

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVE

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GOAL

Learning that our knowledge is all based on perspective

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER explained that education at the primary and secondary level was socialization, or education on how to behave and think in class and society. Public school education socializes students as much as it teaches information. The result of going through a standardized curriculum is that Americans have a large body of shared knowledge and ignorance. Citizens of the same country will generally believe similar things because of similar training, education, and socialization. Everything that students have learned up to this moment can be considered **prior knowledge**. This knowledge includes life and personal experiences, emotions, observations, and any formal education received over the years. Though knowledge is generally thought to be a good thing, students seeking to acquire more must always have an open mind, especially towards information which conflicts with information already learned.

People use their prior knowledge all the time to make decisions and choices, from the simple to the complex (e.g., Should I go left or right? Should I wear this or that? Should I eat this or that? Should I vote this way or that way?). Though not often considered, most people prefer their own prior knowledge because it was learned first. Because the prior knowledge got into people's heads first, it holds a type of superiority or advantage over new information. People are biased and prefer or defer to that prior

knowledge. Prior knowledge is comfortable and familiar, and most people are adjusted and adapted to their prior knowledge.

Prior knowledge has little to do with what is actually right or wrong and true or false; it is simply information learned first by any given individual. So, even if someone were to hear information that is better than what is already known, the tendency is to prefer the prior knowledge for the reasons stated above. Rejecting new, and possibly better, knowledge means no change is required in a person's life because life is still understood in the same way. If one were to accept new knowledge, then other things in an individual's life might have to change, as well. For example, if one were to find out that one's best friend was lying, believing that information could require finding a new best friend; rejecting or de-signifying that information would require no change. Hearing new and different information results in a battle or a conflict in our heads; a war of sorts ensues over what to believe and what to reject. One has to weigh the benefits of adopting new knowledge against the changes required by rejecting old knowledge.

It is difficult to predict what information will be maintained by an individual; there are many factors involved as the struggle plays out. The knowledge that eventually becomes the winner of this battle is what is used for future decisions and choices. Even then there is no guarantee that the information will be used in a consistent manner.

UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVE

"Deconstruction" will be the tool used to minimize the conflict that arises when encountering new information. Deconstruction itself will be explained in further detail in the next chapter. For now, students must realize that the truth they believe as fact is simply a matter of **perspective**. Perspective is the individual's point of view (the subject's point of view), what is seen by someone in one position or location looking at something else. Different people in even slightly different positions or locations looking at the same thing will have different perspectives. What is viewed by the subject is an **object**. Objects are the things, information and events we study, analyze, and try to understand. They are generally something seen through our eyes. From a different perspective, the viewed object will appear different.

The process of deconstruction examines the perspective of knowledge; it is simply a way of examining, determining, and understanding what

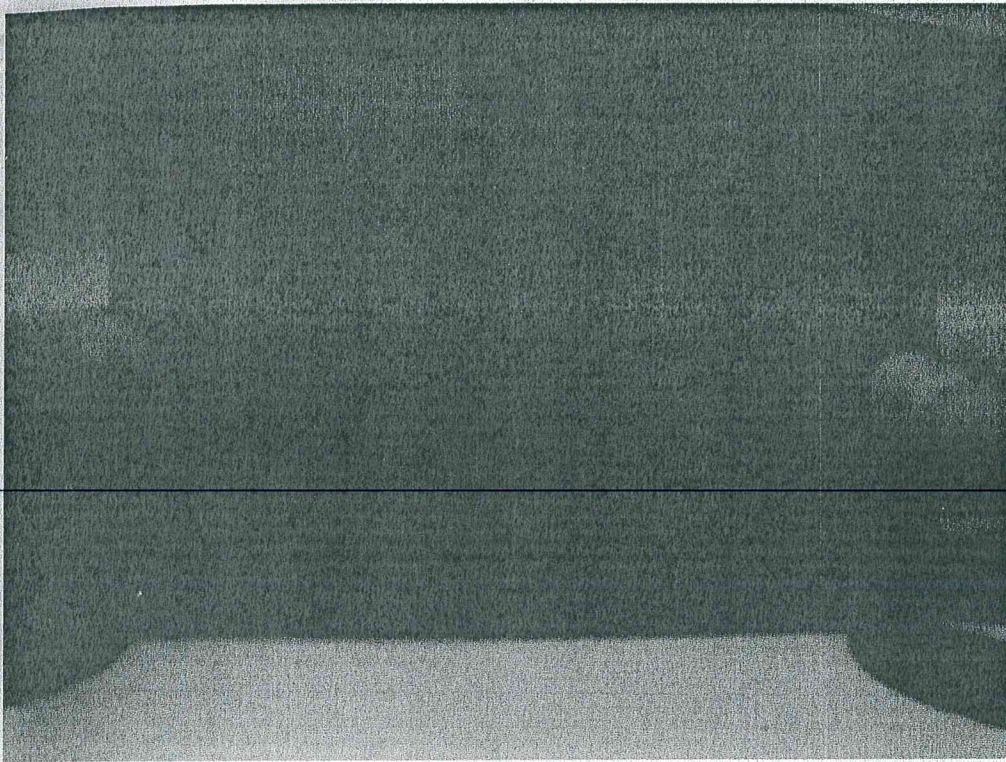


FIGURE 2-1 What is the color of the paper shown in this picture?

perspective is being used when making knowledge. Explained this way, one realizes that disagreement could be a conflict of perspectives rather than information. If everyone had the same information with the same perspective, there would only be agreement and consensus.

We will now conduct a simple example to illustrate the basic problem of subjectivity. Look at the picture in Figure 2-1.

What color do you see in the picture? Suppose I ask students to describe what they have seen and share that information by writing a paper for publication. The papers the students write will describe a blue-colored paper. This particular piece of paper has a different color on each side; one side is blue and the other is white. Figure 2-2 depicts what I saw when looking at the back side of the paper.

If I were to read the papers students wrote and write a response, I would write that the color was not blue but was, in fact, white. This illustrates **subjectivity**. Subjectivity can be defined simply as the perspective of the one performing the observation and reporting; it implies a specific position when viewing an object. If two people are looking at the same object, and each person is located in two different locations, then the difference in

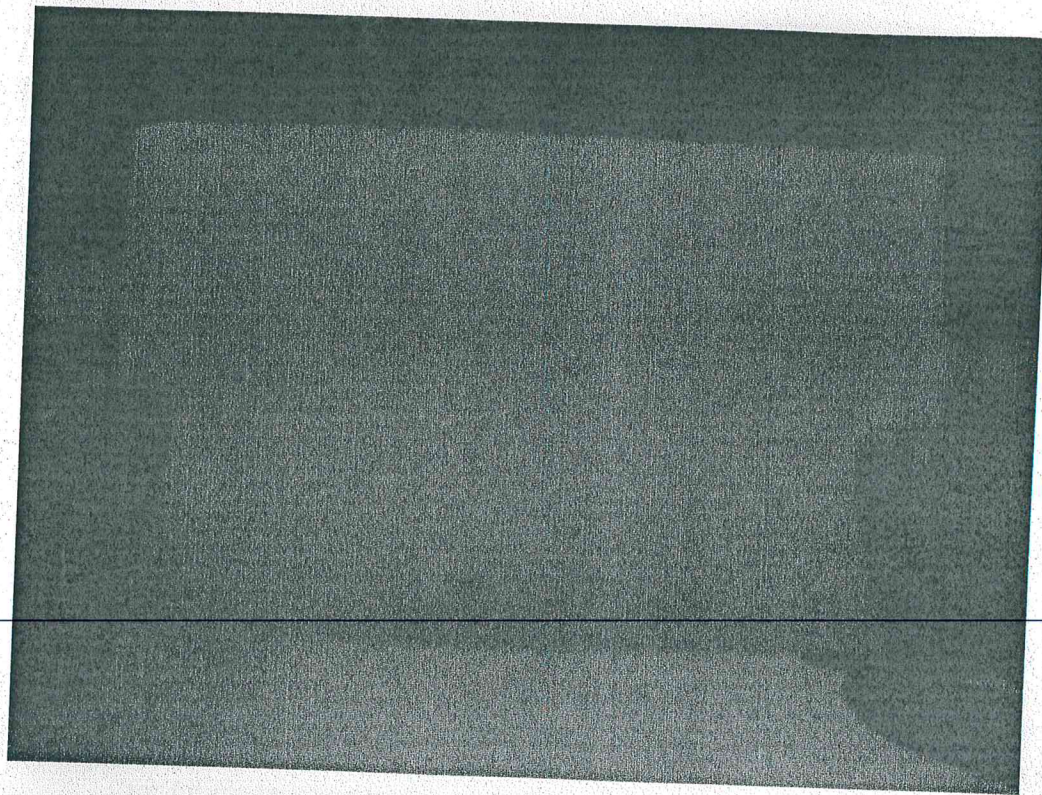


FIGURE 2-2 The same piece of paper seen in Figure 2-1, but from a different perspective: the reverse side.

location is what gives rise to difference in observation or simply subjectivity; different perspectives of the same object yield different observations and reports. The position of the subject when looking at an object determines what is seen. The information produced from that position or perspective is **subjective knowledge**, or knowledge from a specific subjective point of view. Information is often true from a single perspective; change the perspective, and the knowledge and its truth value changes, too.

What is seen by someone from a perspective is empirically obvious; that is, what is observed and reported can easily be verified by experience or simple observation and even by scientific research or experiment. This simple verification process creates reluctance for that person to listen and take seriously the observations of another person, who has a different perspective. Most people do not give much thought to perspective because most people have been trained to think in terms of right and wrong or in terms of true and false. Teaching information in the framework of right and wrong implies and assumes that there is only one legitimate perspective; the idea that there could be other perspectives is not raised and discussed.

If this were an academic debate and the piece of paper represented race, people would say things like: "I was there, I know what I saw. My perspective and voice matters more than yours." And when debate fails, people in the debate resort to attempts to discredit opposing perspectives. Often the accusation of "racist" is heard at this point. This type of impasse is a phenomenon in many classes in many departments where there are competing theories of understanding. Upper-level science classes also have this type of subjective problem. That is, differences in perspective exist in the sciences, as well, in spite of its emphasis on being objective (e.g., not everyone agrees that string theory is the next step for cosmology). Because of subjectivity, even scientific knowledge cannot claim "fact" status, or the status of being true to everyone, all the time, no matter one's perspective. Science is not free from the politicization of knowledge.

THE SUBJECTIVE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH

Given this example of the two-sided piece of paper, we should take note of a couple of basic ideas that can be learned regarding knowledge or truth, in general. Usually, a person cannot see every detail from any given single perspective; however, most objects can be viewed from multiple perspectives. A person can only write from his or her perspective, conveying what one observes and already believes is significant; the subject uses the framework or thinking patterns she or he has been trained to use by schools and educators.

Limitation of observation is not just a result of perspective. Not only are students taught what and how to think, students are also taught what to notice or **signify**. To signify, or signification, is to point something out or teach something that makes that object or detail seem important or relevant. During the learning process, students are taught to pay close attention to certain details, which coincidentally results in students ignoring other details. The very process of the scientific method pre-determines what is and what is not important; the hypothesis dictates what is significant and what is not. Science has taught us to focus only on what is understood to be important and relevant while ignoring everything else. In the case of the paper, discussion has revolved around the color of the paper, and nothing has been said about the shape or size of the paper.

To be fair, in most cases, determining what to observe and what not to observe has a practical aspect; studies and research would be unmanageable

if the amount of information was too large or if there are too many variables. Though in some areas of higher math, more information is better, the restriction and predetermination of variables for specific study allows observers to be selective and biased in their study, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

A simple way to understand this is if someone were asked to describe a mutual friend, the details they include and the order in which they provide the information is a clue to what the speaker thinks is an important characteristic and what the speaker does not think is an important characteristic. Descriptions reveal the details that a person notices or signifies in a friend or when observing someone else. Sometimes people are aware of the significance of order and change the order they list, so that they do not appear superficial in the description of others. What is interesting is that different people will describe the same person differently because they notice or signify different things; the signified features are important to that describer. In fact, if details are not important to the describer, those details will not be noticed and, thus, will not be included in the description; those details are not significant to the observer.

An object can be seen in different ways by different people depending on their perspectives. The information produced by an observer is a matter of perspective, and the disagreements people have with one another could be explained by this difference in perspective. People even express this by saying, "I don't see it that way." What people see when they look at the same object can be different from person to person. The more complex the object observed is, the greater the chance that observations and reports will be different from each other because there are more features to select for signification and more features to ignore.

Something else that can be learned from the two-sided paper example is that things are probably more complicated than they appear. The example of the two-sided paper is simple to resolve, since it only has two sides. However, life is much more complicated than this. Society, climate change, life, race, poverty—these things are much more complex, and yet, knowledge producers essentialize and reduce things to simple explanations. The problem is that simplification distorts the perception of the world around us. Also, oversimplification could happen for a less noble reason. By narrowing the discussion to a single perspective instead of acknowledging the many possible perspectives, it is easier to persuade others to agree with what appears to be the only valid perspective, though it will continue to simply be one perspective among many. In other words, people share observations with others

to persuade and convince them to see things in the same way, the way the persuader sees things. This is normal; however, students and teachers must be fully aware that there are other perspectives, other legitimate perspectives, which can produce different information and result in different opinions and choices. Revisionist history, that is, looking at past events again, is an example of how a different perspective can produce different information and a different interpretation of past events. It is often the case that the new interpretation hardly resembles the old knowledge produced from earlier perspectives.

Opinions are simply expressions of one's prior knowledge, things other people have taught, which the student has learned over the years. Without knowing from where much of the information has come, many people will repeat things that may appear profound or that seem appropriate for that moment. For this reason, opinions are not applicable to this course; questions are fine, questions from subjective points of view are also fine; but opinions offered as facts are not to be considered "absolute truth;" it is all simply subjective perspectives.

For this class and for the specific task of learning deconstruction, *what* a student believes is not nearly as interesting as *why* a student believes what he or she believes. What a student believes will be dependent on the perspective that student takes; once the perspective is determined, the opinions expressed with that perspective are generally predictable. More interesting would be the reason for taking one perspective over another. In other words, the choosing of perspective may be more informative than the predictable opinions that are expressed from a particular perspective. The tool of deconstruction will bring out and try to reveal the perspective of the information that people learn. For the class and class discussion, opinions from prior knowledge will be de-signified because that prior knowledge is likely to be subjective knowledge or knowledge from a narrow perspective that can impede learning something different. The goal is for students to be empowered to make statements from their own perspective while being open to all other perspectives.

In order to do this, this class strives to teach a different perspective that all students can use with little effort and with little requirement to change already existing personal beliefs. The class will try to teach a method that puts everyone on the same page and does not prioritize any subjective point of view that would put everyone with a different perspective at a disadvantage, and it will try to consider all possible perspectives at the same time. Once the class is dismissed, what students do with that knowledge is their choice. As was said before, this class does not seek to dictate or

prescribe what students should do with their lives or the choices they should make. Rather, it seeks to enable students to make decisions that are the best for them after considering risk factors and accepting responsibility for whatever might happen because of those choices. Education should not be about doing what the instructor says is the right thing to do. The information taught may or may not actually be beneficial to all students. It is more important that students learn how to make decisions and choices for themselves for their own benefit. For example, those choices can be for a life of charity and sacrifice or for a life of obscene wealth. It is for the student to decide.

To explain what is meant by "information taught may or may not actually be beneficial to all students," here is an example. When I was a graduate student studying scholarship written about Koreans in the U.S., I tried very hard to gauge where I was, relative to the prescriptions and descriptions of the authors. Much of what I read described what Koreans had to do in order to become American. Often, steps were described and explained; the process of becoming an American was detailed so that one could follow along and figure out where one was in that process of Americanization, how far along one was, how much further did one have to go, what tasks remained in order to achieve assimilation to American life and finally become American.

I realized that, though I read those books to help improve my life, I was merely making my life more difficult (miserable). The books and articles talked about Koreans generally, which meant I could relate to the information because I was of Korean descent, too. However, the details of the people in the books were not exactly the same as my own personal situation. This meant I had to adjust the prescriptions in the book to somehow make them work in my own life, but the prescriptions never worked. The information in those books not only saw different things, but it also interpreted what was seen differently. This resulted in different goals and expected outcomes, none of which were what I desired for myself.

To resolve this, I had to write, for myself, an analysis and assessment of my own personal situation with my own perspective. This is not to say that the scholarship I read previously was wrong, but rather that those books did not have my perspective and, therefore, did not "fit" my life. Sometimes, someone else's perspective may help us to get where we want or teach us to notice different things in our lives; however, that information was originally made for someone else. Students can decide to live the lives others believe is right or students can figure out their own unique take on life and then live it. The books of other writers are fantastic and wonderful

starting points but should never be considered comprehensive and final. In fact, learning about oneself and where one fits in society is ever-changing because we and society are always changing. Life is dynamic, so the way we live and adapt to that life should also be just as dynamic; it should not be entirely dictated by the pages of a book written from a perspective that may no longer exist.

POLITICIZE MUCH?

Politics is the effort to persuade others to agree with one's perspective for the purpose of gaining power or influence or to execute a plan against the plans and efforts of others. Learning and teaching is a highly political activity. In the absence of absolutes (as in the discourse that uses deconstruction), there is only politics of persuasion to garner agreement and consensus. Which perspective should be used, reproduced, taught, and learned is a matter of politics. Political exercises occur in our heads as well as society.

For every view on a particular matter, there are different and opposing views. Any view or issue in education is a political matter. However, many classrooms present information simply as fact, as if there are no politics in that information; it is as if there is universal consensus on what is wrong and right. The absence of obvious politics in the learning process does not mean there is a clear right and wrong. Rather, it is likely that the political engagement already occurred in the past and has been forgotten. History is an example of this phenomenon where only the perspective, opinion, and beliefs of the winners of wars are valid. Citizens who are born after a particular war are taught only the ideology and interpretations of the winner of that war, not all of the competing ideas that existed before the war. To assist in the erasing of the political nature of information, society often destroys public evidence (statues, monuments, etc.) of those opposing views. This phenomenon also exists in and extends to the war of ideas.

One might feel uncomfortable with invoking politics here, but the struggle for dominance in society and in our heads often has little to do with right and wrong; the struggle for dominance is about "more beneficial and less beneficial." Representing a perspective as the right and only perspective is a highly political activity, one that may not have the best interests of individual students in mind.

It is important to note this political aspect of life because of what is at stake: the potential gain or loss of power, comfort, beliefs, and personal identity. For this reason, the process of deconstruction is eventually offensive to everyone. But remember, it is simply a way to reveal the perspective of one's prior knowledge; what becomes invalid for one person may be affirmed for another. Deconstruction is a tool for students to add a layer of critique when judging whether to accept or reject old and/or new knowledge. Deconstruction does not necessarily determine what is right and wrong.

SUMMARY

Our prior knowledge is a blessing and curse. We need it to make decisions all the time, but it hinders learning new, potentially better, knowledge. Students are challenged to consider that all of their knowledge is simply perspective, rather than seeing knowledge in terms of right and wrong; that is, they should entertain the idea that what is considered truth is just subjective truth or truth from a perspective. If perspective is changed, then knowledge, or what is considered truth, also changes. In order to create the perception of fact or truth, people engage in political activity to persuade others to agree.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Try to state why you make the decisions you make. What personal belief or value is reflected in the decision and choices you make? For example, why did you wear that shirt today? Why did you take the route you took to school or class? Why did you buy from that coffee store and not this one?
2. Try to ask several friends, one at a time, separately, to describe someone you all know. Note how the descriptions are different from person to person. What might this say about the values of the person giving the description?
3. How do you feel about the possibility that everything you believe is absolutely true might only be subjectively true?

4. Have you ever considered that you believe the things you believe because it is convenient or somehow to your advantage to believe that way and NOT because it is "true?"