The DDI, ESK, and ME: Troubling the Epistemology of the Dominant Discourse on Indoctrination via Feminist Epistemologies of Situated Knowledges

James C. Lang

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The maxim “fish and houseguests begin to smell after three days” could apply to the problem of indoctrination, which seems to have outstayed its welcome by several decades. In spite of hundreds of papers, articles, and books on the subject in the field of philosophy of education, this bothersome term refuses to go away and the aroma lingers, as does the crucial question that the discourse purports to resolve: How can acceptable education be distinguished from unacceptable indoctrination? Although the literature is dominated by those who argue that indoctrination involves teaching such that students develop a stunted rationality,1 or such that they come to hold beliefs in a nonevidential fashion, 2 this prescription has not served educators well. After a century of rancorous debate on the subject during which virtually all contributors argue that indoctrination is a form of unacceptable education,3 my research reveals not a single recorded instance where this dominant understanding of the term has led to the identification of specific “indoctrinators,” and/or moved them to change their approaches to teaching.4 I would suggest letting the matter rest, were it not for educators’, students’, and theorists’ continuing use of the term, especially in relation to such contentious contemporary issues as the inclusion of “creation science” and “intelligent design” in school curricula.

I suggest that the discourse’s attempts to conceptualize “indoctrination” as a normative educational tool may fall short because, (1) as received in the dominant discourse on indoctrination (DDI), the reductionist epistemology on which the arguments are predicated is vulnerable to compelling critiques via epistemologies of situated knowledges (ESK) that may offer better descriptions of educational epistemological contexts; and, relatedly, (2) our fixation on framing discussions of unacceptable epistemic practices in terms of “indoctrination” and its fractious zero-sum, counteraccusatory arguments precludes potentially more productive conversations about knowledge, knowers, and epistemic differences — especially in educational contexts. I suggest that the problem of indoctrination will not be resolved by a new mix of the same ingredients and that a more useful approach could emerge by interrogating — and “troubling” — the core epistemological assumptions that legitimize the DDI and frame the epistemic imaginary within which education, writ large, is performed. I suggest that better ways of understanding the harms we associate with indoctrination might be forthcoming from the burgeoning work of feminist epistemologists, who have yet to weigh in on this issue. In this essay, I make some preliminary moves in that direction.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CAROUSEL

My claim that efforts to produce an applicable normative understanding of indoctrination have stalled can be demonstrated by the circularity of the discourse
over the past four decades. Were current scholars to read John Wilson’s 1964 claim that “if we are to avoid indoctrination...the beliefs we teach must be rational,”5 followed by Michael Hand’s claim in 2004 that “teaching for belief in propositions not supported by rationally decisive evidence is, when successful, indoctrinatory,”6 they might be forgiven for concluding that nothing much had transpired on the subject during the intervening forty years. After an extensive review of the vast and impressive body of scholarly work on this subject,7 I suggest that any apparent forward motion presents an illusion of progress, as the dominant discourse pivots in a shallow arc around an uninterrogated “mainstream” epistemological axis. A few epistemic eccentrics diverge from the DDI and call for new epistemological approaches. Jim Garrison is ostensibly the first to suggest the merits of applying feminist epistemological theories to the discussion of indoctrination.8 Elmer Thiessen’s comprehensive examination of the discourse proposes substantive modifications to its persistent conceptions of rationality and autonomy. He suggests that the works of feminist philosophers, such as Lorraine Code, might offer possibilities for developing “an epistemology that does justice to both its normative and historical/situational character.”9 Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, as well, says that the work of Lorraine Code suggests the limitations of what most of the discourse accepts as inherently universal “malestream” epistemological conceptions of rationality, and makes room for moves toward “epistemic anti-foundationalism.”10

Space does not permit a full accounting of Milligan’s, Garrison’s, and Thiessen’s contributions to the discourse; however, each, in his way, initiates challenges to the epistemology that underlies the dominant discourse, and suggests further work using feminist perspectives. Taking my cue from these critics, I turn to Lorraine Code, and the growing cadre of feminist epistemologists who coalesce around critiques of what Code terms “mainstream epistemology” (ME).11 Available space allows for only a preliminary sketch of the comprehensive work involved in reading the discourse on indoctrination through Code’s and others’ ESK. Therefore, I will focus on sample ESK critiques of propositional rationalism and rational autonomy, which are core constitutive features of the epistemology of the DDI. I will then hint at ways that critiques by ESK undermine the purported harms of indoctrination, and point to possibly better ways of understanding the harms we want to associate with “indoctrination,” as well as providing more satisfying ways to contextualize epistemic educational practices writ large.

PROPOSITIONAL RATIONALISM AND THE DDI

Propositional rationalism drives the epistemology of the DDI. Proponents of propositional rationalism argue that all knowledge claims are reducible to propositional formulation: “S-knows-‘that-\(p\).’” S represents an undifferentiated rationally autonomous individual or knower who is interchangeable with all other knowers; \(p\) represents a knowable proposition. Evidence is recognizable as such, accessible to all knowers, and can be evaluated impartially — in part by denying the influence of the subjective, affective particularities of the knower — such that knowledge so derived is universally true for all knowers. On ME, this practice of knowledge justification constitutes an effective definition of rationality.
Space permits only a few representative examples of propositional rationalism in the DDI: J.P. White, on the truth of knowledge claims: “The child should believe that \( p \) is true, if and only if he has come to see that there are good grounds for believing it.”\(^\text{12}\) I. A. Snook: “Indoctrination is concerned with propositional knowledge (knowing that), with statements which can be true or false.”\(^\text{13}\) Although Harvey Siegel claims that “the actual truth of a proposition taught is not required for the teaching of it to avoid the charge of indoctrination,”\(^\text{14}\) he nonetheless sets his key arguments in propositional language; here he draws a critical distinction between two styles of holding beliefs: nonrationally and nonevidentially:

If I believe that \( p \) non-evidentially, my belief cannot be redeemed by reasons, for in holding it non-evidentially, my belief cannot be redeemed by reasons for or against \( p \). But if I believe that \( p \) without rational justification, but nevertheless have an evidential style of belief (or at least I do not have a non-evidential style), I will be moved by reasons, for \( p \), and will be happy to redeem my previously adopted but ungrounded belief when I am able.\(^\text{15}\)

Michael Hand sums up his position on propositional knowledge and teaching for religious belief in this syllogism:

a. Faith schools teach for belief in religious propositions.

b. No religious proposition is known to be true.

c. Teaching for belief in not-known-to-be-true propositions is indoctrinatory.

Therefore,

d. Faith schools are indoctrinatory.\(^\text{16}\)

These examples represent just a few of the many explicit and implied instances where propositional rationalism is presented as central to the DDI. Therefore, critiques of propositional rationalism represent critiques of the epistemic foundations of the core tenets of the DDI.

**Propositional Rationalism Versus ESK**

Feminist epistemologists, especially Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, offer compelling critiques of what Code names “mainstream epistemology.” However, the work of feminist philosophers resists reduction to a unified, synthesized feminist epistemology. Indeed, feminist epistemologists claim strength in their differences as much as in their similarities and to attempt a synthesis would inevitably diminish their collective works.\(^\text{17}\) Therefore, when I use the collective term “epistemologies of situated knowledges,” I do so not because I claim that all of those who contribute to ESK are in full agreement on all the issues. Rather, I claim only that the contributors, represented in this essay primarily by Lorraine Code, would coalesce around critiques of ME and key features of “situated knowledges.” For example, feminist epistemologists present shared critiques of ME in terms of its reliance on idealized conceptions of objectivity, impartiality, universality, and moral neutrality.\(^\text{18}\) There are shared views as well related to knowers as multiply-situated (socially, historically, sexually, and culturally, for example) and embodied. In ESK, knowledge does not transcend knowers, but, rather, it is constitutive of knowers.\(^\text{19}\) Knowledge thus becomes plural — knowledges — and, rather than assuming that

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**Note:** The document appears to be a textbook or scholarly article discussing philosophical education, focusing on the methodology of propositional rationalism within the context of the Didactic Discourse Inquiry (DDI) framework. It critiques this approach by highlighting how it aligns with mainstream epistemology and examines how feminist epistemologists, led by figures like Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, offer alternative perspectives that challenge and extend traditional epistemological frameworks. The text emphasizes the importance of recognizing the situated and embodied nature of knowledge, contrasting with the more idealized conceptions commonly found in mainstream epistemology.
there is only one way to derive truths or to understand knowledge, there are instead many epistemologies: hence the descriptor “epistemologies of situated knowledges.”

Code, and other proponents of ESK, argue that ME’s claims are necessarily advanced from somewhere, by someone, and thus they emanate from an embodied, situated person, and not from a detached, objective location — the “god-trick,” as Donna Haraway famously phrases it, “of seeing everything from nowhere.” Only gods can do the god-trick, by assuming a universal location devoid of human particularities; all human perspectives are necessarily embodied, situated in geographical, social, and political contexts, and, therefore, they are always views from somewhere.

In critiquing the limitations of propositional rationalism, feminist epistemologists are not necessarily contesting, as Lorraine Code describes them, “the demonstrated successes of theoretical physics and mathematics, in producing truths that appear to hold ubiquitously and univocally.” This epistemological formulation can do a lot — especially when it is concerned with knowledge as information — but it is not an unquestionable touchstone of truth, even for apparently “neutral” scientific knowledge claims. Such claims are never fully detached from the persons making them, or from the situation(s) in which they are made, nor are they, in anything but a severely narrow sense, universal. Code challenges the broader applicability of propositional rationalism beyond conceptions of knowledge as information only and of knowers as faceless “Ss.” Yet, she maintains that it is this conception of knowledge that most people use every day, and that thus informs “commonsensical conceptions of what knowing is all about: it produces the folk-wisdom that enjoins people to go and see for themselves, it upholds the assumption that ‘seeing is believing,’ and grants overriding credence to ‘eye-witness evidence.’” Propositional rationalism is also a core feature of ME, which is embedded in the dominant practice of contemporary philosophy — so much so that practitioners of the latter would eschew the “mainstream” qualifier since, to many of them, epistemology is singular and unqualified. Based as they are on ME, it is not surprising, therefore, that the arguments in the DDI also depend on propositional rationalism; but Code shows that the latter does not satisfy all forms of knowledge requirements.

**Which S Knows Whom?**

Not all knowledge claims are readily quantifiable as information and not all reduce to propositional formulation. For example, knowing “that p” is a quite different claim from a claim to know a person, as Code explains:

Relations between subject and object do not figure in such [propositional] knowledge claims, nor does the social-political positioning of the subject. Nor do these inquiries consider the relations between and among subjects and their cooperative, argumentative, or otherwise interactive, knowledge-making activities.

Taken in this light, persons qua persons resist reduction to passive objects that are to be known via propositional formulations and thus propositional rationalism is limited in that it determines knowledge of other persons in this way.

On ME, knowledge is determined by a universal process that is accessible by all rationally autonomous individuals, who are themselves interchangeable “Ss.”
Knowledge of their individuality is of no particular consequence on ME, because knowledge is understood to transcend knowers. On ESK, however, knowledge is understood as constitutive of embodied knowers; it is not the product of isolated, independent, and rationally autonomous thought. Rather, in large part, knowledge is constructed dialogically, with other knowers. The idea that knowledge is largely constructed interactively and interdependently via dialogue between persons, rather than via the hegemonic mainstream model whereby knowledge is “discovered” through autonomous, rational epistemic agency and “transmitted” from person to person, changes educational contexts fundamentally.

Feminist epistemologists argue that the processes through which we arrive at our beliefs are not undertaken as atomized, undifferentiated, and radically autonomous agents, but as particular individuals who are bound up in our relations with other particular persons, who do not reduce to, or present themselves as, static inanimate objects for the benefit of an “impartial” learner. In what she calls “dialogic epistemologies,” Lorraine Code challenges the assumption of the “learner as object.” Rather than a learner being a recipient of knowledge, a “second-person” to the “first-person” who presents the knowledge for consumption, “dialogic epistemologies is a recognition that — where the knower/known relation can be conceived as a two-person one — each participant is a ‘second person,’ capable of engagement with the other.”25 Code explicates the distinctions between dialogic epistemology and ME. Dialogic, “interpretive” teaching-learning methodologies contest the fact/value and reason/emotion splits that are central to orthodox positivistic epistemologies. They focus on particularity, context, texture; they resist monologic, abstract formulations to maintain that meanings — the stuff of which their inquiry is made — are intersubjective, hence irreducible to “individual subjective states, beliefs, or propositions.” With their concentration on experiences and constructions of meaning, interpretive approaches resist the formalisms in which subjectivity disappears into a deductive-nomological model; with their commitment to ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation, they escape the tyranny of obdurate privileged access claims.26

I take from Code’s work that the ability to know persons is crucial to knowledge construction practices in ESK, and this ability cannot be accounted for via propositional rationalism. Although Code is not addressing educational contexts specifically, these extrapolations from the key features of ESK can inform the kinds of dialogical teaching-learning models that ESK describe.

To indicate the ways that ESK’s critiques of ME expose weaknesses in the DDI, I will use the preceding sketches of ESK to foreground a brief critique of the harms of indoctrination — surely the concern of those who would use the term — as explicated by Harvey Siegel.

SIEGEL THROUGH THE LENSES OF ESK

Harvey Siegel describes the significant harms that result from indoctrination, which he presents as teaching in such a way that students come to believe things nonevidentially, and thus develop a flawed or stunted rationality.27 In the following, taken from his book Educating Reason, I have grouped some of his claims out of sequence, relative to his construction, in order to better address the common features of the claims.28 In each case, I suggest a critique based on ESK.
INDOCTRINATION COMPROMISES RATIONAL AUTONOMY

[If I have been indoctrinated] my autonomy has been dramatically compromised, for I do not have the ability to settle impartially questions of concern to me on the basis of a reasoned consideration of the matter at hand…. I am in an important sense the prisoner of my convictions, for I cannot decide whether my convictions ought to be what they are, and I am unable to alter them for good reasons, even if there are good reasons for altering them.29

I will take Siegel’s claim, above, as exemplifying perhaps the core feature of the DDI’s argument against indoctrination: it prevents the development and practice of individual rational autonomy. Lorraine Code challenges the hegemonic epistemic autonomy of ME, which she claims permeates and dominates Western societies’ social imaginaries. She argues that rational autonomy, in ME, denies the relational aspects of knowledge construction and the epistemic relevancy of testimony and advocacy: “despite overwhelming everyday evidence, showing that people are fundamentally reliant on testimony and advocacy, the image of the self-reliant knower confronting the world directly remains integral to and constitutive of knowledge in mainstream epistemology.”30 Testimony and advocacy of interested others are discounted because they are typically not about universals and generalities; rather, they involve concrete experience:

Testimony’s situatedness, its inescapable positioning as someone’s speech act, locates it closer to opinion, to hearsay rather than to sanitized — thus presumably more trustworthy — sources of knowledge in controlled observation conditions. Its source in the specificities of experience puts testimony’s detachment and replicability in question…. Testimony…stands as a constant reminder of how little of anyone’s knowledge, apart from occurrent sensory input, is or could be acquired independently, without reliance on others.31

Ironically, Siegel, in necessarily eschewing the legitimacy of the “specificities of experience,” while advocating a strong form of rational autonomy, might be interpreted as claiming a right to “think and know for Others,” based on Code’s claim that:

Epistemic autonomy legitimates mastery over the “external” world, generating structures of authority and expertise, as the power to predict, manipulate, and control objects of knowledge — both human and non-human — informs and guides inquiry. It is but a short step to the place where autonomous man in his epistemic robes claims a responsibility to think and know for Others too immature to escape the constraints of heteronomy — to know “their own” interests or to understand their experiences.32

In response, Siegel would likely argue that, although he may be insisting on a specific kind of rationality, this is not indoctrinating beliefs in rational autonomy, because success would result in rationally autonomous students who are able to reason for themselves. That such students could be “prisoners of their convictions” in regard to their belief in the ideal of rational autonomy itself, however, does not seem to concern Siegel. Yet, ESK argue that rational autonomy is not absolute, but is instead a partial, unachievable, and unacceptable ideal, as formulated on mainstream epistemology. Thus, to teach for belief in it as an ideal would become indoctrinatory on Siegel’s own “definition” of indoctrination, were he not open to considering counterevidence presented by ESK, relative to the assessment of knowledge as knowledge on his own terms.

Whereas Siegel’s conception of rational autonomy requires impartial examination of the evidence, on ESK, partiality, rather than impartiality, is requisite to settle
Siegel’s “questions of concern to me” in a reasoned way (emphasis added). Lorraine Code would point to the paradox of the interchangeable, undifferentiated individual requiring impartiality to decide what surely must be a partial issue — an issue tied to the individual’s individuality. After all, it is clearly important to the specific individual in question; and although Siegel appears to be referring to himself (“to me”), he is doubtless intending his to be a detached perspective, and the “me” is intended to refer to anyone and everyone, everywhere. On ESK, however, Siegel cannot escape embodiment. He is necessarily situated and, importantly, the “situation” of subjects is not only “a place from which to know,” in Code’s words, as the language of “perspectives” might imply, indifferently available to anyone who chooses to stand there. Situation is also a place to know whose intricacies have to be examined for how they shape both knowing subjects and the objects of knowledge; how they legitimate and/or disqualify knowledge projects; how they are constituted by and constitutive of entrenched social imaginaries, together with the rhetoric that holds them in place. It is an achieved epistemic stance.33

Thus Siegel’s claim might have more merit on ESK were he to object that he needs to be able to settle his specific, situated, partial issues as a situated knower.

 Indoctrination Compromises Autonomy

“I have been shackled, and denied the right to determine, insofar as I am able, my own future.”34

In ESK, the Kantian individualist markers of ME become evident, in the depiction of the learner as a solitary and self-sufficient individual, solely responsible for himself, to himself. In ESK, however, no person is fully independent from other persons. Indeed, we owe our sense of ourselves, our identity, our language, our ways of making sense of the world, and, as infants and children, our very existence to others. ESK claim that we are all “second persons” to other “second persons,” and that the “I” and “me” in the piece above ought, in an important epistemological way, to be represented as “we” and “us.”35 In ESK, convictions are not developed in isolation from others, but through interaction and dialogue with others. The harm here, which is actually the inverse of its DDI counterpart, could be described as resulting when a person is brought to believe that they are so utterly discrete as to be solely responsible for all they know, decide, and do. Indeed, students are embedded in an educational imaginary that continuously reinforces their responsibility for their “own” performance, and their need to “be their own person” and to construct a “life plan,” an imaginary that Lorraine Code acknowledges is omnipresent in the larger social imaginary that “maintains a division between theory and practice that amounts, for most feminists, to a false dichotomy.”36 In other words, the kind of autonomy that underscores the harm of indoctrination in the DDI fails to transfer from idealized philosophical theory to the lives of those who are supposedly harmed by its stultification.

 Conclusions

In this ESK “sampler,” I have presented mere snapshots of some critiques that weaken claims about indoctrination that are predicated on ME, while leaving a great deal of fertile terrain untilled. For example, ESK offer equally valuable critiques of
the limited moral dimensions of ME, as well as compelling analyses of the weaknesses they see as inherent in ME’s reliance on scientistic evidence in all epistemic justificatory processes. I suggest that, when the epistemological assumptions inherent in the DDI are read through their parallels in ESK, the conception of indoctrination as it applies to contexts of education is changed as fundamentally and dramatically as are our understandings of the contexts of education themselves. On my reading, ESK turn indoctrination as received in the DDI on its head, rendering its proponents vulnerable to charges of promoting the irresponsible construction of knowledges and knowers, which, I suggest, may serve as a working description of practices in ESK that parallel educators’ concerns relative to indoctrination in the DDI. If educators and educational theorists were to explore indoctrination in those terms, they would need to ask very different questions when working to determine whether this or that educational practice in this or that context could be interpreted as indoctrination. Situated knowledges and situated rationality require interrogation of testimony and respect for the epistemic significance of testimony; they require suspicion of empirical evidence in support of truth claims, as well as questions about the kinds of truths and the purposes to which they would be used; they require acknowledging differences and proscribing attempts to neutralize and reduce differences through essentializing practices; they require participants to be aware of, reflect on, and interrogate power relations among all of the participants in knowledge construction practices; they require resistance to reductionist epistemic practices; they require acknowledgement of knowledges as partial, and of the constructions of knowledges as inherently moral activities; and they require interrogation of the implications of the situatedness of authors — of me, as the author of this essay, for example — on the merits of their claims.

Over time, such a renewed approach could serve to decenter the DDI, and set it on a more productive and useful course. The persons involved in the issues — creationism, secularism, and libertarianism, for example — that are implicated in what we want to call indoctrination resist being characterized as indoctrinators, just as their accusers resist similar countercharges. I suggest that the extant and fruitless practice of lobbing charges at each other from positions of entrenched belief in the universal truths of their relative positions derives from the very epistemology that supports both sides’ claims. Were they to be guided by ESK, rather than ME, I suggest that those on all sides of these issues might work to generate a new, more constructive conversation; one that sets its own agenda and creates its own frame of references; a conversation that measures its results more in terms of its ability to help educators and students engage one another constructively across differences than in producing scholarly artifice for its own sake.


4. Charges of indoctrination likely exist. I claim only that I have not found any case where such charges resulted in changed approaches to educational policies.


7. My current bibliography of articles that specifically discuss indoctrination contains more than 150 entries.


20. Ibid., 86.

21. Code, Rhetorical Spaces, 204.


24. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. See Siegel, Educating Reason. This work, while old, is not dated. Siegel does not appear to significantly revise these views in his more recent articles on indoctrination.
29. Ibid., 88.
31. Ibid., 186.
32. Ibid.