

Can We Measure Trust in Knowledge Acquisition? A standpoint derived from Anscombe's notion of 'Teaching by Testimony'

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Abstract

In recent years, a demand to measure educational outcomes has emerged. In Japan and other countries, accountability is on the reform agenda of educational systems, both at the national and local levels. Educational outcomes must be based on evidence so as to make them visible to stakeholders. The concerns exists, however, that the demand for the measurability of educational outcomes undermines a necessary condition of education, trust between teachers and students, which is not easily gauged.

This presentation examines the significance of trust as a ground for teaching knowledge by elucidating Anscombe's notion of 'teaching by testimony'. In her view, the trust of students in their teachers offers a firm ground for teaching knowledge. This trust allows students to accept the 'testimony' of their teachers and thus to instil knowledge. Therefore, trust is a necessary condition of teaching.

This presentation attains its purpose by the following steps. First, it clarifies the background of Anscombe's perspective. Anscombe develops her own views, based on Wittgenstein's philosophy that indicates the initiation of pupils into their communities. Second, it relies on Anscombe's papers to detail her discussion of 'teaching by testimony' and refers to current discussions of the epistemology of testimony. Finally, it observes that not until knowledge acquisition fails can trust be shown. This position provides a standpoint for grasping the current situation of education and suggests that those who carry out measurements be prudent.

Keywords: Accountability, Teaching by Testimony, G. E. M. Anscombe, Language-game, Trust

Introduction

In recent years, a demand to measure educational outcomes has emerged. In Japan and other countries, accountability is on the reform agenda of educational systems, both at the national and local levels. Educational outcomes must be based on evidence so as to make them visible to stakeholders. The concerns exists, however, that the demand for the measurability of educational outcomes undermines a necessary condition of education, trust between teachers and students, which is not easily gauged.

This presentation examines the significance of trust as a ground for teaching knowledge by elucidating Anscombe's notion of 'teaching by testimony'. In her view, the trust of students in their teachers offers a firm ground for transmitting knowledge. This trust allows students to accept the 'testimony' of their teachers, who thus instil knowledge. Therefore, trust is a necessary condition of teaching.

Measuring Education: The Demand for Accountability and the Crisis of Trust

As Wagner states, the term accountability refers to 'a statement of explanation of one's conduct' or 'a statement or exposition of reasons, causes, grounds, or motives' (Wagner, 1989, p. 7). Accountability involves a set of procedures, such as the report of plans, processes, and outcomes, that seek to make daily teaching visible to interested parties. Therefore, it requires that teachers be cautious in establishing their purposes, instructional

materials, practices, classroom environments, and so on. Educational outcomes must be based on evidence so as to make them visible to stakeholders (Ericson & Ellett, 1987).

Studies have criticised accountability. Davis and White maintain that monitoring organizations cannot audit all the aspects of schools that allow learners to develop their personal qualities and deeper levels of understanding (Davis & White, 2001, pp. 667-81). Biesta argues that a technical-managerial approach has emerged in recent years, one that focuses on the possibility of auditing. While this approach has strengthened the relationship of teachers to government, it has undermined their association with stakeholders. Davis and White and Biesta insist that teachers, who know their schools in detail, should play a role in the auditing and accounting of their activities through peer reviews.

Accountability in Japan has been influenced by the policies of the United States and the United Kingdom, where it was institutionalized earlier than Japan (Kurosaki, 1996; Kodama, 2009). Kodama (2009) criticises the penetration of the concept of performativity, which he relates to accountability, in the reform of education. In contrast to critical studies of the concept, researchers have focused on the way to achieve accountability in education (Miura, 2012; Matsui, 2010).

Accountability is related to trust. O'Neill points out that the background of accountability is a lack of trust in professionals, including teachers (O'Neill, 2002). Thus, measurement procedures are required for securing trust. Katz explains that the demand for accountability in education arose as a means to restore trust in schools. The demand, however, has not necessarily attained its objectives (Katz, 2010).

Studies criticising accountability argue that the concept misses the function of measurement and does not grasp the basis of education. On the one hand, accountability measures the outcomes of education and seeks to secure trust; on the other hand, it passes over the premises of education. Therefore, it risks undermining the basis of education.

What is the basis of teaching that accountability has overlooked? Can it be measured in terms of accountability? Does measuring it secure the quality of education? To answer these questions, this paper turns to Anscombe's discussion of teaching by testimony. The discussion understands education in terms of knowledge acquisition.

The background of Teaching by Testimony: A contrast with Wittgenstein's later philosophy

The Weltbild as a basis of knowledge acquisition

In terms of knowledge acquisition, language is presented in two ways. First, Backhurst states that 'children gain knowledge in the course of learning their first language' (Backhurst, 2013, p. 187). In this regard, this knowledge is 'not just knowledge of the language, but knowledge of how things are. In acquiring language, a child inherits a conception of the world' (ibid.). The conception is not taught by someone, but is acquired by children and is 'the background to [their] thinking and reasoning' (ibid.).

Knowledge acquisition has been argued in the philosophy of education. Studies sometimes cite Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Maruyama argues for '*Weltbild*' or the picture of the world as the fixed foundation for the language game. The concept stems from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. The foundation, which is fixed by the language game, does not doubt propositions themselves:

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (Wittgenstein, 1969, §94).

The '*Weltbild*' is inherited as the basis of communication in a language-game. Thus, *Weltbild* has to be formed in children as the presupposition of knowledge acquisition (Maruyama, 1993). Wittgenstein writes:

The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it. (Wittgenstein, 1969, §144)

Children acquire *Weltbild* as the ‘non-cognitive foundation of knowledge acquisition’; it is not achieved by teaching, but through daily life (Burbules, 2008). Therefore, if teachers intervene in the process, the style of teaching is tacit teaching. Though school life, children acquire a foundation with teachers.

Teaching by testimony

Backhurst refers to another way of acquiring knowledge, through language. He says, ‘a person can acquire knowledge by understanding and accepting someone else’s utterance—not just knowledge that “such-and-such” has been said or written, but knowledge is that such-and-such is the case’ (ibid.). For instance, when a person who knows ‘it is raining in Melbourne’, tells someone of this fact, the person who hears the statement knows that ‘it is raining in Melbourne’. Backhurst calls this kind of knowledge ‘knowledge by testimony’ (ibid.).

In the late 1970s, Anscombe argued for the bond between testimony and knowledge acquisition in ‘What Is It to Believe Someone?’ (Anscombe, 1979 [2008]). This article appeared ten years after *On Certainty* was published by Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein depicts many teaching and learning situations, to which Anscombe refers in her article. The discussion of such contexts is rare in Anscombe’s works other than in ‘What Is It to Believe Someone?’, which is clearly influenced by *On Certainty*. It is thus reasonable to analyse this article after first examining *On Certainty*, given that both works treat the same topic from precise standpoints.

For example, Anscombe depicts the process of knowledge acquisition as teaching and learning. She presents mechanisms for the acceptance of teacher testimony by learners and for their acquisition of knowledge. Wittgenstein’s later philosophic reflections on knowledge acquisition, which see education as supporting the initiation of learners in a community where the language game is shared, functioned as a foundation for Anscombe’s reflections. Thus, Anscombe’s view differs from that of Backhurst. We should see Anscombe’s discussion of teaching by testimony as an extension of Wittgenstein’s view of the ‘a non-cognitive foundation of knowledge acquisition’.

Anscombe’s View of ‘Teaching by Testimony’

‘Teaching by Testimony’ and knowledge acquisition

As Anscombe points out, teaching as testimony and knowledge acquisition is based on a foundation that we cannot doubt. If the foundation is doubted, our everyday communication becomes impossible. Anscombe sets the condition for knowledge acquisition. When a learner acquires knowledge through the testimony by a teacher, she has to believe the testimony of the teacher. On the contrary, when the learner sees that a testimony as false, the testimony is not acquired as knowledge. Whether a testimony is true or false is given by the testimony itself. Thus, without confidence in testimony the communication of ‘teaching by testimony’ and knowledge acquisition would collapse (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], pp. 3-4). ‘Think how much reliance on believing what you have been told lies behind being able to say that. It is irrelevant at this level to raise a question about possible forgery; without what we know by testimony, there is no such thing as what a forgery is *pretending* to be’ (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], pp. 3-4). Thus, Anscombe warns against taking a stance of epistemological scepticism.¹

Here is another example. A person reports that she ate an apple for breakfast: ‘I ate an apple this morning’. It is not important here whether the utterance is based on information such as ‘It was surely an apple’. She would simply know what apples are and would be able to recognise apples as apples. Therefore, ‘[s]he was “taught the concept” in learning to use language in everyday life’ (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 6).

An inquiry into the condition of teaching by testimony

Teaching by testimony presupposes a non-cognitive foundation that establishes trust in teaching. As a condition, we can suppose the utterer's authority for the information. Certainly, in the example in which a person eats an apple, she is 'a total original authority' (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 6). Teaching by testimony depends on the authority of the speaker. However, it casts doubt on this view. Anscombe refers to another example, the case of the information of drawings: Who is the original creator of a drawing? What is drawn in a drawing? According to Anscombe, the information of the drawing can be taught by testimony. 'He [a viewer] almost certainly knows it from having been told, even if he's seen the drawing' (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 6).

A speaker is, however, not an original authority (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 6). Thus, whether a speaker is or is not an authority for the information makes no difference to the conditions of teaching by testimony. 'Much information is acquired from teachers who are not original authorities, and their pupils who acquire it believe *them*' (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 6). To believe a speaker is a condition of 'teaching by testimony'. However, the next steps should clarify what the concept is and what it means.

Belief: A Condition of 'Teaching by Testimony'

Mary Geach, Anscombe's daughter and the co-editor of an anthology of her writings, indicates that her mother was a pious Catholic (Geach, 2008) and that her discussion of teaching-learning is partly derived from the teaching of the Church and on faith in God. However, Geach states the implications of Anscombe's paper are not limited to religious contexts. Indeed, accepting the testimony of a teacher and the acquisition of knowledge are part of everyday life at school.

Anscombe explains that belief by faith has a rather long history (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 1).² What is her understanding of faith? Anscombe speaks about receiving a letter as an example. Smith receives a letter from his friend, Jones. Smith reads in the letter that Jones' wife has had a new baby. In accordance with teaching by testimony, when Smith learns that Jones' wife has had a new baby, Smith believes Jones.

To clarify the mechanism of believing, Anscombe analyses the word of 'to believe', since '[t]hat sense of 'faith' still occurs in our language' (Anscombe, 1975 [2008], p.13). For instance, we can suppose conversations as the following: "Do you believe that Jones had a new baby?" "I was told that he had a new baby, and I accept it on faith".

There seems to be three conditions for faith. (1) Smith's friend, Jones exists. (2) Jones's letter was indeed written by Jones himself. (3) The letter states the prior conditions (1) and (2). 'Those three convictions or assumptions are, logically, presuppositions that *you* have' (ibid.). In other words, to believe does not depend on examining presuppositions one by one, but receiving testimony.

What is it to believe someone who gives you information? For instance, a paper refers to a Christmas cracker with a message in it. Blue crackers have true messages in it; red crackers have false messages. Smith knows this, but Jones does not. Jones then comes to Smith with blue crackers. Jones opens the cracker and finds a piece of paper with a message; he then reads the message to Smith. Smith accepts the message. Does Smith believe Jones? No. Smith knows the facts of the message and accepts them, since blue crackers have true messages. Smith does not necessarily believe Jones. This example involves two conditions. First, to believe someone relates to background factual knowledge. Second, to believe someone is to believe *her*. If Smith did not know the facts about the message, he would not believe what Jones says. The facts are likely to affect Smith's recognition. He does not believe Jones but rather the information in the blue cracker.

Anscombe moves to the next step and examines the two conditions through the example of a false penfriend. Suppose that Smith has a penfriend, but he has been tricked and the friend does not exist. Does Smith believe in his penfriend? It seems silly to say that he does not believe in his penfriend, since he exchanges letters with this supposed correspondent.

In this example, the conditions for believing an utterance are placed in doubt. However, it is not appropriate to restrict these conditions to that of believing information. The former three conditions are also placed in doubt:

(1) and (2) are refused by Jones. How about condition (3)? Anscombe indicates that condition (3) regresses infinitely, since the information that secures the sender requires further information.

After all, what is it to believe someone? The answer Anscombe gives is so simple that some readers are astonished. She says, 'Now the critical differentiating point is this. In all those other cases it is clear what the one who "believes X" means by "X speaking", even when we judge that X doesn't exist' (Anscombe 1975 [2008], p.18).

To believe X is to accept that X speaks such and such. From the above discussion, faith cannot be observed as a substantial concept. We find faith among people in situations where the language game smoothly functions. This idea does not slight faith; instead, it sheds light on the non-observable side of faith.

Conclusion: Trust Cannot Be Shown until Knowledge Acquisition Fails

To investigate the process of knowledge acquisition that is overlooked in the age of accountability, this paper cites Anscombe's discussion on teaching by testimony. Though teaching by testimony requires a non-cognitive foundation, it succeeds when the testimony is simply accepted by a learner, an acceptance that involves the acceptance of his or her utterances, without additional background information to prove his or her authority. In this way, suspending doubt enables teaching-learning as a communication between a teacher and learners. If the lack of trust behind the demand of accountability affects learners, it is likely to disturb teaching and learning, since learners must believe in their teachers.

At this point, we may ask, Should we measure trust itself? Should we develop the conditions indicated by the measurement? Unfortunately, the trial may end in failure. To develop the conditions, it may be possible to list the background facts. However, it is not essential to believe these facts. Again, should a teacher offer additional information that proves that she deserves to be believed? As Anscombe points out, because of the infinite regress of additional information, such information is not essential for belief. Trust is only found when the language game smoothly functions. If so, not until knowledge acquisition fails can trust be shown. Trust is shown by its absence. Therefore, it is difficult to measure trust as a substantial concept.

Of course, if stakeholders are dissatisfied with lazy teachers, the concept of accountability would be needed. It may be reasonable to apply the concept in some cases. However, it is also true that the concept may undermine the necessary elements of a learner's knowledge acquisition. The position of this paper suggests that stakeholders who carry out measurements be prudent.

¹ This point concurs with Wittgenstein's refutation of G. E. Moore's scepticism.

² 'If words always kept their old values, I might have called my subject "faith". That short term has in the past been used in just this meaning, of believing someone' (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 1). Anscombe says that the concept of faith can be divided into secular faith and religious faith. She places importance on the former (Anscombe, 1979 [2008], p. 2).

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