

Teaching, Learning, Diversity:

Just Don't Call It Epistemology¹

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Everything I ever learned that was important to me was learned outside of school. So I never thought to associate schools with learning.

—Amy, undergraduate UMB student, 1998

All of the courses I now teach at UMass Boston are organized around problems of knowledge—what we know, and how we learn to know—about the past. I don't announce this at the outset. Epistemology is emphatically not what students expect when they enroll in a history course, and it certainly would not have been my own first choice when I was an undergraduate. But it should have been, since all of us—whether we are aware of it or not—engage in applied epistemological analysis in our private and public lives every time we consider which information to rely on or to trust. In my own experience as a student and as a scholar/teacher, the supposedly abstract topic of epistemology turned out to be a source of intellectual empowerment that was crucial to my survival in the world of academe.

ANTI-EPISTEMOLOGY: NOTES ON AN EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOLING

As the first generation of my working class, Eastern European Jewish family to attend college, I was thrilled to be entering a wider world of knowledge and understanding—a place where great art, ideas and literature would at last take center stage. Although some of my lofty hopes were realized, I discovered quite early on that despite its rewards and challenges, the university was in some respects a very narrow world—one that charged a high price of admission in the form of 'enforced forgetting' of links to home cultures and communities, and intellectual exclusion of a wide range of important knowledges.

At the University of Michigan, a "History of the Modern World" celebrated the universal achievements of a Western European, male middle class. In psychology, English, economics and music, students were invited to explore and value the triumphs of an identical minority segment of the world's population. It wasn't initially self-evident to me why this should have been so. In a history of "America" or "Russia" or "China," one might reasonably have expected information on women as well as men, workers as well as employers. Otherwise, why not name the U.S. history course "Presidents and their Advisers in American history" or the psychology course "The Psychology of White Men and

1. ©Copyright 2004, by Esther Kingston-Mann. Presented to the 1st Annual Conference-Workshop of the Social Theory Forum, UMass Boston, April 7, 2004 (Panel: "Learning and Teaching Social Theory for Transformation"). **Contact information: esther.kingston-mann@umb.edu**

White Rats"?¹ These titles would in fact have far more accurately reflected the subject matter—i.e., the database and perspectives that dominated these courses.

Later, as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, the repression and invalidation of particular bodies of evidence extended from the nonwestern world to women, minority racial groups and working class people within and outside the west.² At heart, many of my professors were intellectual soulmates of nineteenth century British philosopher-economist John Stuart Mill, who once argued that “whoever knows the political economy of England, or even of Yorkshire, knows that of all nations, actual or possible.”³ So much intellectual certainty, such an intellectually narrow focus, such a wide array of intellectual exclusions—was there really no place in the academy for the hundreds of millions who have—in Eduardo Galeano’s words “been standing on line for centuries to get into history?”⁴ Having struggled against heavy odds to make my way to college and then to graduate school, it was frustrating to discover a profound dishonesty somewhere close to the heart of the world of research, scholarship and teaching that I had chosen.

In the late 60s and early 70s, it was considered perfectly legitimate for elite research institutions across the country to require students to repeat back to their teachers the patently untrue proposition that the experience of the West and of particular social groups was equivalent to the experience of the world.⁵ Although I was well aware that understanding history could not simply be ‘the extension to everyone of what a minority means and believes,’⁶ it was equally clear to me that if I were to succeed in the academic world, my work might well have to comply with the false assumption that the part was automatically equivalent to the whole.⁷ Drawn into a struggle that has led many “outsiders” before and after me to abandon the world of academe, I initially turned my questions against myself. Were my feelings of frustration simply proof that I lacked the dispassionate temperament required of a scholar? During my graduate school training as a historian, questions of epistemology were—unfortunately—not on the academic agenda. Their presence was sorely missed.

1. I am grateful to Castellano Turner (Psychology Department, UMB) for this phrase.

2. The only exception to this general rule was the occasional appearance of the latter groups in cameo roles as tragic victims of one or another notable modern trend.

3. Quoted in Kingston-Mann, *In Search of the True West: Culture, Economics and Problems of Russian Development* (Princeton, 1999), 93.

4. Quoted in Martin Espada, *Zapata’s Disciple*, p. 86.

5. By 2004, this narrow focus has given way in some universities and in some disciplines, but in some—economics, for example—it has not.

6. Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, (New York, 1990), p.xiii.

7. See general discussion in Elizabeth Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (new revised edition, 2004).

TOWARD EPISTEMOLOGY: SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING AT UMASS BOSTON

Luckily, during these years, I was sustained by two breakthroughs:

1) the discovery in myself of a lifelong scholarly passion to discover how the promise of change, progress and revolution played out in the histories of ordinary people, and

2) the fortunate emergence of a gift for self-protective, intellectual guerilla warfare that enabled me to pursue my interests within the uncongenial intellectual frameworks that graduate school imposed. As a historian-to-be and in stark contrast to my own teachers, I wanted to acknowledge a wider range of actors/actresses on the historical stage—women as well as men, factory workers as well as entrepreneurs, peasants as well as landlords. As a graduate student and as a new faculty member at UMB, I began to raise the questions that eventually brought the issue of epistemology to the forefront of my consciousness.

The challenge—as I saw it then—was to create conditions in the classroom that encouraged students to consider the possibility that all people—not simply those who are the intellectual guardians of the 'western tradition' could be involved in deliberations over the content of history.¹ Then and later, some efforts were more successful than others, and none succeeded every time. But all were rooted in the assumption that students at every level could learn to recognize what kind of evidence and what voice a text presented, and intelligently consider how the latter reflected choices about which groups were worth studying and which groups best illuminated a particular history. What follows are some stories from the classroom that illuminate the practice of applied epistemology.

STORIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

As an instructor in the early 1970s, I taught a course in Western Civilization and devised a research project on the Depression era that required each student to interview someone at least 16 years old during the 1930s, to research a contemporary issue of the *Boston Globe*, and to read the textbook's account of this time period. When students reported on their findings, they noticed—without any prompting from me that 1) interview data obtained from people who varied in race, class and gender backgrounds was at odds with the evidence they obtained from their other sources, 2) the *Globe* didn't write about the kinds of people that they had interviewed, and 3) the textbook included no first-person accounts whatsoever. In their research papers, I asked students to consider their information sources, and to reflect on what they now considered to be the most important feature of the Depression era. At this point, I didn't use the word epistemology to describe the project's focus.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War during the late 1970s, I took advantage of the large number of Vietnam veterans at UMB to devise a research project that would allow students to learn from their experiences. From the outset, students were excited to be gathering data from people who were "part of history." In the course of the semester they became more confident, as they assumed the role of "experts" on an important body of evidence with which I (the teacher) was unfamiliar. Although students never used the word "epistemology," they were well aware that they were attempting to reconcile the different knowledges and perspectives encountered in the interviews. It was revealing that at this point that they began to raise questions about my own scholarly work. In Marta's words:

How do you decide data and whose viewpoint is most important? Whose story counts most?

With these questions, the epistemological issue was at last joined.

FAST FORWARD TO THE LATE 1980S AND 1990S

At this point, the UMB student body was increasingly diverse; the faculty much less so but—for complicated reasons—far more committed to diversity as an academic priority than faculty at many elite research universities. Between 1989-1991, a Diversity Working Group of students, faculty and staff won acceptance for a university-wide diversity curriculum requirement that linked questions of epistemology to diversity and academic standards. Adv-

1.Moya, p.166.

cates for this initiative advanced the following argument:

If the reality of the world is that it is comprised of diverse peoples and if the university's mission is to help students understand and make their way in the world, then only a curriculum that includes a focus on diversity can fulfill the university's academic obligation to students.

Although we did not ever mention the word epistemology, ours was above all an epistemological battle over what counts as knowledge in an academic setting.

An important subtext in this struggle—sometimes explicitly stated and sometimes not—was the focus on traditionally marginalized perspectives, histories and experiences. The powerful intellectual rationale for this focus has been brilliantly set out by the literature scholar Paula Moya who sets out this argument very clearly:

Because the marginalized person's condition is at odds with her human need for self-determination, she is the one most likely to encounter the contradictions inherent in a social formation that claims to be extending to all members the promise of equality even as it keeps some persons in subordinate position.¹

We won the battle for a university-wide diversity requirement.² As a consequence, faculty previously challenged by student demands to know why they needed to learn about gays, working class people or members of non-majority racial and ethnic backgrounds, could now respond that the university as an institution mandated the study of diverse knowledges and experiences as essential to the education of all students.³ At the same time, the diversity curriculum requirement provided to students, faculty and staff from historically marginalized social groups 1) a minimal but significant base of intellectual support—of a sort that I would have welcomed in my undergraduate and graduate years, and 2) a more accurate understanding of human history, experience and potential.

MORE RECENT STRATEGIES

In all of my courses, a key intellectual exercise is to assign a text and invite students to collaborate in small group efforts 1) to identify the voices deployed to tell the story of a particular event, movement, or intellectual development, 2) to become aware of how many voices/perspectives are presented, 3) to notice which voices are missing and 4) to consider how the story might be more fairly told. In upper-level courses, I ask students to consider their own prior assumptions and values as they try to tell the story in a way that does justice to more than one perspective. The challenge was to develop a practice that drew attention to the often uninterrogated assumptions that shape the changing decisions made by historians and nonhistorians about which evidence, which perspective, and whose story matters most.

These discussions are not enthusiastically welcomed by all students. Adam finds the discussion of multiple voices unsettling. "If you really believe that no source is neutral—you couldn't believe anyone!" To Alonzo, all this "critiquing" seems a waste of time, an unnecessary "complication" in his effort to get done—and quickly—with his university education. John is even more put off by the implications of these methodological inquiries. After one class, he tells me

I expected the university to be like a supermarket. You shop around, decide on different courses and then get the information that goes with each course.

But it feels like the real agenda in our class is to open everything to question. That's not why I came to school.

Nevertheless, as a teacher, I had the power to say:

In this class, we're going to explore these questions. At the end of the semester, we will check back to see whether these approaches/exercises have turned out to be useful.

1. See Paula Moya, p. 170.

2. The story of this initiative is set out in Kingston-Mann and Sieber, *Achieving Against the Odds*.

3. Before the diversity requirement was passed, there were students who commented to me that the study of African history was "not really history, but appreciation," and asked why—if such topics were so important they didn't hear about them in any of their other classes. See Chris Reardon, "An Urban Commuter College Responds to Diversity," *Ford Foundation Report*, (Winter, 1992): 10-15.

DECODING TEXTS: STUDENT INTELLECTUAL JOURNEYS (2001)

Students are asked to bring the textbook (Leften Stavrianos, *The World Since 1500*) to class. In small groups, they review the book's "Table of Contents," and respond to the following directions:

- 1) Name the words that most frequently recur in the chapter headings?
- 2) How many pages are devoted to the Western and non-Western world?

Students report their findings to the class, and are delighted to find that the answers to these questions are quite unambiguous. The words "Conquest" and "Expansion" occur in almost every chapter heading, and 2/3 of the book is devoted to the Western world.

Reflecting on her group's findings, Ana argues that the author is racist. With devastating kindness, Elena suggests that perhaps the textbook author didn't know anything else about the subject of modern world history... Most interesting for me in these discussions, is the student—Brett in this case—who observes that the author must believe that conquests, expansion and the West are the most important things for readers to learn about. "Why would anyone think that?" I ask. From several people at once: "Look around; he's just saying what most people believe."

This conversation seems to me a good place from which to build. It sets the stage for the epistemological issues that will structure the course. Students are questioning the textbook—which is good—and are taken aback when I announce that unlike them, Stavrianos possesses a Ph.D.! But they persist, and continue to reflect on the choices that Stavrianos and other, more learned authors have made about the information that they should be required to learn in a history course.

TEACHING THE RENAISSANCE

Students read Stavrianos in tandem with a very different but factually accurate historical account authored by a writer named Starhawk. They are asked to identify 1) what each author considers most important about this historical era, and 2) which social group's experience is situated at the center of the narrative. In student online journal responses, the general consensus is that the textbook presents a familiar view of the Renaissance that celebrates the art, science, humanism, questionings, and explorations by a new middle class that created what Stavrianos terms "The Expanding Civilization of the West." In contrast, Starhawk titles her history of the same time period as "The Burning Times." In her account, the key features of the Renaissance were witch burning, the expropriation of land through enclosure, and the expropriation of knowledge (with the empirically-based practices of female healers [witches] replaced by the deductive expertise of church-trained male physicians).

In class discussion, most students initially view Stavrianos as "objective" but find Starhawk more interesting, opinionated and emotional. A majority usually agrees that Stavrianos is a better historian. Playing the role of devil's advocate, I ask students whether Stavrianos presents the characteristics of the Renaissance as positive achievements, or as changes that possess bad points as well as good. Why, I ask, do they think that Stavrianos fails to refer to the witch hunts or enclosure? Do they think that he didn't know about them?

Khara responds: "Stavrianos linked the era of the Renaissance to the future achievements of the West instead of looking at the past as it was for most people living at the time." Elena writes: "Starhawk describes peasants and laborers and emphasizes women, but Stavrianos concentrates on power & wealth and how the powerful and wealthy use their resources. He does not refer to women." Tikeon observes: "For Stavrianos, movement and changes came from the upper class but for Starhawk, changes emanate from the lower classes." On this day, Stephen has the last word: "This era seems more like the Dark Ages for some and the Renaissance for others."

TEACHING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

In a unit on England's Industrial Revolution, I raise similar questions regarding the differences between the text and a selection from E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. According to Jasenka,

Stavrianos downplays the poor and their working conditions. He says their poverty 'must be viewed in the light of contemporary rather than present-day standard.' ... Having been brought up in an upper middle class family I can relate to Stavrianos but I'm also wondering what I'm not seeing around me in my own life ... I read Thompson and get sick to my stomach reading about the children dying from being overworked. I'm sure there are similar kinds of heart-wrenching sadnesses happening today and I wonder, am I being like Stavrianos in turning my back and saying, "Gee, my life is great!"

Ana compares the two sources: 'Thompson doesn't give you an overview, but he includes many primary sources and goes much deeper than Stavrianos.' Li Xu sums up: "Over all, the text gives us a grand macro picture of the Industrial Revolution—it promotes the social progress wildly."

TEACHING THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Students read Stavrianos and a chapter from Vincent Harding's *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. By this point in the semester, students are increasingly sensitive to the implications of the contrasting histories being told and for some, emotions are beginning to run high. Brett writes:

Stavrianos does not make any reference to African resistance to enslavement, but Harding describes the struggle "to resist the breaking of our nations, our families, and the chain of our existence ... To free ourselves from ... brutal captivity ..To resist both the Europeans and their African helpers, to challenge and seek to break their power to take us away from our homeland." Harding is not talking about what Stavrianos describes as the "overall positive result" of the slave trade in "increased global productivity." He is not talking about the concept of "free trade" so cherished by the Europeans, but of the "slave trade" and the horror and struggle that meant for the African people.

First-year student Lelkel carries the discussion further, reflecting on why some information may not be made available to us:

An interesting comment that came up in our discussion in last class came to me reading this passage—history is written by the winner. Throughout this passage we are only given the name of one man, Captain Tomba, who led a slave uprising. The thousands of slaves who fought for their freedom will forever remain nameless. The main reason is there was no means of communication between slaves and ship's crew. But even if the slaves were able to speak English, I doubt we would have had any strong accounts of the uprisings. For one, most of them were thwarted. Second, there is no reason that the slave traders would want to share this information. It would most likely drive men away from the slave trade.

Amos writes:

I am encouraged that researchers have managed to find strong evidence supporting the methods of struggle on the ships. I can see how easily it could have been covered up in order to protect the slave masters and captains ... I only wish, as Harding mentioned, that there was less anonymity concerning those who headed these rebellions. I remember when we discussed the definition of a patriot in class. I saw the rebels as similar to those who recently fought the terrorists on the September 11 hijacked plane.

In a rage, Kristen quotes the following passage from the Stavrianos textbook: "Thanks to the prevailing trade winds the 'middle passage' was normally swift and brief, the average being 60 days." She angrily comments on the textbook author's formulation:

Maybe time flies when you are having a good time! But I am so frustrated with Stavrianos. He said that the voyage was swift and brief—only 60 days! That may be a short time if you are the one *capturing* slaves, but if you are living in those narrow spaces, being beaten, fed inedible food, even a minute is long. How could he write that way?

Although it is a rare first-year student who achieves this level of imaginative understanding, these exercises encourage many students to view epistemology (always unnamed) as a practical intellectual skill. Meghan comments, “I had never thought of questioning the objectivity of textbooks. I can see now that they are written by human beings and not by robots.” Eric observes: “The most interesting thing is that when historians disagree, it’s not just because one is lying and the other is telling the truth.” Eva concludes:

Everything I read has already been filtered through the mind of another human being. With this in mind I began to look more closely at what I read, but also keep an open mind about the information given to me. I now try to get as many sides to a story as I can so when I come to a conclusion it would be a fair, thought out, and educated one.

As an optional question on a final exam, I asked students to choose from all of the semester’s readings a statement that they consider to be particularly objective. I regret now that I didn’t ask them to discuss the reasons for their choices. But the most votes in one class went to the following passage from Vincent Harding:

When the ships came, they brought with them the European passion for profits, the European disease of racism, and the European fondness for power of arms. When these forces encountered all the weaknesses—all the tendencies to fear, deception, and greed—that Africans share with the rest of humankind, the earlier, more flexible patterns of African bondage degenerated into the African slave trade—financed, fueled and directed by the peoples of Europe, and all too often aided and betted by African allies.¹

I was impressed by their choice.

CONCLUSION

There is much to consider in the richness of these student responses. As I see it, these student insights suggest that the practice of epistemological analysis may well lower the unfairly high intellectual price of admission to the world of academe. It helps to bring marginal knowledges to light as alternatives that enrich our understanding, our sense of possibility and our capacity for problem-solving. Equally important for the academic survival and success of diverse students, an exposure to epistemological thinking can significantly reduce the traditional pressure to renounce marginalized cultural histories in order to take one’s place as an educated person.

1. Harding, *There is a River*, p.7.