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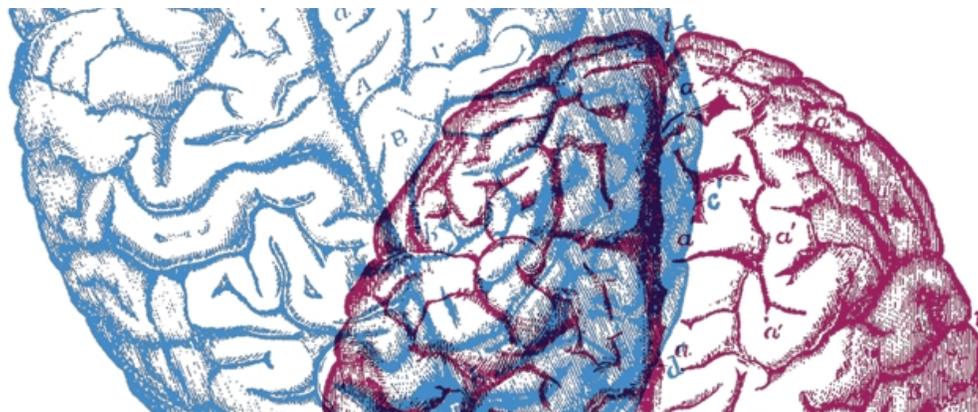
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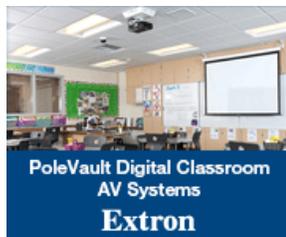
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Cultivating an Opposable Mind

A case study in Integrative Thinking



Integrative Thinking is the ability to create new solutions to complex problems by exploring ideas that appear to be in opposition to one another. Students taking a unique Business Leadership course at John Polanyi Collegiate Institute in the Toronto District School Board are using integrative thinking to tackle challenges in their own lives. By refusing to evaluate and choose between options, but instead seeking out new connections between them, one group of students redefined their school’s approach to eliminating homophobia and created a brand new way of thinking about tolerance within their school community.

“I learned I don’t have to sacrifice one option for another. I don’t have to settle. I can just create something new.”



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– **Salah A., Student at John Polanyi Collegiate Institute**

The teachers at John Polanyi Collegiate Institute (JPCI) in Toronto were facing a not uncommon problem. Despite an established campaign of posters, assemblies and workshops promoting tolerance, homophobia remained a recurring issue at their school and students seemed largely indifferent to efforts to address it. Rethinking their approach, the teachers decided to engage an unusual group of consultants: Grade 12 students in the school's Business Leadership class.

This flagship course, first taught in 2010, was developed through a partnership between the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the I-Think Initiative at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.[1] Students in the I-Think program learn concrete metacognitive tools, based on Rotman's Integrative Thinking curriculum for executives and MBA students. It is an approach that focuses on constructing powerful new solutions to complex problems.

In response to their teachers' challenge, the leadership students recommended a new framework for tackling prejudice at the school – one based on the recognition of their own values, experiences, and challenges. They did so by engaging in a profound reconsideration of their own points of view and by embracing a new way to think.

An Integrative Thinking process

Integrative Thinking began as an attempt to understand how successful leaders – in business and elsewhere – face their own critical challenges. Roger Martin, then Dean of the Rotman School of Management, set out to identify and teach a new set of reflective skills to business students hoping to solve their own tough problems. The successful leaders Roger met challenged conventional wisdom that tried to box them into unpalatable either/or choices. Instead, they found innovative ways to obtain the benefits of multiple, often seemingly incompatible, solutions.

Engaging in an Integrative Thinking process helps students to reconsider and combine opposing choices without having to choose one at the expense of the other. At its core, it challenges the mindset that innovation is an innate capacity and therefore not teachable – a belief that, according to Sir Michael Barber and his colleagues in their 2012 report, is one of the core obstacles currently facing education.[2] Integrative Thinking teaches that the seeds of innovation lie in cultivating an “opposable” mind – one that seeks to find creative resolutions inside competing ideas.[3]

That's what the leadership students at JPCI were challenged to do. Over the course of six weeks, the business leadership students struggled to solve their teachers' dilemma. The Integrative Thinking process helped them redefine their choices and reframe their problem from a constraining either/or choice into a creative design challenge. The following four steps capture the heart of the students' process.

1. Construct a two-sided dilemma

The students were presented with a relatively unstructured problem: “How do we eliminate homophobia at our school?” Their teachers explained that they had previously launched an awareness campaign (in the form of anti-homophobia posters) and held assemblies to create more school cohesiveness, but that these approaches didn't seem to have much effect. The teachers wondered if bringing anti-homophobia content into class

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Ellie Avishai is the founder and Director of I-Think, a unique initiative at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. I-Think adapts Rotman's Integrative Thinking curriculum, which aims to engender self-reflective thinking and creative problem-solving in MBA students, to the K-12 world.

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would have more impact. Fundamentally, they were asking the students to choose how they should spend their time and energy to combat homophobia: in class or out of class?

Integrative solutions emerge from exploring the tension between opposing ideas. So, the first step in the students' process was to clearly define the opposing tensions that they would explore. At first, the choice seemed to be between fun assemblies focused on the community at large and in-class sessions aimed at individual learning. The students extended this tension, pitting "focus exclusively on the school community" against "focus exclusively on the individual." By constructing a two-sided dilemma using extreme and opposing ideas, the students created a clear and manageable structure for their thinking and gave themselves two interesting choices to explore.

2. Articulate the benefits of the models

Once the students had two clearly defined models to consider, they spent time understanding and exploring those models deeply. In order to think from multiple perspectives, the group chose three "stakeholders" or groups of people they felt were the most invested in their answer: students, teachers and the school administration. The students then posed a key question: For each of the options we've defined, how does each stakeholder benefit? What might cause each group to love the idea of exclusively focusing on individual students or on the entire school community? Why?

The students looked only at the benefits of each option, not the drawbacks, aiming to "fall in love" with each model in turn. This allowed them to explore each possibility with an open (as opposed to a critical) mind. Rather than evaluating the viability of each option ("Is this the best possible idea?"), they simply sought to understand its value better ("What specifically makes this an interesting option to explore?"). Students were then able to develop a rich catalogue of benefits that would ultimately serve as the raw material for a new solution. At the same time, they avoided the unproductive sense of deflation that often accompanies the "con" side of a pro/con list.

After conducting some interviews and surveys of their classmates and teachers, the students determined that community events are typically fun and unifying for the school as a whole. They can cause people to think of themselves in a broader context which can, in turn, lead them to see others (and themselves) in a new light. An individual focus, however, had the potential to spark better dialogue (because students would be more informed and thoughtful) and could lead to deeper understanding of social issues. More importantly, the students felt this model would create better relationships between students and teachers.

It is worth noting that it wasn't easy for students to turn off their inner critic when examining options. In fact, this is where students often struggle most, wanting to engage their analytical judgement and be "realistic." As one student from Lakeshore Collegiate, another partner school, summed up the challenge:

"In school you're trained to think yes/no, what's the answer? But through integrative thinking, you're opening up your mind... to take in a million options that you wouldn't have considered before. It can be frustrating because you don't necessarily know how to do that. You try to teach yourself but it takes a while... so learning to think through integrative thinking was a challenge for me."

Through the challenge, students often change their perspective on what it means to be “realistic.”

3. Examine the models and reframe the problem

The next step in the process asks students to take a step back and examine the opposing models side by side. What similarities and differences stand out now that the benefits of each model have been made explicit? What, if anything, do they love about each of the models that they wouldn't want to lose when building a new answer?

When the leadership students examined their models, they noticed interesting things that they hadn't seen before: The community model and the individual model both highlighted relationships, but in different ways. The community model was about strengthening student relationships to the school while the individual model was about strengthening relationships individual students (or students and teachers). This caused the group to pause and think about the problem they were solving in a new way. What if the core problem wasn't really about homophobia at all? What if the problem instead had more to do with the relationships in the school in general?

It occurred to the students that homophobia might be a symptom of a larger problem in the school – they saw that students who identified as “different” (due to cultural, economic or social identities) rarely mixed. In discussions with classmates, they found a pattern that fascinated them: Each social group saw themselves as ostracized and another group as having power. No group self-identified as being powerful. The students interpreted this as a signal that their classmates were feeling isolated and were not communicating with one another. Here is how the group described this reframe in their project summary:

“Our first challenge was finding out what was causing homophobia in the school. We boiled it down to people being ignorant of each other's cultures and expressing that lack of knowledge as fear and anger towards each other. But once again this found us wondering, why didn't they know about each other? We found it was the lack of sharing between the [social and cultural] groups and that they weren't learning enough about each other because they weren't sharing enough about themselves. So that led us to our ultimate question: why aren't students comfortable with sharing information about their cultures and lifestyles with each other? We decided that this was the problem that we would need to solve.”

In isolation, this shift might look like a sudden burst of insight. But it was made possible by rigorous exploration of the competing models. The students' analysis was not one of judging each model critically, but rather of considering what value they might find in each.

4. Explore the possibilities

Armed with their new insights, the students now had a brand new design challenge on their hands – how might they help break down the barriers between the different social groups to enable shared learning?

The students brainstormed a variety of options and settled on a set of activities to get students to mix and mingle, rather than educate about homophobia. They recommended a set of assemblies that would highlight the richness of different cultural heritages, followed by small breakout sessions where students of different backgrounds could learn about each other through facilitated activities. They also suggested a series of one-on-

one discussions under the guise of student pot-luck lunches, to encourage informal conversation among students who otherwise would not connect. Each piece of their solution aimed at increasing awareness and dialogue to break down communication barriers throughout the student body. The recommendations met with surprise and delight from their teachers, who began to investigate how to implement them. The students came away with a new sense of agency in tackling the “wicked” problems in their own lives. As one student wrote,

“This class has made me realize how powerful my thoughts are. Personally, I’ve always been impatient and... I try to get things done as soon as possible. Now I definitely take a lot of time to think more about my actions as well as other people’s actions. It’s definitely not easy, but it has helped me become less judgmental than I was before and has helped me make better decisions.”

The limits of evaluate and choose

Traditionally, students have been offered techniques for evaluating and choosing between competing options when they are trying to solve a problem. It is common to conduct in-class debates, ask students to research how “experts” resolve the problem or ask them to write position papers. Using the iconic “pro/con” list, students are told to carefully analyze the various benefits and drawbacks of a particular solution or point of view, pick a side and then defend their choice. (“Research the climate change debate between proponents of environmental protection and those who support industrial progress. Which side compels you the most and why? Write a two-page summary explaining your position.”) Students learn tools to compare and contrast, form inferences and apply various criteria for judgment.

At their best, these tools aid what philosopher and educator John Dewey called “reflective thought,” where we work to apply an open-minded and scientific rigour to our analyses in order to learn deeply from our experiences.[4] At their worst, they create an implicit assumption that there is a single right answer. What these tools miss are processes that lead students to create unseen possibilities and form new connections when no answer exists at the back of the book. Howard Gardner touches on the importance of this skill in writing of the “synthesizing mind”:

“The ability to knit together information from disparate sources into a coherent whole is vital today. The amount of accumulated knowledge is reportedly doubling every two or three years... Sources of information are vast and disparate, and individuals crave coherence and integration.”[5]

While it is important to teach students specific domains of knowledge like math, science and literacy, it is even more important to teach them to think about how different domains work together. Above all, we must provide students with tools and opportunities to reflect on their thinking. These students, after all, will one day be tasked with solving some of the world’s most pressing problems.

Illustration: Dave Donald

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EN BREF - La pensée intégrative désigne la capacité d’innover dans la création de solutions à des problèmes complexes en explorant des

idées qui semblent contradictoires. Au John Polanyi Collegiate Institute du Toronto District School Board, les élèves suivant un cours exceptionnel de leadership en affaires emploient la pensée intégrative pour relever des défis auxquels ils font face dans leur propre vie. En refusant d'évaluer les options et de choisir entre elles, en cherchant plutôt à établir de nouveaux rapports entre elles, un groupe d'élèves a redéfini l'approche mise de l'avant par leur école pour éliminer l'homophobie, engendrant une nouvelle façon de percevoir la tolérance dans leur communauté scolaire.

[1] This partnership, originally a small pilot program with one class, has grown to include several pilot schools, including Lakeshore Collegiate Institute and Ledbury Park Elementary and Middle School, along with leadership training for more than 150 TDSB teachers and administrators.

[2] Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2012), 25.

[3] Roger L. Martin, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 15.

[4] John Dewey, (New York: D.C. Heath & Co., 1910), 10-13.

[5] Howard Gardner, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 46.

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