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CHAPTER 3

Lessons for Getting Started: Knowing Your Own Mind

“Be curious; not judgmental.”

—Attributed to Walt Whitman, used in the *Ted Lasso* TV series

“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”

—David Graeber

Jazzy, Jeff’s daughter, is teaching a lesson to her high schoolers on evaluating evidence and then responsibly reasoning from that evidence. She is using a lesson from Stanford’s Civic Online Reasoning project (see Lesson 3.1 in the lessons section of this chapter).

Jazzy projects the following two questions:

- What is the source of the evidence?
- Is that source trustworthy?

*These questions deal with the **reliability** of the evidence.*

Then this:

- Does the evidence directly relate to and support the claim being made?

*This is about the evidence’s **relevance** to the claim—in this case, that there has been a prodemocracy protest in Iran.*

When we analyze evidence, we need to pay attention to both whether it is reliable and whether it is relevant to the claim.

She then projects a Twitter feed of a “democracy protest.” The Twitter bio identifies the person posting as Kambree Kawahine Koa, a “journalist” and “political news contributor” who is a verified Twitter user (since the lesson, Kambree has changed her bio). The tweet reads: “WOW! 300,000 March for democracy in Iran!” Before watching, Jazzy asks the class what they think so far.

Keenan: Well, she’s a journalist, so it must be real.

Jazzy: How do we know she is a journalist?

Awa: She says so, right there in the bio!

Jazzy: But who wrote the bio?

(Silence)

Jazzy: Do people always tell the truth about who they are?

Sheffia: Well, most of the time.

Jazzy: Even online? How could we check to see if she is really a journalist?

Timor: And she’s a verified user.

Jazzy: What does that mean? Does it mean we know that she is a journalist? Or just that she’s not a bot?

Despite the immensely powerful manipulations of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, and the cognitive biases embedded in our minds, research does show that we can be more consciously aware, reflective, and rational about news and other forms of information.

After a short discussion and some cross-checking and lateral reading, which throws Kambree’s designation as a journalist in some doubt, Jazzy shows the video (<https://twitter.com/KamVTV/status/947539441878368256>).

The video shows masses of people moving along a major highway, chanting, and waving flags.

So far the kids seem impressed and murmur things like: “Major protest!” “Those people are fired up!” “Looks like it could be from Iran.”

Manar, a student who recently arrived from Iraq, cuts in.

Manar: That’s not true! This is totally NOT from Iran! They are not chanting in Farsi—they are speaking Arabic—they are speaking the wrong language for Iran! And the flags are not from Iran!

There is silence, then Timor yells: “Fake news!” And many conversations break out. Jazzy quiets the class.

Arale: Wow—your background knowledge helps you smell out the crap, but if you don’t have any background, you can really get fooled!

Jazzy: If you don’t have the background, and you know that can make you vulnerable, then what do you have to do?

- Awa:** You have to build some background!
- Sahra:** Yeah, if you are super into soccer, there is way less chance to be duped about misinformation about soccer. But if you don't know about politics you will have to work at it!
- Jazzy:** Okay, team, this kind of work is what we call *lateral reading*, and you *have to do it* to evaluate the reliability of evidence—especially, like Awa and Sahra tell us, if you don't have a lot of background.

Reflection Questions

- When *should* we engage in lateral reading to check the reliability of sources and of evidence?
- When *must* we do lateral reading in order to be responsible readers and people?
- How can we motivate ourselves and our students to engage in this work?

KNOWING YOUR OWN MIND

Here is the good news. Despite the immensely powerful manipulations of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, and the cognitive biases embedded in our minds, research does show that we *can* be more consciously aware, reflective, and rational about news and other forms of information; that we can be critical of sources, that we *can* control for bias, and that we *can* teach in ways that help meet these goals. Based on that research, Pennycook and Rand (2019) argue that “[i]n many and perhaps most cases, it seems, reason does promote the formation of accurate beliefs.” And we would add: *IF we can consciously activate reason and control for cognitive bias*, reason, in this sense, being the System 2 thinking we discussed in the last chapter. Likewise, Wood and Porter (2019) have shown that kindly and respectfully correcting someone else’s misconceptions with data and clear reasoning—and doing so with good will—typically does not backfire and can lead to developing a liminal space for questioning and then for deepened and more accurate understanding.

We believe everything we see and hear. This is why availability bias is so powerful.

In the neuroscience around gullibility, it's established *that we are doomed to believe whatever we see or hear*. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the limbic system and its attendant System 1 “mental moves” developed to promote survival: “That is food, run toward it and grab it! That is danger, flee ASAP!” In survival situations, there is no time for questioning or reflection—it’s all about automatic response: sense it and act! System 1 is our Default Mode System of nonthinking, and we know it is triggered and compounded by attractive possibility, anxiety, or fear. Conscious effort must be exerted to activate and employ System 2 because

it moves beyond the automatic and involves questioning, evaluation of data, analysis, and reflective open-minded interpretation, all necessary for more long-term and complex challenges. It's a truism of neuroscience that *we do not decide what to believe*. We believe everything we see and hear (System 1). So we need to consciously activate System 2 and deliberately make use of it. *We must decide what to disbelieve*.

Bottom line: We are all immensely susceptible to System 1 response, and to cognitive biases of all kinds, known as *legacy cognitive blindness*. We are much more susceptible to these frailties than we believe even when we are aware of them.

Changing your mind is the surest sign to show that you have one!

That's in part because the psyche wants to keep us in a dense fog of mutually reinforced legacy hardware that assumes those near us and most like us are most powerful, right, and safe. In our primordial past, this promoted survival because it maintained social affiliation and unity with one's tribe.

This is no longer the way to survival and success. This is also the premise behind the necessity of cultivating Beginner's Mind, employed in the lessons that follow.

These lessons engage learners with the twin goals of becoming both more curious and open while simultaneously becoming more self-aware and critical of oneself and of information and its sources.

We remind our students what the slam poet Taylor Mali relays in his poem "Like Lily Like Wilson": Changing your mind is the surest sign to show that you have one!

We use Walt Whitman's injunction as a mantra, too; Jeff has this on a poster behind his desk:

"Be curious; not judgmental!"

Followed by:

"Refrain from statements: first listen and ask questions!"

As with all lessons in this book, we are providing model lessons that express and develop important mental models of instruction that will help students internalize powerful maps for navigating the wild world of information pollution. But these are general and very generative models, and you should absolutely adapt the materials, the lessons, the instructional support, the time frames, and all else to meet the needs of your particular students and situation.

We also always advise teachers to DO the lessons they assign—either beforehand as a dry run and rehearsal or along with students to provide a model for what they are doing, along with all the fits and starts. Doing so will help you see how the assignment works, what challenges are offered, and also how you might adapt the assignment for your students and situation. We have also found it immensely useful to invite students to provide feedback for adapting and revising the lesson for future students.



LESSON SUMMARIES

Lesson 3.1: Finding Good Information, Evaluating It, and Verifying It. This lesson is designed to build habits for finding good information, verifying strong and safe evidence through lateral reading, evaluating data patterns, and mindfully justifying interpretations of these patterns.

Lesson 3.2: Ranking and Evaluating Evidence. This lesson provides deliberate practice with evidentiary reasoning because students must explain how any example fits the criteria better (or not) and asks them to consciously “choose to believe or disbelieve.”

Lesson 3.3: Learning With a Beginner’s Mind. In this lesson, students learn how to open their minds and actively seek out different perspectives while confirming and disconfirming information so that we openly see the breadth of reasonable alternate positions in conversations about different topics.

Lesson 3.4: Actively Seeking Out Alternative Positions. By developing understanding of the Default Mode System of the brain, this lesson helps students look for counterclaims, new perspectives, and disconfirming evidence relative to their own usual viewpoints.

Lesson 3.5: Trigger Tracking and Fever Charts. This lesson utilizes Fever Charts as a tool for us to become aware of, and then control, our cognitive biases.

Lesson 3.6: Monitoring Mind Misdirection. This lesson examines optical illusions and misdirection texts to help us see how our brain can misperceive due to cognitive biases like confirmation or availability bias. It helps learners understand what happens when they read and how to promote more mindful and powerful reading.

Lesson 3.7: “Noticing and Naming” Practice for Controlling Cognitive Biases. This lesson concentrates on understanding and recognizing three of the most common cognitive biases: availability, confirmation, and overdramatization biases.

Lesson 3.8: Self-Study of Social Media Use. In this lesson, learners monitor their own social media use (SMU) and explore how we are all being manipulated through cognitive bias.

Lesson 3.9: Autobiographical Research: Developing Self-Awareness Through Self-Studies. This lesson asks students to reflect on their day-to-day lives to promote *mindsight*, a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds.

Lesson 3.10: Having Hard Conversations. In this lesson, we brainstorm how we can help ourselves and others to remain open and curious in the face of cognitive biases.