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Research

Proprioception of Thinking and Emotional Intelligence are Central to Doing Philosophy with Children

By **Blog Contributor**

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by Maria daVenza Tillmanns

Philosophy with children often focuses on abstract reasoning skills, but as David Bohm points out the “entire process of mind” consists of our abstract thought as well as our “tacit, concrete process of thought.” Philosophy with children should address the “entire

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process of mind.”

Our tacit, concrete process of thought refers to *the process* of thought that involves our actions such as the process of thought that goes into riding a bicycle. Bohm contends that we need to develop an awareness or proprioception of thinking as well.

When Socrates enters into dialogue with his interlocutors, he shows the limitations of purely abstract thought by leading them to admit that they really “don’t know.” But, of course, they know. We know what bravery is or what love is, even though we can never “explain” these concepts in abstract terms. Life has taught us through experience what these concepts mean and we have developed an understanding of them. We can recognize when a person acts bravely.

This is where I see the link between our tacit, concrete process of thought and emotional intelligence. We need emotional intelligence to *learn how* to be brave, to *learn how* to love, and be just in the way we act in the world. Knowing what justice is abstractly does not make us act justly.



We have to develop awareness of our actions in order to develop the skills necessary to act the part. This is also where emotional intelligence comes in. In the bulletin of the play *Romeo and Juliet*, director Barry Edelstein wrote the following: “To perform Romeo and Juliet, actors need a series of skills... they must have the emotional and psychological awareness and openness of uncommon depth; they must listen with acuteness, they must possess an imagination of real suppleness and subtlety...” An abstract portrayal would not bring these characters to life.

We can surely agree – abstractly – that racism is destructive, but still act racist, without being even slightly aware of it.

My contention is that while our abstract sense of racism has evolved, our tacit, concrete knowledge has not, which explains that racism is for the most part still rampant, even though we know abstractly that it is wrong.

So how do we educate and develop the awareness of the tacit, concrete knowledge that informs our actions, and develop the emotional intelligence to give a depth of understanding to what we know and believe abstractly.

Proprioception of Thinking

In *On Dialogue*, David Bohm makes the case that while proprioception is generally associated with body movement and the self-perception of body movement, it can also be made to apply to the “movement” of thinking:

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“Proprioception” is a technical term – you could also say “self-perception of thought,” “self-awareness of thought,” or “thought is aware of itself in action.” Whatever terms we use, I am saying: thought should be able to perceive its own movement, be aware of its own movement. In the process of thought there should be the awareness of that movement, of the intention to think, and of the result which the thinking produces. (pg.79)

For Bohm, to see the process of thinking as a “movement,” of which we can become aware, opens the door to an understanding of thinking *as a process*, as something we do with “our entire being.”

We are, after all, thinking beings. And while we may not be aware of it, thinking also informs our emotions on a tacit, concrete level. Emotions do not exist separately, as something coming out of nowhere.

Is the thinking we do abstractly consistent, or as Bohm would say, “coherent” with the thinking that takes place on the tacit, concrete level of thought that informs our emotions and actions?

Imposing abstract thought on the movement of tacit, concrete thinking does not work. Just like imposing the abstract knowledge of knowing what it is to be brave, does not enable you to be so.

The question is: do you have the emotional depth of understanding to act bravely?

Socrates makes this point as well indicating that philosophy is the art of *understanding* the nature of something, the nature of what it means to be courageous in *Laches*, or the nature of friendship in *Lysis*, with the notion that along with this deeper understanding you are able to act on what it means to be courageous or what it means to be a friend.

He makes a clear distinction between knowledge and understanding. He understands the limitations of abstract knowledge and in that way knows that he does not know.

In the *Symposium* he brings in Diotima who, at the hand of a myth, provides us an understanding of love, after everyone else has tried to define love abstractly.

Understanding does not have these limitations. The “openness of uncommon depth” at which we can understand something is endless. It is in constant movement and with every breath can become deeper and fuller.

Developing Understanding through Proprioception

In other words, developing an understanding of what it means to act bravely has to take place in the tacit, concrete process of thought, which guides our actions.

This tacit, concrete process is actual knowledge... In the case of riding a bicycle, if you don't know how to ride, then the knowledge isn't right – the tacit knowledge is not coherent in the context of trying to ride the bike, and you don't have the intended result. The incoherence becomes clear – you fall when you want to ride. Physically, tacit knowledge is where the action is coming from. And physical change depends on changing the tacit response.

Therefore, changing the abstract thought is one step, but unless it also changes the way the body responds, it won't be enough... You need the tacit knowledge which you get by actually riding, ... (On Dialogue, pg. 78-79)

Tacit knowledge of racism, for example, has to be “coherent” in the context of knowing racism abstractly. To *tell* people not to be racist without teaching them how not to *act* racist changes little if anything.

Making children aware of themselves as thinking beings at a young age, when they are still predominantly operating from a tacit, concrete knowledge basis as opposed to one driven by abstract knowledge, is why doing philosophy with children is so crucial.

Doing philosophy with children *engages* them as thinking beings and not solely as abstract (critical) thinkers. We engage children in the *process* of thinking.

Dr. Maria Montessori developed a method of teaching based on providing young children with concrete experiences of the teaching tools she devised from which they could then better understand abstract concepts.

For example, some of her teaching tools give children sensory experiences of the alphabet, having children trace a letter ‘a,’ for example, made of sandpaper with their fingers while pronouncing the letter. She also created small bars of glass beads so children could feel the beads while counting them out loud.

Essentially, she developed teaching tools, which served to educate the concrete, tacit process of thinking.

In this way, children are actively engaged and emotionally engaged in the *process* of learning.

The Importance of Doing Philosophy with Children

Philosophy with children dialogues *engages* children as *whole beings*.

Children's opinions are not solely abstract opinions; they are *lived* opinions.

In the process, they experience that *they* matter; their thoughts and feelings are taken seriously, and as a result they learn to take themselves and their thoughts and feelings seriously as well – they learn that *they* matter to themselves as well.

In our philosophy discussion groups, I always give children what I call “thinking time,” and allow the children to ponder how to articulate what they feel and think into words. They need to use their complete mind, not just their abstract mind. Thinking with one's whole being takes time and children learn the importance of respecting that time. Teachers I have worked with have also commented on the fact they appreciate how I give children enough time, without fear of losing control of the group discussion. When they have “thought things through,” they are ready to talk and share their ideas with the group. If they need more time, I come back to them later or may even ask a friend to help them out, because sometimes, the friend can offer ideas that help the child formulate what they want to say.

It is interesting to note that some children who otherwise rarely speak up in class feel comfortable doing so in our philosophical discussion groups.

Focusing on thinking as a movement creates a space for thinking to accommodate, to listen to other points of view and to integrate these into one's own thinking as it evolves, while trying to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of a certain topic under discussion.

Thinking as a movement and learning to accommodate is similar to our eyes accommodating and adjusting the optics of the eye to keep an object in focus.

For example, can I keep the focus on acting fairly when feeling threatened? Do I have the acuteness of thought so that without suppressing my fear of the other, I can “hold the tension” of my thinking, my emotions and act honorably.

In the end, philosophy is more than developing good reasoning skills, although that is certainly a part of it. And is more than learning to make good arguments for what you believe in. It is more than logic, and more than learning about what other great thinkers of the ages thought.

Emotional Intelligence and “Suspension” of Thought

Emotional life grows out of the brain called the limbic system, specifically the amygdala. The amygdala processes fear and anger, delight and disgust. It reacts to

immediate impulses. Much later the neocortex was added which processes longer-term interests, enabling us to learn, plan and remember. The more connections between both the limbic system and the neocortex, *the more emotional responses are possible.* (“The EQ Factor,” *Time*. Vol. 146, No.14, Oct. 1995) (emphasis added)

Bohm made a similar point when he stated, “there is *movement* in that tacit knowledge, which is that it is *exploring possibilities.*” (On Dialogue, pg. 79) (emphasis added)

The article goes on to say that, “if there is a cornerstone to emotional intelligence on which most other emotional skills depend, it is the sense of self-awareness.... Once an emotional response comes into awareness – or physiologically, *is processed through the neocortex – the chances of handling it appropriately improve.* Scientists refer to “metamood,” the ability to pull back and recognize that “what I am feeling is anger,” or sorrow, or shame.” (*Time*, pg. 63) (emphasis added)

For clarification, “metamood” is distinctly different from the idea of “meta-cognition,” in that the former refers to one’s ability to “pull back” in the moment.

While scientists talk about the “ability to pull back,” David Bohm talks about the need for “suspension.”

The human race doesn't do a great deal of suspension of this sort... Our development has been more toward a kind of immediate impulsive response... (On Dialogue, pg. 74)

Bohm goes on to say:

Is it possible for thought to similarly observe itself, and see what it is doing, perhaps by awakening some other sense of what thought is, possibly through attention? In that way, thought may become proprioceptive. It will know what it is doing and will not create a mess... And clearly, when thought does not know what it is doing, then such a mess arises. So let us look further – first at suspension, then at proprioception. (On Dialogue, pg. 75-76)

Both Bohm’s notion of developing one’s ability for “suspension” and the skill to develop “metamood” create the self-awareness necessary to exercise greater self-control, without suppressing the feelings so necessary for increased understanding of the world we participate in.

In *HR Matters Magazine*, Linda Elders has an article, “Becoming a Critic of Your Own Thinking” (Issue 15, July 2011). In this article she states that a popular way of

conceptualizing the mind is to separate thinking from emotions. But this conceptualization, she argues, is just not true. Thoughts are connected to some feeling state. She continues by saying that we therefore need to be very aware of both our emotions and our thoughts and how, more importantly, they interrelate (pg. 4-5). “Critical thinkers take command of their emotions.” They grasp the root of their own thought and emotion.

Emotional Intelligence and Developing Deeper Understanding

And as noted earlier, the more connections between the limbic system and the neocortex, the more emotional responses are possible. We come to see that “our way” of seeing things is perhaps just “one way” as opposed to “the way.” Emotional intelligence then is the ability to navigate and *consider the many possibilities and respond accordingly*.

Bohm observed that tacit knowledge is also constantly exploring possibilities, “accommodating” our thinking to the world around us.

In her *New York Times* article “To Help Students Learn, Engage the Emotions,” (May, 2016), Jessica Lahey quotes Dr. Immordino-Yang. “It is neurologically impossible to think deeply about things you don’t care about... When students are emotionally engaged, we see activations all around the cortex, in regions involved in cognition, memory and meaning-making, and even all the way down into the brain stem.”

Meaningful learning happens when teachers create an emotional connection to what might otherwise remain abstract concepts, ideas or skills. It is marked by deep mastery and durable learning.

Emotionally, children are flexible thinkers and don’t feel the need quite as adults do to defend their position and find the best arguments to do so. They are more curious and their thinking can travel in all directions, not just the ones they have staked out for themselves.

The concepts they have of the world around them are attached to their imagination and not fixed ideas. And their imagination loves to travel.

Imagination is curious, not defensive.

In *The Atlantic*, Andrew Simmons wrote an article “Literature’s Emotional Lessons” – grappling with the way books make students feel – not just analytical skills – should be part of the high-school English curriculum (April 2015).

To make these decisions intelligently, we need to develop the children’s awareness of

what goes into the entire thinking process.

If we want to focus on developing good decision-making skills, we cannot have children develop good decision-making skills in a vacuum. Decision-making skills involve skills related to knowing how to *act* in real life situations.

In my experience teaching and observing other teachers, students spend a lot of time learning academic skills and rarely talk about emotional reactions they have to what they read – even when stories, as they often do, address dark themes. (Literature’s Emotional Lessons, 2016)

Dr. Jana Mohr-Lone, the Founder of Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO) at the University of Washington, in Seattle, responded to a question from Chris Weller in “Schools aren’t teaching the most important subject for kids” in *Business Insider*, (Aug. 2016) by stating the following:

Occasionally, I’ll have parents say to me ‘You know, I think it might be too early for my kid to be thinking about racial identity,...’ And I always say ‘Well, your kid must be white, ‘because if you grew up as a child of color, by the time you’re seven or eight years old nobody needs to teach you about racial identity. You’re already thinking about it.

To help students cope with real life, unpleasant and disturbing portions of reality have to be included in classroom discussions on a personal, political, or societal level.

I have had occasions where a child would cry during one of our philosophical discussion groups and other children would rally around her to comfort and console her. The teacher and I deliberately chose not to intervene to make the child “feel better.”

It is important that the child knows she is safe and it is safe to cry. Crying is not a negative experience. It is not a happy one, but not a negative one. Adults tend to make it such.

When children are given the space to experience their feelings in deeply moving ways, they are given the opportunity to get in touch with them and deal with them in constructive ways, thereby also learning about who they are.

Children are resilient and eager to learn about the world they live in. How else will they learn to navigate a world replete of injustice, strife and hardship. How do we educate students to be more conscientious citizens, when we end up discussing serious topics from a “safe” and superficial standpoint as not to “rock the emotional boat.”

To enable more connections to be made between both the limbic system and the neocortex, and to increase our ability for proprioception and awareness of thinking in the process of thinking, and how it affects our feelings and “metamood,” Bohm suggests that we engage in what he calls “participatory thought,” which in my view is precisely what doing philosophy with children does.

Bohm talks about “participatory thought and the unlimited.”

Participatory thought sees that everything partakes of everything. It sees that its own being partakes of the earth – it does not have an independent being... literal thought tends to fragment, while participatory thought tends to bring things together. (On Dialogue, pg. 84)

Philosophy for and with children invites what Bohm calls “participatory thought.” All are engaged in thinking together, “those implicit, tacit thoughts that are the foundation of consciousness are shared by all.” (On Dialogue, pg. 93)

“Incoherence” and Disassociated Thought

If we only educate the *abstract mind* and not the *thinking being*, we become “incoherent” thinkers disconnected from the world we *live* in, from other people, and from ourselves as well. This has dangerous consequences.

Disassociated abstract thought can allow us to do the most horrible things to the environment, other life forms, and other people, and provide justifications for it.

When abstract thought takes over, without the awareness of the tacit process of thinking, “incoherence” in thinking takes place and with it the problem of ‘transference’ of abstract thought to real life situations, as many teachers and university instructors are aware of.

Incoherence in thinking is a result of what Bohm calls the paradox in thinking and feeling:

Thus, it is now more urgent than ever that we give attention ... to the inward dullness and non-perceptiveness which allows us to go on failing to notice the paradox in thinking and feeling... A mind caught in such paradox will inevitably fall into self-deception, aimed at the creation of illusions that appear to relieve the pain resulting from the attempt to go on with self-contradiction. (On Dialogue, pg. 66-67)

So how do we develop this perceptiveness, so urgently needed to stave off “the inward

dullness and non-perceptiveness” of the mind.

Suppressing one’s feelings leads to the paradox of thinking and feeling, and in fact leads to self-deception and miscommunication instead.

Bohm contends that thought creates feelings.

Well, I had the impulse to think. I thought something, and then came the feeling. It was caused in that way, and therefore that is all it means.” But if you get the feeling that it does not come from thought, then it will tacitly be taken to mean a direct perception of reality. (On Dialogue, pg. 81) (emphasis added)

Well, I have deep gut feelings about this, which must really be valid.” That’s a failure of proprioception in thought. (pg. 80)

Let’s use racism or any kind of ‘ism’ as an example. Whether or not I am aware of my thinking less of someone because of their race, ethnicity, gender, etc., my tacit thought will generate feelings of fear, anger, contempt, etc. These feelings, then, in turn, generate a sense that these feelings are valid and therefore also true. In Bohm’s words: “[they are] taken to mean a direct perception of reality.”

But thought doesn’t treat itself as a movement. It treats itself as truth – as just being there, telling you the way things are. (On Dialogue, pg. 81)

In other words, self-deception creeps in when thoughts that generate certain feelings are conceived of as a direct perception of reality and therefore as true. Since these feelings are considered true, my reactions to these valid feelings are therefore justified. This is a perfect example of circular thinking.

Self-deception, then, comes from believing these self-generated “truths” are actually the “way things are” and there is no need to self-reflect or even question oneself.

This explains why so little has changed regarding racism or sexism, even though we have come to grips with much of it, yet strictly on the level of abstract thought.

Throughout history, shifts brought about by historical events such as the civil war, the civil rights movement and women’s suffrage, do affect the tacit, concrete process of thought. But change comes slowly, painstakingly, and incurs much sacrifice.

It is indeed a failure of proprioception, if we are not aware of the “truths” we create.

In order to deal with this incoherence in thinking – Bohm suggests, that perceptiveness

or proprioception can help us to “see” both thoughts simultaneously, meaning while operating from our assumptions, we are aware of them as well.

There is, however, some self-reference built into the whole system. There is what is called proprioception, or “self-perception...”

Thought lacks proprioception, and we have got to learn, somehow, to observe thought. In the case of the body, you can tell that somehow observation is taking place – even when there is no sense of a distinct observer. (On Dialogue, pg. 75-76)

Through proprioception, a space is created for thinking to move again, instead of being stuck in the non-moving thought/assumption, simply reacting to its triggers.

Proprioception of thought liberates our thinking from the reflexes of thinking – the reflexes we have been educated (conditioned) into believing to be truths about the world we live in.

Reflexes of thought get in the way of thinking!

Bohm states that when we treat thought as truth rather than as a movement we get stuck in the “truths,” which obstruct the movement of thinking.

In doing philosophy with children, we concentrate on thinking as a movement, thereby developing the child’s capacity for coherent living, where thoughts, feelings and actions cohere.

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