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THINKING ALONG AND THINKING OUT: AN ANALYSIS OF ROBERT FROST'S STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

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ABSTRACT

In the competitive world knowledge is characterized by the creative integration of information and learning from different disciplines. The ability to think is unique to human and a new art of learning is required to be successful. In the 'information age' qualities of independence and flexibility are highly valued and 'learning to learn' has become an important goal. Cognitive skills are different from academic skills. When existing concepts are interconnected new concepts are formed which is a result of cognition. This paper focuses on how different perceptions can be developed through reading a literary text. Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has been analyzed based on a cognitive framework.

Key Words: learning, thinking, cognition, logic, neuroscience

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INTRODUCTION

In this new millennium knowledge is characterized by the creative integration of information and learning from different disciplines. To exist in this competitive world a new art of learning is needed. The ability to think is unique to human. In today's chaotic and unstructured world children and youth need cognitive skills to be successful as adults. Also, the industry and the corporate world increasingly emphasize the need of cognitive skills for better understanding. But now-a-days, cognitive skills are found lacking and the concern is expressed in the academia as well as the industry. The concept of cognition varies according to the disciplines, but is generally accepted to mean the process of thought. Cognition can also be defined as 'developing and trying to make sense of the world.' cognition also includes the process of obtaining knowledge through thought, experience and the senses. Cognition can be natural or artificial, conscious or unconscious. Cognition is the mental

process of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, perception, reasoning and judgment. Cognition is the result of many processes it comprises of. Cognitive skills are different from academic skills. Cognitive skills are the mental capabilities that are needed for successful learning of academic subjects. When existing concepts are interconnected new concepts are formed which is a result of cognition. Cognition has its influence in various fields like psychology, ontology, economics, linguistics, education, politics, epistemology and philosophy. The term thinking can refer a mental activity or a conscious act involving subject's consciousness. In the field of education the term is used to mean a consciously goal directed process, such as remembering, forming concepts, solving problems, making decisions and judgments and generating new perspectives.

Thinking is of many types such as productive, reflective, emotional, logical, creative and critical. The type of thinking that this paper

proposes to deal with is logical-reasoning. Reasoning is the cognitive process looking for reasons, beliefs, conclusions, actions or feelings. Although reasoning was once used to be a unique human capability, recent researches in the field of animal cognition suggest that animals also engage in reasoning. Thinking as a subject is witnessing frequent breakthroughs thanks to the developments in the field of neurosciences.

Hume once used the following metaphor to describe thinking

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions (thoughts) successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.

(Human Development & cognitive Process, ed. John Eliot 480)

Again these perceptions are modified according to the relation of cause and effect. This suggests that thinking is not something which human beings do, but which happens in them. This is the basic notion behind the "stream of thought model." Hume described mind as simply the system of perceptions.

In fact, the twentieth century is touted as the century of brain research. Popular interest in the field too has been on the increase and it is almost common knowledge that we have a rational brain (left hemisphere) and an emotional, intuitive brain (right hemisphere). The frontal lobe of brain involves in distinguishing good and bad actions. This distinction is important for logical thinking. Literature studies have been dominated by ideologies and theories in recent times. Since the second half of the twentieth century, study of literature tended to foreground aspects of language and techniques catering almost only to intellectual needs. Added to this was the general neglect of the study of Art and Humanities by the planners and policy makers. Utilitarianism somehow came to determine what type of education was to be supported.

Enlightenment and rational humanism tended to emphasize the intellect and it was for a long time thought it was the primary duty of every person to control emotions and gain rational thoughts. The academia too thought likewise and

most education has also given primacy to intellectual development. The top sided development is in a way responsible for the demand from industry and the corporate world for certain attitudes, personality factors to be present in the graduates of today. This also explains why spiritual intelligence dominates the media, academia and industry.

The field of neuroscience has played a key role in the reemergence of the importance of emotions in thinking and decision making. Antony Damasio's 'Descartes' Error' and V. Ramachandran's 'Phantoms of Brain' were vital to kindling interest in the emotional aspects of the functioning of the human brain. As long as the humanistically oriented intellectuals and teachers kept appealing in a familiar vocabulary, the needed listening did not come about but the language of the neuroscientists has succeeded in driving home the message. Thanks to neurosciences, we have started to talking about values, positive personality, attitude etc.,

We seem to have restated an idea already known. But history gives us examples of such reinventing. At the present, the need is to identify materials and methods that can help knowledge and skills emerge as an outcome of thinking through one's experience of reading a text. There is a definite need to orient students towards a reflective self-awareness so that they would understand and have control over their learning experience. For this to be achieved we need the head as well as the heart.

Logical reasoning is one of the cognitive skills. This skill is important for the purpose of understanding a text. Thinking can either be emotional or analytical. There are certain texts where emotional thinking dominates. Cognitive thinking helps in creating new concepts or ideas and enhances better comprehension. Thus this paper focuses on how different perceptions can be developed through reading a literary text. Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has been analyzed based on a cognitive framework.

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" poem has been selected to analyze and understand the emotional and logical aspects of

thinking. Since the poem is the depiction of the poet's mind it has enough emotional appeal and moves towards a rational understanding of life.

Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

- Robert Frost

The different stages of cognition that can be found in the poem are

- Information gathering
 - Recognition
 - Perception
- Understanding
- Reflective thinking
- Productive thinking

Information gathering

The first line of the poem indicates the recognition stage.

Whose woods these are I think I know

The second sub stage is perception. In this stage the poet collects visual sensory data like woods, house, village, snow, horse, farmhouse, lake, evening and bells. He perceives nature with a sense of admiration and he is enjoying the beauty of the woods. This section also introduces the poet's thinking and it is evident from the anthropomorphizing of the horse

My little horse will think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near

Understanding

The poet is enjoying the beauty of nature. But at the same time, he realizes that he is isolated and there is no other human being around him. Here the horse has an important role. The desolateness seems to strike an inner chord in the poet. Drawn in by the power of the scene, the poet seems to lose himself in a state that many have explained as "death wish" – a desire to cease and be one with nature. But he is awakened, startled out of that state by another audio sensory phenomenon. The sights mesmerize him but the sound made by the harness bells break the magic. Horse is the symbol of life. By shaking the bells, the horse brings the poet from a slumber like state to a conscious one. Coming back to awareness is what happens in the poet's mind. For the reader, the understanding is gained at a symbolic level. The horse very well could symbolize the instinctual, intuitive urge for continuance of life.

Reflective thinking

Reflective thinking is an important cognitive skill. The line "Woods are lovely, dark and deep" emphasizes this stage. What the poet has recognized, perceived and understood has been reflected in this stage. The poet who has been admiring the beauty of the woods now thinks of the real world. Though he desires to enjoy the nature his rational mind makes him to understand the reality of life. This is the metacognitive stage as he has started looking at his own mood and experience.

Productive thinking

Productive thinking is the final stage and here the fruits of reflection gel as an idea, a resolve, and a principle to practice. The last two lines of the poem showcases this stage. In the lines

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep

The word sleep can be viewed from two perspectives. It may refer to the sleep in its normal sense or the metaphysical eternal sleep. The last stanza has a strong emotional appeal. It is here that the poet's mood and feelings find a parallel in the reader. As readers we are reminded of our own experiences that involved a conflict between a wish and sense of duty and responsibility. In this stage a main idea is formed which is a kind of emergent

behavior. This juxtaposition throws up one of the fundamental questions of life and reflection and thinking on that results in a concept or idea that can resolve the issue. The forming of idea and resolving to implement it can be called an emergent behavior.

The foregoing analysis clearly shows that the poem as a whole is an intellectual exercise which enables the readers to link perceptual, cognitive and communicative activities thus forming a cognitive paradigm. In spite of its size the poem has narrative experience, event value, and progression – travel, stop, place, seeing, impact, reflection, productive thinking and recommencement of travel. From an internal point of view, the poem can be termed a “mentalist” model where “the thinker appears to be a solitary manipulator of self-contained mental representations” (Manfred Jahn in David Herman, 203). But in his effort to share his experience with others Frost also intends his poem to open the “door to the system that accepts cognizers as participants in an essentially social process.”

Conclusion

It is important to understand that it is wrong to treat emotions and reasons as contradictory to each other. There are evidences from cognitive neuroscience to prove that best solutions are arrived at by using both emotion and reason. Literature has the power to improve cognitive capacities as it enhances awareness of our thoughts and feelings. Poems of this kind facilitate the interaction between long-term and short-term memory and hence enhance cognitive capacities by augmenting the thinking process. In developing cognitively an individual moves from phenomenalistic (concrete) view of the world to the constructionist (abstract) view. The poem does underline such a movement – from the phenomenon of woods to the principle of keeping promises. What is in the real sense is an ability to structure one’s experience – a core cognitive capacity which enables one to improvise strategies and skills.

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