Knowing in social interaction: a contextual analysis

The subject of the study is to examine knowing in social contexts. Knowing is contextualized in social situations in which knowledge is considered to have a significant role. College students’ (N = 123) conceptions of knowledge and knowing are studied from two theoretical perspectives: 1) subjects’ implicit epistemologies are analyzed in the cognitive-developmental framework, according to the Reflective Judgment Model of Kitchener and King, 2) analysis of subjects’ descriptions of disagreement situations with academic experts (lecturer, professor etc.), with other professional experts or specialists (physician, lawyer etc.), and with friends, is based on a qualitative data-generated classification, and on a broad theoretical interpretation of conversation as a system of social interaction (Myllyniemi). College students were selected subjects of the study on the basis that in higher education one important goal is to help students understand the nature, limits, and the certainty of knowledge. In addition, previous studies have shown that the implicit epistemologies of students can develop substantially during the college years. The empirical material of the study was collected with a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions.

One of the starting points of the study was the idea that the situations, in which knowing takes place, are relational. Moreover, it was presumed that the nature of social relations (formal vs. informal, task-oriented vs. socio-emotional) would direct one’s orientation in an interaction situation. In this study knowing is contextualized in disagreement situations, in which people are assumed to pay particular attention to the validity and truthfulness of one’s claims and opinions. The concept of ‘knowing’ is approached from two perspectives. First, when contextualized in an interaction situation, the question is addressed, is knowledge a product of a single epistemic perspective or a product of the fullest range of epistemic perspectives in an interaction situation. This perspective is called the epistemic dimension of knowledge. Secondly, it will be explored, how do the participants of an interaction situation express their views and opinions. This perspective is called the intersubjective dimension of knowledge.

According to the results, a conversational process, which is open to divergent viewpoints, and developing towards a mutually accepted shared perspective, seemed to be a mode of interaction, which served best the achievement of knowledge and truth, at least in ill-structured problems. Compromising and agreeing to disagree were also considered as solutions, in which the participants respected each other’s opposing views, and where the participants tried to cooperate to resolve the problem. Accepting the other participant’s view was also conceived as a solution based on argumentative judgments, but, on the other hand, as an inactive solution, which was based in relying on received knowledge. Complying and un-compromising were solutions, in which other circumstances - mainly personal, attitudinal, and behavioural standpoints - seemed to be more decisive than the participants’ epistemological stances.

When the relational contexts were compared, the results indicated that a feeling of ignorance and avoiding argumentative situations were typical in academic context. Silence and showing respect to epistemic authorities were typical in expert situations. With friends, on the contrary, managing conflict situations seemed to be easier and less distressed. Friends seemed to be more ready to engage in verbal debate on controversial issues than in formal relations. On the other hand, a controversy with friends calls also sensitivity and alertness because of the expectable negative emotional climate. The differences between the subjects’ implicit epistemologies and the resolutions of conflict situations were not significant.

The most important sources are Pirttilä-Backman (1990; 1991a; 1991b; 1993; 1994), King & Kitchener (1994), Myllyniemi (1986; 1990), and also the literature of epistemology, expertise, and higher education.

Avainsanat-Nyckelord-Keywords
knowledge
implicit epistemologies
cognitive development
expertise
higher education
social interaction

Säilytyspaikka-Förvaringsställe-Where deposited

Muita tietoja-Övriga uppgifter-Additional information