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Ways of Knowing

What are some examples of the scientific method, rationalism, empiricism, and positivism in your job, discipline, and/or life?

As I began to write this paper, searching for examples of rationalism, empiricism and positivism in my life, my discipline, my job…my sixteen year old son was very instrumental in identifying examples of rationalism and empiricism. In a rare moment of teen-bonding, he turns to me while driving in the car and says, “Mom, I think I like talking things over with dad better than with you. I can present my case with an intelligent argument and he usually agrees and lets me do what I want. But you…you don’t accept my rational argument because you know me too well. You are always thinking about the last time I said this or that and what could happen or how it ‘may’ turn out. It’s not fair. Facts should always rule decisions, not what you think may happen or because you think you know me so well that I am inclined to do the opposite.” Well, there it is…I am an empiricist. I use evidence from observation to predict what my son is capable of doing or not doing. Meanwhile, my husband reasons the constructive arguments made by our son. To be fair…my husband tends to be a rationalist in every facet of life with positive outcomes. But, it just doesn’t work when applied to a 16 year old with hormones raging whose mom is more privy to his actions!

After this episode, I had all but decided that I was an empiricist. However, as I rummaged through my memory for more evidence, I realized that Dr. Galluzzo was right…I am more like the archeologist in the film “Man from Earth.” I want physical evidence that can be studied and proven or disproven. I wanted John Oldman to submit tissue samples in order to evaluate his cells that would prove or disprove his story. This position is in keeping with the positivist assertion that only authentic knowledge is acceptable, that which is based on sense, experience and positive verification.

The more I searched my world for examples of the three methods, the more I realized that I associate and am influenced by other positivist at work. In my discipline, special education, teachers rely on psycho-educational testing results to understand how students learn. Scores in processing and memory tasks are necessary in formulating interventions for academic achievement. ‘Best Practices’ is the catch phrase. We identify and use studies, strategies, texts that have been found valid using research-based approaches.

As I searched further for examples of realism, empiricism, and positivism in my job, discipline and/or life, I recognized that the three are intertwined. Identifying when one was used versus the other was a difficult process as opinions and actions change frequently in the context of a situation when dealing with students. Experience and intuition, also, creep into methods muddying up perspective. I’m beginning to accept Descartes plan for becoming a researcher: if you want to be a researchers you first have learn how to ‘unlearn’ what you know in order to look at things with fresh eyes without giving them contextual meaning. \*I have a long way to go before I’m ready to be a researcher who can record ideas without [observer bias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer_bias%22%20%5Co%20%22Observer%20bias); identify structural limitations; or understand how to construct a methodological process with clarity, [replicability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Replicability), [reliability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability) and validity. My journey begins with discovering who I am as a researcher.