

## Book review: Personal epistemology and teacher education

Item Type	Journal article
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Citation	Smith, M. (2013). Personal epistemology and teacher education. <i>Educational Research and Evaluation</i> , 19 (1), pp. 92–94. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2012.731185">https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2012.731185</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2012.731185">10.1080/13803611.2012.731185</a>
Publisher	Oxford University Press
Journal	<i>Educational Research and Evaluation</i>
Download date	2026-06-16 13:18:35
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Link to Item	<a href="https://wlv.openrepository.com/handle/2436/626390">https://wlv.openrepository.com/handle/2436/626390</a>

## BOOK REVIEW

**Personal Epistemology and Teacher Education**, edited by Jo Brownlee, Gregory Schraw and Donna Berthelsen, London, Routledge, 2011, 310 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-88356-6, £68 (Kindle version) ASIN B00872E84W.

This important collection of recent articles draws together a wide range of research from as diverse a cross-section of the world as the Netherlands, Cyprus, Australia, the United States, Canada, Norway, and Taiwan to provide an international perspective on teachers' personal epistemology. It is the editors' contention that there has been a lack of focus on how teachers' personal epistemologies relate to their teaching, and even less about teacher education. The articles have been chosen in order to bring together some of the key current arguments about how personal epistemology can be applied to the context of teacher education, foregrounding the links between the way a teacher believes they should teach, the way they actually teach in practice, and – crucially – the impact of these espoused and applied epistemologies on learning. Although there is a clear bias in favour of those epistemologies that advocate social constructivist approaches to both teaching and learning, the book cogently puts together a powerful argument for both its central themes and the need for further study in this area.

The book addresses four key themes: the nature of teachers' personal epistemologies; the links between these and teaching; between epistemology and learning; and the challenges and realities of changing personal epistemologies through teacher education programmes. There are two sections to the book, the first dealing with preservice teachers and the implications for teacher education and educators, and the second discussing inservice teaching. Topics include cultural differences in teacher epistemology and the impact on students' learning, inclusion, epistemology in a social context, student autonomy and connections to future practice.

Through the sixteen chosen articles, Gregory Schraw, Jo Brownlee and Donna Berthelsen attempt to allow the reader to ponder four questions they pose in their useful opening chapter, questions that address how personal epistemologies can be conceptually modelled, issues of domain-generalty, how personal epistemology can be related to teaching (and, by inference, learning); and how personal epistemologies can and do change. The chapters all deal to some degree with the differences between constructivist, learner-centric approaches to teaching and transmissionist, didactic pedagogical strategies, with the former being favoured by all the authors. With an understanding that constructivism is the preferred theoretical basis, then, the reader can both enjoy some fine academic research, based mainly in situated, authentic contexts, and concentrate on the four questions posed by the editors.

Schraw, Brownlee and Berthelsen give their own answers to these questions in an excellent summarising final chapter. These answers are useful as they are credibly based on the research they have analysed and lay some constructive and valuable groundwork for further study in four key areas, notably in creating an instructional model that

explains the development and calibration of beliefs and practices and, especially, the role of teacher educators in creating, moulding and developing helpful and theoretically-grounded philosophies of teaching and learning in preservice teacher trainees: working towards a set of guidelines to promote teacher epistemological change.

A key problem with the issue of measuring teachers' beliefs is discriminating and differentiating between genuine beliefs and stated beliefs. Teachers – especially at the preservice stage – may erroneously assert that they hold certain beliefs because they think the researchers may want to hear these, or because they are in current vogue, or even espouse pedagogies that they believe they are practising when they are not. Espoused beliefs should not therefore be considered as predictors of genuine classroom practice. They are not necessarily deliberately disingenuous, but may be considered as representative of intentions rather than actions. These intentions may not suit a reality which bears little or no resemblance to the envisioned situation and experiences for which the original intentions were created. The articles in this book do not deal in any depth with the measurement of personal epistemology; rather they discuss how it may be conceptually mapped, how it can be calibrated against practice and how it can be prompted to change. This failure to bridge the gap between epistemic espousal and pedagogical practice is a weakness in this otherwise excellent volume, but the editors rightly have it as one of the four areas in which they would like to see further study.

The editors' conclusions are that constructivist epistemologies lead to better teaching and that the lack of calibration between beliefs and practice is a fundamental cause of challenge and difficulty for teachers. However, a solution offered by the majority of the articles' authors is that both preservice and inservice teachers engage with reflective practices in order to better understand their developing epistemological understandings and their related practical pedagogies. I heartily concur.

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