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Women's Ways of Knowing: A Journal Reflection

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In working on my Research Reflection paper, I felt the need to further my study and investigation on knowledge acquisition. Research methods raised many questions in my mind on the nature of knowledge and how we come to know. As part of that further investigation, I began reading *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986).

Belenky's (1986) study was the first of its kind to address the problem of knowledge theories created from studies of mostly men; i.e. Perry's work (1970). Their study interviewed 135 women from all levels of life and education to understand what was "important about life and learning *from her point of view*" (p. 11). As I read, I found myself marking many sections and making connections to my life's experiences and learning. This reflection journal fits best in the Learning competency under the personal learning section, as I continue to clarify and reflect on the ways that I know and learn.

In this reflection I will share a somewhat disconnected sequential set of notes and thoughts throughout the chapters of the book. Consider this a form of thinking out loud while reading the book.

Introduction: To the Other Side of Silence

One of the first things that caught my eye in this chapter was the section on Carol Gilligan's work (1982). Instead of the "blind justice" solving conflicts with abstract laws and principles that men prefer, "they argue for an understanding of the context for moral choice, claiming that the needs of individuals cannot always be deduced from general rules and principles and that moral choice must also be determined inductively from the

particular experiences each participant brings to the situation” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 8).

“Mutual understanding is most likely to lead to a creative consensus about how everyone’s needs may be met in resolving disputes.” This rejection of blind impartiality has, “in the eyes of many, marked women as deficient in moral reasoning” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 8). Wow! I know that in my own perspective of resolving conflicts, I want to make sure everyone’s needs are met. The needs of others, and the importance of each person being understood are distinctly female perspectives. This understanding of myself and others will bring deeper understanding in future conflicts.

In the description of Perry’s work, I found the view that relativism is the highest form of knowing uncomfortable; due to my faith in religious absolutes. Is it really true that only when the student completely understands that truth is relative that the student is then “able to understand that knowledge is constructed, not given; contextual, not absolute; mutable, not fixed” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 10)? From my experiences abroad and my study of qualitative research, I know that knowledge is contextual. From my preference for the constructivist learning theory and resultant pedagogies, I know that knowledge is constructed. Yet I still believe in some absolutes that fit into my faith context and are learned by connecting them to my prior knowledge. This paradox and tension is difficult to articulate, yet part of who I am.

Chapter 1: Silence

“In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write – sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other’s experiences” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 26). I love this quote. When I think of reflection in the Leadership program, I find that writing

out my reflection is a deep method of learning. The writing process draws forth and articulates thoughts that were just simmering in my brain. But my favorite reflection is in online courses that are based in discussion, where the conversation flows between participants and everyone is sharing deeper and deeper reflection. To some extent, this happens between educational technology bloggers broadly, and K12 videoconferencing bloggers specifically.

The chapter on silence was deeply disturbing to me. That there are women in this condition distresses me. My eyes are opened to their plight. Understanding better their situation, I am even more loath to judge those who cannot bring themselves to leave bad relationships. I am even more desirous of supporting ministries and services that assist women in finding their voice.

Chapter 2: Received Knowledge and Chapter 3: Subjective Knowledge

I'm sure that in my early life I was at the point of received knowledge. One of the interview quotes from this chapter stood out to me: "When I read things, I get very frustrated. I can read one thing and it seems to make sense. Then I read something else and that makes sense, and it would be conflicting views" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 51). I remember thinking that this plight was the fault of being a missionary's kid. I knew very well that there are valid differing opinions on how to do things. I found that whoever talked to me last was the opinion that I held the strongest. Sometimes I heard their view so well that I find it hard to keep my own view. I still find it very easy to get into another person's perspective, point of view, and see the validity of where they are coming from.

The conflict between respected "sources of knowledge" came to a head in my faith journey between my senior year in academy and my second year of college. I

remember being distressed because two people I respected and trusted had different views of the reasons why Jesus died on the cross. I remember many tears when I couldn't reconcile the views satisfactorily. My loyalties were torn. When I spent a year in the Marshall Islands as a student missionary, I went through all of the Pauline epistles and wrote down all the reasons I could find for why Jesus died. I found over 15 reasons! I concluded that God is like a diamond – many sided. Some people are really attracted to one side and can think that is the only truth. Others find another side and think the first people are wrong. When in fact each of them are right; they've just over-emphasized a particular area.

Note though, that in this resolution, I did not throw all outside sources of knowledge to the wind, as did many of the women at the “subjective knowledge” level in Belenky's study. Instead I went to God's revelation to systematically find a solution. This sounds closer to the “procedural knowledge” in Belenky's study. The procedure of studying the Bible that I subscribe to is to let the Bible speak as a whole – using all the verses on a topic to find an answer. To let the plain statements in the Bible interpret the difficult ones.

In fact, I did not find much in the subjective knowledge chapter that resonated with me. The stories of abuse and of escaping the conventions of society are not mirrored in my experience. I have never had an “extreme antirationalist attitude” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 72); however, this chapter helped me understand better the experiences that lead to this attitude. Therefore I can better understand relatives and friends who are in this mode of knowing. Belenky suggests that subjectivist women experience instability and flux due in part “to the lack of grounding in a secure, integrated, and enduring self-

concept” (p. 81). I was raised in a secure loving family, and am now in a secure loving relationship. In addition, my lifelong foundational belief and experience of God’s love for me has created a “secure, integrated, and enduring self-concept.” While I am blessed with this experience, understanding others makes me more compassionate and sympathetic and much less judgmental. I want to learn to teach, ask questions, and support so that I can assist other women as they move past the subjective knowledge level.

Chapter 5: Procedural Knowledge

I really liked the concept of “methodolators” those who idolize a certain type of methodology (Daly, 1973). The sentence, “when a government funding agency insists upon a particular methodology in the research it supports, it outlaws questions that cannot be answered in that fashion” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 96) reminded me of the current focus on “scientifically based research” that only accepts experimental studies as valid (Reyna, 2006). I am uncomfortable with the idea of randomized trials being “the gold standard” of research (Reyna, 2006) as it seems to deny methods of knowing that are just as valid. It also devalues the human as just a plant or animal that can easily be assigned to treatment and control groups (Dalton, 2006). It “outlaws questions that cannot be answered in that fashion” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 96). Yet I must admit that when I went to find the reference for Daly’s work, I was concerned by her radical feminism in theology. It sounds like the subjectivist knowledge chapter, where the authoritative source of knowledge is women’s experience. I believe balance is critical, and I still believe that God created man and woman *together* in His image (Genesis 1:27).

I like the concept of procedural knowledge as a process, as a way of looking at something from different perspectives. I too am “interested not just in *what* people think

but in *how* people go about forming their opinions and feelings and ideas” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 97). This does not make me feel “profoundly alone” though, because I value and appreciate the different perspectives.

I marked the concept of losing a voice when “separate knowing is the only voice allowed” (p. 106). I have also experienced preferring to listen to others rather than voice my own views. It happens more often in person; however, I have no trouble using my voice in the online world. This interesting development may be due to the amount of time I spend learning and teaching online as opposed to face to face classes. My online voice has been honed and developed; there is no fear there. However, physical presence and greater awareness of others’ position and power can sometimes intimidate my voice. “Faith believed that the only way people could say something important was by weighing its importance in advance” (p. 106), and it’s much easier to think before speaking when writing in the online world.

Future reading and learning must include Paulo Freire’s work. I liked the quote (p. 107) that teachers are genuine partners of the students (Freire, 1971). I prefer this mode, especially in my work as an instructional technology consultant. I want teachers to feel that we’re all learning together; and if they learn some of my learning strategies, they too can apply educational technology tools to their classroom practice.

Chapter 6: Procedural Knowledge: Separate and Connected Knowing

Belenky (1986) makes a distinction between separate knowing, the idea of separating oneself from the knowledge and raising above it, and connected knowing, which includes procedures for “gaining access to other people’s knowledge” (p. 113). Connected knowers see the other “not in their own terms but in the other’s terms” (p.

113). This “may be difficult for men, [but] many women find it easier to believe than to doubt” (p. 113). “It’s easy for me to take other people’s points of view. It’s hard for me to argue, because I feel like I can understand the other person’s argument” (p.113). This is definitely true for me. I want to understand the other person’s perspective, but even if it makes no sense to me, I find it hard to argue against it. I am reminded of an occasion where I had a deep disagreement with a male colleague. His point of view was unintelligible to me; based in an adversarial perspective. I was extremely frustrated with his point of view, but could not bring arguments to defend my point of view. I finally undercut his position in a less than ethical way. I could not see any other way through the situation. This experience was very difficult for me; yet it is explained by the concepts of connected knowing and the differences between men and women.

Connected knowers learn through empathy; separate knowers learn through explicit instruction on adopted a different lens of a specific discipline (Belenky et al., 1986). Both of them are learning to look from another point of view; they just learn differently. Important to remember when instructing others! “Connected knowers begin with an attitude of trust; they assume the other person has something good to say” (p. 116). “These women ... could make moral judgments, but they did not wish to impose those judgments on others” (p. 117). I certainly see this in my life; and it conflicts with my belief to spread the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20). I do not want to judge others; yet I want them to experience the abundant life (John 10:10). This conflict creates the challenge of appropriately sharing my faith, which I will consider further in the ethics and spirituality reflection paper.

Connected knowers bring “half-baked half-truths” to groups and ask others to nurture them (p. 118). I do this all the time on my blog. I throw out ideas and suggestions, ask questions, and invite others to discuss and further the conversation. Interestingly, most of the videoconference coordinators are female (Lim, 2009). Connected knowers in groups accept criticism because they have “shared a similar experience” (p. 118). When I consider the criticism and feedback I’ve received from other videoconference coordinators, I realize now how I can accept this criticism so easily.

Connected knowers “do not always find it easy to enter perspectives very different from their own” (p. 121). “It is important to distinguish between the effortless intuition of subjectivism and the deliberate, imaginative extension of one’s understanding into positions that initially feel wrong or remote” (p. 121). When I see other perspectives, am I using intuition or deliberate imagination? It’s an important question to ask myself.

I found this statement intriguing in light of the Leadership Program. “In institutions that are more progressive, or less rigorous (depending on one’s point of view), students may be encouraged to develop their own curricula, exploring their own self-interests, and to use their own personal experience as a source of knowledge” (p. 123). Sounds like the Leadership Program to me! I think this tells how far we’ve come in the 30 years since this book was published. People see the value of this type of learning for all genders.

Chapter 7: Constructed Knowledge: Integrating the Voices

Belenky (1986) suggests that “a voice of integration” finds “a place for reason *and* intuition *and* the expertise of others” (p. 133). Constructed knowers integrate the knowledge around them. They notice what is happening with others and care about their

lives; they were self-aware and reflective. “Even the most ordinary human being is engaged in the construction of knowledge. ‘To understand,’ as Jean Piaget (1973) said, ‘is to invent’” (p. 133). This definition is compelling. I, too, believe that one must “do something” with knowledge to make it your own. It must be used and share with others to make the learning real.

“Women constructivists show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity” (p. 137). I agree with the “inevitability of conflict and stress” and am becoming more comfortable with the idea of living with the conflict instead of suppressing “the self in order to avoid conflict” (p. 137). This is an area where I can continue to grow and improve; as I still try to avoid conflict. I hope to address this further in the communication reflection and reading.

I like the concept of theories not as truth but “models for approximating experience” (p.138). My journey in the Leadership program has extended from an inability to identify a theory, to seeing the usefulness of theories as well as their inadequacies. Theories can help us think about experience and analyze occurrences to improve practice. But they aren’t the final “truth”. I do not see science as “absolute truth or a procedure for obtaining objective facts” (p. 138); instead as a way of examining the world. Science gives a method for looking at the world. But other questions and contexts can impact our understanding as well. Multiple sources of knowledge expand understanding. “Questions and answers vary throughout history, across cultures, from discipline to discipline, and from individual to individual” (p. 138). Constructivist knowers put systems of knowledge “to their own service. They make connections that help tie together pockets of knowledge” (p. 140). This aptly describes my experience in

the Leadership Program, as the separate competencies have begun to blur, overlap, and inform each other. The connections are exciting and interesting, and inspire a “never-ending quest for learning” (p. 140).

Constructivist women find that “learning that their ideas can be taken in and put to use – that their ideas can spark interest among unknown others – is an exhilarating and confirmatory experience” (p. 146). I already experience this with my blog, and hope to experience it further as I begin publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

Some thoughts are included in this book that will assist me in my ethics reflection paper. I understand better now, my reaction to some of the principles/laws (Johnson, 2005). “Women’s question posing when faced with moral conflict indicates a sensitivity to situation and context” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 149). Women “insist on a respectful consideration of the particulars of everyone’s needs and frailties” (p. 149). This perspective is at the heart of the responsibility orientation as opposed to the rights orientation. Instead of using a logical hierarchy of abstract principles, women try to understand “each person’s perspective, needs, and goals” in order to do the “best possible for everyone” involved (p. 149). The concern for responsibility connects to social responsibility, to ethics, and to my own Responsibility Strength (Rath, 2007). “Since the publication of Kohlberg’s paper, research by, with, and for women has increased. This research suggests that the directions then assumed to be natural do not come naturally to many women. ... An ethic of responsibility may be more ‘natural’ to most women than an ethic of rights” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 229).

Chapter 9: Toward an Education for Women

Finally, these concepts can be applied to my teaching of teachers, most of whom are women. Belenky (1986) outlines suggestions for education, which are intriguingly connected to current beliefs about learning and teaching. For example, connected teaching is a model “in which the expert examines the needs and capacities of the learner and composes a message that is ... courteous to the learner” (p. 194). Sounds like differentiated instruction to me: changing the message, the process, the activity, the product based on the needs of the student (Tomlinson, 1999). Women need to “know that they already knew something (although by no means everything), that there was something good instead them” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 195). The value of accessing prior knowledge (Kujawa & Huske, 1995) in affirming women’s knowledge and creating the confidence necessary for future learning and achievement is critical. The strategy is now an essential part of all good teachers’ toolbox. Good teachers is connected to good mothering. “Good mothering requires adaptive responding to constantly changing phenomena” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 201). “In this sense ‘maternal thinking’ differs from scientific thinking, which considers an experimental result to be real – a fact – only if it can be replicated” (p. 201). This statement describes in stark reality the conflict between innovative new teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction, and the requirement for “scientifically based research” (Reyna, 2006) and explains educators deep frustrations with the No Child Left Behind Act. Evaluation isn’t bad however. “Evaluation in the connected mode requires that the standards of evaluation be constructed in collaboration with the students. Where impersonal standards are used, the students are turned into objects, and the connection between teacher and student is broken” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 208-209). This concept fits well with current views of constructivist classrooms.

Another interesting suggestion is that women like to have the practical experience and then to use that experience to examine theories (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 202). Do women tend to enter Kolb's learning cycle at a different than men? This would be an interesting question to research.

Chapter 10: Connected Teaching

“So long as teachers hide the imperfect processes of their thinking, allowing their students to glimpse only the polished products, students will remain convinced that only Einstein – or a professor – could think up a theory” (p. 215). In what ways do I, can I model my thinking to my students? In what ways do my professors model their thinking? Something to consider.

“Midwife-teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it” (p. 217). I really like this metaphor, and I think that I do this in my online classes which are based in discussion and questions that require reflective thought.

“Midwife-teachers help students deliver their words to the world, and they use their own knowledge to put the students into conversation with other voices – past and present” (p. 219).

In this chapter I found another reason to read Freire: the importance of dialogue, which is actually the basis of all of my online courses. “In Freire's ‘problem posing’ method, the object of knowledge is not the private property of the teacher. Rather it is ‘a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students.’ Instead of the teacher thinking about the object privately and talking about it publicly so that the

students may store it, both teacher and students engage in the process of thinking, and they talk out what they are thinking in a public dialogue” (p. 219).

When thinking about qualitative and quantitative research, I liked this footnote on page 224. “Those who believe that the social sciences should mimic the natural science stance of ‘objective outsider’ criticize participant-observation for its subjectivity. But in a sense the participant-observer is less subjectivist than is the traditional empiricist. The sociologist Sylvaner Bruyn points out that ‘the traditional empiricist considers himself (as a scientist) to be the primary source of knowledge, and trusts his own senses and logic more than he would trust that of his subjects. The participant observer, on the other hand, considers the interpretations of his subjects to have first importance’ (1996, p. 12)”. This could explain my compulsion to blog about my dissertation and ask my videoconferencing colleagues what they think of the results and if they are validated in their experience.

Conclusion

This book was very fascinating to me, as you can see by my long reflection. I can see in the seeds of this book, the changes and trends in education today and it’s gratifying to know that this knowledge has been applied and built upon.

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