

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Roger Martin – Understanding the Purpose of Integrative Thinking

STUDENT: So Roger, how would you define a successful thinker?

ROGER: That's interesting. I guess at the top of my list would be somebody who can think their way through almost anything that comes across their desk, if you will. So I think a less successful thinker is one who's learned this methodology for this one thing, and this methodology for this other -- like if a math problem comes across their desk, they've learned math and they can apply that to it. Or if they're in business, if a marketing problem comes across their desk, they'll use a marketing framework for answering it. What I think of as a successful thinker is, even if the problem doesn't fit any exact category that they've been taught, they can kind of think from first principles and think their way through the problem that's facing them. And people like that in organizations tend to be the kind of people that others go to. They say, "When I meet, whenever I go and ask him something, he kind of can think his way through it," versus others in the organization who'll they say, "Well, if that's strictly a marketing problem," or, "If they're a doctor, that's strictly a heart problem," or whatever, and "He's a heart surgeon, I will talk to that person," as opposed to he or she will be able to solve any problem.

STUDENT: I kind of think the same. I believe that a successful thinker is kind of the one that could see all the sides of a spectrum, all the sides of a system and then come out with a solution or a recommendation that was not there before.

ROGER: Yes.

STUDENT: Yeah.

ROGER: And for me, that person will utilize the thinking of everybody, to come up with the solution, and actually come up with the solution together with others. That's why the things we teach you in integrative thinking are how to think about how you're thinking through a decision; what's your own ladder of inference, and how to inquire into somebody else's, so that you can get the most of theirs. Those are what we think of as sort of the building blocks that would help somebody be that kind of general universal good thinker.

STUDENT: How do you think teachers can incorporate the successful thinking style into their curriculum?

ROGER: Well, I think they can do a lot of things -- some of the best teachers, I think, do them already. But I think other teachers can be helped with methods for encouraging students to both feel comfortable making their own reasoning explicit. So rather than saying what's your answer, they'll say -- they would instead say, "Help me understand how you're thinking about that problem." "Oh, why do you think that? What leads you to that conclusion," to start teaching you to be able to reflect on and understand your own thinking. Because often we just jump to a conclusion, we say, this is how we think. Or this is what we think the answer is, not, "Here's how we thought through that." So I think teachers that encourage that and then also encourage you to inquire into their thinking.

STUDENT: To add onto that, I think that the course itself, Integrative Thinking, it kind of forces us to do that. So for example, teachers are kind of teaching us a way to think in your course. And that really does help us approach a problem differently. We could always use that in [INAUDIBLE].

ROGER: I think so. That's what we hope. We hope that integrative thinking is sort of subject-independent, right? It doesn't matter if you're using it to solve a math problem, to solve a problem on the playground, a problem on your sports team. It's the more universal we can make it, the better, from our perspective. And have you used it in any kind of novel situation that's outside what you think of as education proper?

STUDENT: Definitely. When I was choosing what university to go to, a lot of my friends in their choosing process were looking just at the statistics of the university, which I think is very surface-level.

ROGER: Yes.

STUDENT: So what I did was, I looked more in-depth. I asked people who go to the university what it was like. I took an in-depth look at the clubs, and kind of evaluated different aspects of the universities. And I think that's a part of integrative thinking, having a deeper look at different aspects to make a decision.

ROGER: And you're telling me what your choice was. And that sounds like an integrative choice in addition, right? It's combined of two institutions, getting the best of both, right?

STUDENT: Exactly. So I think I made the right decision. I think I was able to do that because of integrative thinking, and what I was taught in the classroom.

ROGER: That's excellent.

STUDENT: And for me, it was actually on a smaller scale. It wasn't a big decision like choosing a university, it was for a recent project for my physics class. We had to build a pinball machine for [accommodating?]. We were actually debating --

ROGER: Oh! I never got something that interesting to do.

STUDENT: It's very cool, yeah, we were all debating on what shape should it be? What could we add in there? And two people just started arguing in my group.

ROGER: Yes.

STUDENT: So instead of just choosing one over the other, what we kind of did was, I kind of stopped them both. What I ended up doing was, wow, I like this from your idea. I like this from your idea. If we pick your design, we could include this. And if we pick your design, we can include this. And as a result, we ended up with a completely different design that none of them actually came out with. That's why it turned out to be amazing.

ROGER: And probably the two who probably at first would have thought, "If we do something other than my design, I'll be upset," they probably -- my bet is they both were happy.

STUDENT: Yeah.

ROGER: They're sort of happy that their design wasn't chosen, right? It was actually something better.

STUDENT: Yeah.

ROGER: This is where I think -- I think people lock into thinking, "It's got to be my way, or I'm going to be upset," because they can't imagine a better way. And if they're not listening to the other person, or mining it as you did -- I mean, I love both of these examples of you mining everything that's out there to mine. You -- deeper understandings of the various university choices, you -- mining the two models. I just sort of think if it's there to be mined and then utilized productively, it's a shame when it isn't. And that's one of the reasons I'm kind of passionate about integrative thinking. If we can teach smart folks like you to be able to mine more sources of insight in every decision you'll make, your decisions will just be better. And people around you will say, "Wow, man, they're really smart." And I think you are smart. But it'll actually be -- I think

it'll actually be you're smart and wise, because you're using your natural kind of cranial capacity, if you will, plus the wisdom of mining everything you have at your disposal.