

Thinking Skills

Engaging the intellect holistically By JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS

WESTERN education systems emphasize “thinking skills” either as a program or as a strand ideally woven into all subject areas. In Britain, for example, one factor behind the emphasis is a concern that the national curriculum has abandoned the philosophy and practice of holistic education and is dominated by a narrow concept of “schooling” geared to uninspiring utilitarian objectives. Prime Minister Tony Blair says that it is the provision of a “workforce” to drive forward national economic performance, the top priority in his vision of education.

The negative effects of this target-driven schooling on the morale of school-children have been well documented. Disaffection and truancy are rife, and self-harm, depression and even suicide are increasing alarmingly among young people.

The thrust for thinking skills education has focused on the development of a teaching and learning culture that promotes “critical and creative thinking.” There is a pressing need to *revive* such a teaching and learning culture in the Muslim world. Muhammad Asad eloquently reminds us of this in his foreword to *The Message of the Qur’an*, that the spirit of the Qur’an helped revive the culture of inquiry in Europe: “Through its insistence on consciousness and knowledge, it engendered among its followers a spirit of intellectual curiosity and independent inquiry, ultimately resulting in that splendid era of learning and scientific research which distinguished the world of Islam at the height of its cultural vigor; and the culture thus fostered by the Qur’an penetrated in countless ways and byways into the mind of medieval Europe and gave rise to that revival of Western culture which we call the Renaissance, and thus became in the

course of time largely responsible for the birth of what is described as the ‘age of science.’”

But the process of learning and inquiry engendered by the Qur’an was not restricted to a “rational” concept of “enlightenment,” which in its most debased form reduces rich and multi-layered *scientia sacra* to the poverty of scientism. It was a spiritual “enlightenment” under which all other levels of enlightenment are subsumed in the natural order. It is the origin and goal of an authentic Islamic education as it is for all truly holistic systems of education in any culture that endeavor to “unwrap” (“develop” in its original meaning) our full humanness.

There is always the danger that supposedly enhanced thinking skills, both critical and creative, if detached from a higher vision of intellectual and spiritual capacities, will be pressed into the service of the utilitarian goals that govern the schooling process and its prevailing ideology.

Indeed, without understanding the intellect and an awareness of the moral and spiritual dimensions that animate human excellence, education in thinking skills can rarely go beyond the reductionism that focuses solely on sharpening the lower intellectual functions—the logical reasoning, argument and analysis that have been productive in scientific and technological advancement but cannot encompass the deeper needs of the soul and spirit.

An Islamic vision of education can re-animate holistic education that encompasses higher intellectual faculties and a human excellence (*ihsan*) that is inseparable from beauty and virtue and not limited to an individualistic concept of personal achievement, mastery and success. This is a vision of *tahid*, in

which cognitive, moral and spiritual functions are intertwined and interdependent.

“I seek refuge from God from a knowledge which has no use,” said the Prophet Muhammad. The *useful* knowledge he refers to is not merely *utilitarian* but that which enables us to live under the grace and guidance of our Creator. A solely *utilitarian* education prioritizes *useful* education and reduces the ideal of *right* livelihood to a solely materialistic enterprise in which we become “consumers” enslaved by “national economic development.”

Although cultivating rational thinking in any education system is important, *‘aql* (intellect) encompasses not only the lower intellectual level, which depends on the power of definition and conceptualization through language skills, but also the organ of moral and spiritual intelligence and insight, which at its highest level can be equated with the heart.

In a detailed study of *‘aql*, Karim Douglas Crow notes the re-appearance of “wisdom” in recent descriptions of intelligence to connote “a combination of social and moral intelligence, or in traditional terms: that blend of knowledge and understanding within one’s being manifested in personal integrity, conscience, and effective behavior.” He says one key component of “intelligence” expressed by the term *‘aql* was “ethical-spiritual.” (*Islamica*, 3:1, 1999, pp. 49–64)

Through awakening and nurturing higher faculties in an authentically Islamic educational process, Muslims can contribute to reviving the best educational practice for all mankind. ❖

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