Two Hands, Two Decks, and a Theory in Action: Expanding Thinking Vocabularies of Learners in the 21st Century

R. Michael Fisher
Center for Spiritual Inquiry & Integral Education

Abstract:

A complex 21st century offers us complex problems. We need more complex ways to think in order to solve them—such as Ken Wilber's integral thinking. In this article, utilizing historical education referents for reconceptualizing curriculum in order to create more emphasis on meta-cognitive thinking about thinking, I offer a playful arts-based inquiry and performance of a unique curriculum device (a deck of thinking cards) that allows educators and researchers to bring forward their diverse vocabulary of types of thinking. I assert that it is time we passed on this vocabulary to our youth, to access and utilize in their own human potential growth and transformation into integral thinkers.

Keywords:

reconceptualizing curriculum; integral thinking; Pinar; Wilber; thinking vocabularies; integral thinking cards

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.
–Albert Einstein

21st Century Curriculum: An Integral Dimension of Thinking

History

One of the eminent American reconceptualist[1] curriculum theorists of our postmodern era, William Pinar, put out a call to a handful of select curriculum thinkers in 1973.[2] He invited them to present discussion papers under the umbrella conference title, "Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory" (otherwise known as the Rochester Conference). He asked the scholars to guide contemporary curriculum thinking and theories to engage with the challenges of a tumultuous 1960s-70s (primarily youth) counterculture and its implications for reforming, if not transforming, education beyond the Tylerian rational approach to curriculum.

Pinar (1976, 1976a) writes of how some sensitive and less judgmental curriculum theorists of the sixties and seventies were asking: What can the rebellious youth teach older adults, such as educators and parents, about the cascading crises in the world (e.g., the Vietnam War, ecological disasters, racism)? Pinar notes that the youth were arguing that the older generations created the problems and were, for the most part, thinking in ways that showed they were incompetent to resolve. Change and transformation were in the air and a lot of pain, anger, fear and love and joy to go with it—not unlike most revolutions in history.

According to Pinar (1976), over two decades earlier, in the same year of W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), there was a foreshadowing of the critique of the 1973 Rochester Conference. It came from a 1947 Chicago curriculum conference and paper given by B. Othanel Smith. Pinar (1976) noted:

> Smith sketches what he sees as four aspects of the educational task in the present era. . . . [and the fourth of these is] the need for new patterns of thinking about social policies and actions, to replace what he [Smith] saw as the prevalent and obsolete habit of thinking in a linear and compartmentalized fashion . . . [which maintained] the disciplines in separate spheres. (p. vii)

How I would have loved to be at that 1973 conference to engage with the spirit of Smith's and Pinar's intention: to bring in a new consciousness to our consciousness, a new thinking to our thinking, to shake up what had become habitual in curriculum thinking and discourse—in search for "a disclosure of the unconscious, both collective and individual, thus [forwarding] the evolution of a *more integrated* [emphasis added], hence more intelligent, more moral human being . . . this matter takes on a significance that is staggering" (Pinar, 1976a, p. 14).

My imaginary paper would have focused on an *integral curriculum* that brings forth new, more

holistic and integral patterns of thinking—including more critical ways of thinking about thinking. However, with cascading global crises continuing unabated, and in lieu of that historical invitation and opportunity lost, I settle for sharing one of my recent practical curriculum ideas and a little theory—integral theory—to upgrade a reconceptualist vision for the early 21st century.

Problem

"Wait, wait! Hey, where are you going?"

"Down the rabbit hole, what does it look like? Dah."

"I want to come with you!"

"Well don't wait but a second, for it will be too late. I'm already late."

"Ah... what?"

"No whats, buts, or maybes... I'm late, I'm late... I'm late!"

"Okay... Hey! Wait! Wait for me!"

"I can't, I'm late, I'm late... I'm late for a wonderful date!"

As a curriculum thinker there is nothing so much fun as to think differently about how we create curriculum. I don't wait for curriculum trends, philosophers, educational psychologists, government leaders, school boards, teachers, parents, or anyone to give me permission to think about thinking about ideas that may someday inform curriculum—and, if all goes well, these ideas may improve it!

Going down the rabbit hole, chasing rabbits you cannot catch is something a lot of people would not be up for. They haven't the patience. I've been criticized by pragmatists for wasting time "chasing rabbits." But that's a metaphor for chasing the *most* interesting ideas that may some day be useful for something, at least theoretically. Kind of like collecting—there's often no practical reason that one ought to collect some things. For example, I saw a collection of some 1500 ballpoint pens in a person's house once, spanning countries of origins, and dates going back well . . . so far, I can't recall. And, I knew he wasn't saving them to write with them when one pen runs dry, nor did he have a higher moral purpose like sending them off to some "developing" country to supply the less-fortunate school children in need.

The idea I present for a curriculum piece in this article aligns with collecting. There's an intuitive sense that collecting is worth doing, like making art works as "arts-based inquiry."[3] If you attend art exhibitions in the modern world, it's not uncommon to see artists exhibiting their collections of many-fold things[4]—which, I often re-translate to collections of their thinking, thoughts, and their images. Mostly, the process of collecting, like thinking, is itself worth gold. That's not easy to communicate to someone who doesn't know the joy of collecting things; or they don't collect what you collect. There seems little space in our fast-paced world to share our stories of collecting, which is required so we may learn to appreciate their extrinsic and intrinsic value. Doing curriculum for me is like—

"Wait. Wait. Don't tell me!"

Yes, you are already picking up the trail of a wandering author, in an artistic and playful way, leading you down a rabbit hole that you haven't agreed was exactly what you wanted to do in reading an article on thinking. Like Alice, sometimes you let your curiosity get the better of you, and—

Exactly! You are introduced to something new, or perhaps something forgotten, you haven't seen before. Oh, you really think that?

I know you haven't seen this curriculum staging I'm using here before. It's the first part of the voyage into the dark and mysterious.

"Follow the white rabbit!"

Here is Figure 1, an art piece, created as an X-ray (metaphorically) to show you all-at-once what this article is about and my excitement that produced it, without telling you precisely what it is all about:

Figure 1: R. Michael Fisher (2016). *Two Hands, Two Decks and a Rabbit.* Colour-scanned photo collage.

Pedantic descriptions do follow, yet, Figure 1 is offered as a stranger language, reality, experience—at its core, imagistic and magical—at least, to me, because it transfers a whole lot of information about my *thinking about thinking* inquiries and curriculum designs, and does so without you really knowing what is going on—other than that you may have guessed in Figure 1 that I had grabbed two decks of recipe or index cards (508 to be exact) and placed my arms down on a scanner to create an image. It then creates a story starter—at the first level of expression through an aesthetic device of a near "geologic materiality"[5]—as the weight of these layers of cards remind me of grasping hunks of sandstone sediments left over eons ago from an ancient sea bed.

"There are different levels we'll pass that show us how we have thought through time and can remember to think again," says Rabbit in an enigmatic murmur.

It's a wonderland of thinking in non-ordinary and non-consensual ways. Alice is following Rabbit, I follow Einstein, so . . . you may . . . follow me (?).

"Wait! Wait for me."

"I can't. I'm late, I'm late . . . I'm late for a wonderful date!"

Solution

> You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland
> and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.
> -Morpheus to Neo (*The Matrix*)[6]

It's one thing to think about something in order to try to understand it better. It's another thing entirely different to *think integrally* about the relationship between that which is thought about, and the way of thinking about it—that is, to think about thinking. The latter—perhaps a strange notion—I simply call, henceforth, *integral thinking*. This is what I have been designing as core to curriculum for the 21st century;[7] and herein, I share one small piece of it as part of a larger *Manifesto on Thinking About Thinking . . . Integrally* (Fisher, 2016). I wrote the manifesto to shake up what I see as mostly a very out-of-date, if not boring, un-integral curriculum in our schools and societies that is not nearly going to meet the complex demands of crises we face in the 21st century. Integral thinking, based upon critical *integral theory* (to be articulated later) that informs my curricularist perspective and this article, posits that our hands-are-already-full (Figure 1), and concomitantly, we're currently also in-over-our-heads.[8] An entire re-framing of our way of learning about thinking and thinking about thinking...integrally, is necessary to shift beyond this full and drowning condition.

Figure 1 derives its motivational source from my *Manifesto* and Einstein's challenge. The often-cited Einstein quote in the epigraph to this article points to our need for not only different ways of thinking but many interrelating different ways of thinking. Complex problems need complex analysis, need complex thinking.

According to Watkins and Wilber (2015), a whole cadre of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thinkers and critics are now talking about a 21st century where we humans are up against "wicked problems", such as global warming, culture wars, poverty, and racism. We need to be both clever and wise like never before, these thinkers/critics warn us:

> We may want to believe that we can turn our back on wicked problems, ignore the causes and pretend the symptoms don't exist, but the escalating interdependencies inherent in these issues means that they are not your problems or my problems—they are universally our problems, and pretending otherwise is utterly futile.... Wicked problems are... fundamentally developmental problems, and if we really want to find a constructive way forward we need to adapt and take a quantum leap in our *level of thinking* [emphasis added]. . . . And this means very specifically, as we will see, that part of the solution to wicked problems will involve the actual growth and development of consciousness of the change agents themselves. Clearly if a wicked problem is multi-dimensional, involves multiple stakeholders, has multiple causes that no one can

agree on, and displays multiple symptoms, then there will inevitably be multiple potential solutions. (Watkins & Wilber, 2015, pp. 40-41)

What parent, teacher, professor, or employer in the 21st century would not like young people to be educated so that they can access multiple ways of thinking and knowing? Figure 1 implies a *wicked solution* via 508 cards that reflect my life-long learning and thinking developmentally about world problems. It shows, in part and concretely, my weight of commitment and consciousness to hang in there, and it directs the purpose of this article: to expand our diverse ways of thinking through the practice of thinking about thinking (also called by some meta-thinking, meta-cognition,[9] etc.).

Figure 2 represents a minute fraction of the cards from the deck regarding the possibilities of the kinds of thinking that an adult, like myself, has accumulated over a lifetime. At age 65, with 12 years of post-secondary education, and a profession as a researcher/writer/teacher/activist, it's time for me to pass on those types of thinking (with names) to the next generation in one big hunk—simply, what I call a deck of "Integral Thinking Cards." So, here's another X-ray from my mind:

Figure 2: R. Michael Fisher (2016). Types of Thinking: Card Display. Colour-scanned photo.

The Theory Behind Integral Thinking Cards

If you want to know the theory I'm using, which is behind the design of this curriculum tool for thinking about thinking, then you will want to study *integral theory* and at least peek at my *Manifesto*. To summarize, integral theory is a recent branch of the critical theory school. Though there are many different (often controversial and conflicting) uses of the term "integral" in use by diverse thinkers, I focus here only on *integral* as theorized by the post-postmodern contemporary American integral philosopher and public intellectual, Ken Wilber. He introduces the basic

definition of "integral" and its relationship to "integrate" and the quest for a theory of everything that embraces the interrelationship of everything in a "unity-in-diversity" that includes "holistic" and "pluralistic" perspectives but, critiques them when necessary and goes beyond them *via* an "integral paradigm," requiring a developed integral consciousness (thinking and vision) on the way to constructing an "integral culture" and "integral education" (see Wilber, 2000, pp. 2, 30-31, 33-58, 95-96). Wilber states: "I'd like to think of it [integral theory] as one of the first believable world philosophies, a genuine embrace of East and West, North and South" (in Crittenden, 1997, p. x).

You may already be aware of this universal theory on the nature of reality and "everything" that is both ancient (East and West, North and South), and has been newly reconstructed by several contemporary thinkers, of which I only mention the American philosopher Ken Wilber as its most sophisticated interpreter, and whom I am most familiar with. This article is not going to go further down the rabbit hole with that intellectual work. My simple summary of integral theory/thinking is that it is the next evolutionary leap beyond holistic theory/thinking. Integral theory examines the best of holistic thinking but critiques its weakest points, its partiality, and discards what is not useful and what inhibits a fully integral embrace of a spectrum of realities and approaches to knowing.

How to Make and Utilize Integral Thinking Cards

Now, if you want to put a good theory into action, to use integral thinking as a solution to the problem our past non-integral thinking has created, then read on to a practical and pedantic description forthwith of how I went about creating this curriculum tool (a card deck).

Several examples, with minimal details, are given for how this card deck could be used, from young children to young adults. Please understand—this is speculative and needs to be "tested" in the field. The deck of cards is not even near completion in design (Figure 3). Eventually, it will be a computer-linked learner-centered activity for any of the entire set of 508 cards.

What I can initially share is what is virtually cost-free and I believe will be very effective to help young people develop complex integral thinking capacities—or, simply, it will help them to think about thinking in a unique way. Yes, that's the very subject matter you would introduce them to:

"Hello, students. Today, I wish to show you a card game that is made so you can better think about thinking—that is, to learn more about how you think and how to improve it so you can solve the problems you want to in more creative and complex ways."

At least, that's the kind of discourse I imagine might be suitable to offer to some learners you are responsible for (modified for all ages 7 and up, and/or with various other learning challenges).

However, as Watkins and Wilber (2015) pointed out in the quote on solving wicked problems, the very first step as facilitators is to expand your own consciousness—your own ways of thinking about thinking. I began this curriculum project with thinking how I might expand my own thinking about thinking. I made a deck of cards based on my own intellectual life. The problem-solving demands of a globalizing and complex world, with many intense crises, big or small, calls on the adult generations to leave youth with a legacy to think more diversely than the generation before.

Alice spins in circles as a dizzying, vertigo sets in—hearing those prosaic words in the last sentence and feeling them, now . . . they are not only words heard before . . . in the past . . . by

Einstein. They tingle with a new vibrancy. Alice can hardly handle it. She wants to close her eyes. But then she won't be able to follow the rabbit she intuits in the dark, who is not far ahead, tumbling, tumbling . . .

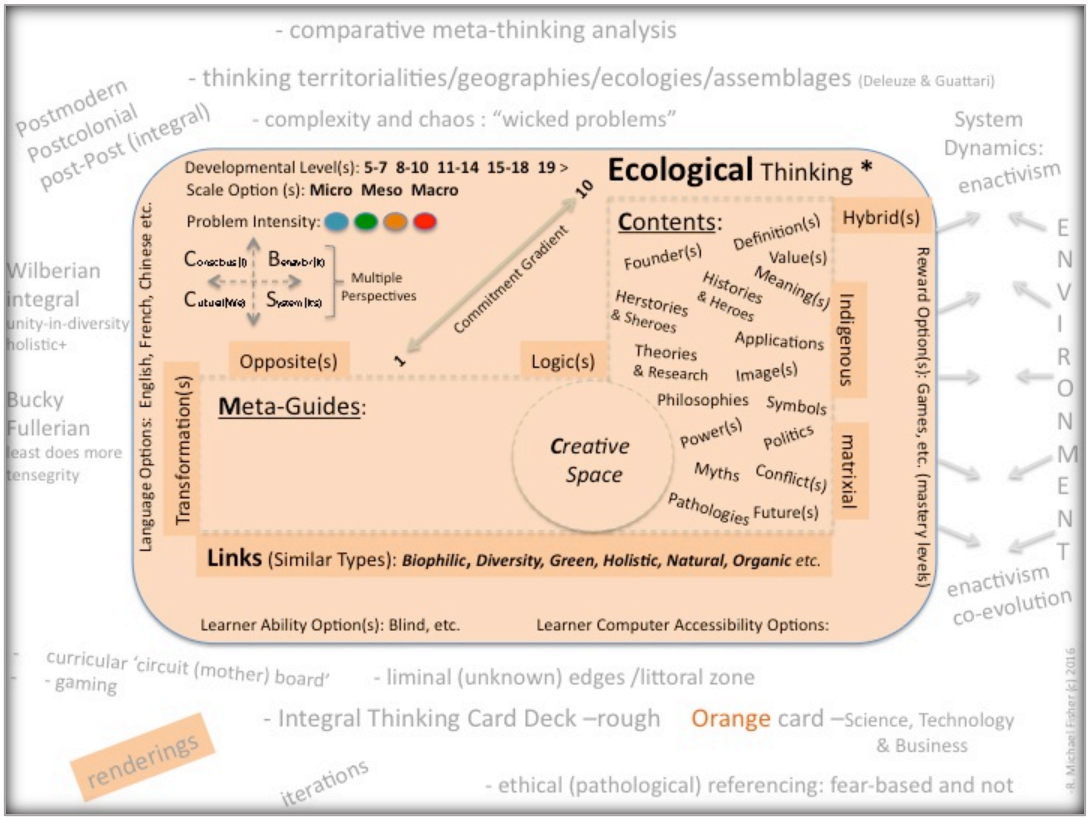

Figure 3: R. Michael Fisher (2016). Rough Design Template (Example) for Integral Thinking Card Deck.

Figure 3 indicates some of the ideas I have had about how to utilize a card that is selected from the deck (or a teacher could assign such a card, or a few, to particular students who wish to work on a particular problem). As Figure 3 shows, there are far too many components of the card's design to enter into with detail here. They are all relatively self-explanatory components. I simply sat down and wrote out all the kinds of thinking I could remember that I have come across at some point in my life, especially as a professional and academic. I then sorted those out into color-coded categories to match the card colors, as follows:

Pink – Arts, Aesthetics, Philosophy, History and Literature
Orange- Science, Technology, Business, Sports, Law, Health
Green – Religion, Theology, Morals, Spirituality
Yellow- Social Sciences, Education, Cultural Studies, Geography, Politics

Of course, not all types of thinking totally belong in one color-coded category but it was surprising how I was able to locate them fairly easily into one card-colored-category. The student using these cards may, for example (as in Figure 3), wish to study "What is Ecological Thinking?" as the problem/inquiry. The simplest way to do that (at this time, without the card deck being fully developed) is for the students to go on the internet and start searching the term "ecological thinking" and see where it leads them, then summarize their findings in a report with their own

creative approaches to the complexity at hand. You could offer them multiple ways of reporting as well. Students ought to learn, in formal or informal learning sites, and to draw on mentors and resource persons of all kinds (e.g., librarian, older peers) to help them make sense of what they are finding and how to search effectively for findings. To encourage students to elaborate (especially with older students), have them follow the sub-link types of thinking on the Ecological Thinking card, in Figure 3—Biophilic Thinking, Diversity Thinking, and so on—and combine all into one report. What has the student learned about this type of thinking and its application potentials?

Now, you may have them draw another card, and another, and compare and contrast the new types of thinking they investigate with the others from their prior cards. Or, you might ask them what kind of world problem they want to solve. Then, have them draw (sight-concealed) three cards from the deck. These would be researched as types of thinking; then after synthesis of that information, the student would create a report that applies the types of thinking (potentially, theoretically) to the problem they took on.

Wouldn't it be interesting to present the deck in an introductory description of the game and pass the whole deck to each student? Even let them take the deck home for the next 24 hours, or even a week. See what happens. Have them keep a journal of their process. What is it like for a child to have the whole thinking deck of an adult (like me, or you, as a teacher) in their possession? I believe there's a symbolic interconnectivity here that transmits an anxiety-reducing wisdom and refreshed trust between generations. You may have other ideas of the value of this passing-on process.

The thinking about thinking vocabulary expands with a renewed growing perspective on any world problem (e.g., global warming) or any problem at all (e.g. how to be more creative). Certainly, teachers and/or students may come up with all kinds of creative ways to use these cards. Imagine different teachers in a school, for example, each making their own card decks of types of thinking. What a gold mine those would be for students and for other teachers too.

The time has come to make thinking about thinking a subject area itself—and, it doesn't have to be isolated necessarily from all the traditional subject areas or specific disciplines. It can serve also as an integration of the subjects and disciplines. We cannot continue to think in isolated fragments or disciplines without reproducing the same problems we have created but merely with a different dress. The integral dimension of thinking about thinking requires young learners have access to the vast diverse vocabularies of many adults without cost or barriers. That's the ideal curriculum, I think.

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Endnotes

[1] Although "reconceptualization" of curriculum has diverse meanings for a number of theorists, arguably Pinar (1988, p. v) summarized its essence and Slattery (2006, pp. 8-9) has further suggested the movement is inherently embedded in postmodern perspectives on curriculum which characteristically challenge the modernist Tylerian Rational of *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1949), the latter which dominated much of the field of curriculum studies and management—and arguably, still does today.

[2] The conference was held in Rochester, New York on May 3-5, 1973. Invited presenters were Donald Bateman, Maxine Greene, Dwayne Huebner, James Macdonald, William Pilder, and Robert Starratt, along with William Pinar, who himself presented papers which became chapters in a book (see Pinar, 1973, vii).

[3] There is arts-based inquiry that gives art and aesthetics the complete lead, which is often my own preference as an artist/researcher/educator, and there are variations on this emphasis all the way to politically motivated and directed "arts-based inquiry" for "revolutionary pedagogy," as in Finley (2005).

[4] A common approach is gathering "junk" collections and mounting them, as in the beverage cans by El Anatsui, 2014 at the Mnuchin Gallery, New York; see the photo image in *Art News*, November 2014 issue (p. 5).
[5] I'm referring here to a sensibility and a lens, merely looking at this photo, informing and invoking the interpretation, much of which is somewhat along the temporality signature of a geologic "new materialist" perspective, apersonal, countless, tectonic, prototypically human (see for example, Bennett, 2013, pp. 244-45). I like this particular casting, register, re-affection with the primordial "cards"—I can't quite put my finger on it, but I like it as I sense it transforms my relationship to knowledge itself, and thus education and learning. But all that would require another article to ferret out.
[6] Excerpt from Scene 29 in the 1998 *The Matrix s*hooting script (Lamm, 2000, p. 301). A subtext for this entire article is a meta-context (inquiry) of how best do we do curriculum when we exist currently inside a hegemonic "culture of fear" or "fear matrix" (see Fisher, 2003). The Wachowski Brothers. sci-fi-action-noir trilogy, *The Matrix*, has often served as the foundational narrative (meta-myth) for my critical thinking and theorizing since 1999 because it so nicely illustrates and performs oppression and potential and precarious liberation in a digitalized world.
[7] Fisher (2010) was my first custom-designed integral curriculum for adult learners "outside" of (and, yet was also complementary to) the mainstream formal higher education networks.
[8] An important integral-friendly Harvard University developmental researcher/educator/theorist, Kegan (1994), has written extensively about this problem of how our thinking (cognitive capacity) has not evolved as fast as our ability to create complex problems we cannot cope with very well. He shows how it is causing daily major psychic and emotional chronic distress, if not a sense of powerlessness, for most people regardless of age, class, race, gender and even years of formal education. He notes we have to have more people who can "shift" to higher orders (levels) of thinking, that is, to meta-thinking (a point Ken Wilber has repeated for decades *via* integral thinking).
[9] There are far too many sources to cite, with their similarities and differences, re: meta-thinking and meta-cognition. From this plethora, I am most enthused by the quality work of Four Arrows (2016). He has been applying metacognition, within an Indigenous perspective, on learning and moral development for the purpose of managing and transforming fear through courage and fearlessness. This is so needed.