

INTROSPECTION IN PRACTICE: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL TO IMPROVE THE OUTCOMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The years spent in education are paramount to a person's intellectual, psychological and social development. The people one interacts with, the topics one learns about, the skills one gains, and the decisions one takes- they all help in seemingly covert yet instrumental ways in shaping who one becomes as a professional and as a person. Hence, it is very important to study and understand what makes these decisions important, and how one can make them better.

In furtherance of this objective, this paper will attempt to investigate the significance of introspection and reflection by students in the years surrounding the path of higher education, specifically looking at what the concept of introspection really means, how it can help with better decision making while choosing a career path or course of study, and how it further helps one become more efficient and satisfied when it comes to academic and professional growth not only in the years spent in university but also beyond that in one's career and life.

This paper will analyse in a qualitative manner the practice of introspection by reviewing psychological and pedagogical studies and publications on the same. It will then go on to analyse the idea of higher education—complete with its objectives and importance in the present socio-economic structure of the world, and use the principles of humanistic psychology to integrate it with the greater picture of individual and collective growth. The paper will carefully study and explain the role introspection plays in this entire process.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where people find forced upon themselves the major decisions of life at an early age. This is especially true when it comes to choosing a future course of study and a subsequent occupational route. This leads to a reality where children go down a path often determined by the agency of societal and parental authority, without a well-thought decision on their own part. They start on a path that will likely bind them for a major chunk of their lives without knowing whether it is indeed the best choice for them. Treading further down such a path without proper self-awareness and self-analysis leads to sub-optimal outcomes in terms of the overall happiness, satisfaction, and professional success they achieve. In such a scenario, introspection becomes a factor that can hugely impact the result of the path taken in the stage of learning and skill development.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Introspection involves a thorough and detailed observation of one's internal cognitive and emotional processes. In other words, "*When we reflect on our thoughts, emotions, and memories and examine what they mean, we are engaged in introspection*"ⁱ. It is a process where one looks 'inward' to better understand oneself in a holistic manner, complete with one's goals, abilities, limitations, emotions, and conflicts. When practiced with proper guidance and conceptual clarity, it helps develop greater self-awareness and aids in decision making, dealing with uncertainty, improving intra and inter-personal relations, and meeting personal goals.ⁱⁱ The pertinent question here is how introspection is relevant to the context in question i.e., higher education. To answer this, let us look at what higher education means, what goals it seeks to fulfil, and how introspection helps get closer to these goals.

Higher education is a venue for the enlargement and improvement of the socio-economic and political capacity of an individual. It is a way for people to capitalize their intellectual capability to produce skills and enlarge their knowledge to an extent where they can engage in meaningful and personally satisfying and fulfilling occupations.ⁱⁱⁱ Hence, the most frequently cited objectives of higher education are an increment in knowledge, a better comprehension of the

world and society, and a raised sense of awareness, values and sensitivity.^{iv} This in turn, is closely linked to the humanistic view of '*self-actualisation*' pioneered by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.^v The idea the humanistic school of psychological thought advocates is that humans, throughout their lives strive to achieve self-actualisation, or a state of reaching the peak of one's potential.^{vi} In other words, humans strive to achieve all that is physically and intellectually possible for them. They strive to grow in a meaningful manner by expanding their skills and values and wish to develop fully as complete beings.^{vii} Higher education, through its goals and practices of helping students grow their intellectual abilities and socio-economic opportunities, propounds the humanistic view of life and growth.

To understand the role played by introspection in the context of higher education, we will divide the journey of higher education into 2 phases where introspection plays a key role in helping students grow and strive to realize their potential. The first involves choosing a course of study and a prospective career path, and the second involves learning and growing as a student and professional through the years of study at institutions offering higher education.

Let us first delve into the preliminary stage where a student must choose a path for the future. People encounter this stage during the period of adolescence, i.e., the transition between childhood and maturity/adulthood.^{viii} In this stage, a key aspect of an individual's growth is identifying and consolidating one's goals and commitments for the future. And given the societal conditions prevailing in society at present, and especially in India, a career usually becomes the centre of most goals and aspirations people build. Prioritising one's education and career becomes a necessity in the modern economic structures we operate in. For most people, education is the only avenue that can lead them to an economically secure future, as formal education has become a necessity in the 21st century professional sphere, especially in a country like India where the knowledge sector is one of the only sectors with room for growth left. Moreover, university graduates more often than not enjoy better living conditions than those who don't go to college.^{ix}

In such a situation, strategic planning becomes crucial so that students can make the correct decisions regarding the direction of their future. To accomplish this, they need to indulge in

thorough reflection and introspection to find areas where they have both interest and aptitude, as both are necessary in ensuring satisfaction and excellence in any given field. ^x A method of introspective self-assessment accompanied by a proper analysis of one's aptitude in various areas can help reach an informed conclusion regarding which direction a student wishes to head in, whether it comes to further studies or a future occupation, resultantly laying down a pathway where they can truly meet their full potential as professionals.

The second stage starts after this decision, when one enters university. In this stage, a path has been laid down for the student to follow, and the objective is to make the most out of that journey. This idea falls in line with the goal of self-actualisation, as here, students get a prime opportunity to develop the skills necessary to succeed as professionals and get closer to their peak potential. Introspection can play an instrumental part in enhancing the level of academic enrichment one can receive through higher education. This is with the help of a practice called contemplative pedagogy or introspective reasoning. It involves obtaining a deeper understanding of the topic of study by engaging with it in a more focused, and concentrated manner through proper reflection and introspection. As this contemplative approach gets internalised, students can create much more meaningful connections with their academic material. This encourages a habit of continuous self-inquiry where students utilise their individual sense of creativity and logic to become more self-aware regarding their academic journey. The larger aim of introspective learning is to programme oneself to observe and understand one's logical thinking process, find out its limitations, and improve upon them to maximise the future performance of the logical process in any field. ^{xi} And if practiced properly, this can yield immensely positive results in the learning experience students get through various institutions. It results in a more self-aware individual, one more open to critical analysis, and one more likely to learn from flaws and mistakes.

This entire approach, starting from a reflective decision-making process regarding a course of study, to studying one's courses and subjects of choice in a contemplative and introspective manner, is a derivative of the humanistic learning theory and the humanistic school of psychological thought. The approach falls in line with the overarching values of humanism,

where people continuously try to improve and become the best versions of themselves, attempting to get closer to their full potential and needs as human beings. ^{xii}

CONCLUSION

Introspection is an immensely helpful practice in various walks and stages of life. This value is truly brought out in the journey through higher education, a period of tremendous growth and intellectual enrichment for people. Right from the stage of deciding on a course of study and prospective career to walking down that path of choice, introspection can play a key role in maximising students' learning outcomes and helping them realise their true potential not only as students and professionals, but as human beings striving to be the best versions of themselves.



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