

FOSTERING MENTAL CLARITY AND INTUITIVE THINKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: RESULTS FROM AN INTERCULTURAL MENTAL TRAINING PROGRAM

Andreas Schmitt¹, Benjamin Bräutigam², Bárbara Tagliaferro³,
Dominik Dupont¹, & David Martin⁴

¹University of Tübingen, Tübingen (Germany)

²University of Cologne, Cologne (Germany)

³University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires (Argentina)

⁴University of Witten/Herdecke, Witten (Germany)

Abstract

In the era of the "attention economy," adults increasingly encounter cognitive overload, attentional fragmentation, and diminished capacity for sustained reflective thinking. While mindfulness practices are widely explored, the potential of structured philosophical thought-trainings combined with contemplative methods remains underrepresented in adult educational research. Phenomenological epistemological frameworks offer valuable resources for cognitive and emotional development, yet their abstract nature often limits accessibility.

This paper presents results from an annual, seven-month Intercultural Mental Schooling Path (IMSP). The program aims to cultivate critical thinking, inner freedom, emotional stability, and intuitive cognition through a structured engagement with the epistemology of freedom. The study investigates whether a meditative, socially embedded approach to philosophical texts contributes to mental clarity, internal coherence, and intercultural openness among adult learners in a global context. The IMSP follows a blended-learning design that integrates daily individual contemplative practice, digital learning tools, and peer-based social learning. Participants work with 627 curated "thought-cards" derived from *The Philosophy of Freedom* by Rudolf Steiner, which systematically guide reflection on autonomy in thinking and action.

Program effects were examined through retrospective surveys focusing on perceived cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. Ongoing longitudinal analyses include standardized instruments measuring spiritual well-being (FACIT-Sp-12), openness to experience (IPIP-OtE), and internal coherence (ICS). Since 2020, 1,926 participants across eight languages have completed the program, forming a global learning community. This contribution presents data from Cohort 2023–2024 ($n = 557$, six languages). Post-intervention evaluations from this cohort ($n = 142$) indicate substantial self-reported improvements in broadened thinking (74%), gaining new insights (81%), increased mental clarity (67%), and enhanced concentration (51%). Qualitative data further suggest greater openness and reduced prejudice in social interactions.

The findings suggest that operationalizing abstract epistemological concepts into structured, contemplative daily practice may constitute an effective approach within adult education. IMSP illustrates how digital tools, blended-learning formats, and peer-supported reflection can renew phenomenological philosophical training in a secular educational context. The program provides a scalable framework for fostering cognitive autonomy, emotional stability, and intercultural competency, and contributes to the empirical exploration of philosophy-based mental training within lifelong learning and mental health research.

Keywords: *Philosophy of Freedom, metacognition, mental health, mental training, critical thinking.*

1. Introduction

In the ongoing effort to address complex global challenges and realize the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, 2015), systems theorists point to a "divorce between inner and outer" approaches to sustainability (Wamsler & Bristow, 2022). While current strategies prioritize external technological solutions, there is an urgent need to link these actions with conscious internal development (Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021). To bridge this gap, frameworks

such as the Inner Development Goals (IDGs; Inner Development Goals, 2021) have emerged, emphasizing that society's collective capacity to resolve these "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) is fundamentally constrained by our internal cognitive state. This disconnect appears to be exacerbated by the realities of the contemporary "attention economy" (a concept coined by Simon, 1971). Recent analyses in cognitive science highlight the technopolitical economy of attention, exploring how digital platform architectures systematically capture and commodify human focus (González de la Torre et al., 2025). Within these digitally saturated environments, adult learners frequently engage in cognitive offloading (Gilbert et al., 2023). While this offers immediate functional efficiency, its unprecedented scale, exacerbated by the widespread integration of generative artificial intelligence, threatens to fundamentally alter our internal cognitive architecture. Habitual reliance on these systems to process information and generate thought risks cultivating "metacognitive laziness" (Fan et al., 2024) and bypassing the self-regulation required for independent thinking. Consequently, as digital platforms increasingly undermine cognitive autonomy (Susser et al., 2019), users face a gradual erosion of what Elgin (2013) defines as epistemic agency, the capacity to consciously monitor and direct one's own cognitive processes. This internal erosion is a real-world challenge that directly undermines the foundational goals of Awareness-Based Systems Change (Scharmer, 2018), an approach which posits that sustainable external transformation requires conscious internal development.

To address this need, we have developed an Intercultural Mental Schooling Path (IMSP) as a program for adult cognitive and philosophical development, utilizing a blended-learning design that integrates daily individual contemplative practice, digital learning tools, and peer-based social learning. The program's core curriculum is derived from Rudolf Steiner's *The Philosophy of Freedom* (Steiner, 1918/1964). Drawing on contemporary first-person research, this foundational text is utilized as a systematic framework for the introspective observation of thinking. Recent studies in phenomenological cognitive research suggest that such disciplined inquiries can be operationalized as methods for systematically investigating the inner dimensions of consciousness (Wagemann et al., 2018). This is further substantiated by methodological frameworks for "first-person experiments in thinking" and the investigation of pure conceptual processes (Ziegler & Weger, 2018). Within educational discourse, this framework is interpreted as a philosophical and pedagogical path of self-formation, providing a structured foundation for fostering mental autonomy and ethical individualism (Bach Junior et al., 2014). Over the course of seven months, participants systematically guide their reflection on autonomy in thinking and action, utilizing these phenomenological epistemological frameworks with the aim of rebuilding cognitive autonomy and the capacity for active perception.

While acknowledging the multidimensional depth of the original text, this study focuses on its potential measurable cognitive footprint. Because the program's curriculum inherently relies on everyday terminology rather than strictly operationalized cognitive constructs, this paper reports a purely exploratory pilot evaluation of the IMSP. By detailing participants' retrospective self-reported changes, we aim to systematically capture these subjective experiences, thereby offering initial hypotheses for future investigations and setting the stage to explore how these phenomenological shifts might conceptually align with established concepts in cognitive research.

2. Methods

Established under the name "The Annual Training Philosophy of Freedom," this program serves as the foundation for what we define within this research as an Intercultural Mental Schooling Path (IMSP). The intervention was designed as a path of spiritual and mental training, aiming to translate philosophical concepts into a tangible inner experience of thinking. The curriculum relies on 627 curated "thought-cards" derived from Rudolf Steiner's *The Philosophy of Freedom* (Steiner, 1918/1964), accessible either via a digital application or as a physical card set. Participants are asked to commit to a daily practice, dedicating 15 minutes to focused "meditative-thought work," a process of sustained concentration and cognitive rehearsal of specific philosophical propositions, over a seven-month period. This deliberate daily engagement aims to transform passive reading into an active, metacognitive phenomenological experience, described within the program's framework as cultivating a "life in thought." In this context, "life in thought" refers to the state where the act of thinking itself becomes a conscious and perceivable internal activity rather than a mere means for information processing.

The curriculum paces participants through 15 to 30 specific cards per week instead of reading the text sequentially for intellectual consumption. This slow, deliberate cognitive repetition is intended to engage the learners' willpower and foster a deep internal assimilation of the thought processes. To support this solitary meditative practice, the IMSP employs a comprehensive blended-learning social ecosystem. Participants receive weekly inspirational letters that provide thematic context and spiritual framing for the upcoming cards. Furthermore, the seven-month journey is anchored by nine global video conferences

featuring keynote presentations, shared mental-meditative exercises, and breakout rooms organized by languages, where participants engage in facilitated dialogue to deepen the philosophical content and share subjective experiences of their daily practice. To further sustain motivation and peer-supported reflection, learners are encouraged to form "buddy" (tandem) partnerships and regional practice groups. Together, these elements are intended to create a holistic educational framework that bridges intensive individual nonautomatic cognitive effort with a supportive global community.

To investigate these cognitive shifts, the Cohort 2023–2024 evaluation was structured as an exploratory-descriptive post-hoc pilot study. We designed a custom retrospective questionnaire informed by recurring anecdotal feedback from previous program cycles, where participants reported improvements in mental clarity, concentration, and willpower. Data collection occurred at the conclusion of the seven-month program using this newly developed instrument to further explore these recurring observations within a structured framework. For the participants, the final survey also served as an integral tool for pedagogical self-reflection and personal feedback at the end of their seven-month journey. The global Cohort 2023–2024 initially comprised 557 adult learners participating across six languages (English, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Czech). Participants self-enrolled via open digital recruitment channels and existing adult education networks. Demographic data were collected specifically from the subset of participants who opted to complete the retrospective evaluation ($n = 142$), with age being recorded in predefined seven-year brackets. The self-administered survey consisted of 74 quantitative items designed to measure perceived cognitive changes, emotional well-being, and spiritual experiences from the training. Quantitative items were assessed using 5-point Likert scales, ranging either from "not at all" to "very much" or "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Additionally, separate, optional open-ended questions allowed participants to provide free-text responses detailing their phenomenological experiences, what worked well, reasons for potential early termination, and desired support. Given the exploratory nature of this pilot study, data analysis was restricted to descriptive frequency distributions of these self-assessed changes, utilizing the open-ended responses strictly to provide qualitative context.

3. Results

Following the seven-month program, we recorded a final sample of 142 completed retrospective evaluations. Relative to the initial enrollment ($N = 557$), this represents a survey response rate of 25.5%. The sample ($n = 142$) consisted of 74.6% female and 21.8% male individuals, with 3.5% missing data. Regarding age distribution, the largest subgroups were participants over 70 years of age (28.2%), followed by those aged 63 to 69 years (23.9%) and 56 to 62 years (21.1%). Middle-aged respondents (42 to 55 years) accounted for 19.7% of the cohort, while younger individuals (up to 41 years) represented 6.3%. In the retrospective evaluation of the training's impact, participants reported changes across several variables. Specifically, 74% of respondents noted a perceived broadening of thinking and 81% reported gaining new insights. Furthermore, participants reported perceived mental clarity (67%) and a capacity to concentrate (51%) following the seven-month practice. The evaluation also indicated shifts in additional domains of the participants' internal processes. Specifically, 59% of the cohort reported increased security in their thinking processes and 55% reported an improvement in overall mental health. Finally, 47% of the respondents noted a subjective strengthening in their willpower and 46% in their intuitive capacities.

The numerical data were supplemented by qualitative reflections provided by 79% of the respondents ($n = 112$). Participants described a perceived reduction of interpersonal boundaries, a sense of shared humanity across diverse cultural and national backgrounds, and an increased capacity to navigate difficult social interactions. Furthermore, participants noted that the shared engagement with the program's content functioned as a unifying element, with several responses highlighting the perceived resolution of previous misunderstandings or social discord. Regarding the structural elements of the training, qualitative feedback identified the curated "thought-cards" and the weekly introductory letters as supportive elements for engaging with the philosophical text. Participants also reported factors that hindered sustained engagement. Responses concerning desired support and early termination cited a lack of personal time due to professional and family obligations. Furthermore, participants requested more direct personal exchange, such as a peer "buddy" system, and noted technical or communicational hurdles during the onboarding phase.

4. Discussion

The pilot evaluation of the IMSP indicates that structured and contemplative engagement with philosophical texts, specifically the epistemology of freedom, is associated with high levels of perceived mental clarity (67%) and concentration (51%). By operationalizing Steiner's concepts into an educational

context, the program can be conceptually explored as an "epistemic gymnasium." Within this framework, the curated "thought-cards" appear to serve as cognitive resistance training, requiring participants to transform passive reading into an active, self-directed observation of their own thinking processes. These findings align with literature suggesting that structured reflective and mindfulness-based interventions are positively associated with the cultivation of attention, cognitive flexibility, and emotional self-regulation (Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2019; Weare, 2019). This synergy potentially empowers IMSP learners to reclaim internal regulation, foster cognitive autonomy, and counter the passive cognitive offloading prevalent in digitally saturated environments. Furthermore, the observation that 81% of participants reported "new insights" provides preliminary support for the development of intuitive cognition. Through the empirical lens of naturalistic decision making, this can tentatively be viewed as rapid, experience-based pattern recognition (Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Woiceshyn, 2020). These findings offer initial hypotheses for future investigations into how the program's cultivated practice of "life in thought" might function as an epistemic technology for linking inner and outer development, a critical need highlighted in recent sustainability literature (Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021). Building on these preliminary hypotheses, future theoretical work must explore how the program's phenomenological state of "life in thought" conceptually aligns with established cognitive constructs, such as core executive functions (Diamond, 2013), cognitive flexibility (Dajani & Uddin, 2015), and epistemic agency (Elgin, 2013), to determine how these shifts can be most effectively classified and empirically measured.

The results of the quantitative analyses are further supported by qualitative feedback, which indicates that the developmental process may have supported a transition from reactive social patterns toward a more conscious and constructive social presence. Participants' reflections on resolving social friction and fostering a sense of shared humanity across diverse backgrounds suggest that the reported enhancements in social openness and the real-time observation of personal biases may represent a meaningful shift in the participants' interpersonal cognitive frameworks. Consequently, the IMSP's focus on the observation of thinking may translate into increased social agency, an enhanced capacity for active perception, and the ability to modulate interpersonal responses in complex cultural contexts. This dynamic reflects the core phenomenological principle upon which the program is built: that conscious inner activity must deliberately precede any effective outer action. Rather than merely adopting external behavioral guidelines, participants appear to be developing the underlying cognitive flexibility necessary to support Awareness-Based Systems Change.

While these results indicate potential for committed learners, the present outcomes represent descriptive phenomenological shifts rather than causal findings. Primary methodological limitations include the absence of objective digital activity tracking and a survey response rate of 25.5 percent. Low response rates are a common challenge in retrospective evaluations of uncompensated online programs. However, qualitative feedback also indicated that integrating the rigorous daily practice into professional and family life was a significant barrier for sustained engagement. This highlights a clear need for enhanced social scaffolding, which will inform future iterations through peer exchange mechanisms like the buddy system. Furthermore, the custom survey tool was exploratory and not psychometrically standardized. Consequently, the analysis remained descriptive, utilizing frequency distributions and anecdotal feedback to illustrate trends without inferential modeling. Finally, while self-reporting introduces potential recall and social desirability biases, the retrospective design may partially mitigate response-shift bias as participants evaluate growth through the cognitive framework acquired during training (Howard et al., 1979). To address these limitations, the active Cohort 2025–2026 utilizes a prospective longitudinal design. This ongoing phase integrates strict psychometric validation using established scales, including the FACIT-Sp-12 for existential well-being, the IPIP-OtE for openness to experience, and the Internal Coherence Scale (ICS). These quantitative metrics are complemented by qualitative methodologies, such as focus groups and interviews, to explore broader organizational impacts. For instance, initial data from a school faculty in Alicante suggest that the IMSP may enhance faculty cohesion and inspire educators to actively reshape their shared institutional spaces. By transitioning to this more comprehensive, mixed-methods framework, we aim to develop the IMSP into a scalable, empirical research model for future adult education.

5. Conclusion

The "divorce between inner and outer" approaches to global challenges highlights the need for profound educational interventions that directly address the fragmented reality of the attention economy. The descriptive data from our pilot cohort suggest that the IMSP may function not merely as a theoretical philosophy course, but as a potentially practical and scalable epistemic gymnasium. By empowering individuals to reclaim their epistemic agency and counter the passive over-reliance on digital cognitive offloading, such structured contemplative practice has the potential to foster the cognitive autonomy

required for true Awareness-Based Systems Change. Ultimately, practical countermeasures like the IMSP highlight a critical, often overlooked dimension of global problem-solving: sustainable external development must be anchored in sustainable human cognition. Equipping adult learners to navigate the digital age requires bridging this inner-outer disconnect from within. As learners engage in internal capacity building, the reported cognitive shifts appear to organically support the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), contributing to the broader foundation needed to address the SDGs.

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