

Epistemological Development - William Perry's Stages of Adult Cognitive Development

The relationship between learners and knowledge is central to the work of William Perry in his influential Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years (1970). Perry traces the development of male college students' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and themselves as knowers during their undergraduate years at Harvard.

Perry observed that freshmen often reported a *dualistic* view of knowledge: information was either right or wrong. Knowledge was seen as a collection of facts known to experts. The role of the professor, as such an authority, was to dispense this knowledge. The students' role as learners was to passively receive this truth, keeping quiet until they knew what the correct answer was.

When the students' belief in absolute truth was shaken, they began to entertain the idea that there are multiple truths and that knowledge is a matter of subjective opinion. During this period, learners began to develop trust in their own "inner voice" as a source of knowledge and thus based their judgment on intuition, feeling, and common sense, often regarding one opinion as valuable as another. Perry found that the majority of his undergraduates were at this stage.

During the next stage of development, Perry saw that some students recognized that opinions could differ in quality. They came to learn that they must follow a process whereby they use reason to objectively analyze a number of factors and then present a cohesive argument for a point of view. They saw that "truth" was *relative* to the frame of reference used to evaluate an issue. Less than half the Harvard seniors interviewed subscribed to this perspective.

Perry postulated a final stage wherein individuals made a commitment to a position with no external assurances of correctness. The learners recognized that all truth--both in and outside of the academy--existed in an *historical, cultural context*.

These stages affect students' observable classroom behaviors. Whereas learners in the "dualist" stage tend to be quiet and accepting, learners in the "multiplist" stage will tend to argue basing their arguments on the premise that all opinions are equal. "Dualists" may demand that he authority give them information to memorize and will tend towards dogmatic, moralistic assertions of right/wrong when they debate a point. "Relativists", on the other hand, will debate using logical analysis and other critical thinking tools.

By recognizing that learners are at different stages and that they change their beliefs about knowledge, an instructor can make informed course decisions. Textbooks, course goals, assignments, exams, and evaluation criteria can be chosen to both reflect the learners' current level as well as with a view towards helping them develop to the next level if appropriate. For example, an instructor can check if a given textbook up for adoption presents material only in a non-problematic way or if it presents alternative perspectives and controversies. The instructor can decide if the desired goals of a course match the likely developmental level of the learners; i.e., are the students expected to be dualists (memorize information), multiplists (have opinions) or relativists (think critically).

In her review of the Perry schema and other developmental models, Kurfiss (1994) observes that certain college settings appear to encourage epistemological development. A college's culture can foster development towards the critical-thinking, relativist stage when:

- faculty openly express doubt rather than adopt an authoritative stance and are willing to consider the ideas of others while providing a rational defense of their own position(s);
- rote learning, lecture teaching, and "objective" testing are de-emphasized;
- students are expected to defend ideas through critical analysis;
- faculty are available for and open to interactions with students; and
- disagreement and lively debate about ideas among students and between students and faculty are encouraged.