

The stages of thinking described by Baxter Magolda (1992)

Stage of Absolute Knowing

In this stage knowledge is seen as absolute – right or wrong. It is the least developed stage in Baxter Magolda's scheme. Learners believe that absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. When there is uncertainty it is because there is not access to the 'right' answers. Such learners may recognise that opinions can differ between experts but this is differences of detail, opinion or misinformation. Formal learning is seen as a matter of absorption of the knowledge of the experts (eg teachers). Learning methods are based on absorbing and remembering. Most new undergraduates think in this way

Transitional stage

There is partial certainty and partial uncertainty. Learners start to have some doubts about certainty and consider that authorities may differ in view because there is uncertainty – but maybe it is only because the research has not yet been done. Learners see themselves as needing to understand rather than just acquire knowledge so that they may make judgements as to how best to apply it. Teachers are seen as facilitating the understanding and the application of knowledge.

Independent knowing

Learners understand that there is uncertainty but they consider that to manage this, everyone should develop her/his own beliefs or opinions. This seems to be an embryonic form of the more sophisticated stage of contextual knowing. Learners now expect to have an opinion and can begin to think through issues and to express themselves. They also regard their peers as having useful contributions to make to the development of their opinions. They will expect teachers to support the development of independent views, providing a context for exploration. However in independent thinking, the idea of making judgements of some perspectives as based on more or less appropriate evidence / reasoning within that context may be overlooked.

Contextual knowing

This stage is one in which knowledge is understood to be constructed, and the way in which knowledge is constructed is understood in relation to the consideration of the quality of knowledge claims. The context in which claims are made is taken into account. Opinions are now supported by evaluated evidence. The view of the teacher is of a partner in the development of appropriate knowledge or ways of thinking.