

MEDITATIONS ON THE IDEOLOGY OF INQUIRY IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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PART ONE: 1988 REFLECTIONS AND 2007 REVISITATION

I. Stakeholders: Inquiry for Whom?

Prevailing Belief (1988): Inquiry in Higher Education Should be Primarily Oriented to Scholarly Peers Rather than to Other Major Stakeholders (Administrators/Faculty, Public Policy-Makers, and the Educated Public

2007 Reflections: Public Policy-Makers are now an important stakeholder constituency. The public writ large—a significant omission, in my judgment—and to some extent administrators/faculty qua stakeholders remain on the periphery. Tellingly, our rhetoric of communication elevates/privileges scholarly discourse—objectivist, scientific (scientistic)—as against a “public idiom” (Jacoby) and an active voice that conveys “neighborliness” (Savage, 1988).

II. Aims of Inquiry

Prevailing Belief (1988): Inquiry in Higher Education Should be Aimed at Developing Specialized Knowledge at the Expense of Developing More Generalized Knowledge

2007 Reflections: Still lots of “junk” and “piffle” (Keller, 1985). Still not enough “interdisciplinary” research that is “problem-centered” inquiry rather than dominated by disciplinary lenses. Moreover, there is not enough “integrative inquiry” that knits together extant research, including studies based on secondary analysis and meta-analytic studies. Most of the literature in the public domain that represents more generalized knowledge—such as studies by Bowen and Bok and writings by such individuals as David Damrosch and James Duderstadt—has been done by individuals outside of the field of higher education. (Future-oriented scholarship—normative scholarship that imagines alternative futures for higher education—is quite rare save for a few individuals such as James Morrison.) In short, we continue to emphasize specialized (“disciplinary”) knowledge at the expense of problem-centered inquiry.

III. Inquiry Paradigm and Modes of Inquiry

Prevailing Belief (1988): Inquiry in Higher Education Should be Guided by the **Positivist Ideal** of the Natural and Physical Sciences and **Quantitative Modes of Inquiry**

2007 Reflections: What happened to Popper's (1959) observation that we should view inquiry as following a meandering course in which tentative "knowledge claims" are subject to ongoing criticism, refutation, and revision? Amen.

IV. Inquiry Perspectives

Prevailing Belief (1988): Inquiry Should be Guided by a **Functionalist Perspective** Rather than by **Non-Traditional Inquiry Perspectives** (Neo-Marxist, Feminist, Critical Race Theory, Etc.)

2007 Reflections: More open to alternative perspectives than two decades ago.

PART TWO: **TROUBLING SIGNS?: A PERSONAL VIEW**

1. Testing/Verification of Extant Knowledge/Ideas Predominates Over Imaginative and Spirited Engagement/Discovery/Advancement of New Ideas
2. Methodological Correctness/Methodological Determinism/Scientism is at the Epicenter of Inquiry (Cooptation of Grounded Theory, e.g., "Qualitative" as well as Quantitative and "Mixed Methods") rather than the Pursuit of Meaningful Problems—Including "Burning Questions" of Administrators/Faculty and External Stakeholders as well as those of Curiosity-Driven Academics/Faculty
3. Extant Frameworks/Theories/Literature and Data Availability Drive Inquiry Far More than Meaningful, Problem-Based/Interdisciplinary Questions [Example: Diversity. E.g.: What can colleges and universities learn from HBCUs about drawing on diverse racial/ethnic/socioeconomic/life experiences to enhance the learning of all students?]
4. Research is Often Ahistorical, E.G. Program Quality/Reputation and, in turn, Redundant
5. Qualitative/Mixed Methods Undervalued and Underutilized: Ethnography, Oral History, Grounded Theory, Mixed Methods
6. Communication: Writing-as-Reporting (Objectivist, Scientistic) as Against Writing-as-Interpreting, Writing-as-Constituting (Stories/Vignettes), Writing-as-Praxis (Social Justice and Absence of Active Voice