

## Operant Subjectivity

*The International Journal of Q Methodology*

### An Introduction to *Quiddity College*

James M. M. Good  
*University of Durham*

Amanda Wolf  
*Victoria University of Wellington*

In the previous article in this volume (Stephenson, 2022), William Stephenson outlines and assesses the importance he attached to what he regarded, late in life, as his most important unpublished works. A key manuscript among his “Ten Pillars of Q-Methodological Wisdom” is *Quiddity College: Thomas Jefferson’s Legacy for Moral Science*. In the Foreword to this manuscript, Stephenson recalls that while studying for his Psychology PhD at University College London, he attended classes with Sir Percy Nunn, one of the UK’s then-leading educational theorists whose influence “left him imbued with a sense of the worth of education for mankind” (Stephenson, 1970/1980 Foreword p. 3). Prior to that, while studying for his PhD in Physics at the University of Durham he had completed a Diploma in the Theory and Practice of Education.

Stephenson’s first book, *Testing School Children: An Essay in Educational and Social Psychology* (Stephenson, 1949), was effectively a critique of the selection procedures adopted in the UK’s post-World War Two educational policy. On several later occasions Stephenson commented on what he regarded as the superior non-selective schooling system in the United States. In the late 1960s, in the context of student unrest and anti-Vietnam war protests, Stephenson reflected on the purposes of college/university education and began writing *Quiddity College* (Stephenson, 1970/1980). Conceived over a 15-year period, it outlines a “Jeffersonian approach to moral science.” Ostensibly, it is a blueprint for an ideal college of higher education based on Stephenson’s unique experience of English and American education. In it he attempts to sketch a framework for an ideal college environment that would provide regular and carefully structured opportunities for academic work, play, and socializing. It is, in part, a personal response to some of the issues arising from the student unrest in the late 1960s and reflects the deep influence on his thinking of the writers of key figures in Scottish Enlightenment “common sense” philosophy such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid. *Quiddity College* also represents a statement of some of the basic influences on and assumptions of Q methodology.<sup>1</sup>

In a paper presented at the 2011 Annual Conference of the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity in Birmingham, U.K., James Good noted how the core strands of Stephenson’s theory, especially the notions of self, concourse, play, and his adoption of “consciring,” converged with his lifelong interest in education (Wolf, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> An edited book by Steven Brown and Diane Montgomery explores the multi-faceted relations between Q methodology and the educational sciences (Brown and Montgomery, forthcoming).

Contact author: j.m.m.good@durham.ac.uk

With the notion of *concourse*, Good explained, “Stephenson evoked a notion of ‘shared knowledge’ . . . the individual’s cultural heritage, born of history” (Wolf, 2011, p. 64). *Conscire*, Good continued, is an “intersubjective conception of knowledge.” As Stephenson himself wrote, “there is no ‘mind’ in any substantive sense; there is only *conscire*, the sharing of knowledge in a culture. . . . This takes two forms, one with self-reference for which we should reserve the term *communicative*, and one without self-reference, which we should distinguish as *informational*” (1980, p. 24). Stephenson had previously expanded the *communicative* form with his play theory (1964, 1967).

In *Quiddity College*, Stephenson also set out to examine the “cultivation of subjectivity,” by presenting an ideal college philosophy and curriculum. He wrote:

My concern . . . is with one’s culture as the essence of an undergraduate’s experience — taking care to emphasize the professionalizing function, without losing sight of the important need for the student to find his own identity.

The plans for *Quiddity* are to be fashioned in the light of the premise that culture is fashioned in play . . . in the act of communication, of societal conversation, of composition, of intelligent writing and speaking, not in *vacuo* . . . but about matters of significance. (Stephenson, 1970/1980)

Although the manuscript is grounded in a review of higher education in the United States in the 1960s, many of the themes retain their currency for contemporary observers of education debates. And we venture that such concerns and plans as occupied Stephenson’s thinking continue to resonate today, as perhaps they always have in one form or another, with those who aim to prepare children for the future. Certainly, too, worries about testing—and counter-arguments — are current, and in many ways similar to those at the time Stephenson published his *Testing School Children* (Stephenson, 1949). In New Zealand, the debate shaped up around the use of “national standards” for primary students’ literacy and numeracy, with reports at individual, classroom and school level, and recent calls for mandated hours of instruction in maths and reading. In the United States, the debate has been in full swing in the context of “no child left behind” as well as an upsurge in publicly funded private academies focused on the “basics.” Close to Stephenson’s aims in *Quiddity* is discussion about the success of educator E. D. Hirsch’s curriculum innovation, known as the “core knowledge program.” Children taught according to Hirsch’s theories scored higher on reading tests and had more general knowledge in social science and science than children in control groups who were taught according to the prevailing curriculum in New York City schools (Phillips, 2012). Hirsch’s ideas also had a strong influence on the educational policy of the United Kingdom’s recent Conservative government (Gibb, 2015).

Whether readers are educators, parents or policymakers, or just curious about Stephenson’s ideas, we are confident the following excerpts will hold some interest. We have prepared a very lightly edited Foreword, Chapters 1 and 2, and Chapter 9. Apart from formatting in the journal’s house style and the corrections of typos, the text remains unchanged. The full Table of Contents appears as an Appendix.

## References

Brown, S. R., & Montgomery, D. (Eds.). (Forthcoming). *Q methodology and education* (Methodology of Educational Measurement and Assessment series). Springer.

- Gibb, N. (2015). How E. D. Hirsch came to shape UK government policy. In J. Simons & N. Porter (Eds.). *Knowledge and the curriculum* (pp. 12–20). Policy Exchange.
- Phillips, A. M. (2012, March 11). Nonfiction curriculum enhanced readings skills, study finds. *New York Times* (online global edition).
- Stephenson, W. (1949). *Testing school children*. Longmans, Green.
- Stephenson, W. (1964). The ludenic theory of newsreading. *Journalism Quarterly* 41(3), 367–374.
- Stephenson, W. (1967). *The play theory of mass communication*. Chicago University Press.
- Stephenson, W. (1970/1980). *Quiddity College: Thomas Jefferson's legacy for moral science*.
- Stephenson, W. (1980). Consciring: A general theory for subjective communicability, In D. Nimmo (Ed.). *Communication yearbook 4*, 7–36, Transaction Books.
- Stephenson, W. (2022). Ten pillars of Q-methodological wisdom. *Operant Subjectivity*, 44, 33-44.
- Wolf, A. (2011). Q methodology and its applications: Reflections on theory. *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology* 35 (1), 48–71. (With J. M. M. Good, S. R. Brown, E. H. W. J. Cuppen, D. Ockwell, & S. Watts).