

# Beyond Subjectivism

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**ABSTRACT** Key Words: subjectivism, connected knowing, separate knowing, Women's Ways of Knowing, objectivity, critical epistemology, epistemology and gender

*In this essay on epistemological development in college students, I argue that "subjectivism" (a.k.a. "multiplism;" often identified in female undergraduates) should be understood and treated not as a manifestation of a primitive, irrational notion of knowing that must be exterminated and replaced by the more impersonal, detached, objective procedures embodied in scientific method and critical thinking. Rather, it should be regarded as a point of departure for moving into more reflective modes of thought when approached via, and encouraged into, the more personal, empathic procedure made known in Women's Ways of Knowing as "connected knowing." Along the way, I develop further the difference between "connected knowing" and "separate knowing" (the latter being the dominant academic paradigm of knowing), bringing out how connected knowing is an important and at times indispensable complement to separate knowing in achieving an objectivity integrated with subjectivity.*

In the course of a study of epistemological development at the highly selective, academically demanding liberal arts college for women where I taught for many years, I interviewed Kim,<sup>1</sup> an African American student in the midst of her first year. "It is said that the earth goes around the sun," Kim said. "I don't have any proof. It's written in books – sure. But the person who wrote it in books could have been misinformed." I asked the fifteen seniors in my seminar on Psychological Development in Adulthood to comment on Kim's statement. Some responded with a condescending smile, as if listening to the cute sayings of a young child, and several expressed astonishment that anyone admitted to this college could hold such preposterous views. I said to the students, "Pretend you are Kim's physics teacher. How might you deal with her?" All they could suggest (short of beaming her up into space) was that the professor reiterate and perhaps elaborate the astronomers' arguments in support of heliocentric theory.

In another interview, Sue, a first term white senior, asserted that, if a professor tells her a book is great, and she can't connect with it, then she's going to say it's a bad book: "If I think it sucks, it sucks. Even though I'm not an expert, it's my feelings." The seminar students were more sympathetic to Sue's position: "I know how she feels," they said. "So what if you were her English teacher?" I asked. "What would you do?" "Well," they said, "maybe he [*sic*] could talk about why the critics think it's a good book, what it is about the book that makes it good."

In terms of the epistemological positions my colleagues and I defined in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (WWK), Kim and Sue appear to operate as "subjectivists." Subjectivists rely on the authority of first hand experience; they are immune to the pronouncements of "so-called experts." The seminar members, taking the role of professor, seemed to respond from the position we called "separate knowing." They took an adversarial position, countering the students' concrete experiential views with arguments based on impersonal reason and supported by scientific and scholarly research. I believe my students were right in thinking this is the way most of us professors would respond. But I suspect they were wrong if they thought it would work.

Data collected by a number of investigators in a variety of settings indicates that subjectivism (also referred to as “multiplism”) is pervasive among undergraduates.<sup>2</sup> Although I had been teaching undergraduates for years, it was not until I began to interview them that I realized how common subjectivism was. Carol Gilligan once quoted an interviewee as asking, “Do you want to know what I think? Or what I really think?” In the relatively safe environment of the interview, students try to tell us what they really think; in class, they have learned to produce “acceptable lies” in the poet Adrienne Rich’s chilling phrase (Rich, 1979, 239). Anna, a first year student, said to her interviewer,

In my math course I’m having a hard time coming to grips with what these people think infinity is, and for the duration of the course I’ll go along with their right answer, and when it’s over I’ll go back to my idea. . . . Maybe some day I’ll see the light and their right will be right for me, but for now I have my own particular right, and I’ll just stick to it.

Anna had learned, as many do, to keep her academically inappropriate epistemological assumptions in the closet and out of the classroom. Once upon a time, I colluded in this enterprise, stamping out subjectivism whenever it reared its ugly head. Like the members of my seminar, responding to Kim and to Sue, I regarded this approach as a primitive way of knowing that should be exterminated, to be replaced by the more impersonal, detached, objective procedures embodied in scientific method and critical thinking. In the course of my research, however, I experienced a conversion. I still believe that subjectivists are not really thinking, and I still want to help them develop less reactive, more open-minded, thoughtful ways of knowing. But I no longer believe that the critical, impersonal procedures we academics have learned to cherish and to practice and to propagate are the only ways of really thinking.

In *WWK* we described an approach we claimed was equally powerful, a personal, empathic approach, relying on narrative rather than argument as the preferred mode of discourse. We called it “connected knowing,” in contrast to the more impersonal “separate knowing,” and we argued that educators should seek to cultivate both modes, instead of concentrating almost exclusively on separate knowing. In the years since the publication of *WWK*, we have learned more about the ways in which separate and connected knowing play out in practice,<sup>3</sup> especially in higher education. As a result of these investigations, I have come to believe that connected knowing provides a smoother, more courteous route than separate knowing for guiding subjectivists into more reflective modes of thought. In order to acquire the procedures of separate knowing, subjectivists must abandon many of their epistemological predilections, whereas in connected knowing these same predilections can be preserved and developed. That is the argument I wish to make – or the story I wish to tell – in this essay.

## **Connected Knowing and Subjectivism: The Development of a Distinction**

As I have recounted elsewhere, connected knowing was originally a serendipitous finding. Claire Zimmerman and I came upon it while searching for evidence of critical thinking, and at first we didn’t know what we’d found. Towards the beginning of a longitudinal study of epistemological development conducted at Wellesley, one of our interviewees made a spontaneous comment illustrating the adversarial aspect of the procedure we would now call separate knowing: “As soon as someone tells me his point of view, I immediately start arguing in my head the opposite point of view. When someone is saying something, I can’t help turning it upside down.”

The next year, we converted this response into a stimulus and asked our interviewees to respond to it. To our surprise – and, at the time, dismay – most of them said they didn’t much like that approach and they didn’t use it much. Grace, for instance, said that even when she disagreed with someone, she didn’t start arguing in her head; instead, she tried to imagine herself into the person’s situation. She said, “I sort of fit myself into it in my mind and then I say, ‘I see what you mean.’ There’s this initial point where I kind of go into the story, you know? And become like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole.” Today, we might interpret this comment as an example of Jerome Bruner’s “narrative mode for construing reality,” a way in which “human beings make sense of the world by telling stories about it” (Bruner, 1996, 130). At the time, however, it seemed to us to express only a sort of naïve credulity, indicating not the presence of a distinctive way of thinking but the absence of any kind of thinking. Grace, we decided, was the sort of person who would fall for anything, one of those “overempathizers” that the psychologist Robert Hogan describes as “equivocating jellyfish” (Hogan, 1973, 224).

But although such a description might conceivably be applied to Grace, it could not be made to fit others of the women we interviewed, in the Wellesley and *WWK* studies and in subsequent research.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, the undergraduate who said, “When I have an idea about something, and it differs from the way another person is thinking about it, I’ll usually try to look at it from that person’s point of view, see how they could say that, why they think that they’re right, why it makes sense.” Or one we call Cecily, who told us: “When I read a philosopher I try to think as the author does. It’s hard, but I try not to bias the train of thought with my own impressions. I try to just pretend that I’m the author. I try to really just put myself in that person’s place and feel why is it that they believe this way.” Or the college counselor, who said that in her work she tried “to look for pieces of the truth in what [the student’s] saying, sort of collaborate with them.”

Although the counselor described herself as “a bit of a chameleon,” she was clearly something more. All three of these women used the word “try”; Cecily used it four times in four sentences. Jellyfish and chameleons don’t need to try; they just do what comes naturally. Ultimately we came to see that these women were describing a genuine procedure for constructing knowledge, requiring deliberation, effort, and skill, a way of knowing that is uncritical, but not unthinking.

In contrast, subjectivists assert that whatever feels right is right for them. They operate according to what the psychologist David Perkins and his associates call a “makes-sense epistemology” (Perkins, Farady and Bushey, 1991, 99), accepting without question conclusions that seem to “make sense ‘at first blush’” (Baron, 1991, 177), usually those that accord with their own prior beliefs. Asked how she decided among competing interpretations of a poem being offered in class, a student replied,

I usually find that when ideas are being tossed around I’m more akin to one than another. I don’t know – my opinions are just sort of there. It’s almost more a matter of liking one more than another. I mean, I happen to agree with one or identify with it more.

Subjectivists may “listen” politely to their classmates’ views, but they do not attempt to explore these views, nor do they engage in active introspection; they simply, spontaneously, react. Although they acknowledge — indeed, insist — that other people’s opinions are “right for them,” they tend to dismiss them as irrelevant to themselves. In contrast, connected knowers suspend their own disbelief and deliberately “try. . . try. . . try” to enter into ideas that seem at first blush to make little sense to them, in order to see how they might make sense to others and even, perhaps, to themselves. As we wrote in *WWK*, “It is important to

distinguish between the effortless intuition of subjectivism . . . and the deliberate imaginative extension of one's understanding into positions that [may] initially feel wrong or remote" (Belenky et al., 1986, 121).

### ***Separate and Connected Knowing***

Both separate and connected knowing are procedures which transcend makes-sense epistemology and meet the criteria for Perkins's "critical epistemology." Both procedures contain the premise that "it is not enough for a particular story to match one's prominent prior beliefs," and "it is not enough for a particular story about a situation to hang together. One must consider what other, rather different stories might also hang together" (Perkins, Farady and Bushey, 1991, 99-100). Separate knowers,<sup>5</sup> in the writer Peter Elbow's terms, "play the Doubting Game," searching for flaws even in positions that seem at first blush to make perfect sense, considering whether alternative interpretations of the evidence might apply, offering contrary evidence, and generating competing arguments. In contrast, connected knowers "play the Believing Game" (Elbow, 1973), entering into stories beyond the bounds of their own meager experience, and attempting to make meaning out of narratives that may seem at first blush to make little sense.

Subjectivists cannot play either game, nor do they seem to wish to do so. Sue defiantly described herself as perfectly satisfied with her makes-sense epistemology:

In something like English where I just don't see where anyone else is coming from, my train of thought is so different and I feel secure with my train of thought, then I stick with it. Because I know I can't see where they're coming from so why keep trying at it if it doesn't feel comfortable to you but you have your own thoughts that feel right?

Yet, the phrase "keep trying" suggests Sue had tried (and failed) to see how other people's stories might also hang together. And there are other indications in the interview that she wished for a more critical epistemology. For instance, when the interviewer asked, "How would you describe yourself as a thinker?" she replied: "I don't think. That's the problem, (laughing) I don't think at all." A teacher had told her that she must "learn to think." "She says all I'm concerned about is doing something, and I don't think about the process. I don't think about how I get there. I don't reflect." When the interviewer asked her to describe some things she liked about herself as a thinker or learner, "things that you wouldn't change," she could not think of any. "There's a lot of things I *would* change," she said. For instance, "I'm looking at something, but I'm not processing it. I can't make myself look at it from four different angles and really think about what it means, really analyze it all these different ways and really get in touch with it." Although the "procedure" she envisioned still had a magical intuitive quality ("you get this instant response to something and you really have a grasp of it"), Sue did seem to realize it might be useful to "reflect" rather than simply respond, and to examine a phenomenon from a variety of perspectives instead of "telling one story about the situation that weaves together the facts in one way, from one point of view" (Perkins, Farady and Bushey, 1991, 99).

Sue had no procedure for accomplishing this, but her remarks suggest that she might be open to a connected approach. Over and over, she expressed despair over her inability to understand other people's thinking and to make others understand hers. She could make no sense of her teachers' and classmates' thoughts ("I can't see where they're coming from"), nor could she express her own thoughts in a form that

made sense to them: “There’s no way that I can make them see my thought,” she said, “although I would love to. They’re just never going to see where I’m coming from.” Some variant of these phrases occurred ten times in a one hour interview, leading me to suspect Sue might be more interested in learning to think *with* other people than to think *against* them, more interested in believing than in doubting.

## Aversion to Criticism

Subjectivists do not wish to criticize other people’s views or to subject their own views to criticism. If everyone’s views are equally valid, and everyone’s opinion is “right for them,” what’s the point of criticism? In any case, as one student said and many implied, arguments are merely empty rhetoric: “If you support an argument well, anything can be valid.” Connected knowers also eschew criticism, but for different reasons. For them, validity is not an issue; the question they ask is not, “Is it right?” but “What does it mean?” When, in playing the Believing Game I ask you, “Why do you think that?”, I am not demanding logical or empirical justification; rather, as Elbow says, I am asking, “What do you see? . . . Give me the vision in your head. You are having an experience I don’t have; help me to have it” (Elbow, 1973, 261). I’m not at all concerned with whether your thoughts “make sense” according to objective standards; clearly, they make subjective sense to you, and I want to share in that sense. My purpose is to achieve as full and accurate an understanding as I can, and evaluation interferes with – indeed, in the connected knower’s view, precludes – understanding.

In contrast, evaluation is at the heart of the Doubting Game. Mel, an MIT undergraduate, is perhaps the most zealous (and fairest) players of the game we have ever encountered. “If I could get a job shooting holes in other people’s [ideas],” he said, “I would enjoy my life immensely.” (I suggested to Mel that he consider a career in academia.) Mel described the game this way:

If somebody explains [their position] to me and I can . . . shoot holes in it, then I won’t tend to believe it, and if they can explain away every misgiving that I have about the [position], then I’ll tend to believe it. . . . [And] if they seriously believe in something which you think is very wrong, if you – if you shoot enough holes in what they’re saying, they’ll start doubting it themselves. It could happen to you, too. It happens the other way around.

At my college, members of the faculty often complain that it is difficult to entice students into debate; they yearn for a few more Mels in their classrooms. Sue was aware that “[this college] is supposed to make you open up and challenge other people’s ideas,” but she was unable to do it. In class, she said, she was “a mute.” Although members of the faculty saw too much “dancing around disagreement” among their students, Sue experienced the classroom climate as “extremely critical.”

If you open up and say something, there’s more people willing to contradict you than support you in what you say. And after a while – I mean you don’t want to get, like, shot down all the time. It’s not good. It makes you feel, you know, really small. So it makes you like tend to shut up, because you don’t . . . you don’t want to have your thoughts criticized. You just want to . . . when you want to say something, you just want to have it float out in the air and just, you know, stand. You don’t want to have it shot down. There’s so many things that I just want to say, you know? But I feel I’m better off if I just shut up, because I don’t want to . . . I don’t want to have my thoughts attacked.

In order to engage in classroom debate, instead of remaining “a mute,” Sue would have to acquire the art of separate knowing. So long as she has no idea where those verbal missiles are coming from, she is unable to dodge them, let alone intercept them with missiles of her own. In order to construct and contest arguments, she must learn the criteria for validity, the standards and conventions of the various disciplines as to what constitutes evidence for a claim, because this is where those missiles are coming from. But if her teachers were to try to turn her into a separate knower, they would meet with considerable resistance. To take two (admittedly extreme) exemplars of the contrasting positions, it would not be easy to transform Sue into Mel, to convert her deep-seated aversion to disagreement to his passionate zeal for debate, however desirable that might be as an ultimate goal.

## **Attachment and Detachment: Taking Things Personally**

Why is it that students resist subjecting their ideas to criticism? There are, of course, many reasons. One popular diagnosis among professors is that students – especially, so it is said, women students – take their ideas “too personally.” If this is Sue’s “problem,” then perhaps the way to lure her into debate is to frame it, as Elbow (1973) suggests, as “only a game.” But Sue doesn’t want to play games. She does take her opinions personally, and she doesn’t see this as a problem. “I do not like to play the devil’s advocate,” she said. “I do not like to just take the opposite side just to start some sort of conflict, just to see what other people are going to say. If I think something’s right, I’m going to stick to my side, probably because I’ve got this intuition that it’s right.” Like many women we have interviewed (including more sophisticated ones) she values authenticity.

These women find it hard to play with ideas. They lack detachment, the capacity to stand aside from one’s beliefs and examine them objectively, which is at the heart of separate knowing. Ed, an MIT student who spent a summer as an intern working with distinguished scientists in a hospital laboratory on various projects, provided us with an eloquent account of the beauty of detachment. Each week, the interns met with the scientists to present their ideas, and each week the scientists proceeded to shoot them down. Although daunted at first, over the course of the summer Ed came to realize that the scientists were not being malicious: “They didn’t mean anything personal, when they shot you down right away. . . . I thought it was real neat. . . . They didn’t see ideas as *possessions*. They saw ideas as ideas.”

A few years ago, I observed a philosopher guiding a class of first year students through a discussion of the arguments made in Darwin’s time for and against the universe having been created by God. When the discussion showed signs of deteriorating into an exchange of personal beliefs, the teacher reminded the students: “Remember, we’re not talking about beliefs, here. We’re talking about arguments for beliefs.” Ed would have found that distinction “real neat;” I did too, and I hope that some day Sue may grow to appreciate it, but at the moment, she cannot. Subjectivists do see ideas as possessions; they “stick to” them.

Connected knowers are not so stubbornly attached to their own ideas as subjectivists are; they are willing to set them aside in order to consider how “other stories might also hang together.” But they continue to value their own subjectivity; in common with subjectivists, they take things personally, and they assume others do too. The respect that both connected knowers and subjectivists grant to other people’s views is based in part on their awareness that, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz puts it, “there are people attached to those ideas” (Geertz, as quoted by Berreby, 1995, 4). For the subjectivist, this respect takes the form of a polite, aloof

tolerance, a promise not to intervene, on the grounds that “a person’s experience can’t be wrong.” Connected knowers go farther: they develop procedures for entering into the other’s personal experience and forming a personal attachment to it.

## **First Hand Experience as a Source of Knowledge**

For both subjectivists and connected knowers, beliefs are based on personal experience: to understand a phenomenon means to experience it at first hand, to be “in touch” with it. Kim took a history course along with some students who were “into” chemistry and physics. “We were talking about slavery,” she said, and for them, “it just could not click why some black people are violent, frustrated with society. They could see why two positives would connect. I can’t see that force but I can see anger and emotions.” Sue recalled how a high school teacher enabled her to “see” physical laws by showing her how to experience them:

We’d be talking about some physical principle like vectoring or something. And he said, “The next time you’re in your car and the wind blows, you’ll see your car move a certain way, and that is a perfect example of this principle.” And he was right. I’d go driving and the wind would blow and I’d maneuver my car around and I’d totally understand at that moment. I could really get a grasp at that principle.

Both subjectivists and connected knowers are attuned to narratives of personal experience, rather than “impersonal” arguments. The writer Ursula LeGuin recounts a conversation among a group of women which began, but did not end, in the separate mode: “[We] were beginning to quarrel over theories in abstract, objective language — and I with my splendid Eastern-women’s-college training in the father tongue was in the thick of the fight and going for the kill.” Then Pauline Oliveros, a composer, cleared her throat and said, “Offer your experience as your truth.” The conversation shifted into a different key: “When we started talking again, we didn’t talk objectively, and we didn’t fight. We went back to feeling our way into ideas . . . , talking with one another, which involves listening. We tried to offer our experience to one another. Not claiming something: offering something” (LeGuin, 1990, 149).

In the Eastern women’s college where I taught, the father tongue still prevails. Indeed, the prejudice against first-hand experience runs deep throughout the academy, in spite of gestures toward “service learning” and the like. Courtney Cazden reports the observation of a Tlingit graduate student at Harvard, who noticed that in class when a student raised a question “based on what some authority says, Prof. X. says, ‘That’s a great question!’ , expands on it, and incorporates it into her following comments. But when people like me talk from our personal experience, our ideas are not acknowledged. The professor may say, ‘Um-hm,’ and then proceed on as if we hadn’t been heard” (Cazden and Hymes, 1978, 22). We teach students to keep quiet about their experience or to preface their remarks with modest disclaimers: “This is just my experience,” or “I know it’s just anecdotal evidence.” (We professors often indulge in anecdote, of course, but we claim it is merely a device to liven up the lecture.) Students learn that narratives of personal experience are not considered real evidence.

In her classic work, *Literature as Exploration*, first published over fifty years ago and still very much alive today, Louise Rosenblatt asserts that the academic embargo on personal experience extends even to the study of literature, in spite of the fact that for most readers “the human experience that literature presents is primary” (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, 7). Often, she has observed, “the instructor never even glimpses the student’s personal sense of the work discussed” (59), treating the literary work “as if it existed as an object,

like a machine, whose parts can be analyzed without reference to the reader” (226).

Rosenblatt, a pioneer in “reader response theory,” looks at literature from a constructivist perspective. She conceives of the literary work as “the product of creative activity carried on by the reader under the guidance of the text.” This being so, Rosenblatt says, it behooves the teacher of literature [and other subjects, too] to create an environment in which the students’ “experienced meanings” can be evoked (214). Teachers hesitate to do this, fearing that it amounts to “an invitation to irresponsible emotionalism and impressionism” (226). Some of these responses – “It sucks,” for instance – may be hard for teachers to hear and hard for them to work with. Even those of us who agree in principle with Rosenblatt that “even vigorous rejection is a more valid starting point for learning than are docile attempts to feel “what the teacher wants” (67) may find it hard to welcome such unappreciative and apparently mindless comments. Nonetheless, Rosenblatt insists, this is the place to begin:

The student’s primary experience of the work will have had meaning for him in these personal terms and no others. . . . Only on the basis of such direct emotional elements, immature though they may sometimes be, can he be helped to build any sounder understanding of the work. The nature of the student’s rudimentary response is, perforce, part of our teaching materials (50).

Regardless of the nature of the material under study, whether it be Dante’s *Inferno* or the nature of infinity or Social Darwinism or the Arab-Israeli conflict or heliocentric theory, I believe Rosenblatt’s dictum holds true. It is imperative to elicit these responses, not only to allow but to invite them to “float out and stand” long enough to be heard.

## **Gender and the Classroom Climate**

According to the educational philosopher Kenneth Bruffee, this is unlikely to happen, for in most class discussions the adversarial model prevails. “If we look at what we do instead of what we say,” he writes, “we think of knowledge as something we acquire and wield as individuals relative to each other, not something we generate and maintain in company with and in dependency upon each other” (Bruffee, 1984, 645). If more women had been included in the “we” who designed the institutions of higher education, the situation might be different. Feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich have repeatedly objected to the dominance of the “masculine adversary style of discourse” (Rich, 1979, 221) and women undergraduates at every level of epistemological development – not just subjectivists – have expressed a desire for a more communal classroom climate. Drawing on her longitudinal study of epistemological development among undergraduates at a prestigious liberal arts college, Marcia Baxter Magolda concluded that, in general, “men supported argument and debate in class and women supported meaningful participation without adversarial connotations” (Baxter Magolda, 1988, 535). These women would not have identified themselves with Bruffee’s “we;” implicit in their notion of “meaningful participation” was a conception of knowledge as “something we generate and maintain in company with and in dependency upon each other.” Similarly, Catherine Krupnick, in a study involving extensive videotaping of classes at Wheaton College in Massachusetts soon after the college began to admit men as well as women, found that male students, who made up one-tenth of the class, did a quarter of the speaking. When the women did speak up, they tried, more often than the men, to build on the ideas expressed by a classmate rather than to challenge them, although this connected approach received less reinforcement from teachers than the male’s more separate style (Fiske, 1990, B10).

Baxter Magolda's research revealed persistent gender differences throughout the college years, with men showing a "separate" pattern and women a "relational" pattern at every level of epistemological development. She concludes:

Traditional environments often reinforce debate and competition which affords greater validation to the male pattern than to the female pattern. . . . Being encouraged to express one's views in a setting that does not simultaneously jeopardize peer relations is necessary to encourage female pattern students to take these risks (Baxter Magolda, 1989, 20).

The danger of jeopardizing peer relations looms especially large in a classroom composed of strangers. As a young woman participating in Ana Aleman's research explained, "I'm sitting in classes with twenty other people and I don't know them . . . . You don't have any relationship with them outside of class. . . . You don't know them as a person, you don't know anything about them" (Aleman, 1998, 6). Concerned about how her comments might be interpreted and how she might be judged, she found it safer to remain silent. Outside class, in an atmosphere of "preestablished intimacy and trust," she and her friends freely engaged in intellectual activities their professors had tried in vain to elicit from them, including a version of devil's advocacy: "asking probing questions and suggesting alternative considerations in an effort to expand the friend's understanding and intellectual confidence" (7).

It was not until I served as evaluator of an experimental program instituted at my own college in the 1980s that I became aware of the impact personal relationships could have on student learning. Students who chose to participate in an interdisciplinary first year "Cluster" program lived together in the residence hall and shared a common curriculum organized around a common theme or period. In interviews conducted as part of the evaluation of the program, both the students and their instructors attested to the remarkably high quantity and quality of the students' participation in class. For instance, one student said, "I never talked in class [before]. But here we know each so well, and we know what we're all feeling. You get to know how people think. So we talk a lot about stuff." Faculty members agreed. As one teacher said, "the biggest difference was that the students were much more active."

There were a lot of days in this class when I had to ask them not to ask questions for awhile [laughs], and this is not the experience normally. You had to stop them from talking in class. It's such an inversion of the usual thing. There were these very speculative questions, very abstract discussions. That was the biggest difference, that these very interesting conceptual things tended to take over. Some nuts and bolts stuff were lost, but there was a great deal of intellectual engagement in these other things.

Cluster students reported that these kinds of conversations went on outside of class, too, and in the pages of their journals. "At first," a student said, "it was just personal stuff. When we first got here all we were talking about was men. Now, it's different. I was real surprised. We talk about school work a lot now, just about what we learned or something. Last week we were talking, and somebody said, 'Do you realize that we're talking about philosophy here?' For instance, she said, 'We talked in class about "Are we real?"' And then a couple of friends and I were saying, 'Are we really here, or are we imagining ourselves here?' And then I'm sitting there with my journal writing, 'Are we really here?' And I put, 'Well, we examined that today, and there was that lecture on Comte's views.' And I have two pages on that." For these students, the

“academic” had become “personal.”

Although separate and connected styles of knowing are by no means gender-exclusive, they may be gender-related, and certainly they reflect gender stereotypes. Might male students feel as uncomfortable in “connected” classes as women sometimes feel in those conducted on a “separate” model? To explore issues of gender and epistemological style in an educational setting, I turn now to two unusually thoughtful accounts of courses consciously designed to cultivate both separate and connected knowing among both male and female undergraduates.

## Teaching Connected Knowing: Two Case Studies

Stephen Fishman, in collaboration with Lucille McCarthy, and Barry Kroll describe in detail what went on in their courses, and they explore in depth what they and the students learned from the experience. In Fishman’s introductory philosophy course and Kroll’s course on the history of the Vietnam war, students were presented with a variety of texts, some consisting of arguments based on objective evidence, some consisting of narratives of personal experience. In Kroll’s course, for instance, students read memoirs written by individuals who had suffered in the war as well as scholarly accounts of the conflict.

In both courses, students were encouraged to use both ways of knowing in class discussions. To illustrate, on one occasion the philosophy students were discussing whether children should turn in parents who were dealing drugs. “Vickie’s arguments,” Fishman reports, “were based on ‘disinterested reason’ and ‘detachment’ and “could have been voiced by anyone. . . . They do not appeal to any special circumstances in Vickie’s life. I call these ‘separate knowing arguments’ because they stand by themselves.” The assumption is that any reasonable person would assent to them, regardless of what they knew about Vickie. In contrast, Diana told of growing up in Columbia during the drug wars, hearing shooting in the streets and learning her relatives had been killed. She said that if she were doing drugs, she would want someone to stop her. “For Diana to be persuasive,” Fishman writes, “the class had to know Diana’s background, had to imagine how her childhood differed from theirs. Diana’s thinking asked the students to step closer, whereas Vickie’s asked them to step back” (McCarthy and Fishman, 1991, 437).

Both Kroll and Fishman had to work hard to elicit students’ personal responses to the subject matter of the course. Fishman:

It is not easy . . . for students to find connections between their personal and their academic languages. . . . Initially, when I ask what they think about an issue, they seem insulted, as if I’ve violated a rule. . . . My students want desperately to look things up, appeal to a book, keep *themselves* out of their work (McCarthy and Fishman, 1991, 434).

Fishman believes that the students “do not know how to work their opinions into school conversations, how to profit from close study of themselves;” “their inner voices,” he thinks, “are insufficiently provoked” (434).

To provoke the voices, the two instructors used various strategies designed to help the students “explore what was going on in their own hearts and heads” (Kroll 1992, 8). Members of Kroll’s class made

“regular, detailed, and thoughtful entries” in journals, handed them in weekly, and wrote a retrospective review at the end of the course, so that both students and instructor could trace their intellectual and emotional development. Fishman began each period with a ten minute “freewrite” (Elbow, 1991, 13ff). “Once we had time to tune to our own voices,” he says, “we could tune to the voices of others” (McCarthy and Fishman, 1991, 441). Reversing the usual practice, students spent more time discussing their classmates’ responses to the classical texts than they spent on the texts themselves. Different students recorded and distributed the “minutes” of each discussion, so that everyone could keep track of the knowledge that was evolving through collaboration among group members.

Both separate and connected knowers can acquire more objectivity when they become better acquainted with themselves, the ways in which their personal predilections can shape their interpretations of external events. In separate knowing, one minimizes personal bias through “weeding out the self” (Elbow, 1973, 149), while in connected knowing one *uses* the self as an instrument of understanding. As Rosenblatt points out, although subjectivity is a source of bias, it is only through our past experiences and present preoccupations that we can achieve any reading of a text (or any other object) in any discipline.

For Kroll’s students, the achievement of objectivity was not an easy task. Some – most of them women – so identified with the emotions expressed in a memoir that they were unable to stand back and examine the author’s conclusions with a critical eye. Others – mostly men – could not connect. For instance, in his journal, one man wrote, “I find it difficult to share the emotion of the subject matter and the somber tone of the class. I find it hard to believe that the stories I read for today were reality because I’m so far removed from them” (Kroll, 1992, 24). And another said, “Who am I to judge actions that I don’t really understand, and especially since I have never been in any kind of similar or even remotely similar situation?” (75).

“To understand a poem,” an undergraduate said, “You must let the poem pass into you and become part of yourself, rather than something you see outside yourself. There has to be some parallel between you and the poem.” For subjectivists, the parallel, the “click” of connection, is there or it isn’t; one cannot will it into being. Connected knowers, in contrast, learn to construct the parallels by conjuring up “metaphorical extensions, analogies, associations” (Elbow, 1973, 149). Kroll’s students rummaged through their memories in search of experiences which might be analogous to those undergone by, say, a soldier in combat. One man remembered how, during a Lacrosse game, he had “felt indestructible.”

I thought I was a badass. Also, I was very intent on inflicting pain. . . . I was swinging my stick as hard as I could. I was trying to hit the Purdue guy between the pads. . . . If combat is anything like that, . . . I can certainly understand how people become hooked.

Students also learned to use one another as partners in connected knowing. Recall that the women in Aleman’s study, anxious about how their comments would be interpreted by unfamiliar classmates, remained silent. In the early weeks of the philosophy course, Todd experienced the same trepidations, but instead of keeping quiet, he coped with his anxiety by presenting carefully constructed arguments designed to be impregnable. By the end of the term, however, the class had evolved into a community based on “trust and openness,” and Todd had learned to speak in a different voice. In a retrospective account, he wrote,

At the beginning you want to make a big bold impact. When the barriers of worrying about what people are going to think are broken, you mumble on and see if maybe somebody else

can pick out what you mean by what you're saying. So, the last few weeks I said, "Well, I just need to get it out." So I'd throw it out there, and sometimes I'd find myself fumbling a lot, and I'd say, I don't know what I mean, but someone might be able to help me. It was okay for people to see I wasn't polished (McCarthy and Fishman, 1991, 440).

Todd had broken through gender stereotypes, adopting a way of speaking more often attributed to women and sometimes described as "powerless speech." His new voice sounds much like the "epistolary voice" that Erika Scheurer found in examining Emily Dickinson's letters, suggesting "a mind thinking" rather than a mind "having thought," "unrevised thoughts in progress" (Scheurer, 1995, 99). These are the kinds of thoughts both Kroll and Fishman, in trying to "endorse uncertainty" (Kroll, 1992, 97), encouraged their students to "get out" in their journals and freewrites. "Unrevised thoughts in progress," as Scheurer says, invite response, "a reply to build on further" (Scheurer, 1995, 99). Todd provides a perfect description of the kind of knowledge building that occurs among connected knowers: "you mumble on and see if maybe somebody else can pick out what you mean by what you are saying." Todd's classmates, by "feeling their way" into his mind, like the women in LeGuin's group, collaborated with him in "making meaning" (Bruner, 1996, 130), helping him to articulate and develop his embryonic thoughts.

## **Meaning-Making in Everyday Life: Integrating Objectivity and Subjectivity**

Those who do research on writing have noticed, as Fishman did, that "it is not easy for students to find connections between their personal and their academic languages." Andrea Lunsford reports that less "advanced" students do express their personal opinions in their papers; in fact, that is just about all they do. All the "basic writers" in Lunsford's study "focused primarily on themselves." They "merge with the topic; they cannot distance themselves in order to gain a variety of perspectives on the topic" (Lunsford, 1980, 281). These students sound like subjectivists: they see no need to consider alternative views; their own perspective is the only one that is real to them. In time, a substantial number of these students may learn to "distance themselves" from the topics of their essays, but at some cost. Lunsford observes, as have others, that "the basic writers' prose is more vital, more engaging and more true to the students' experiences than the impersonal, strangely disengaged prose often produced by our more skilled students." "The real challenge," she says, "lies in helping our students become more proficient at abstracting and conceptualizing and hence at producing acceptable academic discourse, without losing the directness many of them now possess" (287).

The "impersonal, strangely disengaged" tone of these papers should sound familiar to us, for it is characteristic of much of the academic literature we read and write. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman once drew a distinction between "academic arguments," the kind that fill our journals, and "intellectual" discussions. In "academic arguments" the protagonists, who make a living at this sort of thing, are expected to exhibit "professional detachment," untainted by personal feelings or values. "Intellectual questions," in contrast, "grow out of reflection on experience" and are pursued by "amateurs." Personal feelings are admissible in intellectual arguments, "since the outcome of their argument is expected to have personal as well as professional consequences" (Jencks and Riesman, 1962, 242-243). The disinterested academic arguments students learn to construct are of limited value in dealing with the "intellectual" personally relevant issues of everyday life. Rosenblatt writes:

It is comparatively easy for the student to think rationally about difficult human problems

when impersonal academic treatments make them abstract subjects of thought. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking is probably not very useful; it lacks the conflicting impulses or emotional perplexities out of which thinking usually grows in real life. Reason should arise in a matrix of feeling (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, 216).

The academic disciplines are grounded largely in philosophical and scientific traditions dominated by what Bruner calls a “paradigmatic” mode of knowing, which focuses on the validity of knowledge, established through separate knowing procedures such as logical argument and empirical testing. In Bruner’s view we devote far too much pedagogical time to the paradigmatic mode, for “neither the empiricist’s tested knowledge nor the rationalist’s self-evident truths describe the ground on which ordinary people go about making sense of their experience” (Bruner, 1996, 130). In real life, outside the academy, we rely largely on “narrative” thinking, constructing possible stories to account for “how things are, how they might have come to be that way, and where they might be going, from what perspective, and so on.” The emphasis is on making meaning, as in the discussion among Todd and his classmates, rather than evaluating finished ideas. Impregnable arguments and definitive experiments are irrelevant to this enterprise; personal feelings are not.

Students trained only in the paradigmatic mode may be well prepared for solving the well-defined problems set by their instructors, but, lacking skill in narrative thinking, they are ill prepared for dealing with the “ill-structured” problems of everyday life, for which there is no single certain answer and no foolproof method for deciding among competing answers. King and Kitchener report that many of the college seniors in their sample, seemed to be “at a loss,” when presented with such problems, finally deciding they must be just “opinions” (King and Kitchener, 1994, 325). Based on her research with older adults as well as her sense of the culture at large, Deanna Kuhn believes that people “often remain multiplists for life” (Kuhn, 2000, 317). Even “choice of political candidates,” she says, “tends to be treated as a matter of personal taste and opinion” (Kuhn and Weinstock, 2002, 139). Of course, choice of a political candidate should involve personal opinion, but the opinion should be reflective rather than reactive.

In courses where narrative thinking is welcome, students are encouraged to develop procedures for constructing such opinions. In these classes Sue’s honest reaction to a book – “It sucks,” for instance – would be allowed to “float out;” no one would force her to defend it, but neither would it be allowed to “just stand.” She would be asked to reflect upon her response, in an attempt to understand what in the work and in herself produced that reaction. Once convinced that “narrative construal is not a zero-sum game” (Bruner, 1996, 96), she could begin to closely examine how “other rather different stories might also hang together,” and how they might provide opportunities for enriching and revising her own.

Rosenblatt’s “reflective thinking” and Bruner’s “narrative thinking,” as well as our “constructed knowing” (*WWK*) and Labouvie-Vief’s “wisdom” (Labouvie-Vief, 1990, 78) are related approaches, all of which involve the integration of emotion, and reason, attachment and detachment, subjectivity and objectivity. Each of our constructed knowers had developed her own distinctive version of the position, and each felt responsible for making and acting upon her judgments. We found few undergraduates who spoke from this position. Baxter Magolda found none. Her research participants did not achieve “self-authorship” until their mid- to late-twenties. It was not until then that their “internal voices” began to shape their lives, as they “acknowledged the inherent uncertainty of knowledge and took up the challenge of choosing what to believe,” and “attempted to live out their beliefs in their work and personal lives.” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 119-120). It may be naïve, even pretentious, to expect young people to achieve wisdom prior to graduation from college,

but if we did less than is done now to inhibit its development, and more promote it, we could at least make a start.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from participants interviewed in various research projects, including those carried out by my students, and names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Baxter Magolda, 1992; King & Kitchener, 1994; Kuhn, 2000; Perry, 1970/1999.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Clinchy, 1996, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Clinchy, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> In using the term “knower” as in “separate and connected knowers,” I do not mean to imply that the approaches are mutually exclusive or that individuals are limited to a single approach; research participants tell us they often vary their approach, depending upon the domain or type of inquiry; and measures of attitudes toward separate and connected knowing appear to be orthogonal (Galotti, Clinchy, Ainsworth, Lavin, and Mansfield, 1999).

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