

Education and Existential Intelligence

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Introduction

Many people wonder, *What does it mean to engage in 'existential thinking'? What does this have to do with my life and intelligence?* Let's consider a few times in your life when you may have had the opportunity to think about existential concerns. Let's talk about life and death.

Was there a time in your life when someone close to you unexpectedly died: a friend, a relative or perhaps even a beloved pet when you were a child? Did you ask yourself, *Why?* and complain, "*Life just isn't fair!*" Have you ever known anyone who committed suicide? Did you wonder, "What were they *thinking?*" Did you listen to the differing explanations provided by people about the meaning of death and continue wondering about it and what you really thought about it? Did you want to learn more and continue asking questions or read books?

Another occasion for existential thinking is at birth. Have you ever been present at the birth of a family member or perhaps a pet or other animal? When your dog or cat is pregnant and then finally gives birth the focus of the whole family changes from its normal daily routine to a concern with the health of a new living being. It seems like a "miracle of life" that a blind tiny puppy will grow into a large lively dog. It is a profound existential thought to realize that you are now responsible with nurturing this tiny animal into a healthy, happy family pet. I can still remember when I learned that I was going to be a father for the first time. It felt like the world stood still for a few minutes. I suddenly felt a new connection with all living things. I now had a new, shared relationship with the experiences of my own father and grandfather and all the fathers before me. I was now a part of that world called "fatherhood." I was no longer the center of my universe. My life now had a new and growing purpose and that purpose would have a new first name, Dad.

It's at times like these that we are deeply engaged in existential thinking.

We've all heard it described that your life flashes before your eyes whenever you have a close encounter with death. Has this happened to you? Afterwards, did you find yourself looking at your life differently? If you attend church, temple or mosque have you ever walked out after an especially powerful sermon or ceremony and felt yourself more alive, appreciative or deeply moved "in your soul"? Have you ever watched an emotional movie and felt like it touched something more than your emotions? Somehow it stirred the foundations of your very being? After Sept. 11, 2001 did you somehow think differently about the world and your place in it? Have you ever wondered about your mission in life? After Sept. 11 did you, like most of America, come to look at firemen and policemen differently? All of a sudden their job was no longer merely to put out fires or to arrest people, but now their mission was to save America and "our way of life" from the terrorist "evil-doers." Their jobs were no longer "ordinary" but instead now carry "existential meaning" and importance not just to themselves, but to all Americans and perhaps to all of human history (if the American dream was to be defeated by the forces of evil). This existential connection is what we mean when we call someone a "hero."

Sept. 11, 2001 gave President George W. Bush the platform upon which to speak to the deepest fears of all Americans that our homes would be destroyed by “evil-doers” who hate freedom and our way of life. His speeches now always speak to our fear of death and the death of the American dream. Great leaders always confront our deepest fears and our greatest dreams. President Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address that helped to rouse the north to the greater cause of the war. President Kennedy helped America imagine the New Frontier of the future and the mission to put men on the moon. President Roosevelt guided America through the great depression and then World War II and consolidated our role as the “leader of the free world.” So, that now it is said in Europe “When American sneezes, the world catches a cold.”

The roots of the word ‘existential’ are existence and exist. To exist means to live and so to think about your existence means to think about your life and perhaps Life itself. In those moments when we are thinking about the meaning of our individual lives or the greater purpose and mission of our group then we are engaged in “existential thinking.” Sometimes we walk into a religious service thinking about the football game we’ll watch later that afternoon or the party that we enjoyed last night...and then half listening to the prayers, readings or the sermon we’re just going through the motions, but then we hear something that awakens an old memory or an old feeling and suddenly we’re fully awake and hearing clearly a message that rearranges our perception of the world and our role in it. Maybe you walk out with a clearer sense of your Mission or duty. Maybe you now know that you’ll join the military service to take part in homeland security. Or maybe you realize that your deepest desire is to feed people or guide people out of their dependency upon alcohol or drugs...or you decide that you must develop your math skills so you can graduate from college and support your family so your children can have the privilege of going to college...maybe you realize that there is no longer a need to continue an argument with someone that you love...whatever is particular to you and your life or the lives of others...when you are offered the opportunity to think about life differently so that you see the larger issues and implications of your behavior and choices it is at that time that you are deeply engaged in existential thinking. Some people say that this is when they hear God talking to them and others might call it a Guardian Angel whispering. Others say it is your Higher Self speaking to your ordinary self. These are different names for those times when we are personally connected to profound ideas that shape the meaning, course and ultimate understanding of life itself.

Some people think about Existential questions and concerns more than other people. Just like some people enjoy music, singing, playing or creating songs more than others. Obviously, we are not all alike. Our minds all work differently. Most of us devote very little time to considering the meaning of our lives and instead are content to live daily life the best that we can. Some people devote a lot of time and thought to considering the meaning of daily life and exploring questions of Truth, Justice, Morality and Meaning. These people may become community leaders, ministers, philosophers or various types of artists or writers. Most of us are content with our own opinions and don’t worry about how other people think about these big issues. That is until we are confronted with dramatically differing world-views and must make an effort to understand or resolve these differences. We may turn to someone we know who has skill or insight into these matters to help us understand and to resolve this problem. This might be a clergy person, teacher, counselor or family member. In the past it has been the elders who are thought to be “wise” and able to guide our decision making or thinking about difficult matters. These people would tell stories that illuminate the mystery. These stories might become known as ‘myths’ and then later ‘sacred stories’ or written down as “sacred texts.” A wise person was someone who could clear the confusion and see through the ordinary troubles of life in order to reveal the basic human principles in the

dilemma. If we can see these principles then we are offered the freedom to choose the best solution to the problem. These principles are those that have withstood the test of time and have been honored by people enough to be saved and written down or retold generation after generation. Examples include: The Ten Commandments, The Flood, the Creation of the World, Aesop's Fables, The Torah, The Parables of Christ, The Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path of Buddha, the Tao Te Ching, the I Ching, the Koran, etc.

The development of your existential thinking skills may or may not be important to you just like one person might really want to develop his/her musical skills while another person couldn't care less. If you have some interest in existential thinking then it is useful to know how to find out more about it when you want to do so. It is also helpful to know where to look for people with a shared interest in discussing their existential concerns. Some people are more inclined to explore the world of philosophy while others are concerned with religious and theological ideals. Still other people are better suited to expressing their existential ideas in visual art, poetry, novels or the study of history. If you have leadership ambitions then it is important to know how various significant leaders have incorporated existential thought into their vocation. If you are naturally strong in your existential thought then you might wish to explore careers that will allow you to develop and channel your existential strengths into a meaningful job. You might be perfectly suited to a career as a minister, philosopher, writer or counselor. On the other hand, you may have very little interest in existential ideas, but you might find that you get more out of life when you take the time to pause and reflect on the existential implications of seemingly ordinary events such as marriage, love, war, friendship and the possible "heroic" implications of your mundane and sometimes boring job.

What is Existential Thinking?

Existential thinking is a meaning-making process where an individual is able to reflect philosophically on issues important to the life of oneself as well as other people or "humanity." Such thinking requires an abstract attitude that discerns ideas pertaining to the meaning, purpose and fundamental aspects of life from everyday experiences. To answer the question "What does this mean?" requires the consideration of a second question: "In relationship to what?" in order to produce an adequate answer. When we make meaning of daily events we refer to either an implicit or explicit set of beliefs, values, preconceptions, expectations, goals, etc. depending upon the context. When we take into consideration universal, transcendental, fundamental, essential or ultimate concerns we will then activate our existential awareness.

At the age of eight Helen Keller was asking questions of Anne Sullivan such as "*Where did I come from? Where shall I go when I die? Who made God? What is a soul?*" Such existential curiosity reveals her precocious development while children of that age are more typically preoccupied with their toys, games, friends, family and school activities. Only rarely will the average eight year old child raise such concerns let alone probe so widely and carefully.

Anne Sullivan deferred answering Helen's inquiries and instead encouraged her to think carefully about these issues until she arranged for Helen to speak with notable clergy. Anne exposed Helen to a wide variety of myths, Bible stories and classic literature as part of her instructional curriculum, but was hesitant to impose her own beliefs upon her.

Existential thinking, however, differs from beliefs, faith or ideology because it is the *process* of meaning-making rather than what we assume to be the Truth or the final product of meaning-made. Faith in or acceptance of any principles or ideas can be the result of existential thinking or not. A person may assume that certain ideas are “true” as a matter of unexamined pure faith such as children who learn by rote memory the creed taught to them by parents or religious education. Conversely, one may achieve the same degree of belief in precisely the same principles (or not) as a consequence of personal experience, lengthy reasoning and critical analysis.

Neither Anne Sullivan nor Helen’s parents imposed a preconceived belief system upon her young mind and thus she was able to contemplate all the various ideologies to which she had been exposed and then formulate her own existential inquiries.

Existential thought reveals through logical analysis, expressive dialogue or insightful inquiry the connections among phenomena (facts, events, processes) and ideas that are vital, essential or central to the human condition (e.g., death, birth, purpose, etc.). Logical reasoning can be used to derive principles from phenomena for a variety of purposes (scientific, scholarly, or theoretical) but it is not existential unless it concerns the fundamental or ultimate philosophical aspects of life itself.

A few examples will serve to clarify the essential task of existential thought.

A historian may analyze a particular battle in terms of the overall war, but it takes an existential thinker such as Abraham Lincoln to reveal the significance of a battle in terms of the meaning of the war itself to the philosophical life of the American people, their beliefs, aspirations and their essential humanity.

A professional naturalist can discern important patterns in the movements of an ant colony along the banks of a lake, but it took Henry David Thoreau to relate those movements to the human condition and an individual’s life so that he may conclude that “An unexamined life is not worth living.”

A sociologist can describe the importance of the mother and child relationship to the health of the community and the psychologist to the emotional health of both the mother and the child, but it takes Leonardo da Vinci to illuminate the meaning of that relationship to the health of the soul and its relationship to a deity.

Like ripples from a pebble dropped in a still pond the quest for meaning radiates out through multiple levels of analysis (i.e., psychological, social, cultural, physiological, historical, ecological, etc.) until it leaps metaphorically out of the pond itself to address transcendental concerns.

Existential Thinking and Its Relationship to Beliefs

It is easy to confuse existential thinking with religious beliefs, particular forms of philosophy, spirituality or faith. The following descriptions strive to clarify that existential thinking is related to these concepts, but is not the same thing. It is a mistake to associate existential thinking with any one particular point of view, beliefs or set of assumptions.

Existential thinking involves the active inquiry into vital questions and concerns that humans have about the meaning and mysteries of life and death. It is a cognitive process that gets expressed via various disciplines such as philosophy, theology and artistic pursuits. Existential thinking is not the same as one's spiritual or religious faith, but may be part of one's personal journey and spiritual development. Existential thinking emphasizes the questions that one pursues while beliefs provide the answers to those questions.

Existential inquiry is not the exclusive domain of any particular religion or philosophy. Existential thinking is the cognitive process involved in formulating and exploring essential or fundamental questions about life issues. Existential thinking can be compared with the musical skill of melody creation which is an essential skill for any musical genre. Melody can be expressed in classical, jazz, folk, rock or gospel musical styles.

Existential thinking underpins philosophical inquiry for secular, sacred and artistic belief systems. Individuals can have any degree of inclination and skill for dealing with existential nuances and complexity. Some people spend very little time or effort dealing with existential issues while others may find that it is an abiding concern that becomes developed to a very high degree. Meanwhile, the majority of people may find that existential concerns play a limited role in their daily life but are activated during specific times and circumstances such as during religious rituals, birth, death and life transitions.

Existential thinking provides the tools that are used to understand "the answers" provided by various religious beliefs, philosophical systems and artistic pursuits.

Spirituality is a very broad concept with many different dimensions and definitions. Definitions can range from an emphasis on divine / sacred entity to the more secular and humanistic use of the term to describe high emotion such as "team spirit." In its more religious context it suggests a connectedness between the individual and something beyond one's self such as another person, God or Angels (Demons).

Existential thinking can be an important aspect of one's spiritual growth and development. It provides the cognitive tools for exploring questions about one's place, purpose and role in the world / universe. It can provide the lines of inquiry for creative and artistic pursuits. It also forms the basic starting points for many different philosophical orientations towards life. A person's faith in any particular belief may be arrived at via the careful exploration of existential issues or not. Faith may just as easily be arrived at simply and without sustained existential inquiry.

Existential Thinking

- asking and exploring Big Questions
- fundamental human concerns
- philosophical inquiry
- search for meaning
- universal issues & values
- understanding ethical dilemmas
- life and death questions

Religious Concepts:

- God
 - sacred
 - divine spirit
 - Holiness
 - life after death
 - afterlife
 - soul
 - Resurrection
 - Father, Son, Holy Ghost
 - Blessedness
 - Gods, Demi-Gods
 - Angels & Demons
 - Heaven / hell
 - Reincarnation
 - Buddha Nature
 - Worship
 - Prophets
 - Divine Word / Text
 - Moral belief systems
 - God's Plan / Law
 - Truth
 - Grace
 - Four Noble Truths
- Faith
 - Revelation
 - The Answer
 - The Tao
 - Father Spirit

Philosophy Concepts

- nature of reality
- What is knowledge?
- consciousness
- human nature
- thinking / feeling

Artistic Concepts

- inspiration
 - creativity
 - essence
 - beauty
- meaning
 - understanding / insight

Existential Intelligence in the Classroom

When students pose that infamous and sometimes dreaded “*why?*” question as in “*Why do I have to learn this stupid stuff?*” will you merely dismiss it as a time wasting distraction or will you respond with a profound and thought provoking answer? Will you be ready to open the door to deeper and wider understanding of how your discipline assists individuals and communities to create meaning in life? Will you be prepared with an answer that shows students how your discipline can provide a sense of direction and fulfillment in daily life? Will you tell a story or demonstrate how the skills of your discipline provide the tools to help students to grapple with philosophical problems? Your response may be an illustrative example from your own personal experience or from a leader in your field. You may tell a historical anecdote or describe a current (or future) challenge to your community's survival or well-being. It may be helpful to think about major leaders in your field and how their work addressed philosophical concerns and questions both in your discipline as well as in the community.

Addressing the existential implications of your discipline raises the level of discussion and understanding of your field beyond the merely practical and “technical.” Many students may appear to be disinterested in such philosophical discussions, but it will help them to place their new learning into a wider context so that their knowledge (skill) will not be completely disconnected from their own lives and from the life of their community.

Existential thinking explores fundamental questions of meaning and purpose. Some students will not have questions or concerns about these issues while others will be actively engaged in their consideration. Your response to existential ideas can make connections between the practical matters of daily life and a broader philosophical perspective. To “stretch” students’ thinking we need to make explicit the connections between the mundane and universal principles. Each of the disciplines taught in schools can be viewed as “tools” that allow individuals to examine deeply into beliefs and assumptions so as to survive and thrive with a profound sense of meaning and purpose.

Often in life philosophical matters are taken for granted until a crisis arises or a person is faced with a life altering decision. Soldiers may experience this shift keenly as do leaders when faced with a crisis or disaster. President George W. Bush wrestled with the ordinary problems of managing the U.S. government until the 9-11 tragedy provided him with the platform to address our ultimate survival concerns in his public appearances and speeches. Several years later the 9-11 commission investigating the tragedy blamed the intelligence community and related government agencies with a “failure of imagination.” Philosophical thinking requires a shift from our ordinary preoccupation with mundane matters into using one's imagination to consider abstract principles and essential concerns or possibilities. We do not want to have a “failure of existential imagination” in our classrooms when we respond to students’ “*why?*” questions with small-minded answers, such as, “You need to learn Algebra so you can pass the high school graduation test.”

Small-minded answers to the “*Why?*” questions squander an opportunity to expand the thinking of those students not normally given to existential thought and to affirm and inspire students who have an interest in or a need to address philosophical issues / concerns. It is our job as classroom leaders to actually lead students’ thinking in our discipline so that they understand it *conceptually* and not merely its mechanics. Many students may not fully appreciate the importance of such philosophical connections at

the time (while others will) but the wise teacher will plant such seeds of understanding so that they may blossom in the future when life and conditions change.

There are opportunities and times in life when existential concerns are particularly salient and it is relatively easy to engage students in existential discussions (such as after 9-11), but in daily life we often take for granted such issues. Existential concerns are most evident in times of change, decision, stress and crisis such as during adolescence, war, death, birth, marriage, injury or divorce. Of course, our existential concerns are also regularly addressed as a part of religious life and philosophical inquiry. Weekly church sermons and religious education provides regular opportunities for children as well as adults to break from the concerns of daily life to glimpse their philosophical connections. Festivals that mark solar events such as the summer solstice and vernal equinox are interpreted as opportunities to illuminate a community's cosmology. The liturgy of the Catholic Church cycles through periods of lent, advent and ordinary time. It is said that the Amish people consider mundane activities of life such as washing a window to be an opportunity for prayer and connection to God.

Christopher Phillips ' ([Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy](#), C.C. Norton) promotes philosophical discussions via the establishment of "Socrates Cafes" in prisons, coffee shops and schools as a means of helping people resolve personal and community dilemmas.

One distinction that might be made between "art" and "craft" is that art deals with ideas while craft emphasizes technical skill and practical utility. Great art and literature addresses large themes essential to the human condition. When a work of great or profound art is experienced the person will encounter an existential issue or concern.

Existential thought is qualitatively different from that used in the other intelligences although they may intermingle as the other intelligences serve as communication systems for abstract ideas. The Intrapersonal intelligence is the means by which a person manages one's self during the course of daily life. Interpersonal intelligence serves to focus one's thoughts on the mind, feelings and perspectives of another person or people. Existential thought strives to understand the subtle essences and complex meaning(s) of life itself. The Intrapersonal intelligence can use this information for better self-management and personal well-being. The Interpersonal intelligence can use existential understanding for relating better to others by having insight into their deepest fears, concerns, dilemmas and aspirations. Logical thinking helps a person to sort through the complex issues to focus on what is essential and most meaningful in life. Music is a vital element during most crucial life events (birth, marriage, graduation, death) and transitions. Even the Naturalist intelligence has a long history of being used to enhance existential discovery. Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond provided grist for his writing about existential themes. The life stories of most major religious leaders involve a period of time spent in the "wilderness" where they were stripped of worldly creations and thus enabled to deeply consider existential dilemmas and then return to civilization with "eternal truths." Understanding the connection between "living things" and the meaning of life itself is probably more direct when one must deal with the basics of survival unencumbered by superficial thoughts and man-made things.

Addressing Existential Issues in the Disciplines

“Why should I learn this stuff?”

The task of connecting an educational discipline to existential concerns often involves answering two basic questions *“What good will it do me in life?”* and *“How can I use this to make sense of the world?”* Of course, students will have other important concerns about life’s meaning depending upon their maturity, life experiences and intellectual style. Students with a more practical and realistic personality style may have little patience with the contemplation of existential concerns. Meanwhile students with a more reflection thinking style may be highly motivated by such discussions.

While the field of philosophy is one of the main disciplines devoted to the cultivation of existential thought each of the other academic disciplines likewise has its own “philosophy” that can be thought of as a sub-philosophy to the larger endeavor of understanding the existential features of life itself. If we can activate the students’ thinking in terms of broad abstract ideas and personal meaning-making then we have a unique ‘hook’ by which to engage them in our subject.

Language Arts:

It is through the expression of profound stories that human beings explore the meaning and purpose of their lives. Story telling comprised the original school and religious expression. Finding words to describe life experiences and verbal labels for ideas and concepts liberates people from confusion and frustration. Novels allow us to learn about the lives of other people. The Great Books address the larger concerns of people through the ages. Poetry is a powerful use of words for imaginatively connecting personal experience (thoughts, feelings) to questions about originations and ultimate purposes. Precise logical verbal expression gives people tools to clearly communicate existential ideas and to work through problems.

Domains:

- philosophical essays
- journals and autobiographies
- sacred texts
- mythologies
- prayers
- song lyrics
- aphorisms and epigrams
- Folk tales and fables

Selected Readings:

- on literature, poetry, philosophy

Visual Art:

Humans have used visual imagery to express existential concerns since time immemorial and long before the invention of a written language. Pictures and signs evolved into letters and into words as people strove to record their thoughts and communicate knowledge and ideas. There is evidence that ancient humans used red powder in their burials indicating possible concern about the afterlife.

Symbols are powerful images that can communicate complex ideas and have long been associated with

religious, mythological and philosophical thought. Sculpture such as grave stones, Egyptian obelisks, Rodin's The Thinker, Winged Victory, Earth Goddess, Adonis, etc. are physical representations of ideas that inspire people.

Architecture is also used to provide people with visual and physical experiences that resonate with existential ideas and feelings such as ancient megaliths (Stone Henge), the Pyramids, Chartres, etc.

Domains:

- symbols - architecture - interior design - dolls - costumes
- icons - sculpture - illustrations - models - self-portraits
- illuminated texts - illustrated books

Selected Examples:

- The Books of Kells - Kachina Dolls - religious garb - mother & child
- Stone Henge - Pyramids - The Thinker -
- Van Gogh's Starry Starry Night - Da Vinci - Rembrandt

Music:

The relationship between music and Existential intelligence is fairly obvious. Composers, vocalists and instrumentalists frequently describe how performing music allows them to gain profound insights or heightened awareness of the human condition. Music is one of the fine arts that has a long historical connection with religious thought and experience. Every important and highly meaningful life event has music associated with it in some way: funeral dirges, wedding marches, birthday songs, folks songs, national anthems, holiday (holy day) songs, etc. Of course, as with any art form, music is more often associated with more ephemeral concerns and entertainments without serious thought.

A hallmark of a serious vocalist or other musician is that she or he has cultivated an "authentic voice." While a strong Intrapersonal intelligence may be necessary for this skill it may also be obtained through an expression of one's existential thought.

Domains:

- lyrics - gospel - blues - religious music

Selected Examples:

- Requiry -

Social Studies:

A person is part of a historical continuum and social milieu that has recorded the story of its time line and strives to make sense of each success and every failure. How a society explains an individual's role and purpose creates the fabric of culture that gives its people a sense of belonging and security. We can use history to study the changes in philosophical orientation from one time period to the next. We can examine the differences among cultures by looking at their key existential concerns and solutions to historical challenges. Social studies can address significant existential questions such as how have humans succeeded or failed at managing their life sustaining resources? Which human frailties have contributed to the decline of civilizations?

Science:

Scientific thought organizes the world into meaningful patterns and studies the relationships among living entities. How human beings fit into the grand ecology of life on earth is a scientific as well as existential question. Science deals with both organic and inorganic systems that provide context for human life.

Domains:

- earth science - life science - astrophysics - atomic physics

Mathematics:

Humans are capable of rational thought and can use logic to discern the meaningful from the irrelevant. This multi-purpose tool can be used to solve simple practical problems such as counting objects and organizing things or it can be used to propose new questions and explore abstract ideas. Curiosity is a rational skill that may guide a person's thinking beyond the known and physical world. Goal setting allows people to look into the future and consider strategies for achieving their hopes and dreams. A logical approach provides an objective method for carefully analyzing any situation so as to abstract it's meaning.

Domains:

- problem solving - organization - planning - evaluation
- organization - prioritization - metacognition - synthesis

Industrial Arts:

Humans are the most advanced toolmakers of all earth's creatures. It takes a large amount of time, effort and instruction for individuals to master the use of our many sophisticated devices. Early ancestors perfected the craft of making stone tools that ensured survival of the species for providing food, fuel, clothing and shelter.

Domains:

- shelter - transportation - communication

Family and Consumer Studies:

The core element of the community is the family and its economic welfare is of vital importance to the larger society. How well a community's families are managed can determine the overall health of the social order. Without a basically healthy home life most individuals are unable to have the time and resources (emotional and intellectual) to ponder larger questions of meaning and purpose.

Domains:

- shelter - clothing - food - environmental - economic

Health:

A comprehensive health education program can lead young people into adult lives with the physical vitality necessary to allow for the contemplation of existential issues. Health curriculum can address questions such as: How do humans cope with pain and suffering? How do self-destructive behaviors contribute to social disorder and cultural erosion?

Physical Education:

The metaphorical connection between the attainment of physical prowess and spiritual strength has a long history going back to the ancient Greeks.

Existential

Main Features: *"To be concerned with "ultimate" issues of life and to engage in transcendental concerns. The capacity to locate oneself with respect to the furthest reaches of the cosmos--the infinite no less than the infinitesimal--and the related capacity to locate oneself with respect to the most existential features of the human condition--the significance of life, the meaning of death, the ultimate fate of the physical and the psychological worlds, such profound experiences as love of another human being or total immersion in a work of art."* Howard Gardner, 1999.

- Religious

- Philosophical

- Artistic

- Scientific

Careers:

___ Theologian

___ Rabbi

___ Philosopher

___ Poet

___ Counselor

___ Artist

___ Teacher

___ Clergy, nun

___ Theoretical Scientist

___ Writer

Teaching with Existential Awareness

Explore how an idea is useful for marking our place in the universe and ask questions of ultimate purpose; then the learning will touch profound understandings. Everyone has a philosophy of life even if they aren't able to articulate it. When what you are studying is carefully connected to your personal philosophy of life then even the smallest details are important.

The following questions will activate your Existential intelligence and perhaps expand its use in your classroom as appropriate.

Do I ask questions about how information relates to the meaning and purpose of life?

Do I value the questions or attempts of students to answer existential questions?

Do I use ultimate questions to capture the attention of students and add depth and range to my verbal explanations?

Do I look for ways to include philosophical discussions in my learning units?

Do I look for ways to translate concepts into powerful philosophical implications and possibilities?

Which teacher do I admire emphasizes the Existential intelligence in his/her curriculum?

Existential Intelligence

Core Capacities, Functions and Domain Skills

“To be concerned with ‘ultimate’ issues, questions, mysteries and meanings of life, to engage in transcendental concerns...the capacity ”...to explore the nature of existence in its multifarious guises”

Logical Analysis:

To use reasoning to create logical responses, explanations, investigations or models of ultimate life issues. “I think therefore I am”

Functions:

Artistic: novels, symphonic music, narrative analysis, criticism, dramatic analysis

Philosophical: essays, texts

Religious: theology, dogma, scriptures

Scientific: cosmology, theoretical physics

Intuitive Insight:

To express understanding about ultimate issues without an explicitly detailed logical basis....a subjective knowing, a phenomenological experience.

“I just know it to be so!” This is most often associated with artistic and creative endeavors or spontaneous insight associated with experiential learning.

Functions:

Artistic: visual art, stained glass, zen gardens, labyrinths, chanting, experiential art, poet, music, singing

Philosophical: story telling, folk wisdom, reflection and epiphanies

Religious: prayer, meditation, mythology, rites and ritual

Scientific: logical connections between science and meaning- “ah, ha”

Tools

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| – visual art, sculpture, architecture, sacred space | (Visual-spatial) |
| - contemplation, meditation, prayer, insight | (Intrapersonal) |
| – poetry, stories, essays, texts, lyrics | (Linguistic) |
| –sacred dance & movement, labyrinths, drama, prayer | (Kinesthetic) |
| –singing, experiencing sacred/cosmic sounds, rhythms | (Musical) |
| –explanatory & cause & effect & complex reasoning, mathematical models | (Math/logic) |
| –relating to animals, ecological systems, relating to animals | (Naturalist) |
| –immersion in a relationship to a person or people | (Interpersonal) |

Levels of Skill and Sophistication

Novice: simplistic, primitive, obvious, rote, rigid, imprecise, reactive, impulsive, limited, superficial, habitual, unreflective, merely practical, ego-centric, momentary

Master / Expert: complex, sophisticated, flexible, subtle, nuanced, conceptual, insightful, philosophical, principled thought, cosmic, profound, universal, wise, far-sighted