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Do the benefits of inoculating health care workers against smallpox outweigh the risks? Is affirmative action an effective tool for promoting genuine access to higher education? Controversial problems about which “reasonable people reasonably disagree” (p. 5) are called ill-structured problems. They are characterized by: 1) an inability to be defined with a high degree of completeness and 2) they cannot be solved with a high degree of certainty. King and Kitchener have conducted studies with late adolescents and adults to see how they come to understand and make judgments about ill-structured problems. The findings lead to three major observations: 1) there are significant differences in people’s underlying assumptions about knowledge; 2) these differences are related to the way people make and justify their own judgments about ill-structured problems; and 3) there is a developmental sequence in the patterns of responses and judgments about such problems. The reflective judgment model (RJM) was developed as a theoretical framework to understand and organize observations.

A central goal of education is fostering student reasoning involved while confronting ill-structured problems. The RJM describes a progression of seven major steps in the development of reflective thinking leading to the ability to make reflective judgments; each step represents a different epistemological perspective. The seven stages are grouped into three levels: pre-reflective thinking (stages 1-3), quasi-reflective thinking (stages 4-5), and reflective thinking (stages 6-7).

The RJM was conceptualized out of the cognitive-developmental tradition and there is commonality with constructive-developmental perspectives. These two approaches share three assumptions: 1) meaning is constructed, 2) the emphasis on understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences, and 3) development occurs as people interact with their environment. Patterns of meaning-making are described in developmental terms as becoming more complex, integrated, and complete over time. King and Kitchener, unlike Piaget, reject the assumptions that cognitive development is best measured by deductive reasoning, and that it is complete with the emergence of formal operations at age 16.

King and Kitchener are now interested in “How can educators apply their understanding of the nature of the development of reflective thinking as described by the RJM to educational practice?” (p. 16). King and Kitchener offer several possibilities for answering the questions: 1) there is indication that educational experiences lend themselves to encouraging growth toward reflective thinking, 2) development of reflective thinking by theoretically grounded interventions is a slow, steady increasing process that follows the sequence of stages outlined in the RJM, and 3) the findings of differences in performance with and without contextual support suggests that educators should be encouraged to evaluate the amount and type of contextual support offered when assessing reflective thinking.

As a result of the research that has been conducted, the authors desire for educators to “better interpret their observations about student behaviors by understanding how such behaviors are grounded in their epistemic assumptions, and how these assumptions about knowledge and how it is gained are related to the ways students justify their own judgments about controversial issues” (p. 17).