

Title of workshop proposal: Can personal experience be evidence?

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## CAN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE BE EVIDENCE?

This paper is an attempt to bring philosophical theory of evidence to bear on the role of personal experience in building professional knowledge. That is to say, I wish to use evidence theory to problematize an intriguing aspect of the gathering and use of evidence in professional contexts; namely the tenability of experience-based knowledge claims. Teachers often refer to their firsthand experience as the ultimate judge of what works in education, often expressed as “I’ve seen it with my own eyes” or “I felt the frustrations on my own body, so I know all about it”. Furthermore, research indicates that teachers believe the testimony of local colleagues above empirical research results (Floden 1996). But what kind of evidence does personal experience provide? How should such putative evidence be appraised?

To exemplify: in a study by Boggiano and Katz (1991) a teacher claims that the use of controlling techniques, such as evaluation and rewarding of academic performance increased the students’ intrinsic motivation. And how did he know this? Because he had seen it with his own eyes. Leaving aside the problem of how one can (directly) observe that intrinsic motivation increases: how should we regard this claim? Clearly the teacher took himself to have what Peter Achinstein (2001) calls veridical evidence for his claim; that is, he took his belief to have been established as true on the basis of his own true experiential evidence. He dismissed the results of Boggiano and Katz’ research, which suggested that controlling techniques did not lead to increased intrinsic motivation.

Should we accept the teacher’s personal experiences as evidence for his claim? It becomes necessary to look at the concept of evidence itself. This concept is used in different ways by different people for different purposes. In this paper I will go with Peter Achinstein and Thomas Kelly (2006), who both see the root meaning of evidence as that which justifies belief. Evidence is something that supports the truth of a belief (hypothesis, theory, claim) or indicates its falsity. This function can in principle be performed by facts, experiences, and all sorts of data. The evidentiary relation largely assumes that the evidence is true, factual, accurate, etc., or at least trustworthy. This seems to be taken for granted. We believe a claim because we think the evidence is true, and that the evidence bears on the claim. Thus, at the outset, experience can function as evidence for a claim. That is to say, we believe a

professional's claim to knowledge because we assume the truth of the experience, and judge that the experience in question supports the claim.

So what might be the problems involved in viewing the teacher's personal experience as evidence supporting the truth of his claim? Let me begin by making a distinction between public and private evidence. Many philosophers, researchers and practitioners alike seem to ascribe to evidence the role of being a neutral arbiter, a court of appeal to generate agreement, for example about which educational strategy is the better for increasing students' intrinsic motivation. But since even fully informed and rational scientists disagree, is it the case that the bearing of evidence on a claim is a highly relativized affair? What, Kelly asks, must evidence look like if it is to secure intersubjective agreement among inquirers? What constraints must we place on evidence, and what properties must it possess? Most importantly, Kelly himself suggests, such evidence must be public; that is, it is available to and can be grasped and appraised by multiple individuals. In the case of the teacher, the evidence is not public. Rather, it consists of the teacher's own perceptions, interpretations and feelings. These are accessible only to the individual in question.

But the subjective nature of personal experience need not condemn it as evidence, I think. Kelly too doubts that all genuine evidence must be public. When I have a headache, I am justified in believing I have a headache. Other people may have evidence of my headache by my testimony or by my behavior. And, Kelly says, the evidence that others possess in this case is not identical to the evidence that justifies my own belief that I have a headache; hence, purely private experience is sometimes evidence. I have two comments to this. The first the difference between the examples. In Kelly's headache example the speaker talks about his own subjective state. In the case of the teacher, more is at stake because the teacher makes an objective claim about what increases students' intrinsic motivation, and subjective evidence might therefore not be sufficient for acceptance of the claim. My second comment is that I think that Achinstein would resist Kelly's analysis. In some situations, Achinstein argues, it is important to distinguish between reasons and evidence for belief. My having a headache might be a reason for my belief that I have a headache, but it is not my subjective view that I have a headache. It is too close to be evidence.

Achinstein's idea that something can be too close to be evidence might have important implications for a professional experiential knowledge base. It is the emphasis on firsthand

experience in most professional accounts of learning that makes the idea of “too close” so relevant. If the experience professionals (and others) take to be (veridical) evidence for their experience-based claims turn out not to be evidence at all, a very thorough-going rethinking of professional learning is necessary.

So what could experience be if it cannot function as evidence? The evidentiary relationship is basically one of support. It is equally plausible to view the relation between experience and claim as causal: your claim is formed (inferred, induced) on the basis of certain firsthand experiences. In such a case, your experience might explain why you hold certain views, but it does not justify them. The answer to the question of whether personal, firsthand experience can be evidence is by no means clear. But the question is worthy of exploration.