

Running Head: PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

*Questioning Authority: My Personal Pursuit of Knowledge*

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To critically analyze how I come to know and how that process influences my actions, it is also imperative to understand why I come to know. As a first year student in the HALE Masters program at MSU, I have returned to higher education four years removed from my undergraduate degree for two major reasons. First, I want to be more thoughtful and educated so I can be a better professional. Simply challenging myself intellectually will help me think more critically in my everyday work, even when the concepts I study do not have immediate relevance to my current position as Honors College Admissions Counselor or any future positions I may hold. A second reason I have returned to higher education is more practical. A Masters degree is required for upward mobility in my field. Thus, I have dual motivations: intellectual growth and practical professional advancement.

After this consideration of my current learning pursuits, it is important to reflect on my personal beliefs about education and educational institutions and how these beliefs guide my thinking and approach to my work. For the first eight years of my formal education, I do not believe I ever questioned why I was learning. School was mandated and I viewed knowledge as something that was transferred from teachers and books onto students. This thinking continued through high school, but I was introduced to ideas of critical analysis in a few of my social science classes. I came to understand the nature of an argument and research. This growth continued into college, where I was urged to think critically about the nature of thought and life in my political theory courses, where we read Plato, Nietzsche and others. Through these courses, I reflected on and further developed my own epistemology. I was asked to think about what I regarded as truth, belief and justification. I realized my personal definition of these important terms was shaped by my place in society. I had to ask myself, how do I know what I

know and why do I believe certain things. This was a difficult process and one that I had never before encountered.

A reoccurring dilemma throughout all of my formal education has been how much to accept from what I read and from what my professors say. My primary education was through Catholic school where teachers were authority figures not to be questioned. I believe this has influenced me greatly throughout my education. When I read articles and books, I feel myself easily swayed into agreeing with the author as long as the analysis is strong. Currently, I am appreciating the HALE Masters program for requiring me to use the authorities of the field as a foundation that allows me to discover and reflect on my personal philosophies of learning, leadership, and more. Babbie is helpful in reminding me that there is nothing inherently wrong in “believing what we’ve been told” as it is the only way a human can make sense of this complicated world (2007, p. 3). His further comments on recognizing the possible fallibility of authority guide me toward the required next step: every information source, even myself, must be analyzed for “errors in inquiry” (Babbie, 2007, p. 6). Through the process of my formal education, I can see that I have moved from blindly being a container for the knowledge that is imparted on me by educational institutions to a more thoughtful, critical and active participant in my education.

After determining my personal beliefs on education and how I go about learning, a more refined view of the issue can be gained by asking if I am open to alternative ideas and concepts. I was able to reflect on this question during our online discussion. When I start a research project, I usually have an idea or an issue that I find interesting. Sometimes, that idea has already progressed into a loosely defined research question. For me, the most enjoyable part of research is getting into the literature, establishing a base of knowledge and discerning the more

important and refined research question. I believe this shows that I am open to alternative ideas at a very important moment in the research and learning process. In this way, I am able to question my own authority. Another critical juncture when it is important to be open to new ideas and concepts is after formulating your own view on a topic or thesis for an argument. I find this more difficult. If the research has been done well or the view has been carefully and critically formed, it is harder to question. I realize I need to challenge myself to do a better job being open to new ideas and concepts in this area.

Ladson-Billings provides some helpful ideas on staying open to alternative ideas and viewpoints in “It’s Your World, I’m Just Trying to Explain It: Understanding our Epistemological and Methodological Challenges”. She asks the reader to realize that all of their research is based upon a foundation. This foundation has been formed by certain beliefs of truth, an epistemology. In addition to acknowledging the epistemology we are working with, Ladson-Billings concludes by imploring the readers to “keep open the possibilities of limitless thinking and innovation” (2003, p. 12). She is asking that we be open to refining our knowledge foundation and ideas.

There are a number of ways I can best position myself to critically analyze my knowledge of education. First, I must always remember to question authority. As I have previously stated, I am apt to be easily swayed by strong arguments. For me, questioning authority will mean thinking critically about new information and then checking to see how it fits in with my other understanding of knowledge. Second, in my planned future professional life in the higher education admissions field, I will read the relevant research and scholarly journals, looking for relevant studies and new ideas. Discerning the appropriate usage of research findings and practical experience will be my goal as a practitioner. A relevant point that

emerged from our online class discussion and from Floden's chapter, "What Knowledge Users Want", is too not be too focused on the particularities of my situation and then dismiss the research (2006, p. 27). Floden warned against this dismissal by teachers, but I think it is a warning for all professionals. Lessons can be learned, and proscriptions possibly applied, even if the situations are not the same. It will take a critical analysis to see what ideas can be gleaned from research in disparate settings. Third, simply by being enrolled in the HALE Masters program and taking the courses, I am better prepared to sift and winnow my knowledge of education for the rest of my life. Through classes like EAD 860, Concepts of a Learning Society, I have realized that learning will and should happen throughout my life, formally and informally. My job is to acknowledge those learning situations and think carefully about my experiences.

Through addressing my personal beliefs about education, my openness to alternative ideas and my positioning for critically analyzing my knowledge of education, my personal concept of inquiry has emerged. I realize I need to read books and articles, engage my professors, and attend lectures. But I also need to listen to my classmates and listen to myself. Only by asking myself the critical questions, and making sure I question authority (in all of its forms), will I truly learn. Asking the fundamental questions of what it means to know must be done continually. We must be aware of ourselves, of what makes us who we are, of what underlying truths we believe and why. Boyles' article, "Dewey's Epistemology: An Argument for Warranted Assertions, Knowing, and Meaningful Classroom Practice", provides some helpful ideas as I formulate my personal concept of inquiry. "The point of inquiry in education is not to collect detached artifacts or pieces of the dead wood of the past. Active engagement *of the sort Dewey suggests* means students attempt to reach stability of beliefs rather than certainty"

(Boyles, 2006, p. 65). From the thoughts of Dewey, Boyles is suggesting that true inquiry and learning will only take place if students (which we all are) go beyond learning pieces of information and truly think deeply about what this information means to their lives. How does it fit in? Boyles' suggestion resonates with me because I need to remind myself that I am not trying to achieve absolute certainty, but rather a "stability of beliefs" that allows for adjustment and retooling (Boyles, 2006, p. 65).

Carefully thinking about all of these questions has been an extremely helpful exercise. I have realized I need to understand the underlying foundation of my beliefs so that I can see how new information is either accepted into or denied from my knowledge system. With a guiding reminder to question authority in all of its forms, I look forward to continually asking myself these questions throughout this semester, the rest of my Masters program, and throughout my life.

References

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