**Week 7: Lecture 1 - Critical Inquiry and Metacognition**

We began this course with a survey of critical thinking and critical inquiry. That included learning how to ask the right questions to help us interpret and comprehend what we see, hear, and otherwise experience. We have also explored several analytical tools for solving problems, understanding arguments, and investigating our own biases and ethics.

We have applied these questions and tools to a variety of problems, arguments, situations and events - from personal/professional contexts to global and existential crises!

This last module brings us back to the beginning in a way. Critical inquiry originates from our minds; it is a way of thinking that applies strategic questioning to analyze and understand our experiences, that is, to the external world. But that process of critical inquiry must also be applied *internally*.

In the 1991 movie *Silence of the Lambs*, serial killer Hannibal Lecter is critically psychoanalyzing Agent Clarice Starling. Agent Starling, clearly unnerved by this intense application of critical questioning, bravely responds with her own questions:

“*You see a lot don't you doctor? Why don't you turn that high-powered perception at yourself and tell us what you see? Or, maybe you're afraid to…*”

Being a responsible, critically aware person, professional, and member of society requires that we are not afraid to apply our analytical skills and critical questions to ourselves - to our decisions, to our actions, and yes, even to our own thinking. Thinking about our thinking is the most effective way to develop our analytic and problem-solving skills.

That’s what **metacognition is**: thinking about our own thinking. Many researchers agree that critical thinking and critical inquiry are essentially included as part of metacognition. There are many similar definitions of metacognition, but this definition seems to capture its essence in a very useful way:

“*Awareness of one’s own thinking, awareness of the content of one’s conceptions, an active monitoring of one’s cognitive processes, an attempt to regulate one’s cognitive processes in relationship to further learning, and an application of a set of heuristics as an effective device for helping people organize their methods of attack on problems in general*”. (Hennessey, 1999, p. 3)

Awareness of our own thinking and of the content of our thinking…monitoring and regulating our own thought processes…applying heuristics (mental strategies) to help us approach and solve problems…that all sounds like critical inquiry at work! Consider some of the critical questions implied by the activity of metacognition:

1. What am I thinking about, how am I thinking about it, and how effective am I at that thinking?
2. What questions am I asking, and how are they advancing my learning?
3. Why am I not understanding this?
4. What other questions should I be asking?
5. Is my thinking being influenced by internal bias, external forces, or cultural assumptions?
6. Am I applying a useful strategy for understanding new situations and problems?

In short, metacognition is about:

1. **Monitoring our own thinking** (what am I doing in my thinking, what skills and strategies am I applying, and how well am I doing all of that? What are my motivations?)
2. **Regulating our own thinking** (how am I correcting and adapting my thinking to achieve comprehension?)
3. **Evaluating our own thinking** (what are my limits, my biases, my basis for beliefs? How useful or valuable are the processes and strategies I am employing in my thinking?)

Why is this important?

The answer to that question is probably obvious, and there are many reasons. First, thinking about our own thinking causes us to be more effective thinkers. Also, combined with ethics and the recognition of implicit bias (week 6), metacognition causes us not only to be more effective thinkers, but *better* thinkers. That is, we become *qualitatively* better, not only in how we do it, but in *why* we do it. That means we will likely be more thoughtful, respectful, and careful; more humble, open, and adaptive; more aware, sensitive, and appreciative; more ethical, fair, and objective. If we genuinely wish to solve problems (arguments, social issues, misunderstandings), we need to examine ourselves first. This is critical self-reflection, and critical self-reflection is (or should be) at the core of all social relationships. Proceed to the next (and final!) lecture to read more about critical self-reflection and its relationship to emotional intelligence.

Reference

Hennessey, M. G. (1999). Probing the dimensions of metacognition: Implications for conceptual change teaching-learning. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for Research in Science Teaching*, Boston, MA.

**Week 7: Lecture 2 - Critical Self-Reflection and the Development of Emotional Intelligence**

What are you doing right now? In addition to reading this, what else is captivating your attention? Are you focused or distracted? Take a moment to reflect on your surroundings or context, on your current degree of focus on what you are reading, and on the thoughts, sights, and sounds that compete for your attention. What questions can you ask to help you with this reflective exercise? Ask them :) [pause and take a moment to do this]

Critical inquiry is a key element of this reflective process; asking strategic, relevant questions to identify specific challenges, distractions, and internal ‘noise’ is an important step toward improved decision-making, information retention, and overall cognitive efficiency.

But *critical* self-reflection, while related, goes deeper than this, asking questions that focus instead on what we think and why we think it. Mezirow (2006) describes critical self-reflection as an individual process of questioning the *assumptions, presuppositions,*and *perspective*s that determine and regulate our actions, decisions, and overall behavior. Mezirow et al. (2009) also suggest that it is a primary catalyst for transformative learning among adult learners. That’s you!

Transformative learning is learning that causes us to change our views, opinions, perspectives, and behaviors; it increases our awareness of our own thinking and how our thinking influences our actions and our environments. Transformative learning also fosters self-motivation, self-governance, and empathy (more on that shortly).

Critical self-reflection is inherent to the transformative learning process, and critical inquiry is the process by which these are enacted. We question not only what our assumptions, presuppositions, opinions, and perspectives are, but also where they originated, what they mean, and how they influence our thoughts and our actions.

Developing this deeper awareness of our own thinking will result in more informed, intentional behavior. Heightened self-awareness is essential for developing our ***emotional intelligence***: our capacity to recognize, comprehend and regulate our emotions, and to recognize, comprehend, appreciate, and respond to the emotions of others.

This includes self-awareness, empathy, motivation, self-regulation, and the development of our social skills. We have briefly covered some of those attributes (self-awareness, motivation, and self-regulation) and others are somewhat self-explanatory (such as development of social skills). It is helpful to briefly reflect on empathy.

**Empathy**is, in short, the ability to understand what other people feel. When we exercise empathy, we are attempting to view a situation or an environment from the perspective of others. From there, we then begin to imagine *being in their position* to feel what they feel. When we think of it this way, it is easy to see the importance of critical inquiry for developing our awareness of what others experience, how they experience it, and how it impacts them.

To sum it all up: critical inquiry *as* critical self-reflection is at the heart of developing emotional intelligence.

References

* Mezirow, J. (2006). An overview of transformative learning. In P. Sutherland and J. Crowther (Eds), *Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts* (24-38): New York: Routledge.
* Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E. W. (2009). Transformative learning in practice. Insights from community, workplace and higher education. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.