Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
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Citation for published version (APA):
van Goor, R. L. C. (2012). Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA
1. Introduction

It seems to be a demand of an acceptable contemporary epistemological approach that it is able to deal with the inevitable uncertainty connected with claims to knowledge. In the foregoing I have argued that fallibilism, as a potential - relatively - ‘uncertain’ solution that still leaves room for a claim to general validity of knowledge claims, leaves some important questions unanswered, and that a contextualist epistemology might offer a fruitful alternative provided that it is capable of avoiding the pitfall of relativism or arbitrariness. I have demonstrated that a so-called 'discursive epistemology' – in which an interpretation contexts of justification as dynamic-discursive communicative contexts is used – meets these conditions. This discursive epistemological approach suggests that it might not be such a bad thing that we are not able to appeal to something like a relatively solid, deeper-lying 'ground' when it comes to an idea of the justification of knowledge.

Resembling the way in which justification takes place in day-to-day conversations, a discursive epistemology offers an approach to epistemology in which the processes of the development and justification of knowledge is regarded as dependent on an ongoing communicative exchange between speakers and their audience. In such an approach, the legitimacy to make a claim to knowledge – in the definition of being justified to make a claim, or as ‘epistemic entitlement’ – is not acquired through justificatory grounds that can be regarded as relatively fixed and more 'certain', but rather through grounds that are merely – often implicitly, and mostly for the time being – 'accepted' in the discussion. Understood as such, the safeguard for the epistemological soundness of the claims that are made and the arguments that are used is supplied by the participants in the communication because they are continually watchful as to whether the speaker's contributions meet the prevailing standards within that communicative process. This latter element does, however, raise the question of whether this does not make knowledge too dependent on the more or less coincidental conventions of a communicative community, and whether we then may still be able to speak of the progress of knowledge in a more scientific sense. In this chapter, I will address those questions in connection with the insights gained from the research in chapter six, which dealt with the question of how people
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– especially children – learn to participate in the conventions of a communicative practice.

2. The practice-based discursive (re)construction of knowledge

The research in chapter six describes how children's growing into a communicative community also entails their learning to participate in the joint construction and reconstruction of acceptable presuppositions on how the world is; an image that is confirmed by Adler (2008). “Our vast background of beliefs is largely a background of knowledge because of accumulated tacit confirmation that we pick up automatically in acquiring competence in the conversational practice and merely acting on our beliefs”, he submits (ibid., p. 348). As such, knowledge is acquired in a holistic way through participation in a communicative process in which the participants, each from his or her own background, continually and actively supply and discuss matters. As participants in the communication, we are socialized as it were in a certain practice-based process of an ongoing reconceptualization of the world. This perspective immediately dismisses the notion of strict, or conservative, conventionalism, because the ‘conventions’, which seem to be the substratum of our knowledge of the world, are constantly subject to change. By zooming in on the productive, context-transforming role played by the participants in the communication, it becomes clear that the beliefs currently applied within a communicative community do not put any fixed restrictions on whatever is regarded as knowledge within that community. Thus, the danger of conventionalism is averted.

Essential in this, is the idea – which also came to the fore in chapter four – that participation in a communicative process entails not only becoming familiar with a communicative process, but also the understanding that each contribution (a pupil’s included) implies a proposal to change the communicative process. When communicating, speakers are constantly trying their best to put certain topics on the agenda, to introduce new viewpoints or manners of speaking. They try to convince their partners in the conversation to apply certain concepts, appreciate certain matters, use certain methods, etc. As such, each communicative contribution is aimed at changing something – however small – in the way in which the world appears within the communication. This also enables us to explain why practice-based communication may be viewed as an ongoing ‘negotiation about how the world is’. That is to say, it is a negotiation or discussion about what we will or will not regard as a 'matter of fact'. In such a process, the currently applied ‘conventional’ beliefs about the world are, if needed, replaced.
by ‘better’ ones – which gives the practice-based communication a criti-
cal-discursive nature.

The critical-discursive nature of practice-based communication
also shows when we look at the role played by the audience. Besides for
the fact that each partner in the conversation, as a speaker, submits
proposals to change, as a listener they are in fact always involved in the
acceptance, rejection, or discussion of the proposals that are made by
other speakers. With every communicative contribution, it will depend
on the audience as to whether it is inclined to embrace that contribution
to the conversation, or whether they will fight or even ignore it. A
speaker who wants to change certain suppositions or standards within
the beliefs prevailing in the relevant practice will have to make
considerable effort to bring the audience over to their side. However, if
the audience sees reason to do so, or is convinced that a communicative
contribution will yield a plausible or valuable reconceptualization of the
world that fits the other associated presuppositions of the world, it will
sooner or later be inclined to accept that contribution. In the continuing
the discussion about how the world is, the contributions made by the
partners in the conversations act as the critical touchstone for the way in
which the world is described, understood, and discussed. This will not
lead to inflexible conventionalism, however, since the way in which the
world is understood is constantly tested and reconstructed.

Despite the fact that the presuppositions of the world applied in
the communication are principally discussable and replaceable, certain
presuppositions or collections of presuppositions may last a long time
when they satisfy. Although the communicative context constantly
changes, it may seem that no real transformation takes place because
certain presuppositions that are deemed to be basic are not put up for
discussion and, therefore, continue to function as taken-for-granted
presuppositions. At other moments, however, an entire system of beliefs
may suddenly topple because a critical contribution to the commu-
nication unexpectedly and convincingly undermines a whole collection
of presuppositions. This explains, for instance, why, at one moment,
knowledge development within certain scientific disciplines seems to
quietly drift on within a clearly demarcated paradigm - a situation that
Kuhn refers to as a state of 'normal science' – whereas at another
moment a true scientific landslide occurs, in which a 'conventional'
paradigm crumbles and an alternative paradigm is ready to replace it -
which Kuhn calls a state of 'revolutionary science' (cf. Kuhn 1962). This
way of interpreting things further makes clear that the relative constancy
of some presupposed acceptability standards is not necessarily evidence
of a 'more certain' nature of those standards. It only shows that the
partners in the conversation have not (yet) seen reason to put the presupposed standards up for discussion, or have not (yet) spotted a possibility for developing a better conceptualization.

When a certain collection of, fundamentally regarded, presuppositions is not put up for discussion for a long time and is consequently applied as self-explanatory, according to Elgin this may be referred to as a "reflective equilibrium" (Elgin 1996, p. 106). Such a state of equilibrium may be regarded as 'reflective', precisely because it concerns an equilibrium that has emerged on the basis of an ongoing negotiation process. "We proceed dialectically", she submits, "[a] process of delicate adjustments occurs, its goal being a system in reflective equilibrium. Achieving that goal may involve drawing new evaluative and descriptive distinctions or erasing distinctions already drawn, reordering priorities or imposing new ones, reconceiving the relevant facts and values or recognising new ones as relevant" (ibid., pp. 106-107). After a process of polishing, testing, calibrating, and trying, certain beliefs, standards, methods, etc. will, at a certain moment within the communication, be regarded as "facts". On the same issue, an epistemologist like Brandom concludes that it is in this way that a form of objectivity can also be realized within a dynamic-discursive approach towards justification; an objectivity that does not derive its status from its reference to something like an external reality, or from the application of a specific - rational - method of inquiry, but that is realized intersubjectively within the ongoing communication, and that is normative by nature because it is part of the standards to which the partners in the conversations are bound (cf. Brandom 2000, pp. 196-204, see also: Bransen 2002).

We could now be inclined to explicate the beliefs, standards, methods, etc. that constitute the heart of a 'reflective equilibrium', and take them as a starting point, or norm, for the further communicative process within a certain communicative practice. Apparently, there is a presupposed, a relatively stable, reflectively realized agreement on the validity of certain beliefs and standards, so why would we not explicitly bring that agreement into action as a standard for the further debate? This is, for instance, proposed by Spiecker and Steutel (2001) who advocate a step-by-step method for reaching a 'reflective equilibrium' for the philosophy of education; a method that, in their eyes, could render moral principles that may be deployed for the purpose of evaluating moral judgment. However, the problem of such an explication and anchoring of the prerequisites needed for the reflective equilibrium to arise, or of the elements that are part of the equilibrium, is that it is self-refuting, since the reflective nature of the equilibrium actually demands that disruptions of the equilibrium may occur that could not at all be
foreseen and that could also affect the – what we thought – most basic presuppositions (cf. Elgin 1996, p. 133). Therefore, the notion of a ‘reflective equilibrium’ actually does not tolerate any externally imposed standards of conditions. Each attempt to do so anyway would in fact bring foundationalism back into the picture again, because such standards would be granted an epistemological privilege since they themselves are placed well away from the sphere of influence of the reflection. Such an external intrusion in the equilibrium would also hinder the development of knowledge, rather than encourage it. “Having forsaken foundationalism’s reliance on self-justifying claims”, Elgin submits, “we can enhance understanding only by drawing on what we have already established” (Elgin 1996, p. 133). In other words, for the further development of our insights we must lean on the insights, standards, and presuppositions as established in the communication so far, without any external foothold. In that sense, the joint development of knowledge has been compared to rebuilding a ship at open sea.

2. Discursive epistemology and progress in (scientific) knowledge
Whatever is accepted as beliefs within a communicative practice, and whatever may, therefore, be considered knowledge within that practice, in a discursive epistemology is made dependent on an ongoing process of negotiation, in which each accepted contribution to the discussion changes, to a greater or lesser extent, the collection of implicitly accepted beliefs and thus the body-of-knowledge used within that practice. That does not, however, clarify what actually might be considered as the ‘progress’ of knowledge within such an approach. Contrary to change, ‘progress’ is a normative notion, which means that it may only be referred to on the basis of specific criteria. In scientific discourses, these are usually criteria concerning (research-)methodological justification. A logically consistent and, therefore, conceptually unambiguous argumentation, a theoretical substantiation, or the execution of a controlled experiment may be set as conditions for a valid justification for a claim to knowledge, for instance. From a discursive-epistemological perspective, it can be clarified as to how such criteria for science are, just like all the other acceptability standards together with which they make up the communicative context, are themselves also part of the ongoing negotiation process - and thus also subject to the processes of communicative evolution. As to which criteria for scientific validity are applied may, therefore, also be regarded as the provisional outcome of a critically-discursive change process. The fact that science, then, does not only entail a methodological evaluation of theoretical claims to knowledge, but also the rigorous assessment of the way in which these claims
came about, is indeed characteristic of the scientific discourse. For that reason, scientists – according to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie voor Wetenschappen; KNAW) – are, for instance, not only supposed to conduct research in line with the currently accepted scientific methods, but must also describe their methods "in such a way that others are able to assess their validity" (KNAW et al. 2001, p. 5). It is most probably thanks to the trust in the critical, self-corrective abilities of science that we also assign science the role of knowledge authority within our society.

In order to gain insight into what all this means for individual scientists, we can now use the insights that chapter six rendered in respect of understanding the notion of 'expertise'. Concerning participation in a communicative practice – such as a scientific communicative practice – it is submitted in this chapter that 'expertise' has a twofold nature. The term ‘expertise’ refers to the extent to which a participant in the communication is familiar with the collection of presuppositions that are shared within the communication. Obviously, this is also important when it comes to scientists. Scientific expertise presupposes matters like knowledge of a certain academic discipline, being able to design a consistent line of argumentation, the competence to apply certain methodological principles, etc. At the same time, ‘expertise' also involves a speakers' ability to – successfully – put parts of the communicative context up for discussion. Here, the 'expertise' might well lie in the ability to question those suppositions that others take to be basic (after all, the questioning of a random part of the context is reserved for each participant in the communication, including the ‘novice’). Given all this, the expert scientist would appear to not only be someone who excels in the conducting of research in line with the general idea of 'proper science', but also someone who, at the same time, is able to critically, and successfully, question certain principles that are deemed to be at the core of the scientific endeavor. Excellent scientists, according to Elgin, are scientists who at the least have the ability “to operate successfully within the constraints the discipline dictates”, but are also able “to challenge those constraints effectively” (1996, p. 123).

3. Consequences of a discursive-epistemological approach for philosophy of education
The foregoing shows that epistemic criteria do not precede scientific discourse, but are part of the ongoing scientific discussion. This supports the thought already proposed in chapter two that the idea of the ‘the primacy of epistemology' must be abandoned. This insight bears also on the philosophy of education. We do not need to be concerned, however,
that this would imply the inevitable downfall of strict epistemic criteria for doing philosophical-educational research. It only shows that the criteria for what is considered to be a philosophically acceptable contribution to the debates in philosophy of education are themselves a topic of discussion. This does not only involve the question of what is considered an acceptable method of inquiry. The tasks of the philosophy of education, for instance, are also part of the discussion - as is illustrated in this dissertation. The things that the philosophy of education should concern itself with, what it can do, and how it should go about, is simply part of the ongoing negotiation on what the world - in this case, the world of philosophy of education - is like. With each contribution, participants in educational-philosophical debates inevitably bring up for discussion the beliefs, criteria, or starting points that were previously taken as taken for granted. At the same time, they act as guardians of the limits for what may apply as philosophically acceptable contributions to that debate. In this connection, my reaction to fallibilism in the philosophy of education may be seen as illustrative. On the one hand, I question a certain standard that seems to be broadly taken for granted by philosophers of education in the field. For I suggest to abandon the idea that for the justification of claims within the philosophy of education, beliefs are needed to which a certain epistemic certainty is attributed. At the same time, the reaction acts as a defense of another standard to which, as we have seen, usually an important role is assigned in academic research – hence, also in the philosophy of education (cf. chapter one). For I argue for the rejection of attributing epistemic certainty by, among other things, pointing out that it erodes the reflectivity of the philosophy of education, thereby endangering its critical, self-correcting capability as an academic discipline.

How the philosophy of education should be designed is, therefore, now made dependent on the educational-philosophical discourse itself. In separate contributions, proposals are made to accept or reject certain acceptability standards for the philosophy of education. In light of other acceptability standards, those proposals are then incorporated, or not. The content of philosophy of education thereby seems concurrently dependent on what the separate speakers are committed to, and on the commitments that play a role in the wider educational-philosophical discourse. In any case, commitment seems to play an important role when it comes to the format and content of the philosophy of education. That is something we have seen before in this dissertation. In chapter two I showed that, in reaction to the rejection of the ‘primacy of epistemology’, contemporary antifoundationalist philosophers of education suggest to take a basic commitment – in their case,
to fighting exclusion – as a starting point for philosophy of education. Although I have argued that, in light of my findings, such a proposal does not seem very fruitful, there is now again reason to believe that there might well be a shift taking place within the philosophy of education from a 'primacy of epistemology' to a 'primacy of engagement'. However, whatever such a 'primacy of engagement' might entail exactly is not at all clear as yet. This is reason to further investigate the idea of the 'primacy of engagement' in the next chapter.

4. References