

The “My Paradigm is Better Than Yours” Argument: Educational Perspectives Through Rose-Colored Glasses

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The title of this reaction paper was inspired by a book, “Sceptical essays,” by British philosopher Bertrand Russell (2004) that was originally published in 1928. Looking back from the year 2009, this book provides a 81 year time capsule of Russell’s philosophy. Russell (2004) relates the tale of Pyrrho, who established Pyrrhonism (the original name for skepticism). Pyrrho “maintained that we never know enough to be sure that one course of action is wiser than another” Russell (2004, p. 2). Russell (2004) admitted Pyrrho’s outlook may be perceived as a radical form of skepticism, while Russell (2004) acknowledged himself as supporting a middle position of skepticism.

The skepticism that Russell (2004) values and upholds revolves around three propositions: a) when experts agree, the opposite belief is not certain; b) when experts do not agree, no belief can be judged as certain by a non-expert; and c) when all experts agree that there is not sufficient basis for a positive belief to exist, the non-expert would be advised to delay a decision. “These propositions may seem mild, yet, if accepted, they would absolutely revolutionise human life. The opinions for which people are willing to fight and persecute all belong to one of the three classes which this scepticism condemns” Russell (2004, p. 3). As a non-expert, or novice, this skepticism seems highly applicable and useful when examining the paradigm environment.

In contemporary educational paradigm research the second proposition

outlined by Russell (2004) ‘when experts do not agree, no belief can be judged as certain by a non-expert,’ seems pertinent. Evidence of the experts not agreeing, fighting, and persecuting each other can be seen in themes of published articles with titles such as ‘Qualitative *versus* Quantitative Research,’ or ‘The *War* Between Positivism and Interpretivism.’ As a novice educational researcher, I wish to initially learn rather than enlist in a ‘civil war’ against any ‘domestic enemies.’ Call me a paradigm pacifist. However, the more I read about the differences and similarities between paradigms, the more confident I am in placing myself within a paradigm, or between paradigms. It will simply take time and effort to get where I am going. For the present, as a novice, I am still reading, thinking, discussing, and evaluating.

The propositions presented by Russell (2004) indeed have links to Pyrrhonism and my present position. A Pyrrhonist “typically suspends judgement, acknowledges his lack of comprehension, refrains from making claims to knowledge (including the claim that he does not know), and thereby hopes to attain tranquility of mind” (Vesey & Foulkes, 1990, p.242). Therefore, not only could I be labeled as a paradigm pacifist, but also as a paradigm Pyrrhonist.

Researchers of education are presently in a unique situation as there is a variety of paradigms which have support. As recently as 40 years ago, this was not the case. Until the second half of the 20th century, researchers were guided by a single paradigm of science, logical positivism (Paul, 2005). There was a change, according to Howe (1998) as illustrated by Rabinow and Sullivan’s (1979) term the “interpretive turn” which described the movement away from positivism to interpretivism in the mid to late 20th century. After this change, Howe (1998) saw the new debate as *within* interpretivism, specifically *between* the postmodernists and the transformationalists. Howe (1998) concludes that although there

are large differences between postmodernists and transformationalists, interpretivism can incorporate *both* deconstruction and transformation. “They would do well to avoid overblowing their differences on how to understand and balance these in a way that engenders a new generation of *paradigm cliques*” (Howe, 1998, p.20). ‘Paradigm cliques’ was a term used by Howe in a previous publication to describe the quantitative/qualitative debate. Thus, the interpretive turn indicated a triumph in the battlefield for interpretivism, but also signaled the beginning of a civil war within interpretivism between postmodernists and transformationalists.

The term ‘paradigm’ is difficult to define. This is not so surprising as Masterton (1970, cited in Guba, 1990) noted that Thomas Kuhn, the person most associated with bringing the term paradigm into the public forum, used the term in at least 21 ways. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined paradigm as “a term used very widely and loosely to refer to a conceptual framework of beliefs, theoretical assumptions, accepted research methods, and standards that define legitimate work in a particular science or discipline” (p. 382). This ambiguity and vagueness surrounding the term ‘paradigm’ might be due to the constant, ever-changing nature of paradigms.

This evolving paradigm change over time is illustrated by Guba (1990) who saw the opposing paradigm points as having traditional or conventional positivism on one side, while postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism represented a challenge on the other side. Fifteen years later, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) outlined the expanded major paradigms as positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, and participatory action frameworks, with the parallel perspectives of feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, and cultural studies also playing a part. Thus, in the fifteen years from 1990 to 2005 there has been an expansion in the perception of paradigms to incorporate new perspectives.

Although Guba (1990) admits his preference for constructivism, he concludes that none of the four paradigm types is the ultimate choice; each has its own value. In the future, Guba (1990) asserts, all four paradigms may be replaced to make way for the evolution of a new paradigm. Guba (1990) seems a lot more open-minded than the purists on either side of the paradigm continuum. Guba (1990) further states that we are currently involved in a large debate over which of the paradigms is preferred, and this fight for supremacy is pointless. I agree that this war between the paradigms seems senseless. To build on what Guba (1990) wrote, paradigms exist, they have value, and they have evolved and will evolve with time. We live in exciting times where we can see changes in paradigms. I would go further to say that becoming involved in the changes is even more dynamic and interesting.

Kuhn (cited in Richards & Schmidt, 2002) saw 'paradigm shifts' resulting from thinking revolutions that formed new paradigms; rival paradigms were incommensurable. On the other hand, Guba and Lincoln (2005) refer to the shifting of boundaries between paradigms, and the "blurring of genres" (p. 197). As an example, positivism and postpositivism were identified as commensurable. Guba and Lincoln (2005) also call for an eclectic approach where researchers can select between different paradigm types. This eclectic style of taking the best that each paradigm has to offer and creating a hybrid type of paradigm is one of the ways we can hope to demolish and build on the accumulated knowledge of paradigms for the future. This eclectic approach is advocated by researchers such as Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) who propose mixed methods as a third major research paradigm (as a complement to the two dominant research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative). They see mixed methods as a solution to the 'incompatibility thesis' (Howe, 1988, cited in Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Both dominant research paradigms

are salient and valuable, therefore we should be able to use them both in a third major paradigm, mixed methods.

Schwandt (2000) noted that “It seems to be a uniquely American tendency to categorize and label complicated theoretical perspectives as either this or that” (p. 205). Hughes (1999) has also argued against overuse of so-called ‘political correctness’ and jargon. A distinction between use and overuse is vital here. One result of overuse of politically correct language was the splintering and weakening of subgroups into sub-subgroups. This sub-labeling of increasingly smaller and specific categories can lead to the opposite effect of what was originally intended. Instead of ultimately unifying people, the splintering of sub-groups may have actually divided them further apart. On a similar note, Schwandt (2000) warns “such labeling is dangerous, for it blinds us to enduring issues, shared concerns, and points of tension that cut across the landscape of the movement” (p. 205). Schwandt (2000) concludes that what we are looking at is “not a choice of which label—interpretivist, constructionist, hermeneuticist, or something else—best suits us. Rather, we are confronted with choices about how each of us wants to live the life of a social inquirer” (p. 205). This shunning of labels could lead to what Schwandt (1996, cited in Guba & Lincoln, 2005) referred to as a “farewell to criteriology” or the “regulative norms for removing doubt and settling disputes about what is correct or incorrect, true or false” (p. 206). Guba and Lincoln (2005) conclude that in postmodernism there is no single truth – all truths are merely partial, and further, there is no solitary correct paradigm that should be adhered to by all social scientists.

In the future, paradigms might keep their labels and identities, or they may balance on the slippery slope of interdisciplinarity if there is a collapsing of labels and blurring of paradigm genres. By ‘interdisciplinarity’ I mean a potential future disappearing act between paradigms where labels, identities, and

power evaporate.

However, for the future I feel we need rival paradigms, even if we do not agree with them, to keep a healthy balance, and to check between the various paradigm options available to researchers.

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