Andrea Boykin

Reflective Analysis

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When I began this class, although I did not know the term for it, I would have described myself as a positivist as I usually rely on data and proven facts to determine what I know. I believe that my way of knowing started when I was very young out of an interest in certain topics and was cultivated through my undergraduate degree, my graduate degree, and the jobs I worked throughout the years. However, after going through Ways of Knowing, I have realized that the way of knowing in which I relied on while going through school is not the only way of knowing, and that other ways of knowing have value in the study of human behavior and education.

My interest in research, which has affected my way of knowing, started when I was very young. My mother and father had two complete collections of the Encyclopedia Britannica at home. I wasn’t a child that enjoyed playing outside with friends, so if my sister was busy I would often read a book or go through the Encyclopedia. One of the games I would play by myself was flipping through the pages with my eyes closed and putting my finger down on any page, then reading about whatever word I put my finger on. I also remember my mother telling up to look up things in the encyclopedia or dictionary if we had a question. Starting very young, I saw resources such as the Encyclopedia or dictionary as a solid way of knowing and that I shouldn’t rely on what other people said without confirmation from an outside source. The combination of seeing sources such as the dictionary and encyclopedia as reliable sources and my interest in using them helped me to appreciate validated sources.

This interest in research continued when I was around nine years old at the time my parents purchased the internet for our house. I remember looking up anything that interested me online especially topics regarding dreams, art, and astronomy. I would spend hours reading online information about these topics and developing an interest in how the people knew what they were writing about, often double checking any interesting fact to make sure there was not only one person claiming it to be true.

My way of knowing was refined throughout high school. In high school, I took AP level English and Art History; both classes had a profound effect on the way that I write which effects the way that I come to know. In both classes, everything I wrote had to have textual proof; opinions were not allowed. I recall in AP English being required to write only the necessary, to not include any embellishing words that were not necessary to the content of the sentence, and to always have textual proof when making a statement. In Art History, we did not write about how the art made us feel and we also had to have textual proof that was based on historian research and comparison between other pieces of art. Throughout that year, all of my writing was based on textual proof that had a base in research. I also wrote what was necessary and without bias. Opinions contained certain styles of writing, including narrative, were not reliable and should not be included in the writing. My way of knowing, which was reflected in my writing, became a reliance on unbiased researched evidence, either found in study or literary and historical text. Any information that I wrote had to have textual evidence which could be cited, or needed to be my synthesis or conclusion of information based on the resources that I found. In college, any paper that I wrote followed the same pattern; information was unbiased, I attempted to move myself from what I was writing, and everything was based from evidence. The way I wrote became the way that I knew things.

When I started teaching special education, the emphasis was placed on evidence based practices and data, two things that I was very familiar with, just in a different way, due to their cultivation in my high school and college education. In school, we often tested children monthly to show growth in addition to the in class testing and assessments. Every score of the child, and even their behavior, had to be documented extensively. In meetings, this data would be used to make inferences about the child and used as justification for certain decisions. As a teacher I realized that data was important, but the data never showed the full perspective of the child. It could not account for if the child took the test when hungry or if he had stayed up late. The data only showed one side, but the story behind the data was equally as important. In meetings, I was often able to show the collected data, but then provide a narrative that would explain certain behaviors of the child and how it possibly correlates to the test scores and data. Providing a narrative a helped to support what was revealed in the data, or used as a tool to show how the data could not be relied upon solely. Using narrative in conjunction with the data helped students to get the services they need, determine appropriate IEP goals, and place the proper supports in the classroom. Relying only on numerical data would not have provided a complete perspective of the students, which may have effect their placement, goals, and services.

Ways of Knowing helped me to have a better understanding of my way of knowing. When I first started the course, I thought that I was a person that relied upon data solely and rejected narratives and text that was opinion based. The combination of the in class lectures, the books, and the weekly reflections helped me to become aware that there are ways of knowing that were not strictly data based, and my way of knowing leans towards some of those ways of those knowing.

When starting the course, I aligned myself with the positivists because I was mainly aware of quality research having a quantitative based. If a research article or journal did not have a quantitative based, then I relied on information that was gathered in a systematic way using quality sources and relevant textual examples. Although I still come to know mainly by synthesizing researched information, I have a greater understanding of how I use narrative and how narrative is important for research. I have realized that in some studies, especially in the topics of social science, quantitative positivists studies may fail to represent the subjects as a whole. It gives singular perspective, which in some cases, will not be enough to develop research that has a relevant connection to the audience being studied. For example, a quantitative study can be produced that demonstrates students increase their reading fluency when reading a digital copy of a book. However, if the students participating in the study preferred paper to the digital copy and the study did not capture the narrative of the students, the research could have implications that do not work well for the target population. Becoming aware of the types of research and ways of knowing and the purpose of each will help me to create research that is relevant for the target participants.

Although I still lean towards accepting studies that align with positivism more, and still usually reject the idea of narratives being used solely as a way of knowing, after this class I am more aware of the importance of narratives in social science. I am not yet close to the post-modernists, because I do believe that studies when done correctly can reflect aspects of specific subsets of the population, and I still hope for generalizability. However, I would categorize myself as more of a post positivist with an appreciation for narrative when needed. I understand the need for a scientific method, and a systematic approach to study. However, I now have more of an understanding that other factors, including the researcher and aspects of what is being observed can effect or act in support of the results, synthesis, and conclusion.

Having an understanding of how I come to know and other ways of knowing will help me understand various forms of research and have a better perspective of specific studies used within my courses, projects, and dissertation. It will affect the quality of my research and the way I approach studies when working independently and within a group setting. At the beginning of this course while working on a study for a professor and trying to find relevant articles for a literature review, I found myself disregarding qualitative studies and not including them as articles that should be reviewed. Midway through the course, I understood my own bias towards that way of knowing and also started to appreciate it and see its purpose within the study. That incident highlighted my growth; now I am able to look through different ways of knowing and understand the author’s intention. Additionally, throughout the program, I will be able to approach research now understanding that positivism is not the only way to approach knowing and research, but that other forms of knowing exist that also have value within the field of social science.