

“There are only two ways in which humankind can produce knowledge: through passive observation or through active experiment.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Word Count: 1334

The aim of this essay is to assess whether there are only two ways of producing valid knowledge, as suggested by the statement. However, in order to do so, a question must be asked: can we produce knowledge in other ways rather than through passive observation and active experiment? I will look at History and Human Sciences, such as psychology and anthropology, as areas of knowledge, in order to make examples that we gain knowledge from observing and experiments; nonetheless, I will conclude by partially agreeing with the statement as we can gain knowledge in other ways by taking into consideration subjects such as history and through our personal interpretation.

There isn't a precise definition of what knowledge is but it generally refers to what we know and what we have learnt through education and perception. This indicates that most of the time humankind gains knowledge by observing, as well as by experimenting and sharing new experiences. In areas of knowledge such as Human Sciences, subjects such as psychology and anthropology are useful to our purpose. In some cases an anthropologist may simply watch and record behaviours of the participants in order to obtain results from his investigation and therefore he will gain knowledge only through passive observation. What it is meant by “passive observation” is the mere observance of the events unfolding before our eyes without our direct involvement but rather as spectators. . A real life example of passive observation is looking at some children playing. In this situation an observer does not directly interact with those being watched. However, at the same time, the knowledge of being observed can be considered itself an interaction that can influence the children 's behaviour. In fact, as soon as they notice that are being watched, the observer will become part of the experiment and the children will, very likely, behave

in a different way. Therefore, to what extent can observation be passive? It is not correct to argue that humankind gains knowledge only by observing rather than acting, because as soon as the children realise that they are being observed, the observer will influence the result.

It may also be suggested that, in addition to passive observation, humankind can produce knowledge through active experiment; instead of gaining knowledge only through observation, we also contribute to it by giving input to the others in order to reach conclusions regarding theories and assumptions. An example taken from real life of a situation of active experiment is when a school inspection team visits a school. The inspectors' duty is to make observations and assessments regarding the school facilities and the standard of teaching and learning. Hence, in order to give a good impression, students use the Hawthorne effect: the phenomenon of modifying for the better an aspect of their behaviour in response to their awareness of being observed, in this case by the inspectors, in order to obtain a positive evaluation regarding the school. If we consider this example, the input of the teachers and the students is to use the Hawthorne effect when they are aware of being observed by inspectors so as to give a good impression about the school. By consequence, the use of the Hawthorne effect by the teachers and students alike could be considered as the input that it is necessary for the inspectors. Similar experiments with a similar approach are replicated also in psychology in order to prove different theories.

Since observation is not always passive and since it doesn't necessarily give inputs to those involved, another way in which humankind can produce knowledge is by

“participant observation”; a method widely used in Anthropology and Sociology and based on a long-term study. With this method knowledge is produced, for instance, by interacting with the people observed. Passive observation is combined with active experiment. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the behaviour of a given group of individuals through an intensive involvement in their cultural environment over a period of time. An example could be found when an anthropologist spends months or even sometimes years living with a remote ethnic group to study their cultures and customs and to try and get an inside perspective of the everyday life of that specific group.

However, is there only active, passive or participant observation in order to produce knowledge? One could argue that in History, for example, different views and interpretations over same historical events may have great impact in producing knowledge. If we consider the World War I, the causes are much deeper than the ones we study in History lessons and are still part of long lasting debates. Historians such as A.J.P. Taylor, for instance, argue that the Great War was caused by misunderstanding and miscalculations. Fritz Fisher, on the other hand, suggests that the war was planned and provoked by different countries. Hence, a student could abide by one view or the other. Personal interpretation has thus a significant role as a mean through which humankind can achieve knowledge in a specific area such as History because it is, ultimately, up to the individual to decide which interpretation to choose as to who was responsible for the break out of World War I. Only with your own personal view and therefore, through your personal interpretation you gain a better understanding and a better point of view regarding the causes of the World War I.

However, if everyone can give an interpretation about historical events such as the War World I, to what extent are the different sources reliable? In my opinion there is no certainty about my personal view regarding historical events and what was in the past considered as accepted because every source can be considered as biased, due to the fact that everyone has their own personal interpretation. By consequence, it cannot be established that we gain perfect knowledge through our personal interpretation because some sources will be always accepted and others will be always rejected and so considered as biased. Moreover, one cannot use passive observation or active experiments in History because the events that are discussed and studied, such as the War World I, have already happened; personal interpretation is thus the only way of knowing that comes along as a way in which humankind can produce knowledge.

In general, it could be argued that there are only two ways in which humankind can produce knowledge: for example, through active experiments or by simply a passive observation. I agree with this statement only to a small extent because, at the same time, it could be stated that there are other ways in which humankind can produce knowledge. For instance in subjects such as psychology and anthropology, in order to gain a better understanding of a group of individuals and their behaviour, participant observation is a method extensively used. Moreover in an area of knowledge and a subject such as History, also different views and interpretations over the same events may lead to a very great extent on having an impact in producing knowledge. However, it could be claimed that there is no absolute certainty to judge whether certain knowledge is true because every source can be considered as biased. Furthermore the lack of evidence to prove that there are only two ways in which humankind produce knowledge and the lack of criteria to judge whether it is true or

not that we gain knowledge only through active experiment and passive observation, confirmed my position of agreeing to the statement only to a small extent.

To conclude, as humans like to have an involvement into new cultures and share their point of view, I firmly believe that we gain knowledge through participant observation and personal interpretation as well as by observing and giving inputs to the others.

Bibliography

- Wendy Heydorn and Susan Jesudason. Decoding theory of knowledge for IB diploma. Cambridge University Press 2013.

The introduction to the essay is adequate, although somewhat vague in referring to “other ways”.

The examples throughout the essay are rather general and/or hypothetical ('anthropologist', 'school inspection', etc.).

The candidate has a reasonable grasp of the implications of the various types of observation, but is not so clear on what constitutes active experiment -- how is a school inspection an experiment?

The discussion of participant observation is rather too brief and a bit vague; no conclusion is drawn. The history section is acceptable, although once again the example is too general (causes of World War I).

The argument for interpretation fails to demonstrate how it might work as a way of producing knowledge, and the claim that the variety of possible interpretations leads to unreliability of sources does not follow logically.

There are some problems with referencing.

Overall, this is a basic essay meriting a level 2 (4/10).