Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
van Goor, R.L.C.

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

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
1. Introduction

Developments in epistemology undermine the traditional ambition of philosophy of education to contribute to the formulation and justification of basic principles for educational practice (Snik et al., 1994). Particularly antifoundationalism, which rapidly wins ground, makes this ambition seem too pretentious. In philosophy of education, antifoundationalism appears to cause a tendency to restrict the practical ambitions of this discipline to demonstrating the (individual or social-contextual) restrictions of any attempt to come to 'justified' foundations (Van Goor et al., 2004). By drawing attention to the limited validity of any justification, these authors want to put the powers of philosophical judgments into perspective, hoping to resist exclusion of alternative positions and to keep an open mind to their possible relevance. In order to achieve this, they stress the importance of formulating 'counterpractices' (Biesta, 1998; Peters & Lankshear, 1996), of 'deconstructing' existing positions (Biesta, 2001; Egea-Kuehne, 1995), or of analytical applications of irony in philosophy (Van Goor & Heyting, 2006). These approaches characteristically bring established answers up for discussion, rather than providing new answers.

Though being aware of potential exclusion and the possibilities of resisting it unmistakably shows evidence of a normative orientation, the above-mentioned positions cannot be called normative in the traditional, prescriptive, sense, because the desirability of avoiding exclusion is not primarily brought up and defended as a position in its own right. The authors concerned especially stress the impossibility of determining even relatively certain foundations, which makes that the philosopher of education is ultimately thrown upon his own preferences, opinions, and affinities - with all their limitations. In short, with respect to knowledge and knowledge-claims these authors seem to replace the traditional 'primacy of epistemology' with the 'primacy of commitment' as I will call it. This way of looking at knowledge-claims implies that positions are not considered reducible to such foundations or basic principles that can show epistemological privilege; instead they are seen as ultimately dependent on the author's specific engagement with the situation that I will refer to as 'commitment'. The specific interpretation of this commitment and its consequences for philosophy of education will be the subject of my analysis.
Though most antifoundationalist authors seem to agree that avoiding exclusion does have practical relevance, it does not solve all problems with respect to philosophy of education's practical relevance. For example, if philosophy of education should restrict its pretensions to making critical analyses in order to reveal excluding one-sidedness, which could break discussions open, how should we evaluate such critical analyses in their turn? Doesn't this result in a paradoxical situation, because these analyses themselves would be liable to similar restrictions, and result from the commitment of its author (Roth, 1995)? What kind of relevance could such a philosophy of education still have? Doubts like these make some authors concerned for an impending "intellectual paralysis" (Blake et al, 1998, p. 5), which according to Smeyers (2005) should be counter-acted by reintroducing some kind of explicit normativity in philosophy of education. If educational thinking inevitably gives evidence of the commitment of its originator, he seems to argue, we better make this commitment explicit from the beginning. That would make the position of the author clear for everyone.

Apparently, it's not at all clear what the 'primacy of commitment' exactly implies, and how we should understand its consequences for philosophy of education. In order to answer these questions, I will first consider the interpretations of 'commitment', or 'being committed' (2), and the related interpretations of the 'primacy of commitment' (3). A further inspection of the latter brings to light a discrepancy with the non-relativist ambitions of the antifoundationalist authors (4), which gives rise to a reconsideration of the interpretation of commitment and its role in the development and justification of knowledge (5). Against this background, I develop a more precise interpretation of the 'primacy of commitment' that enables us to deal with the reproach of relativism (6). In conclusion, I discuss some consequences of my findings for understanding the practical relevance of philosophy of education (7).

2. The concept of commitment
The concept of 'commitment' has been differently defined by different authors, sometimes including the behavior commitment finds expression in, and sometimes only consisting of the attitude that lies at the basis of what is considered committed behavior. Meyer en Allen (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 62), for example, distinguish 'attitudinal commitment' from 'behavioral commitment' whereas Morgan (2005) mentions both as two characteristics of commitment. However, there seems to be agreement about two aspects that are considered to be of crucial importance to the concept of commitment. As Becker (1960, p. 35) in his much cited analysis concludes, 'commitment' refers to an affectional situation of
'being committed' - which I will call the 'feeling-dimension' of commitment - on the one hand, and the activity of making a commitment to a specific content - which I will call the 'content-dimension' of commitment - on the other, leaving in the middle whether it should be accompanied with some kind of physical behaviour. Willms, for example, defines students' commitment to their schools - apart from the behavioural component - as "pertaining to student's sense of belonging at school and acceptance of school values [italics added]" (2003, p. 8). In this example, the sense of belonging represents the feeling-dimension, and the acceptance of school values represents the content-dimension.

The necessary presence of both of these two dimensions, concerning feeling and concerning content, recur and again (Bellah, 1985; Blustein, 1991; Echeverria, 1981; Lieberman. 1998; Lovie, 1992; Montefiore, 1975; Morgan, 2001: Sternberg. 1987). For example, Blustein stresses that the presence of the feeling-dimension is not enough to speak of commitment. because "not everything or everyone people care about is an object of commitment"; there has to be some kind of evaluative judgment as well (Blustein, 1991, p. 120). Lieberman stresses the other side of the picture. According to him one cannot speak of commitment if there is only an endorsed content, and not the necessary affectional attachment to it. As a consequence, serious doubts concerning the endorsed content cannot occur in typical cases of commitment (Lieberman, 1998, pp. 40ff.).

Commitment, then, seems a matter of feeling involved in certain - often political or cultural - problems or situations, accompanied by taking a specific position as regards content, i.e. the cause one is committed to. Consequently, I will broadly define 'commitment' as 'an appraising involvement in a situation'. The 'appraising-part refers to the content-dimension, and the involvement'-part refers to the feeling-dimension; in 'commitment', both dimensions are present. The kind of situation a person is involved in does not make any difference for the necessary presence of both dimensions. Both are there, whether one is thinking of commitment to institutions (Coser, 1974), religions (Audi, 2000), communities or practices (Bellah, 1985), organizations (Becker, 1960; Buchanan, 1974), activities (Lieberman, 1998; Scanlan, 1993), and relationships (Sternberg, 1987). For example, like Willms (2003) with respect to school commitment, Buchanan (1974) considers 'organizational commitment' characterized by affectional attachment to an organization as well as endorsement of its aims and values. Bellah et al. discuss commitment to communities, which requires feeling "patterns of loyalty and obligation" as well as endorsement of what "its hopes and its fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women" (1985, p. 154).

A more profound understanding of the concept of commitment
will require a more detailed view of the interpretation and mutual relations of both characteristic dimensions. Current philosophical interpretations of commitment especially appear to diverge with respect to the way both dimensions are related, one group of authors attributing priority to the feeling-dimension over the content-dimension and a second group of authors attributing priority in reverse. In the former case, the feeling-dimension is considered a derivative of the content the person concerned endorses; in the latter case the content-dimension is considered to ensue from the affectional involvement, i.e. the feeling-dimension. The difference between both interpretations can be exemplified with two phases in the history of Sartre's thinking.

In his existentialist Opus Magnum 'Being and nothingness', Sartre (1969) relates commitment to the human ability of taking life in one's own hands. The present moment of choosing is of vital importance to Sartre's existentialist conception of commitment (Craib, 1976, p. 29). In his existentialist phase Sartre primarily relates commitment to the existential moment in which a human subject makes his own choices in specific situations, manifesting his personal authenticity. This authentic position-finding of the subject takes place in the direct personal and situational existence, and precedes the restrictions that are inherent in any social convention. In this way, Sartre's existentialist interpretation of commitment gives priority to the feeling-dimension. The content of the position the individual chooses ensues from an existential moment in which the individual is purely left to his own devices, and not from a consideration and application of some endorsed value system. As a consequence, the position a person chooses at any particular moment is no predictor of what positions the subject will choose in future situations. Any present choice is, as David Cooper formulates it, "a 'fundamental choice' for which no justification is available" (1990, p. 143).

Whereas in Sartre's existentialist phase the appraising orientation of the subject resulted from making a fundamentally new choice at every occasion, in his later Marxist phase Sartre displayed a quite different view of commitment. Now he proves himself a fanatical follower of a political doctrine that considers commitment following from adherence to a theory, a content that fundamentally restricts future choices. De Brabander (2003) explains this radical turn in Sartre's views as a sign that Sartre now identifies with the picture of the committed author who abandoned the dream of being an impartial and 'free' choosing member of society as being unrealistic (cf. Sartre, 1948, pp. 76ff.). His 'conversion' to Marxism made Sartre an exponent of a conception of commitment that prioritizes content, and that explains the affectional attachment to a choice from the fact that it is a consequence of the specific value system the person endorses.
Those philosophers of education, who replace the primacy of epistemology with the primacy of commitment (cf. chapter two), also give evidence of a conception of commitment that either prioritizes the content-dimension or the feeling-dimension. The former group will consider the appraising involvement in a situation primarily a consequence of the belief-system (ideas, values, etc.) that determines what positions in what situations an individual can get enthusiastic about. However, these authors do not associate this belief-system - this prior content - with an explicit and crystallised doctrine like Marxism. These philosophers of education rather consider this prior content as extracted from the social-historical context of the individual - a context that is either interpreted in terms of group-membership (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2000; McLaren & Giroux, 1997; Peters & Lankshear, 1996; Weinstein, 1995), or in terms of discursive practices like discourses, language games, or social-communicative systems (Biesta, 1998; Blake et al, 1998; Heyting, 2001; Marshall, 1996; Peters, 1995a; Peters & Marshall, 1999; Ruhloff, 2001; Simpson, 2000; Usher et al, 1997). In the first case, the content that constitutes the primary source of commitment consists in the views, beliefs, ideals and values as shared by the members the group, and consequently the commitment of an individual will reflect the norms of the group to which he belongs. In the second case, the content that constitutes the primary source of commitment consists in the system of beliefs that is taken for granted in the discursive practice involved. Citing Foucault we can say that "each discursive practice implies a play of prescriptions that designate its exclusions and choices" (1977, p. 199), which produces the content that is considered the primary source of commitment.

There is also a group of antifoundationalist philosophers of education who consider the appraising involvement in a situation as ensuing from a primarily affectional process. These authors prioritise the feeling-dimension of commitment. In their view, something like 'being touched' in a specific situation is constitutive of the way the content-dimension of commitment takes shape, instead of the other way round. This affectional source of commitment is sometimes conceived of as strictly individual and personal in nature, whereas others rather consider it to be relational in nature. Kohli (1998) and Prior McCarthy (1995), who see the biographical constitution of the body as the final source of position-taking in the world, take the individual-oriented stance. In their view, the physically experienced accumulation of life-events causes a specific, pre-reflexive way of being, from which the contents of individual appraisals result.

Noddings (1984) represents a relational view of the affectional process that is assumed to be at the root of commitment where she stresses the 'natural' and spontaneous response of care that any confrontation with
another person can evoke. Lynda Stone (1995) also implies an interpersonal affect as the source of commitment, but she explains it in terms of friendship. Still others see the interpersonal affect that constitutes the source of commitment simply in being touched by the 'otherness' of the other person (Biesta, 1999; Child et al., 1995; Masschelein, 1998; and 2000; Säfström, 1999). Whatever form it thought to take, these authors consider the interpersonal affect to be the source of commitment, of the appraising interpretation of the situation by the subject. Noddings, for example, formulates it as follows: "The 'ought' - better the 'I ought' - arises directly in lived experience. 'Oughtness', one might say, is part of our 'isness'. [...] I have called this spontaneous response 'natural caring' (1998, p. 187). In other places, she reacts against Kantian views, because they would priorities content (principles) over feelings: "An ethic of care inverts these priorities. The preferred state is natural caring; ethical caring is invoked to restore it. This inversion of priority is one great difference between Kantian ethics and the ethic of care" (Noddings, 1995, p. 138).

Summarizing I can say that authors give priority to either the content-dimension or the feeling-dimension of commitment. Authors who give priority to content usually consider this content as resulting from a context, - either a group, or a discursive practice. Authors who give priority to feeling consider this affectional source of commitment to be either an expression of physical individuality, or of interpersonal relatedness.

3. The primacy of commitment (I)
The various interpretations of the concept of commitment also affect the way authors understand the antifoundationalist primacy of commitment with respect to knowledge claims, and the practical consequences they ascribe to it. For example, authors who consider the group-context the primary source of commitment, will ultimately consider knowledge-claims as reducible to shared beliefs, ideals, preferences, and values of the group. Accordingly, these authors will also be inclined to stress the social risks that this state of affairs implies. If knowledge claims reflect belief-systems of the group, they argue, such claims will also reflect current power relations and group interests, which would play into the hands of dominant group members and exclude members of other groups. Consequently, authors who understand the primacy of commitment as related to group-contexts will be inclined to associate the development and justification of knowledge with social struggle. For example, Henry Giroux argues that science and rational procedures in general should be understood as part of a broader historical, political, and social struggle" (1997, p. 195).

If a discursive practice is considered to be the context, that
determines the content-dimension of commitment, justification of knowledge is ultimately seen as reducible to the belief-system that is implicitly taken for granted in a specific discourse or language game. Such an interpretation of the primacy of commitment makes justification only convincing within the boundaries of this discursive practice. For example, Michael Peters argues that the validity of any claim is subject to the restrictions set by the rules of the language game in the context of which the claim was made, because "...the rules are irreducible and there exists an incommensurability among different games" (Peters, 1995, p. 391). To claim any authority outside of the boundaries of the current language game would require playing another language game according to Peters. This interpretation of the primacy of commitment draws attention to the social phenomenon of communicative boundaries and exclusion. In both context-related interpretations of the primacy of commitment, commitment is determined by a contextual belief system that functions as a boundary beyond which no justification is possible, and in both cases authors stress the importance of being aware of the restrictive effects of this situation in the social realm. Consequently, these authors stress the importance of trying to overcome the conventional belief systems that cause these restrictive effects.

Those authors who give priority to the feeling-dimension of commitment interpret the primacy of commitment depending on the kind of feeling they consider fundamental, which also explains the kind of practical consequences they primarily stress. However, in all cases, justification is ultimately considered dependent on the affective condition of the person(s) concerned, and not on a conventional social or discursive context. As Noddings sees it, the reasons we can and do give for our actions often "point to feelings, needs, impressions, and a sense of personal ideal rather than to universal principles and their application" (1984, p. 3). Prior McCarthy, who accentuates the individual nature of feeling as the source of commitment, writes: "In speaking and knowing, it is not rules that are crucial, but the knowers and speakers themselves" (1995, p. 45). Though recognising expertise as being able to apply certain rules, she alerts to the limited scope of all rules, which puts individual judgment in the forefront: "But, sooner or later, the questions are left to the judgment of individuals" (ibid., p. 37). According to Prior McCarthy, expertise ultimately depends on the question whether "he or she possesses a certain kind of past life, a particular kind of biography. What I mean by 'biography' is a life itself and not a narrative or a set of ideas" (ibid., p. 36).

Though considering the feeling-dimension the primary source of commitment, these authors are well aware that processes of giving and
accepting reason are regulated by social and communicative conventions. Like authors who consider contextually determined content the source of commitment, these feeling-oriented authors stress the restrictions of our conventional instruments for formulating and testing arguments. Exactly for this reason they consider it important to alert to the affectional source of commitment. In their view, taking this affectional source seriously is the obvious way to escape from the restrictions of these social conventions and get our thinking better attuned to our basic feelings. To many authors, this possibility of escaping from conventions gets an ethical import as well. Noddings (1995) is very explicit in this matter. According to her, the spontaneous, affective response of 'natural care' should be the starting point as well as the aim of ethics. In her view, no genuine relation of care can result from any ethical doctrine; if anything, ethical doctrines should serve the blooming of the original caring-affect. Kohli argues in a similar way. According to her, the original feeling resides in the bodily situatedness of the subject, and the almost absolute supremacy that was traditionally ascribed to reason - and to the related importance of generalization - has resulted in the neglect of views that stem from the physical-personal dimension of existence. In order to emancipate from this tyranny of reason, Kohli wants "to put voice to the production of my own body" (1998, p. 519).

Similar arguments can be found in authors who locate the basic feeling in being confronted with the 'otherness' of other people. They also consider this interpersonal affectional source of ethical importance because it can free from conventional 'blinders'. This original interpersonal affect is considered the source of accepting responsibility for the other as other, a responsibility that precedes principles and beliefs, and that is a natural part of being in a situation. According to these authors, it is impossible for a subject to withdraw from this pre-reflectively anchored responsibility, because the subject is only constituted as such in this relation (Biesta, 1999; Säfström, 1999). It is important to recognize, that claiming and justifying knowledge can ultimately be reduced to this affective-ethical situatedness of the subject. "For, in this light", Standish writes, "the ethical is there at the start in our actions and projects, and hence inevitable there at the start in research in education" (2001, p. 498).

All in all, the various conceptions of commitment result in two interpretations of the primacy of commitment with respect to knowledge. The primacy of commitment means that claiming and justifying knowledge is considered either to depend on the belief system that characterises the current social-communicative context, or on the pre-reflective, affectional being in the situation. Both interpretations of the primacy of commitment share some crucial elements. Across the board authors
consider the conventional nature of claiming and justifying knowledge a limitation that should be overcome in order to combat exclusion - either of alternative social-communicative contexts, or of original, pre-reflective ways of feeling as sources of judgment. In all cases, the unquestioning acceptance of prevailing conventions is to blame for excluding effects. That raises the question how these authors imagine such prevailing conventions to function, and in particular how they conceive of the possibility of escaping from such conventions.

4. How to escape from conventional restrictions
The restrictions that result from the social-conventional embedding of knowledge and its justification appear to pose a problem antifoundationalist philosophers of education want to overcome. At first sight, this idea of the social embedding of knowledge may cause a semblance of relativism to these interpretations of the primacy of commitment (Williams, 2001, p. 221). However, the authors in my sample deviate from relativists in one important respect. Relativism not only implies making the acceptability of claims dependent on the locally current set of norms, it also implies the impossibility of bringing these norms up for discussion (ibid., p. 226). Antifoundationalist philosophers of education appear not to share the latter. They rather explicitly aim at overcoming or at least challenging such local restrictions. Consequently, they do not consider it impossible to escape from the compelling character of criteria for acceptability that are part of conventional communicative contexts (Van Goor et al., 2004, p. 185). In this respect, they deviate from relativism. This raises the question: how do they imagine the possibility of such an escape?

A first view of how to escape can be reconstructed from texts that prioritize contextually determined content as a source of commitment. Peters (1995b), who considers language games the determining contexts, thinks we can escape from its restrictions by making use of the differences between language games that exist next to each other - each of them characterized by its own specific norms for justification. This "multiplicity and proliferation of forms of reason, defined by the rules of particular discourses or language-games" (ibid., p. 391) makes it possible to escape by changing language games. Changing language games also would make it possible to discuss one language game from the perspective of another language game.

This impression of things can be found in many of the discussed antifoundationalist philosophers of education. Often arguing from a critical-pedagogical perspective, they stress the possibility of questioning the socially prevailing knowledge frame by confronting it with alternative
frames - practices (Biesta, 1998), or narratives (Giroux, 1997; Peters & Lankshear, 1996). For example, Gur-Ze'ev mentions the importance of 'counter-education' that could offer "possibilities for identifying, criticizing, and resisting violent practices of normalization, control, and reproduction" (1998, p. 463). Such alternative frames, discourses, or language games that seem a necessary precondition for the possibility of escaping from prevailing ones, do not necessarily have to exist already. Some authors also mention the possibility of creating them (Biesta, 1998; Giroux, 1997; Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Peters & Lankshear, 1996). Especially this last suggestion seems surprising because these same authors also stress the restrictive nature of current contexts. How is it possible to create a new discourse, language game, or belief system if one is confined to the restrictions of an existing one?

For similar reasons, it is hard to imagine how it would be possible to change between existing vocabularies. Being confined within the limits of a specific communicative context seems to imply the impossibility of imagining alternatives, in particular if they are conceived as mutually incompatible as Peters (1995b, p. 388; and p. 91) explicitly does and other authors at least implicitly suggest. Either a communicative context keeps one caught within its limits - thus making acceptability and justification restricted to the current context -, or the conventional context is open and allows for change and revision of positions - but in that case the context would no longer be restrictive. To have both at the same time seems impossible. Antifoundationalist philosophers of education do not extensively discuss how the restrictive nature of communicative conventions can be consonant with criticizing and changing them, but some ideas can be found in Rorty.

Rorty, who uses the term 'vocabularies' for communicative contexts, describes the role of communicative conventions just like the above-mentioned philosophers of education. Like them, Rorty considers any use of language - including the norms that regulate processes of claiming and justifying knowledge - to be an expression of a specific vocabulary that is characterized by a specific set of concepts, beliefs, and norms (1989, pp. 11 ff.). In addition, Rorty does not think either that we are irrecoverably at the mercy of a current vocabulary, even though we may be more familiar with some vocabularies because of socialization. In his view, the influence of socialization explains why people may be inclined to unquestioningly hold on to a current vocabulary. Just like the antifoundationalist philosophers of education, Rorty thinks it possible to change vocabularies and to choose alternative ones. Even our 'final vocabulary' can be reconsidered, resulting in a redefined self. "We redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past in those terms and compare
the results with alternative redescriptions", Rorty writes (ibid., p. 78). Finally, Rorty also thinks it possible to create new vocabularies, although he doesn't think that it is easy.

Discussing how it is possible to create new vocabulary. Rorty also seems struck by the riddle how a vocabulary can be restrictive and closed, and open for change or revision at the same time. He stresses the exceptional nature of this phenomenon, and - speaking of the inspiration and genius of a poet - he also stresses the special abilities that are required to make this happen (ibid., p. 12). However, Rorty's explanations of this phenomenon are not so clear. His reference to the inspiration of a poet suggests the possibility of relating to a vocabulary, which seems at odds with Rorty's view that we always find ourselves in a vocabulary, subjected to its restrictive effects (ibid., p. 75). At this point, the main problem we seem to be facing, is how to find a position outside any vocabulary. Rorty does not solve this problem, and the context-oriented philosophers of education leave it in the dark as well. But Rorty's use of the words 'inspiration' and 'genius' suggest that a solution might still be found by considering the personal, affectional sphere that is not pre-formed by vocabularies, as those philosophers of education, who prioritize the feeling-dimension of commitment also suggest. In their view, this affectional dimension makes it possible to escape from being confined to communicative conventions.

Masschelein most explicitly discusses this 'critical' function of the feeling-dimension. He considers it a human capacity "that is 'older' than the order of representation" (Masschelein, 1998, p. 528). Because this affect precedes any form of linguistic expression, Masschelein considers it the ideal position for recognizing the defectiveness of any set of linguistic instruments. In his view, we have to be sensitive for what precedes linguistic conventions, because "at such a moment the linguistic attempt to understand and to grasp reality is seen for what it is, precisely because it fails" (ibid.). At the level of feeling, it becomes possible to get to the very heart of things, and to gain an idea of the shortages of our linguistic representations. Other authors ascribe a similar function to the original affect, like the response of caring in Noddings, or bodily being in Kohli. From such affectional positions, the restrictions of conventional linguistic instruments are thought to become visible. However, I doubt whether this movement 'back to the affectional roots' suffices to explain the possibility of bringing the belief systems of conventional contexts up for discussion. Even if we consider such affectional states as pre- or extra-linguistic, the problem remains how one would be able to express an insight resulting from such a state in a way that would be understandable for other people. Trying to do so would throw us back to the confinement of a conventional
vocabulary. Naming such affectional roots - e.g. as 'care' (Noddings) or as 'friendship' (Stone) - would already be a problem. The language of emotions can profoundly differ from culture to culture. Nature, classification, meaning, and appreciation of emotions, as well as ideas about what situations call for what emotions, about the power that is ascribed to emotions and the ways to deal with them can diverge extremely (Heelas, 1996). Antifoundationalism, which forbids any 'direct' entry to external reality - as a result of which no epistemologically privileged knowledge seems possible - also forbids the possibility of 'directly' understanding and representing feelings.

Rorty recognizes this problem, and he rejects any appeal to 'original' affects as standards for evaluating communicative conventions. As he formulates it: "... the claim that an 'adequate philosophical doctrine' must make room for our intuitions is a reactionary slogan, one which begs the question at hand. For it is essential to my view that we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate, no deep sense of how things are which it is the duty of philosophers to spell out in language" (Rorty, 1989, p. 21). Consequently, the interpretation of the role of genius in criticizing conventional vocabularies as an appeal to any kind of pre-linguistic origin must be rejected as well.

It appears to be rather complicated to realize the ambition of maintaining the primacy of commitment with respect to knowledge while rejecting epistemological relativism. Trying to do so confronts us with two problems, depending on the interpretation of the concept of commitment. Either the idea that the communicative contexts people participate in determine the preferences, opinions, and affinities that lie at the basis of knowledge-claims, makes it difficult to understand how it is possible to criticize this same context. Or the idea that an 'external' position, apart from communicative conventions, would be possible and enable us to judge conventions, seems to contradict the inability to express such judgment in any understandable - and therefore conventional - terms. It seems that one is either confined to current conventional belief systems, or to one's own pre-linguistic affect. A non-relativist interpretation of the primacy of commitment will require reconsideration of some of the concepts it involves in such a way that getting epistemological privilege back in by the backdoor by creating any kind of direct access to reality is avoided, while at the same time allowing for bringing contextual belief systems up for discussion. As the main problem seems to be caused by the role that is ascribed to communicative contexts as related to commitment, a reconsideration of both concepts and their mutual relatedness might offer a solution.
5. Restrictions versus conditions of possibility
The function of commitment in developing and justifying knowledge as suggested in the discussed texts, seems primarily to indicate a situation of confinement, either to the belief systems and criteria of communicative contexts, or to the 'insights' of a pre-linguistic affect.

This restrictedness does exclude any epistemological privilege - as antifoundationalists maintain -, but it also seems to exclude possibilities of overcoming these restrictions - as these antifoundationalists' non-relativist ambitions would require. This situation seems to result in a stalemate. However, a closer look at the way authors practically deal with this problem in their argumentations reveals a quite different picture. These antifoundationalist authors devote a substantial part of their argumentations to urge people with deviant belief systems or ways of feeling on to surmount restrictions, and they do so taking refuge in arguments. In other words, they operate as if arguments could be understood and accepted across the boundaries of communicative contexts, or as if arguments could change original affects that make people choose specific positions with respect to content.

Noddings, for example, who prioritizes the feeling-dimension of commitment, explicitly recognizes the consequence that ultimately convincing others cannot be a matter of giving reasons, but has to take place in the affectional realm instead. Against this background, teaching care will not consist in passing on rules, but in "nurturing an ideal" (Noddings, 1984, p. 124). According to this way of seeing things, people can only change position if a change of affect has taken place first. Despite of that, Noddings does not behave like that when she addresses her main opponents, the adherents of a principle-oriented Kantian ethics. She makes use of arguments as her main weapons instead, and she even seems to be aware of the anomaly of this approach as compared to her own theory: "I shall have to argue for the positions I set out expressively" (ibid., p. 2).

At first sight, Kohli seems to proceed in accordance with her affect-oriented theory. She localizes the affectional basis of commitment in the bodily-biographical situatedness of the subject. Reacting to Peter McLaren and Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, she characterizes McLaren's argumentation as rooted in his "immediate connection to the oppression of Chicano/Chicanas in California and Mexico". Gur-Ze'ev's as an expression of "the politico-philosophical restraint that comes from an Israeli whose memory of the holocaust ... is still painfully fresh" (Kohli, 1998, p. 511). However, she doesn't leave it at that. She continues to bring up arguments in order to convince these authors of her views.

This way of proceeding makes it hard to maintain, that the
affective dimension should be considered the ultimate source of our positions and beliefs. Consequently, the concept of commitment cannot be understood exclusively prioritizing the feeling-dimension as the source for renewed content. Accordingly, this feeling-dimension cannot be understood as a pure pre- or extra-linguistic position either. If affects can be influenced by means of linguistic arguments - a presupposition these authors demonstrate in their texts -, or indeed if affect can cause new content, there has to be some kind of exchange between affect and content. Even Masschelein, who, unlike Noddings, Kohli, and Stone, does not specify a particular type of affect as the ultimate source of content, still urges to take refuge to affective experience for genuinely renewing content while using arguments as his main instrument.

This does not mean, that one should prefer the alternative interpretation of commitment, which prioritizes content over feeling, because this interpretation still leaves in the dark how the barriers of communicative contexts can be overcome - considering that the validity of arguments is restricted to the current context. Consequently, the content-oriented interpretation of commitment does not allow for a non-relativist interpretation of the primacy of commitment either. After all, if commitment - now resulting from endorsed contents that determine for what causes someone can become enthusiastic - is determined by the communicative context, what could cause the readiness to start playing a different language game, as Peters (1995b) calls it? To explain that, again, we have to accept that there is some kind of two-way traffic between the feeling-dimension and the content-dimension of commitment. This results in the first conclusion: a non-relativist interpretation of the primacy of commitment requires a concept of commitment in which both dimensions - the feeling of 'being committed' and the content one makes a commitment to - go hand in hand, are mutually related, not prioritizing either dimension.

A second conclusion that can be drawn is that the function of both dimensions of commitment with respect to the development and justification of knowledge cannot be understood as an insurmountable barrier for accepting alternative views. The appraising involvement in situations is changeable, or is at least treated as such. This changeability even seems the main objective of most authors, who primarily seem to try and convince others of the acceptability of their own position. As demonstrated above, authors who prioritize the feeling-dimension of commitment demonstrate this impulse to convince others with the help of arguments authors who prioritize context-related content act likewise. For example Peters, who wants his modernist readers to replace their language game with a postmodernist one, sets out to bring this about by means of
THE PRIMACY OF COMMITMENT

arguments. "First and foremost, such a philosophy would involve a serious engagement and re-evaluation of modernity ... It concerns itself with deconstructing and providing a genealogical critique of the foundational interpretative frameworks which have served to legitimate techno-scientific and political projects in the modern world" (Peters, 1995a, p. 203). Though a protagonist can be expected to demonstrate some resistance against abandoning his current position, treating his adherence to this position as absolute will drive us into a pragmatic contradiction.

A non-relativist interpretation of the primacy of commitment will require a conception of commitment in which the feeling-dimension and the content-dimension go hand in hand, and which does stress the willingness to persuade others across barriers instead of the inability to recognize and accept alternatives beyond the current context or affectional basis. As a result, commitment can be defined as an appraising involvement in a situation that is characterized by a mutual dependence of the affect- and the content-dimensions, and that motivates people to propagate their position amongst others. This view of commitment is, for example, expressed by De Vries, who describes a committed intellectual as someone who "... ascends the stage, gets up to speak, places a signature on a reader's letter ..., publicises a burning j'accuse, joins a talkshow. What has to be defended is the truth, or civilisation, or whatever should pass for that ... [Trans.: RvG] (De Vries, 1992, p. 111).

This enthusiasm seems hardly imaginable without assuming that argumentations can in principle be accepted outside the current context, an assumption that is required for a non-relativist interpretation of the primacy of commitment. This means, that such a non-relativist interpretation requires a revision of the concept of context as well. Understanding commitment as the willingness to propagate the own views in the presence of a dissenting forum will also cause a shift in our understanding of context. The role of conventional communicative contexts now seems primarily important as the bearers of the information of how others - the forum one confronts - can be approached and potentially convinced. Relating the context primarily to the forum - instead of to the speaker - can reconcile the idea of contextual restrictions with the simultaneous openness of this context. For example, Noddings, who reconciles herself to the idea that she has to argue to convince others of her positions (1984, p. 6), clearly demonstrates how she fine-tunes her arguments to the - Kantian - forum she addresses. She chooses her arguments, guided by the beliefs of these specific opponents as she observes them, apparently aware of the chances she will not be heard or understood if she arguments otherwise. "But we must realize, also, that one writing on philosophical-educational problems may be handicapped and even rejected in the
attempt to bring a new voice to an old domain, particularly when entrance to that domain is gained by uttering the appropriate passwords" (ibid., p. 2).

This means that the relevance of the context with respect to making and justifying knowledge claims should be understood as related to the communicative conventions of those who are to be convinced. If context restricts anything, restrictions should be related to the audience addressed; context restricts the range of arguments this audience might appreciate. This explains why a proponent fine-tunes his argumentation to the forum he has in mind. Stalnaker: "Discourse contexts, I have been suggesting, can be represented by the set of possible situations compatible with the information that is presumed, by the speaker, to be common ground, or information that is shared by all the relevant participants" (1999, p. 101). The restrictive nature of a context as understood here functions as a condition of possibility for - rather than as a hindrance to - convincing others. It makes it possible to choose arguments that are potentially understandable and effective to influence the beliefs and convictions of others. Consequently, this revision of the concept of context results in shifting attention from whatever would become impossible because of it, to what becomes possible thanks to it.

Against this background changing communicative conventions seems more the rule than an exception. Though the acceptability of new claims remains controlled by the norms and concepts that are characteristic of this context, this does not make that context a steely frame. As Brandom formulates it: "For the inferential norms that govern the use of concepts are not handed down to us on tablets from above; they are not guaranteed in advance to be complete or coherent with each other. They are at best constraints that aim us in a direction when assessing novel claims. They neither determine the resultant vector of their interaction, nor are they themselves immune from alteration as a result of the collision of competing claims or inferential commitments that have never before been confronted with one another" (2000, p. 176).

The contextual beliefs, concepts, and norms that regulate the process of mutual conviction are themselves subject to change in the course of this very process; this kind of change is a main raison d'être for communication, and the participants are attuned to this aspect of communicative contexts. This interpretation of context means, that every contribution to communication will change contextual communicative conventions as soon as it is accepted. "Every claim and inference we make at once sustains and transforms the tradition in which the conceptual norms that govern that process are implicit. ... To use a vocabulary is to change it" (ibid., p. 177). Participants register the normative reorientations
during the process - that should be considered part and parcel of any communicative practice -, an aspect of participation in communicative practices Brandom (1994, p. xiv) calls score-keeping.

6. The primacy of commitment (II)
The ambition to avoid relativism while maintaining the primacy of commitment results in a conception of commitment that does not prioritize either the feeling-dimension or the content-dimension, and that stresses the willingness to propagate one's own views in the presence of an opposing audience. Relatedly, this ambition results in a conception of context as the changing system of beliefs, concepts and norms that make it possible to express and evaluate new claims. In as far as restrictions are involved, they are related to the belief-systems of the audience that do forbid accepting any arbitrary position, but that enable a proponent to formulate potentially convincing arguments in the first place. In other words, they do not function as communicative barriers, but as conditions of the possibility of communication. In this view, restrictive norms do indeed regulate the development and justification of knowledge, but they do not imply the unchangeable rigidity that is characteristic of relativist epistemological views. With respect to the primacy of commitment, the question remains whether it still makes sense to speak of the primacy of commitment, and if so, what does this primacy exactly mean?

In the discussed texts, the primacy of commitment seemed to imply the local - person, group, or discourse-related - and not universal validity of knowledge. However, if communicative contexts are changeable and mutually open, and individual affects are not to be considered as disconnected from content, then the idea of separate communicative contexts should perhaps be abandoned and make place for the idea of one communicative space in which ultimately one form of validity would exist - be it a changeable one. In other words, do the previous analyses of commitment and context disprove the possibility of speaking about local validity? Are we not forced back into the position of the primacy of epistemology? I think not.

To start with, the primacy of epistemology does not only entail the idea of universally true knowledge, but also the idea that such knowledge would be true independent of our psychological or social situation (Williams, 2001, p. 65). And this is not the case, even though we can speak of one coordinating communicative space. On the contrary, as long as we maintain that the justification of knowledge builds on a system of currently accepted claims, a "body of common assumptions" (ibid.), and not on a system of epistemologically privileged foundations, no situation could possibly arise in which knowledge would not depend on
psychological or social factors. Consequently, my analyses do not refute antifoundationalism, and the primacy of developing and accepting knowledge remains in the beliefs people endorse in the social and/or the personal realm.

Apart from that, it remains meaningful to speak of local acceptability. Michael Williams points out that all instances of justifying or doubting knowledge - including all attempts to make others change positions - take place in some specific context, i.e. some specific system of assumptions that function as criteria the validity of which is not doubted - at least not for the time being. In order to explain this, Williams discusses the nature of these assumptions in more detail. In his view, we should not simply understand them as replacements for the foundational certainties one has to abandon as an antifoundationalist. In Williams' view, such assumptions do not function as 'foundations'. They do not contribute to 'proving' anything, they rather enable us to ask questions and to formulate answers. For example, we have to assume that the earth did exist five minutes ago if we want to ask and examine historical questions (ibid., p. 160).

Such context-specific assumptions make the existence of a variety of discursive practices possible, and assumptions that - for the time being - function as unquestioned in one context, can be subjected to challenge in another, or in the same at a later point in time. This also explains why it remains a good idea to distinguish communicative contexts from each other, even if they are not considered 'closed' or 'fixed': they give rise to different types of questions, made possible by their specific sets of default assumptions. In this way, the communicative practice in which physical knowledge is developed and tested differs from the communicative practice in which historical knowledge is developed and tested - though in both contexts assumptions change significantly over time as renewed knowledge claims are accepted or rejected.

This pragmatic distinction between communicative contexts does not prevent them from being mutually open. It is possible to move between contexts in various ways. For one, we could imagine 'umbrella-questions' that concern different contexts at the same time. Such as questions that ask for comparisons (Brandom, 2000, P. 171). For example, one could ask for the similarities and the differences in the ways children are studied in psychological and in educationalist contexts. Such questions would imply an 'umbrella-context', that in its turn is characterized by specific constitutive assumptions, such as assumptions about what it means to 'study children'. It is also possible for insights that are developed in one context to cause changes in another context. For example, new conceptions of the physical universe, in which the geocentric picture of
the world was abandoned, resulted in a serious undermining of the astrological discursive practice (Williams, 2001, p. 227).

Neither the revised conception of commitment, nor the revised conception of context gives cause to renewed adherence to foundationalism. On the contrary, both rather support the idea of the primacy of commitment with respect to the development and justification of knowledge. The progress of knowledge seems all the more dependent on the claims people want to defend in the presence of specific fora and in the context of specific communicative conventions.

7. Discussion
Not only the position I have called the 'primacy of commitment', but also the way antifoundationalist philosophers of education alerted to it and defended it indicates a specific commitment. In defending their position, these authors also had in mind to make a contribution to reducing social exclusion if only by revealing it. They alerted to the contextual restrictiveness of knowledge claims as a main source of potential exclusion, because these restrictions would keep us from recognizing claims originating from alternative sources or contexts. My revised interpretation of the primacy of commitment makes this view of exclusion no longer tenable. However, the primacy of commitment still has relevant implications with respect to the problem of 'exclusion'. Now the primacy of commitment is related to the willingness to make and defend claims within a specific forum, exclusion gets to mean exclusion from participation in specific discursive practices. This participatory aspect of communication can also be thought of political and ethical importance, which is what Brandom does when he states that: "Our moral worth is our dignity as potential contributors to the conversation. This is what our political institutions have a duty to recognize, secure and promote" (2000, p. 178).

Access to communicative fora can be blocked in various ways. It can be caused by a lack of familiarity with the constitutive assumptions of the involved practice (for example a specific discipline), but refusing access to potential participants also implies participative exclusion. In the latter case, characteristic of the claimer – such as social background or ethnicity – may be used as a criterion for the relevance or the acceptability of the claim. In such situations, social power relations are reflected in the communicative assumptions of this specific practice. History gives ample evidence of this form of participatory exclusion. In most Western countries, women were refused access to the parliamentary-political discourse until far into the twentieth century, and even today some defend the idea that political responsibility should be understood as exclusively
male. Fortunately, such assumptions are changeable – at least this one has changed from an unquestionable to a disputable claim.

The antifoundationalist idea of local validity not only inspires philosophers of education, it also worries them. It could result in “intellectual paralysis” (Blake et al., 1998, p. 5), and the tendency to reduce the tasks of philosophy of education to formulating critique. Smeyers (2005) wants to oppose this by suggesting that philosophers of education should make their initial convictions/beliefs – the frame from which they judge things – explicit from the beginning. Making basic beliefs explicit would not annul the limited nature of validity, but it would at least make these limits visible and put each contribution in the right perspective, Smeyers seems to think. Accordingly, as he formulates it, “the...time seems to be ripe for explicit moral (perhaps even political) commitments” (ibid., p. 183). However, it is questionable if and to what degree making initial positions explicit could solve the problem that Smeyers observes. Of course, in as far as it is possible to explicitly formulate any assumptions one makes, doing so would tribute to clarity. However, that would still leave untouched the discursive assumptions that regulate how we formulate and defend our claims, including political and moral ones. As discussed above, such discursive assumptions refer to the beliefs, concepts, and criteria of the addressed forum, of the current discursive practice in which the protagonist brings his claims to the fore.

Smeyers remarks, however, seem to suggest more than an appeal to philosophers to be clear and hide as few ideas from any audience as possible. He seems to have in mind that people should make explicit the supposedly irreducible source, the basic beliefs that explain the content of the specific claims they make as protagonists. This only seems a welcome form of openness as long as one assumes that the protagonist has certain 'basic' beliefs that are irreducible and sacrosanct, from which he derives his claims - a state of affairs the addressed forum can only recognise and accept. However, this view of local acceptability that implies the impossibility of bringing locally accepted criteria up for discussion was criticized above, and rejected as relativist. The solution Smeyers suggests holds on to this - relativist - illusion that some 'basic' claims are inevitably exempt from further justification because they are 'basic' for a specific person or group. Holding on to this illusion could result in the idea that making beliefs that are designated as 'basic' explicit, could be a license for refraining from further duties of justification. In my view, the primacy of commitment rather implies the willingness as well as the possibility of defending any claim - explicitly or implicitly made - in the face of doubts, and to change it in the face of convincing counter-arguments. Against this
background, there is no reason to fear that we will have to reduce the tasks of philosophy of education to criticizing.

8. References


FACING EPISTEMIC UNCERTAINTY


Lankshear, P. McLaren & M. Peters (Eds.), *Counternarratives - cultural studies and critical pedagogies in postmodern spaces* (pp. 1-39). New York, etc.: Routledge.


construction of history. New York: Colombia University Press.

