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ECLECTIC THINKING AND ECLECTICISM:
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES*

ABSTRACT

A particular reader can classify the findings of educationists as:

1. acceptable;
2. acceptable with certain reservations; or
3. unacceptable.

A closer look at the findings that have been classified as “acceptable” shows that they derive from a variety of theoretical backgrounds. If the reader is the victim of a method-monistic training he or she will feel uneasy whenever a result is selected from outside his or her monistic field.

The educationist who is confronted with epistemological guilt feelings can either suppress these feelings and continue selecting acceptable pronouncements or enter an epistemological paralysis that promotes a lack of productivity.

However, there is a third possibility, which is to look critically at the possibilities offered by eclectic thinking without falling into eclecticism.

This means that the reader must be attuned to:

1. searching for commonalities;
2. sharing problem-oriented meanings;
3. questioning theoretical purism;
4. noting strong points.

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1. ORIENTATION

The scientist (researcher) usually is attuned to receive and assimilate criticism of his work if the criticism is well intended, positive, constructive and free of false reasoning. One accusation that a scientist finds difficult to swallow and against which he strongly and sometimes less strongly revolts is the accusation, motivated or unmotivated, that he has acted **unscientifically**. There is a particular form of being unscientific to which each scientist is allergic and this is any allegation that he is uncritical (without criteria), subjectivistic (“because I hold it and it fits in with what I think and believe”), doesn’t verify (“it seems correct”) and unoriginally borrows from the written reports of other scientists. No scientist wants to be guilty of **eclecticism**.

On the other hand, each scientist is on guard against being accused of tunnel vision, that he approaches reality with epistemological blinders. Tunnel vision, blind thinking, easily can occur when there is a falling into a method-monism, i.e., when a specific method is declared to be the only method. This often is done with pronouncements such as “in my **soul** I am a through and through

phenomenologist who has no **fundamental** criticism whatever of the phenomenological method. No scientist wants to be guilty of rigidity and dogmatism.

The scientist who wants to avoid a laissez-faire eclecticism, on the one hand, and a paralyzing rigidity, on the other, must be keenly on guard against not become imprisoned in the “golden mean”. It is incorrect to assume that scientific activities are valid merely because they are the middle way between two extreme possibilities. The safety of the middle way can provide a false sense of security that can consume the scientist.

Refusal to search for an authentic third possibility can lead to stagnation in thinking. The third possibility that is free of eclecticism and rigidity is the way of **eclectic thinking** which is explicated in the following pages.

2. ECLECTIC THINKING: IMPLICATIONS OF SOME DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

2.1 Reader’s Digest. Universal Dictionary

2.1.1 Etymologies

* eclectic: choose from what appears to be the best from a variety of sources, systems or styles. Greek *eklektikos* from *eklektos*, selected, from *eklegein*, to except
ek = out + *legein* = select

An eclectic is someone who uses the eclectic method

* eclecticism is a system or method

The eclectic practices *legien* (Landman, 1974: 1-15). A choice is made: *legein* is practiced. **Legien** is found again in **legen** (lay) that refers to the following activities:

- *voorle* (lay before, present) = someone presents something, discusses something with someone.
- *daarle* (lay out, explicate) = something is explained (elucidated, clarified).
- *oorle* (turn over, consider) = something is deliberated.

2.1.2 *Voorle* (lay before, present)

Lay before means to bring into unconcealedness. It is a disclosing as letting the essentials, the real essentiality appear. **Legen** (lay) further refers to the fact that something is compiled and this requires:

- noticing “somethings” that must be compiled, thus must be brought by each other. These “somethings” are real essences.
- identifying the place where they are made and brought by each other. It is this place (these places) where the “somethings” noticed are. Real essences can be compiled there where they are and this is in the best possible **text**.
- separating essentials from non-essentials. The essentials belong with each other as fundamentals and the non-essentials belong with each other as ignorable because they do not make a substantial contribution to understanding. It is the essentials that are chosen to be compiled (and preserved).

2.1.3 *Daarle* and *oorle* (explicate and consider)

Explicating and **considering** refer to elucidating (interpreting) what must be discussed and talked through. Discussing refers to dialoguing (conversing) and talking through refers to reflecting radically (essence-disclosing reflection). In summary, these refer to an interpretive conversation. As soon as the real essences are extracted from the best possible text(s), compiled and elucidated, they are discussed. The sharpest form of elucidation is defining because then precise describing, formulating, arguing, explaining and interpreting in which emphasis especially is placed on **meanings** become possible (Landman & Le Roux, 1992: 396-403).

2.1.4 The interpretive (hermeneutic) conversation

Communication is the activity of shared understanding (Gadamer). It is the intersubjective sharing of meanings. Hermeneutics emphasizes understanding through communicating (Desilet, 1991: 152-157). A group of persons in conversing (with each other or with a text) are in a position to disclose richer meanings than what an individual is able to do alone. In a conversation meanings are set free and this is what is meant by interpretation (McBrien, 1990: 424-425). A hermeneutic dialogue has to do with the interplay of interpretations, but with the awareness that final interpretations are

not possible, and since the subjectivity of the interpreter is central there cannot be only one correct interpretation. The group (interpretation-conversation) must counterbalance alternative interpretations against each other. There must be an interplay of meaning-bound interpretations (Smith & Blasé, 1991: 6-21).

2.2 Philosophical Dictionary. W. Brugger (Ed.)

2.2.1 Interpretation

Eclecticism is a spiritual attitude of the thinker who directs his thought to studying the outcome of the thinking of others with the aim of selecting (picking out) what for him is true and valuable. If the selection occurs without verification there is mention of syncretism (mixing concepts).

2.2.2 An essence-disclosing attunement

If what is true and valuable is equated with essentials, the eclectic must reflect on them with an essence-disclosing attunement. The essences must be extracted from a particular text, separated from the non-essentials and then defined. The phenomenologist will exercise particular phenomenological actions as steps of verification. The defined essences that survive these verifications will be retained for scientific conversation or argument. Anyone who uses the following verification steps, verifies them in light of a particular criterion, namely being truthful to reality:

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACTIONS

Action	Brief description
1. Thinking away	If some matter or other regarding a proposed (thought out) situation can be thought away and that situation does not change, then such a matter indeed can be ignored.
2. Acting away	If some matter or other regarding an actual situation can be acted away and

	that situation does not change, then such a matter indeed can be ignored.
3. Separating	When it is determined which matters are important and which are not, and the unimportant matters are eliminated, then the important matters can glitter (shine, glow) more clearly (will be clearer in their being).
4. Contradicting	For every matter its opposite is stated as a possibility and its negativity (or the positive) is indicated so that the positive (or the negativity) of the relative matter can glitter (shine, glow) more clearly.
5. Hermeneutic questioning	The following question is asked of every meaningful matter that is relevant: What purpose is served by its realization? or: What is the significance of its realization?
6. Awakening life	A matter permissible by a philosophy of life (life-view) is an enlivened (animated) matter (it has been awakened to life).
7. Becoming practice	A matter that can be part of a specific practice (especially in order to improve that practice) is a significant matter.
8. Determining categorial status	A matter that can be applied as an illuminative way of thinking, i.e., in terms of which reflection can be meaningful, is a significant matter.

2.3 Dictionary of Psychology. H. C. Warren (ed.), 1934.

2.3.1 Interpretation

Eclecticism is the selection of essential features from incompatible theories or worldviews, explicating them and integrating them into a comprehensive system. If this selection occurs with “being truthful to reality” as a criterion, the demand of integrative possibility also can be met where this involves the integration of essential features (essences) into a system that already is accepted as being true to reality. The following is an illuminative possibility:

2.3.2 The definition-integration method (La Roux, 1984: Chapter 3)

A particular way of implementing the integration of definitions is the definition-integration method. The fact that the definitions true to reality can be integrated indicate that a first defined essence has something particular to do with the second defined essence, namely that together they more clearly describe reality.

Such a method can be justified in light of the following pronouncements:

1. There are various approaches to the real facts of being human and these facts manifest themselves in various forms. Such approaches and ways of manifestation are called perspectives and indeed a perspective is a particular standpoint from which one tries to understand facts. Perspectives with justified claims to results true to reality as defined ought to be able to be integrated with a resulting increasing flow of knowledge.
2. There is not a single method (way of disclosing) that on its own can adequately bring to light and verify essential characteristics. Various methods can be used as complementary possibilities. Each complement can make a contribution and if each contribution is true to reality its integration is possible and the definition-integration method can be applied.

When various scientists are involved in the same reality (e.g., the reality of educating) and their approaches to it are true to reality, congruencies in findings ought to be able to be integrated into the outcomes with the expansion of knowledge as a gain.

These scientist fulfill the demands of being true to reality and integratability (possibility of integration).

2.4 Philosophical Dictionary. H. Schmidt (ed.), 1969.

Eclecticians (from the Greek *eklegein*, select out) are not those who try on the basis of unity-creating principles to design a philosophical system and they also are not focused on a few philosophies. What “appears right” is taken from various systems (schools of thought) and is reconstituted to form a unity. Eclecticisms often are described as lacking originality and creativity.

3. ECLECTIC THINKING AS A SEARCH FOR COMMONALITIES

3.1 Dissatisfaction with rigidity

Eclectic thinking is characterized by a dissatisfaction with rigidity that leads to a firm imprisonment in the shackles of coercive rules, laws and prescriptions so that thinkers are going to purposefully and critically cross borders in search of commonalities (Prochaska) in order to conquer a narrow dogmatism (Mahalik, 1980: 666).

3.2 Commonalities

Some examples of commonalities (Landman & Swart, 1992: 403-405):

3.2.1 Educative reality

The common of all Education (Pedagogics), in the first place, must be the aspect of reality that is going to be placed in the scientific spotlight and this is the educative phenomenon that is observable in the form of the educative event in educative situations. Thinkers

who involve themselves with other phenomena do not qualify to be called educationists (pedagogicians).

In this connection, the eclectic thinker will not cause trouble regarding the following two possibilities:

- i. the assumption (presupposition, paradigm) that the perceivable being-there of the reality of educating (educative phenomenon as educative event) is the educational calling to reflective and also deliberative thinking about it; and
- ii. the conviction (paradigms) that the educative reality is a particular God created reality that the educationist himself is called to study.

3.2.2 Methodologies

Scientific activities regarding the educative reality must be methodical, i.e., occur with methodological accountability.

The educative reality is a particularly involved reality. Its complexity compels the educationist not to fall into a methodism, but to apply a variety of methods that are **true to reality**. Then educationists in pedagogic conversation(s) can compare with each other the results from applying the various methods and reflect on their possible integration, i.e., of the knowledge of the reality of educating that has been disclosed.

The common in education indeed can be threatened if

- (i) the existence of numerous perspectives (methodological grounds) on the complex educative reality are not recognized;
- (ii) the right to exist of methods other than the specific (chosen) method is denied; and
- (iii) suspicion and disdain of other methods occur subjectivistically (and sometimes emotionally).

3.2.3 Research methodologies: Stating the problem

The researcher (Masters, Doctoral student, faculty) selects articles with the help of key words in his theme (title of research project, paper, thesis, dissertation).

Below are stating the problem studies undertaken as follows:

1. define the stated problem in each article (as the first commonality);
2. reduce each stated problem to clear questions where each question concerns only one matter;
3. place similar questions with each other (second commonality);
4. select those questions that directly have to do with the research themes (third commonality);
5. state questions that:
 - 5.1 are not asked and that must be (are going to be) answered by the unique research. The originality of the research resides in this, and it is a meaningful beginning to a unique contribution; and
 - 5.2 weak (inadequate) questions are stated and improved (sharpened) so that adequate answers can be sought.

3.2.4 Research methodologies: Empirical research

1. Identify the section and each article that describes the application of the research procedures;
2. put the descriptions of the same procedures by each other, e.g., questionnaires (first commonality);
3. put agreements in the descriptions by each other and pay attention to additional information that is provided (second commonality);
4. search the descriptions for reasons for using the research procedures that are selected for the unique research (third commonality).

Eclectic thinking in the form of identifying commonalities has scientific and research significance.

4. ECLECTIC THINKING AS SHARING PROBLEM-ORIENTED MEANINGS

4.1 Increasing openness and regard

Today regarding the human sciences there is mention of an increased methodological openness and regard for alternative perspectives and paradigms. There is mention of an increased intermingling of epistemologies and procedures, sometimes with a re-attunement of the **phenomenology** of being human (Borgen, 1989: 90-97).

An eclectic strategy might be a logical step in a more flexible handling of various perspectives (i.e., paradigms).

4.2 Designing meanings

Reality manifests itself phenomenologically through an interaction with the individual thinker. This leads to the construction (design) of **meanings** as a creative process (event) (Duncan, Parks & Rust, 1990: 165-166).

Highlighting the meaningful has to do with a flexible, eclectic strategy to order (structure) one's own perceptions and experiences. A structure arises from the interaction among thinkers (Mahalik, 1990: 167). This means that eclectic thinking is done to form a synthesis among one's own perceptions and experiences and the integratable findings of other (co-) thinkers. This integration cannot occur on the basis of "I adhere to that finding because it corresponds to mine" but a specific finding is selected because it:

- i. allows my own perception and experience to appear more clearly and their being true to reality is broadened; and
- ii. it is scientifically evaluated just as one's own experience is (Landman, 1989: 308-310).

4.3 Sharing meanings

It seems that it can be scientifically meaningful to first structure one's own experience before hermeneutic conversations are carried

out with other conversational partners (via conversation and literature studies). In this way shared findings (“shared constructs”) arise (Mahalik, 1990: 167-168) on the basis of meanings that are shared. It can be particularly fruitful when meanings are shared in light of a problem for which the best possible solution is sought. The following then is a particular eclectic action: interpersonal interaction and meaning construction (union of meaning) that is organized around a problem (Mahalik, 1990: 168). Among other things, this requires problem directed text study.

5. ECLECTIC THINKING AS QUESTIONING THE SENSE OF THEORETICAL PURISM

5.1 Method choice and aims

Eclectic thinking is the natural result of the fact that no one model or theory is the most effective for problem solving (Nance & Myers, 1991: 119-130). Each theory/method (approach) only is a part-perspective on the human world (Simon, 1991: 112-118).

Among other things, this means that a scientist’s choice of method is determined by his aims:

Method	Aim
Phenomenological method	Disclose essential characteristics
Hermeneutic method	Interpret essential characteristics and meaningful relationships
Dialectic (triadic) method	Disclose meaningful relationships (always among possibilities)
Contradictory method	Verify essence status by stating contradictions as possibilities
Statistical methods	Numerically explore quantifiable essential characteristics and meaningful relationships

Literature study	Describe the context of a problem by evaluating existing problem statements, hypothesis formulations and problem solutions
Experimental method	Determine the dependence and independence of essential characteristics and meaningful relationships
Autobiographical method	Determine and evaluate personal lived experiences and experiences
Definition-integration method	Integrate definitions with the aim of a sharper description of reality
Definition-in-question form method	With the aim of more sharply formulating and refining the statement of the problem
Argument-analysis method	Determine the logic of an argument and freedom from false reasoning
Problem-historical method	Determine the cultural-historical context in which the original authors had found themselves. Also: historical development of problem solutions
Transcendental critique method	Specific questioning of preconditions and fundamental motives. Determine the philosophy of life permissibility of scientific (including research) activities.

5.2 Methodological purism

Thinkers who cling to one approach (theory, methodology) often view other possibilities as “invalid” rather than only as different views. Too much faith in one approach can lead to a prejudiced avoidance of other possibilities. Energy that can be applied to the search for new and better alternatives might be squandered in the justification of one’s own standpoint. The question is: what approaches will be superior in the particular situation or for attaining specific aims?

The only time that a puristic approach will work is when it has to do with the problem area or stated aim in which the specific approach can offer the most adequate problem solution(s). The approach that will be chosen will vary as the problem area (the problematic and the aim) varies. More than one theoretical perspective/ methodology can be applied in order to understand various stated problems as aims. Theoretical (i.e., methodological) purism cannot be more important than a solution to the problem being sought (Nance & Myers, 1991: 122-127).

5.3 Epistemological myths

The role of eclectic thinking is the systematic organization and coordination of different theoretical approaches (orientations) without giving preference to one particular possibility and without stringing together the various theories (methodologies, approaches) in order to form a unity. The task is to provide guidelines on the basis of which a choice can be made regarding which approach is most appropriate for a given situation (problematic). In this way the thinker’s potential effectiveness is sharpened (Nance & Myers, 1991: 127-128).

Myths:

The myth of universal superiority: There is no irrefutable evidence that one approach is superior with respect to the global problematic.

The myth of equality: The fact that one approach is not superior to another possibility does not mean that all approaches are equal.

The one theory (methodology) is better than another in certain cases but decidedly is weaker in other cases (problem areas) (Nance & Myers, 1991: 128).

5.4 Separating theory and method

It is possible that thinkers can use techniques (procedures) without subscribing to the theories (philosophies, paradigms) underlying them (Lazarus, A.A., Multi-modal Therapy). This is possible because techniques and methods can be effective for reasons other than those given by their creators for their success. Methods and techniques are used with regard to persons and not theories (Lazarus). Studying the results of applying various methods really is a study of their effectiveness (Mahalik, 1990: 663).

6. ECLECTIC THINKING AS NOTING STRONG POINTS

A discontent of many thinkers with the limitations that are placed on them by an inflexible paradigmatic attunement “**fueled the eclectic fires**” and led many thinkers to investigate the contributions of other directions of thinking. The investigation might not be random but must occur on the basis of a “consistent rationale” (Mahalik, 1990: 655). This means that particular criteria must be met for the choice of findings that are going to be made from the various approaches and for their integration.

Eclectic thinking requires an attunement that encourages thinkers to concentrate on the strong points of different approaches (Mahalik, 1990: 658). This point of departure assumes that there will be a way (method, criterion) in terms of which strong points can be identified. Contributions to an authentic understanding of the pedagogic can be such a criterion. Noticing strong points and verbalizing them can be a meaningful (eclectic) contribution.

The scientist (researcher) who is attuned to noticing the strong points of different approaches and then chooses to apply the identified strong points in his own scientific practice and research can study writings (books, articles, reviews) that deal with methodological criticism. Most publications that discuss various methodologies point out strong and weak points.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Eclectic thinking can be scientifically acceptable providing eclecticism has been overcome because the following criteria have been met:

- * The criterion of concentrating on real essentiality.
- * The criterion of separating essentials and non-essentials.
- * The criterion of intersubjective verification in interpretive conversations.
- * The criterion of true to reality definition-integration.
- * The criterion of identifying and focusing on commonalities.
- * The criterion of sharing problem oriented meanings.
- * The criterion of questioning the sense of theoretical purism.
- * The criterion of eliminating epistemological myths.
- * The criterion of noting strong points.
- * The criterion of being dissatisfied with rigidity.

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