs so that they follow closely in the steps of the master. "All visitors must stay on the path."

Objectivist educators consciously or unconsciously accept the definition of objective as "apart from the human mind." There are those who reject the argument that the categories by which we conceptualize the world and our experience are products of the mind. For them, the categories actually exist in nature, waiting for the perfect human mind to discover them. Objectivists work toward the attainment of this perfect mind that will eventually learn to abstract the true essence of nature as it exists "out there."

Many teachers have been caught up in the objectivist myth. In their own education, Knowledge was something given to them by their teachers. Therefore, they assume they must now give to their students in the same way. The adherence of those teachers to the objectivist myth is mindless in the sense that it is unexamined. According to Palmer,

"In the objectivist myth, truth flows from the top down, from experts who are qualified to know truth...to amateurs who are qualified only to receive truth. In this myth, truth is a set of propositions about objects; education is a system for delivering those propositions to students; and an educated person is one who can remember and repeat the experts' propositions. The image is hierarchical, linear, and compulsive-hygienic, as if truth came down an antiseptic conveyor belt to be deposited as pure product at the end.

"There are only two problems with this myth: it falsely portrays how we know, and it has profoundly deformed the way we educate."⁽³⁾

Palmer points out that although many classrooms maintain this image of teacher, students, and subject as separate entities, "...I know of no field—from astronomy to literature to political science to theology—where the continuing quest to know truth even vaguely resembles this mythical objectivism."

A continuation of the discussion on knowledge and the role of teaching may be found in Chapter 10 of *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*.

References

1 Dewey, J. (1939). *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Holt Rhinehart & Winston, 8.

2 Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 100-101. The diagram is adapted from Palmer's book with his permission.

3 Ibid, p 101.