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Co-writing, Co-knowing. Transforming Epistemologies

Our article offers a vision of how collaborative processes of knowledge-making in an interdisciplinary faculty writing group can transform professional lives of isolation into ones that flourish. Central to our co-creation of knowledge are the practice of storytelling in a critical self-reflective manner and the elements of commitment, connection and relationship. Together we have found that these elements provide basic strategies for managing the isolation that would otherwise be a significant force in our working lives.

Our commitment is epistemological and moral, as we commit to knowledge-making, but also to each other as individuals and as moral agents, to our values, and to bringing our values into our work. Learning about ourselves together can enhance our sense of identity and our ability to navigate limits and boundaries.

Through supportive, intentional and reflective collaboration, we re-vision knowledge-making as fundamentally social and relational, and theorizing as grounded in the specificity of narratives of shared, lived experience.

Keywords: Collaboration, Commitment, Knowledge-making, Storytelling, Transformation

Introduction

While many of us are brought to academia by a passion for our subject matter and a life of learning, the reality of living and working in the academy can be disconcerting and dispiriting, for all of us, as it has sometimes has been for the authors. The result can leave a person feeling disconnected, isolated, marginalized and somehow "not enough". One of us has described the graduate school experience with the words "the best thing you are going to get is a lack of negative reinforcement". Sometimes the experience of being a faculty member is not much different. This sense of disconnection at times made us feel that our ability to theorize was insufficient, and that our ability to do our work, to know, was being hampered. We felt this in many ways: in feeling less competent than others, in feeling that we were not fitting into our professions as we should, or in suspecting that the topics and issues we felt were important to pursue did not garner the approval of our peers or were otherwise unacceptable.

Each of us has experienced feeling isolated and like a person swimming upstream; this has sometimes led to fearfulness, ambiguity, pain and (a sense of) failure – certainly calling into question our sense of competence in knowledge-making. This feeling of a "lack of fit" in a setting with discipline-specific paths/actions for "being a good teacher/scholar" or being successful might be likened to concerns with body image or body concept in a culture that has a set of ideals and pressures to urge us to achieve those ideals. In both cases, these "right paths" and "aesthetic ideals" constrict our picture of what is even possible and impose limitations on our beliefs (our knowing) and on us as whole persons. Sociologist Dorothy Smith articulates this issue in terms of experiencing "a contradiction in the relation of our discipline to our experience of the world".[1]

Most of us understand our work as academics through the given philosophies, assumptions and practices of our disciplines and graduate school training. Typically, we do not consciously reflect upon ways in which we conduct ourselves in our everyday work lives. The path of least resistance allows us to rely on the routines established by custom and bureaucracy, and to respond to our environment rather than actively and thoughtfully creating it. What we have found is that when taking

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1   D. Smith, *Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology*, in: *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*, ed. S. Nagy Hesse-Biber, M.L. Yaiser, Oxford 2004, p. 32.

the well-worn path results in isolation and disconnection, a different project or path is needed. Again in Smith's words, "transcending that contradiction means setting up a different kind of relation than that which we discover in the routine practice of our worlds".[2]

In this essay we explore our writing group's evolving sense of what our project of knowing might be (as individuals, as a group, and as it might be shared beyond ourselves). We suggest here that the *practice* and *process* of understanding ourselves and our institution(s) is worth articulating because it gives us important clues as to our way out of disconnection. Our epistemology, our project of knowing, is different from the traditional project(s) of knowing in the academy. It is conscious, collaborative, respectful, committed and reflective. It is also process rather than ideal driven; it is based on telling our stories, listening to each other and collectively sharing our knowledge and routes to knowing. Our project of co-knowing incorporates our experiences across our whole lives, not just our work as teacher/scholars. In addition, our project of knowing helps us to desire that knowledge-making be embedded in a commitment to each other as individuals and as moral agents, to our values (always under reexamination), and to bringing the results of our process of knowing into other places in our lives.

What We Do: Our Practice and its Practical and Philosophical Dimensions

Co-writing and co-knowing in the academy can take many forms. A growing body of literature shows the importance of personal relationships and interaction for the realization of creativity and knowledge production.[3] In this section, we provide specifics about our writing group that illustrate how our mutual relationships and interaction contribute to our knowing, a knowing we share well beyond our writing group. Through our practice of storytelling, listening and giving feedback ("advising"), we live out our moral philosophy that commitment, community and the embrace of whole lives transforms knowing, working and living.

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2   Ibid.

3   M.F. Belenky, B. McVicker Clinchy, N. Rule Goldberger, J. Mattuc Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, New York 1987. See especially ch. 6. Also see *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. L. Alcoff, E. Potter, New York 1993; P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York 1991; J. Trebilcot, *Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories*, in: *Feminist Ethics*, ed. C. Card, Kansas 1991.

Our epistemology, our project of knowing, is different from the traditional project(s) of knowing in the academy. It is conscious, collaborative, respectful, committed and reflective. It is also process rather than ideal driven; it is based on telling our stories, listening to each other and collectively sharing our knowledge and routes to knowing

Three of the five of us founded this scholarly writing group in 2000, immediately after each of the three received the doctoral degree. We wanted not only to achieve tenure and promotion at our institution but also to benefit our students, school and community through our passion and commitment, and to keep learning and creating. While we are not experts in group dynamics or interpersonal communication, our several years of refining this group process have led us to an understanding of how and why things have worked for us and, more importantly, why we are still committed to this group over ten years later. As we have lived out our values, we have learned through doing together at least one way of knowing and of sharing that knowing.

We built and rebuilt our group by identifying people with at least two characteristics in common: exploring and creating exciting and useful knowledge, and perhaps needing some support. Because as individuals and as a group we spend significant time getting to know, questioning, learning about and reflecting on each member's work, everyone's intellectual curiosity is engaged. Further, we think it important to include a diversity of scholarly styles and practices, thus widening the array of epistemologies.

The idea that each member needs some kind of support is, in some ways, obvious; if we did not need additional support, why would we be willing to invest so much time and energy and to make a long-term commitment to the group? A focus on need for support turns out to be group-serving as well as self-serving in that it inherently lays the necessary foundation for long-term commitment. Commitment and community are key words in the ways of knowing we have discovered and continue to develop together.

In terms of group makeup, we happen to include female-bodied persons only, but this was not intentional at the beginning. Although we have identified a feminist lens as a component of what makes work interesting to us, in principle that does not exclude male-bodied colleagues. Over time, however, in our own case we recognized what we perceived important benefits in maintaining an all-women group. What was and still is intentional is that no two members come from the same department (we are in philosophy, health and wellness, economics, sociology and Spanish), as that would limit the various epistemologies from which each of us learns and produces. Moreover, we often share stories of specific personnel issues, which is a practical reason for not doubling departmental representation. In terms of an optimal number of group members, we have found that four or five works well, because of how it maximizes a group dynamic and expands the ways of knowing and thus producing new knowledge.

All of us are very busy people, teaching six to eight courses per year, serving as good campus citizens who often are doing more than our share of committee work, and juggling the interplay between personal and professional lives. The only way we believe we can stay active as scholars, or knowledge-makers, is to *make* the time to be scholars, and we are helped to do that in a community setting.

The basic purpose of the group began as that of providing a space and time for each member to share her scholarly writing and ideas and to get feedback aimed at improving the work in both process and outcome. We devote group time to listening to the presenter's exploration and helping her narrow, expand, define and articulate the work. We have learned that sometimes the greatest contribution to generating knowledge is that of listening and giving feedback to our lists or plans and ideas for projects.

Over time, however, recognizing ourselves as whole persons and that our motivation for collaborative work is itself morally grounded, we have become much more than just a "scholarly writing" group.[4] In addition to articles for conferences, journals and books, we also have helped each other write letters for tenure, promotion, sabbatical requests, recommendations, and reports for committees, programs and departments. In addition, we have developed templates for these standard pieces of professional writing, which we share with other campus colleagues, whether at their request or at our suggestion, along with our actual letters for use as models. We also encourage strategizing and planning, talking about teaching issues and specific assignments, and processing campus services and politics. Attention to teaching and campus issues surfaced naturally as we shared our lives as scholars in a particular place. We do have objectives and guidelines – even rules – but we also give ourselves permission to be flexible. As we live out this group experience we seem to have settled on one basic rule or expectation: to provide whatever support any one of us needs to the extent that each of us is able and willing to do so. Commitment to our group, therefore, both in terms of process and outcome, is of primary importance.

Related to this concept of commitment, and perhaps of even greater importance than the activities named above, however, is the way we have created a space within the academy where we can bring our whole lives,

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4   This idea of collaborative work being morally motivated is articulated by David Wright and Susan Brajtman in the context of their work on relational knowing in interprofessional team nursing care. See *Relational and Embodied Knowing: Nursing Ethics within the Interprofessional Team*, "Nursing Ethics" 2011, no. 18(1), p. 20–30.

including our personal peaks and valleys. This characteristic of our group cannot be separated from the knowledge we co-create; indeed, our mutual commitment to each other as whole persons, with a professional as well as a personal life, is the moral value that undergirds all of what we do.

How do we practice such commitment? It is primarily through telling our stories, listening to others' stories, hearing responses and giving them. Because of the level of trust we have developed, each one of us can openly and as honestly as possible narrate what we have tried to do in a piece of writing, what we think we want to do but cannot quite articulate, why we cannot make a decision about what is a priority, why we believe we are qualified or not for a position, etc. Response to such fully engaged stories that often reveal deeper levels of consciousness (or subconsciousness) than usually accessed, almost invariably elicits a deeper kind of hearing, a discernment of what really matters to the teller, to the whole person she is. Our commitment to each other far outreaches acceptance or belief in the abstract knowledge each one provides; rather, it is a commitment to the whole person, based on the knowledge that whole lives require moral knowing, acting and sharing.[5] We work frankly and with care; we ask and answer direct questions even when a response might be painful. A willingness to be criticized is not even enough; we expect each other to want sincerely both negative and positive feedback, because we believe that fertile grounds for growth and knowledge are often dark, dank and dreary. We negotiate. And we honor confidentiality: what is said or shared within the group stays in the group. In these ways, our knowledge-making practices involve a significant moral dimension.

Years ago, a member was on the verge of an emotional collapse that was sabotaging a manuscript she was preparing. In that case, the other group members refrained from posing questions, either personal or professional, but rather took over the session by discussing, chapter by chapter, the current draft, while the writer herself merely listened and took notes. This is a clear example of the kind of moral commitment

> [...] our mutual commitment to each other as whole persons, with a professional as well as a personal life, is the moral value that undergirds all of what we do

5   The concept of the whole person we are relying on draws from the literature on narrative theory, e.g., S. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2011; J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, London 1992, 1997; and R. Culbertson, *Embodied Memory Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self*, "New Literary History" 1995, no. 26.1, p. 169–195; and the literature on critical race theory, e.g., P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York 1991; and M. Lugones, *Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception*, "Hypatia" 1987, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 16.

we have to each other, as it precludes the possibility of us walking away from each other rather than remaining present and supportive during emotional distress. But further, we made sure that the scholarly work continued, because this group member was working under a deadline. So we supported her not only in her personal difficulty, but also in the scholarly project that she herself was committed to.

The member who came to the group shortly after returning to academics following 10 years in the non-profit (and start-up business) world reacted with surprise and delight in her first session of receiving feedback in the group. Whereas her boss's editing had felt like negative criticism, what she experienced from the writing group was entirely different. She found it to be astute and critical, yes, but in a more global sense, accepting, understanding, encouraging and—above all—useful for further revising and developing.

More recently, during work on documents authored by the whole group, one member assertively proposed that instead of all five of us editing each section or paragraph, we should break into individuals or groups of two to tackle pieces of the work. Another member works by lists, projecting them on the screen or writing them on the blackboard so that her colleagues can suggest visual ways of prioritizing, grouping or even erasing certain points.

We agree with Wright and Brajtman that collaboration involves communicating in such a way that "the knowledge and skills of various team members synergistically influence" the achievement of the group's and members' goals.[6] Because we bring such different experiences, expertise, and approaches to learning and ways of knowing to the group, we also contribute in different ways to critiquing and revising writing. Several of us quickly grasp the holistic purpose of a piece and contribute by suggesting rearrangement or deletion of sentences, whole paragraphs or sections, or by requesting further development of certain motifs. Others' contributions revolve around more detailed grammatical and lexical issues. At one time or another, all of us skillfully suggest connections with prior or current work by the same or different author, at times even suggesting useful sources.

A unique characteristic of our practice is our deliberate choice to maintain a playfulness in our work. It's not just that we have great senses of humor, but that we work to maintain an atmosphere that encourages play in the midst of our serious work. As María Lugones says in her article, playfulness is an attitude that turns our activity into play.[7]

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6   D. Wright, S. Brajtman, *Relational and Embodied Knowing*, p. 21.

7   Ibid., p. 16.

> Playfulness makes it easier to be wrong, to make mistakes, because we know we have the support of smart colleagues who will take our work seriously and have our interests at heart. In this attitude we can work openly, not worrying about competence or "getting it right", but being open to what knowledge we will come to

It's an attitude that emphasizes the excitement of discovery, and that encourages laughter rather than shame when we blunder. In playfulness, we employ gentle teasing right alongside direct critique, taking out the sting and replacing it with the assurance that we are all invested in the success of each member. Playfulness makes it easier to be wrong, to make mistakes, because we know we have the support of smart colleagues who will take our work seriously and have our interests at heart. In this attitude we can work openly, not worrying about competence or "getting it right", but being open to what knowledge we will come to. And playfulness can be feisty and irreverent, helping us remember that rules and norms are not sacred.

Lugones' picture of playfulness includes a further aspect that we came to know on our own but also recognize in her description. She claims that playfulness is characterized by uncertainty, by "finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight".[8] Although we have not always been able to see uncertainty as a source of delight, we do realize that it is a rich field of possibility, a field in which, if we can learn to just be there, we may find important insight. For example, one of us has mined the chaos and ambiguity of personal trauma to articulate challenges to claims in traditional moral theory. The ability to wait and simply experience uncertainty rather than attempting to resolve it just to end its discomfort provides opportunities to discover new paths to knowing. We have termed this a "productive ambivalence", and it seems clear that the ability to know through this ambivalence is strongly fostered by the stable ground of connection and commitment our group creates. It helps us avoid the kind of certainty that actually limits knowing by closing off questions with irrefutable answers.

We are not the first scholar-professors to recognize the need to form a group such as ours or to act on that recognition. But, like so many others, we found early on that we simply had to create our own supportive structures to thrive in the academy – structures to help create knowledge in a different way. We do not like the ways the traditional stories of the academy limit us. Further, we understand now that through collaborative work our stories shift and our picture of what is "true" changes. This picture is often ambivalent and not necessarily "correct". We discovered that for us significant knowledge-making in the academy depends a great deal on our coming and being together. Based on how our lives, professional and personal, have been transformed through our co-writing and co-knowing, we eagerly share our stories with others wanting to get off the traditional path of solitary knowledge-making.

8   Ibid., p. 17.

How our Practice Affects the Epistemology of Our Work/ Co-Knowing Epistemology

From separation to engagement

Work in feminist epistemology over the last several decades has opened new pictures of the world we live in, made rich with women's lived experiences. In fact, a grounding in lived experience is one of the things these theories have in common, along with attention to epistemological aspects of relationship and connection.[9] Yet another aspect that many such theories share is an emphasis on the notion of narrative, or storytelling, as a form of theorizing more congenial to many women's thinking. In particular, the early work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, in their volume *Women's Ways of Knowing,* theorizes knowing in ways that our group unconsciously modeled in our own development as knowers.[10] Here we tell a short story of our own knowing.

The first of us who put our working/writing group together were relatively fresh out of graduate school, and consequently were still heavily influenced by the training we had received in the traditions of the academy, even though we all felt some need to resist those traditions. One of us had the good fortune of access to a graduate program in feminist theory, and thus had a more conscious and deliberate agenda regarding the desire to reject academic traditions.

At this initial point in our group's history, we could easily be described, in Belenky et al.'s terms, as separate knowers: that is, as persons trained to work at knowing as a project that is designed and intended to produce truth through a particular method. This method, of course, is the one preferred by the academy, at least in Anglo-American universities. According to this method, truth is a matter of objective fact, and it is the goal of all knowing. Truth is the sign of knowing: it is the indicator that knowing is what has been achieved, as opposed to "mere" believing or, worse yet, opinion. Knowing, under this model, works by separation of self from the object to be known and is articulated in visual metaphors. To know is to see, and in order to see, there must be a distance (a separation) between the knower and the known. What is to be known, then, cannot be a part of the knower, but must be (at least conceptually) distinct.[11]

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9   *Feminist Epistemologies.*

10   M.F. Belenky, B. McVicker Clinchy, N. Rule Goldberger, J. Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing.* See especially ch. 6.

11   This raises interesting questions about the possibilities of self-knowledge.

To know, according to this model, the knower uses a methodological doubt, in the way Descartes did, to subject all possible objects of knowledge to strict epistemological evaluation. Such knowing assumes that each possible thing, each possible point of knowledge, must be challenged and inspected rigorously and in accord with some set of objective criteria, in order that its reality be proven beyond that initial procedural doubting. In this model, the claim for authority of knowledge rests on reason, and reason is justified through argumentation, itself expected to be an impersonal relating of evidence according to standards believed to be universal.

In the language of the sciences, this model of knowing is sometimes described as "positivistic", having "an emphasis on detachment, impartiality, objectivity, prediction and control". It is a model which "presumes detachment from context and denies the inseparability of the knower from the known". Wright and Brajtman describe this model of natural science philosophy as maintaining a "paradigm of control, privileging detached observation and rational explanation".[12]

As new products of this model of knowing, we ourselves were highly trained in argumentation, in the use of impersonal reason to "prove" or at least justify our theories and knowledge claims. But we felt uneasy, because working by this model, knowing in this way, produced internal dissonance. We *felt* like separate knowers, and although we experienced this as a success of a certain kind, in that it enabled us to join the academy as professionals, we also experienced this knowing as somehow wrong, or at least inadequate.

Although we weren't aware of it at the time, our group exemplified the kind of knowing that Belenky et al. described as separate, the knowing that is the model of the English-speaking academy, and we both used and resisted it at the same time. What we see now is that the group itself enabled our transformation as knowers, and as we became knowers in a different way, we became ourselves more fully.

The distinction offered by Belenky et al. that makes most sense to us is the distinction between knowledge, which is conceived of as a matter of fact, and understanding, which is seen as a matter of engagement, intimacy and relation. Our writing group began with the intention of enabling us as new faculty to gain the approval of our peers and thus

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If there must be distance between knower and known, then how, and what, can I know about myself? Very little, presumably, in this model of knowledge, because that self-knowledge cannot be objective and thus doesn't count as true knowledge. This problem in itself made us very uneasy.

12   D. Wright, S. Brajtman, *Relational and Embodied Knowing*, p. 22.

secure our positions. And we succeeded. Along the way, we realized that we were learning to know some other things.

Because we responded relationally to each other as persons rather than simply as academics, we were able to shift our interactions to a fuller level. As we have indicated earlier, we took each other seriously as full persons with a full range of life projects and needs, and we made deliberate choices not to exclude any range of concerns from our group discussions and processing. This deepening of our relationships deepened the possibilities for the knowing work, the epistemology, in which we engaged. We see ourselves in the descriptions of connected knowers that Belenky et al. offered: as engaged in a process directed at making meaning rather than producing truth, as deeply involved with the objects/subject matter of our studies rather than impersonal, as oriented toward discovery, sharing and support rather than toward judgment of arguments, as desiring inclusion and acceptance rather than control.

This is the model of knowing that Belenky et al. call connected or relational, and it is a knowing that emphasizes a very different process from that of the traditional model of separateness and objectivity. In the model of connectedness, knowing as understanding is grounded in the lived experience of inescapable relatedness and in the further experience of that relatedness as something to be recognized and celebrated rather than shunned. Connected knowers see their knowing as part of the social construction of self and world, recognizing that the process they use brings them together with the thing they would know, and that consequently both they and the known are to some (however small) extent changed by the relation that such knowing constitutes.

What is important to consider here is that the phenomenon of knowing, in this model, exhibits a number of features whose implications have tremendous potential for the world. We turn now to a discussion of some of these features that, although previously noted in the literature,[13] are worth revisiting. In doing so, we also name some of these features in our own experience of collective knowing, and offer some observations of our own that have grown out of this work.

Engagement, trust and agency

A connected model of knowing is an engaged model, but there are many different kinds of engagement, some of which will be preferable

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13   For engagement see S.L. Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value*, Palo Alto 1988; for trust see A. Baier, *Trust and Anti-trust*, "Ethics" 1986, vol. 96, no. 2, p. 231–260 and for agency see D. Tietjen Meyers, *Feminists Rethink the Self*, Boulder 1997.

over others. We will argue here that the preferred type of engagement for knowing is intimacy characterized by trust. This kind of intimacy is reflected in the embracing of fundamental values such as helping others and a commitment to holistic caring.[14] To engage this way, it is crucial to recognize that knowing implies and requires both purpose and values. As Donna Haraway puts it, "some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference".[15]

Many feminists and critical race theorists have argued in support of the claim that knowledge is value laden rather than value neutral.[16] They argue that the supposedly objective and universal viewpoints of traditional epistemologies, the "view from nowhere",[17] merely obscure the specific set of investments, of values, that are in fact present in them and in the knowledge constructed from them. That is, where Hobbes,[18] for example, claims to be elucidating universal human nature in his description of the "state of nature", he is actually describing a world populated by upper-class white English, or possibly more broadly, European men. He is describing a world populated by lots of himself, but because he has neglected to consider the possibility of any other viewpoint, he has assumed there is no need to do so. From a feminist standpoint, one obvious question to ask of Hobbes' state of nature is not "what form of government could bring order out of this violent chaos" (which is the question of social contract theory), but "why doesn't Hobbes notice that even in the state of nature all people must have relationships of caretaking, at least when they are young?".

The upshot of this strain of feminist criticism is the claim that a more careful attention to the lived experience of more persons shows us that our perspectives, and thus our theories, do actually contain and express the values that we hold. Hobbes was monarchist and was obviously articulating a position in support of monarchy (or something very close

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14   D. Wright, S. Brajtman, *Relational and Embodied Knowing*, p. 22.

15   D. Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s*, in: *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. L.J. Nicholson, London 1990, p. 202–203.

16   See, for example, H. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*, Princeton, NJ 1990; N. Scheman, *Who Wants to Know? The Epistemological Value of Values*, in: *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, eds. J. Hartman, E. Messer-Davidow, Knoxville, TN 1991; *Feminist Epistemologies*; P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

17   T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York 1989.

18   T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part 1, Ch. xiii and xiv, New York 1996 [1651].

to it). His theory is clearly informed by this value; it is equally clear-
ly informed by his ignorance of the lived experience of persons of any
class, gender or race he did not share. He does not recognize, for exam-
ple, that he himself could not have grown to the condition and values
he held without the support and relation given him by his caretaker(s).

Feminist theorists, including epistemologists, tend to agree that
knowing is a process undertaken by persons and, as such, is infused to
greater or lesser degrees, with the values held by those persons. In gene-
ral, although not consistently or perfectly, feminists intend to and do
acknowledge the influence of those values on their theorizing. That is,
having accepted certain premises, such as Hill Collins' assertion that
"assessments of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evalu-
ate an individual's character, values and ethics"[19], feminists believe that
it is part of our responsibility to knowing and to each other to deliber-
ately reflect on our lived experience in order to be clear about what our
values are, and where they are embodied in our knowing. In our writing
group, we have come to value narrative or storytelling as a method of
knowing superior to argumentation; as Wright and Brajtman put it, "it
is through narrative that we make sense of experience, create commu-
nity, give coherence to life events, and imagine the future. Through nar-
rative, we become human".[20] Consequently our theorizing now often
contains narrative, or stories, along with a brief statement explaining
our valuing this type of knowing.

In addition, two of us have expanded our scientific methodology
to include the use of storytelling or narrative as a legitimate method of
discovery. For example, in an effort to understand the value of farmland
in western North Carolina, our economist used interviews and focus
groups to complement the use of standard quantitative techniques that
by themselves are insufficient. When participants were asked to iden-
tify a place on Google Earth, they then told about why this place was
important to them. This importantly integrates the story-telling into
traditional scientific methodology.[21]

Recognition of the centrality of value in knowing is crucial for
connected knowing because it is difficult to form intimacy, and thus
the understanding that intimacy enables, without knowing the values of

19   See P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 218.

20   D. Wright, S. Brajtman, *Relational and Embodied Knowing*, p. 23.

21   L. Greden Mathews, A. Rex, *Incorporating Scenic Quality and Cultural
Heritage into Farmland Valuation: Results from an Enhance LESA Model*, "Journal
of Conservation Planning" 2011, vol. 7, p. 39–59. For stories see: www2.unca.
edu/farmlandvalues/

the ones with whom we wish to be intimate. Similarly, it will be much harder to participate in knowledge-making with persons whose values one does not know. In particular, persons in such a situation are very likely to come to a point at which they will find that they disagree in some matter of value in a way that wrecks or undermines the knowing they are attempting.

Recognizing the values involved in any particular instance of knowing gives rise to a further concern for the possibilities of connected knowing: purposiveness. In her article "Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories", Joyce Trebilcot relates a story expressing her dismay at realizing that some, perhaps many, of her fellow graduate students in philosophy felt no particular or personal motivation or purpose in studying philosophy, or a specific topic in philosophy.[22] How could she possibly understand others, she asked, if they had no expressed purpose in their pursuit of knowledge?

This point has been made by many others, including Naomi Scheman in her article "Who Wants to Know? The Epistemological Value of Values". We summarize part of her argument by saying that purposes in any exercise of knowing indicate all of the following: who we are, what we value, and whether and by whom we can or should be trusted.

Although we recognize different purposes for different exercises in knowing (e.g., classes, specific papers, research projects, etc.), in our group we also see ourselves as having a number of more general, and perhaps more profound purposes. For example, one purpose we have is to contribute our voices to the construction of knowledge both specifically and broadly, and thereby contribute to the construction of a world that we could more fully embrace. We see this also as connected to notions of both activism and obligation, such that at the moment one of us became chair of her department, she worked to improve working conditions for her specific corner of the campus community. Another is currently chair of the faculty senate, in which position she works toward the welfare of the university more broadly. These represent instances of knowing in many ways: both positions require the seeking and synthesis of many kinds of information as well as a great effort at developing intimacy with a variety of colleagues, in order to know, but also to be able to put the knowledge to practical purposes.

Of course, the very fact that our description of connected knowing includes that it is directed at meaning rather than truth displays another

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22   J. Trebilcot, *Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories*, in: *Feminist Ethics*, ed. C. Card, Kansas 1991.

of our purposes in knowing (as well as our values – we value meaning more than truth). Here we can show how connected knowing both reveals and is required by our purposes. Meaning is itself socially created, and consequently requires engagement with others. An individual person cannot make meaning by herself, because if she is truly alone, she will not have access to the tools of meaning-making: language, self-consciousness, interaction with others. Because meaning is social, it can be constructed only through engagement, and presumably such meaning will be improved through as broad an engagement as possible; i.e., through inclusion. As Barbara Thayer-Bacon puts it, "others shape our views, [and] others also help us become aware of how views differ… we are able to gain more critical leverage the more we experience and expose ourselves to others' standpoints".[23] Further, we recognize that to the extent possible, "exposing ourselves" in this way requires effort on our part to learn more about differences expressed in those standpoints. We agree with Sandra Harding in her assessment of Patricia Hill Collins' important claim that "genuine dialogue across differences" is necessary for knowledge making, and for "the development of less partial and distorted belief by any knowledge community".[24]

Equally important, however, is the goal we have of enabling agency. Believing that *knowing is powerful* (not the same as "knowledge is power"), and being teachers and mentors, we all share the value and purpose that if we have gained understanding that is useful in aiding others either directly or indirectly, or in increasing the possibilities for flourishing, for ourselves and/or others, then we have an obligation to use that understanding to do so. Joey Sprague talks about this kind of obligation on the part of (feminist) researchers in social science fields. She argues that "the interests of critical researchers in valid knowledge coincide with their values for social justice", and that researchers could see their roles in the production of knowledge as enabling the voices and knowledge making of those they study. Researchers could, for example, see themselves as working to "make cross-cultural understanding, true democracy, or social justice possible" by helping those they study, often the disadvantaged, recognize ways in which the "problems and irrationalities in their lives are understandable" when they are connected with the interests and power imbalances of the dominant class.[25]

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23   B. Thayer-Bacon, *A Pragmatist and Feminist Relational (E)pistemology*, "European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy" 2010, no. II(1), p. 9.

24   S. Harding, *Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity?*, in: *Feminist Persepctives on Social Research*, p. 54.

25   J. Sprague, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Research: Bridging Differences*, New York 2005, p. 80.

We try to contribute to flourishing and agency in our own institution. For example, we have given several presentations for our institution's Center for Teaching and Learning, which is dedicated to professional development. On such occasions we present our group model to new and junior faculty to encourage them to consider similar ways of achieving their own professional goals. Also, we have all served as individual mentors to new and junior faculty, both informally and through our institution's mentoring program. We have all engaged in other collaborative projects with others in our institution or elsewhere, and several of our members have been founding participants in an interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship project called the "Food Cluster". In this extensive project colleagues from a variety of disciplines have worked together to create a cluster of related courses that share research and learning projects over the course of a semester. Further, out of this work they have developed conference papers and published work in which they have been able to include students. All these are projects of shared learning and shared knowing, and they are valuable to professionals and students alike.

This purpose obviously exhibits our values, our moral commitment: we see ourselves as committed to the flourishing of the group, each member of the group and the group as a whole, but also to the flourishing of others we can reach, such as through publishing or teaching, or with whom we interact more directly. Of course we do not claim that we can make the world perfect for everyone. What we intend, and work toward, is enabling ourselves, and then others, to feel themselves capable of making a difference and/or of making meaning in their own lives.

We believe this is accomplished by the establishment of the kind of engagement that creates and fosters trust. We experience ourselves as having heightened our own agency as individuals partly because we engage in a kind of knowing that is founded on trust, on the kind of intimate understanding that comes when we believe we can rely on the avowed values and purposes of our partners in engagement. Further, our experience as teachers tells us that this is when our students also begin to know differently—to understand with us—when they come to trust that we will stand by our avowed values and purposes, our claims about wanting to support their agency. In our experience, it is at this moment that they come to see themselves as agents engaged with us in a project of knowing. And in this kind of knowing, being an engaged agent entails being transformed, being changed, becoming. It is here that we see most clearly how knowledge is dynamic, active, a process rather than a thing to be achieved. It is also here that we see agency as engagement – the ability to do, to effect, to change/transform self as well as others.

Continually becoming knowers

There are many ways to conceptualize the dynamic qualities of engaged knowing. One is expressed poignantly in the work of Susan Griffin, where she articulates the process of traditional epistemology as needing to "pin down" its objects.[26] Using the work of naturalist John Audubon as an example, she explains that visual, distancing knowing needs also to make things hold still in order to be known, just as Audubon kills his specimens and literally pins them on boards to study, draw and know them. This kind of knowing, because it requires that its objects be as separate as its knowers, causes dynamic knowing to be difficult. Such epistemologies see their objects as inert and passive, and thus have difficulty understanding those objects in terms of their ongoing, dynamic being.[27]

Engaged knowing recognizes the dynamic character of the world and works within that frame rather than attempting to "fix" it. It's easy to see why this model is unsatisfactory on the terms of traditional epistemology; for example, if knowing changes the knower as well as the known, then the knower is not in full control of either her/himself or the object of knowledge. This model means that the most we can say about our knowing is "this is what it looks like at the moment", not "this is what *is*". And if the object of knowledge is changing, then our knowing it is never finished, never complete, never fully true in that traditional sense. In fact, knowing in this model begins to look like traditional "women's work": the caretaking that is ongoing, the cleaning that is finished only to provide a clean surface for the muddy footprints that are left on it moments later.[28] But if in fact this is what the world is like in lived experience, then this kind of knowing is what we need, a knowing that can see the clean floor as it is in this moment, *understanding* that this is not the entirety of its "nature" or its story.

Engaged knowing is transformative, then, in that it recognizes the transforming—changing—character of the world, but even more in that it enables agency. But here again is the importance of purpose and value, because we must be aware of our values and sure of our purposes in order to affect the world responsibly. Perhaps surprisingly, then, in the engaged model of knowing, knowing is powerful in the sense that it does change things. Perhaps most obviously, gaining knowledge changes

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26   S. Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, San Francisco 2000.

27   N. Scheman, *Who Wants to Know? The Epistemological Value of Values*, p. 181.

28   S. Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, New York 1982.

our "interpretive position".[29] Babbit says that knowing is not merely a matter of obtaining the right or full propositional knowledge but rather of reconstituting one's self or situation such that one's position is unsettled and then reset.[30] If our values and purposes are not clear, we may slip into a knowing that controls rather than enables. In this sense we see the importance of both commitment and community: it is our commitment to specific values and purposes that keeps us from pursuing and using knowing wrongly, and it is our community of engaged knowers and our mutual commitment that help us see when that might happen and correct for it.

Further, it seems clear that commitment is itself a transformative engagement, as it literally means that we dedicate ourselves to a particular path in our own becoming. In a community of engaged knowers, then, we commit to each other and to the transformative possibilities inherent in opening ourselves to the interconnection that knowing requires. But since these are possibilities only, and not certainties, we must recognize that our knowing will proceed further, and at a more profound level, when we can trust.

Although we cannot—and would not wish to—claim to be finished with this knowing work, we can offer a summation at this point: (truly) to know simply means to be transformed. That is, connected knowing is transformative knowing, in that it is the kind of knowing that we *allow* to touch us, to change us, to transform us. It is knowing that accepts, and consequently incorporates the known into the knower to some extent, and vice versa. Or, in the words of Scheman, "all knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known".[31] It is the intimacy of understanding that transforms, in the same way that a relationship transforms us, makes us more than what we were (albeit sometimes in a negative way, too). To know intimately is to mix one's self with the known, to become at least slightly different because of what one is allowing in. And the key here probably is in being able to trust, which can be enabled only by moral commitment (you can't trust others if you think they might arbitrarily wrong you). Knowing that is grounded in trust is probably the most transformative that knowing can be. Further, transformative knowing turns out to be "stronger", more "powerful", because to transform the self and the known is to have a significant effect on/in the world. So where traditional epistemologies are

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29   S.E. Babbitt, *Feminism and Objective Interests: The Role of Transformation Experience in Rational Deliberation*, in: *Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 256.

30   Ibid., p. 18.

31   Ibid., p. 137.

aimed at, and may achieve, *control* over the known, they cannot *effect change* in the objects/subjects of knowing, and so do not really accomplish what they probably intend. Because engaged knowing is not interested in control, but relies on commitment and community to sustain its agents/agency, it can function in the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the world to enable change it does not control (not fully, anyway).

Passing it on, and still becoming

Our group has learned to know in an engaged way, and we have experienced this as a happy transformation. We have experienced it as truly agency enhancing in so many ways. It enables us to truly bring everything to the project of knowing; every piece of thinking, intuition, experience, whatever, can be placed in front of other knowers when we trust that they have our best interests at heart, that they care. It enables us to fully accept what others have to offer, and to be open to the changes that they suggest (both for our knowing and for us as persons). It enables us to focus on what we can learn and how it can be useful, rather than on how we look, although this is also admittedly enabled by the privilege of tenure as well. Similarly, it enables us (more easily) to remain misfits: to continue working in "marginal" issues and to maintain our investments in those issues. On the other hand, it helps us recognize our privilege and recognize where/when that privilege is showing in our work, and to recognize our obligation to use that privilege when we can to support others less privileged, and to work toward the dismantling of the structural imbalances of power at work in the world. It enables us to sit in the ambiguity that is rich with potential knowing rather than being pushed by that discomfort to reach for (false) certainty.

Further, engaged knowing enables a spirit of play. Recognizing the incompleteness of our knowing reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. Engaged knowing makes it easy to feel joy in the work and successes of others, perhaps especially those in our community of knowers. Play is itself a form of engagement, in this case one that says "I know what I'm saying is hardly an ultimate truth, but hey—go with me a little on this and let's just see what happens!".

Conclusion

A community of knowers is built more out of what we do than of what we are. It's what we do, the interactions we choose, that forge connec-

tions between and among us.[32] It's what we commit to that shows our values, and lets others see whether they want to be in community with us or not. It's our loyalties that define our purposes and our communities, and consequently the paths of our knowing, our becoming. And if making meaning is the goal of our knowing, then perhaps we can say that we are knowing well when we are engaged in the kind of knowing work that enables us to contribute to bettering the conditions and supporting the agency of those to whom we know ourselves connected.

Our group has learned these lessons of knowing over time, and we surprise ourselves with the ways in which we evolve as we look back on our time together and see that evolution. The recognition of that evolution has shown us that we have found a way out of disconnectedness; while it does not mean that our work lives are somehow "perfect", it does mean that we have a different perspective on what our purpose is. While on the surface, we may have fulfilled the normative expectations of what good academics do (our resumes are just fine), our careers mean something deeper and more personal to us. These deeper meanings say to us that continuing to produce knowledge that we understand as useful and based on good judgment and practice is important, even and perhaps especially when it is seen as marginal or against the grain. We also have come to place an even greater value on the notion that knowledge is not owned by any individual. It is a process, and as we all look at our teaching or our writing we see how it is inflected and influenced by conversations with others—in and outside our writing group. This speaks to the humility we see as appropriate to knowledge-making, and to the great power of collective knowing.

32   Ibid., p. 185.

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Tytuł: *Współ-pisanie, współ-poznawanie. Transformujące epistemologie*

Abstrakt: Nasz artykuł prezentuje wizję tego, jak procesy tworzenia wiedzy oparte na współpracy w ramach interdyscyplinarnej grupy piszących przedstawicielek kadry akademickiej mogą przekształcić życie zawodowe spędzane w izolacji w rozkwitające życie. W naszym współtworzeniu wiedzy kluczowe znaczenie posiadają zarówno

praktyka krytycznie reflektującego nad sobą snucia opowieści oraz elementy zaan-
gażowania, powiązania i bliskich stosunków. Zauważyłyśmy wspólnie, że elementy
te zapewniają podstawowe strategie pozwalające na radzenie sobie z izolacją, która
w innym wypadku stanowiłaby istotną siłę w naszym życiu zawodowym. Nasze zaan-
gażowanie jest zarówno epistemologiczne, jak i etyczne, ponieważ zaangażowałyśmy
się w wytwarzanie wiedzy, ale jednocześnie każda z nas jako jednostka i podmiot
etyczny, zaangażowała się w nasze wartości, oraz w to by wcielić je w życie. Wspól-
nie ucząc się o nas samych, wzmocniłyśmy nasze poczucie tożsamości oraz naszą
zdolność do nawigowania w obrębie naszych ograniczeń i granic. Poprzez wspiera-
jącą, intencjonalną i refleksyjną współpracę poddałyśmy rewizji proces tworzenia
wiedzy jako coś w sposób fundamentalny społecznego i relacyjnego oraz steorety-
zowałyśmy go jako coś ugruntowanego w specyficzności narracji współdzielonego
przeżytego doświadczenia.

Słowa kluczowe: storytelling/opowiadanie historii, transformacja, współpraca,
wytwarzanie wiedzy, zobowiązanie/zaangażowanie