

Women's Spirituality at CIIS: Uniting Integral and Feminist Pedagogies

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Abstract: This paper articulates an educational framework termed integral feminist pedagogy, based on the author's experience teaching in the Women's Spirituality program at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Integral feminist pedagogy unites the principles and practices of both the integral and feminist traditions. The strength of integral pedagogy lies in its focus on the inseparability of an individual's mind, body, and spirit. However, integral pedagogy is often understood today in a way that divorces individuals from their social and political context. Feminist pedagogy, on the other hand, excels in raising students' awareness of social and political context, but may neglect individuals' psychospiritual realities. This paper argues that integrating the two traditions helps each better fulfill its vision of social transformation. In order to illuminate the core premises of integral feminist pedagogy, specific examples from classrooms in the Women's Spirituality program are explored.

Keywords: Integral education, diversity, feminism, social justice, spirituality.

Education at its best—these profound human transactions called knowing, teaching, and learning—are not just about information, and they're not just about getting jobs. They are about healing. They are about wholeness. They are about empowerment, liberation, transcendence. They are about reclaiming the vitality of life. Parker Palmer (1997, p.3)

Introduction

How do we as educators hold our students as whole, embodied beings navigating a world of immense oppression but also of immense beauty? How do we engage them in thinking critically about power and privilege while also honoring and encouraging their self-expression and personal growth? How do we foster both “liberation,” and “transcendence,” as Palmer (1997) suggests the best education can do?

In this paper I attempt to answer these questions by articulating a model of integral feminist pedagogy that is based on my experience teaching in the Women's Spirituality program at the

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California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). This model marries two distinct pedagogical traditions that have each profoundly shaped my educational philosophy and practice. The integral tradition emphasizes the interrelatedness of mind, body, and spirit; feminist education, meanwhile, focuses on the connection between the personal and the political. To bring them together is to recognize that our “selves” – our minds, bodies, and spirits – are embedded within a system of social and political relations. We are multidimensional beings, possessing both interior depth and social breadth. An integral feminist pedagogy can engage students on these multiple levels at once, and thus provide a deeper level of transformation than is possible via either tradition alone.

I enter this conversation as a woman of color educator who has been teaching at the university level for seventeen years. I began my university teaching career as a graduate student at the University of Washington (UW), where I worked with undergraduate students in Women Studies classrooms. My experience of feminist education at the UW, as both a student and instructor, was powerful. The breadth and nuance of feminist politics came alive for me in these classrooms. However, I also experienced an internal dissonance as my spiritual self was left out of the discussions. I longed for a place to talk about my inner, spiritual life and how it was being influenced by what I was learning politically. In every class that I taught, I noticed at least a few students who seemed to share a similar longing.

Coming to teach at CIIS thus felt like a breath of fresh air. Finally, it seemed, I could be my “whole self” and find a welcoming space for the discussion of intuitions, dreams, encounters with the sacred, or intrapsychic realities. However, I soon came to see that many spaces at CIIS were absent of discussion of political structures and of gendered and racialized experiences, despite the founder's vision of spiritual and social integration. My “whole self” was not welcome, after all. Many CIIS students (and faculty) tended to gravitate toward either spiritual or political realms, reproducing the dichotomy found in the culture at large. While my own program, Women's Spirituality, explicitly strove to challenge this dichotomy, we had to do so against the grain of cultural conditioning that views spiritual and political liberation as wholly separate.

Despite the challenges, I believe that the Women's Spirituality program has been able to offer a uniquely transformative education by consciously bridging the spiritual and political. As core faculty in the program, I have had the opportunity to reflect deeply upon how to interweave the two realms in the classroom. My articulation of integral feminist pedagogy is grounded in some of these everyday classroom experiences.

In the following sections, I examine the histories and core tenets of both integral pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. I then reflect upon the history and evolution of the Women's Spirituality program at CIIS, highlighting the pedagogical challenges and opportunities the program has faced. In the final section, I share four core premises of the integral feminist pedagogical model I use in my own teaching.

Integral Pedagogy

At the very heart of integral pedagogy is the belief that education should engage not just the intellect, but also the inner dimensions of the person such that deeper levels of learning and transformation are made possible. While the tradition of integral education is rooted in the works

of multiple philosophers, including Rudolf Steiner, Jean Gebser, and Ken Wilber (Esbjörn-Hargens, S., Reams, J., & Gunnlaugson, O., 2010) it is the work of Sri Aurobindo as explicated and implemented by Haridas Chaudhuri that has been so pivotal to the development of CIIS and of my own understanding of integral pedagogy.

Born in 1872 in British-controlled India, Aurobindo came of age at a time when rote, mechanical education was the norm. His belief that learning should be centered on the student, while commonplace today was radical for his time (Subbiondo, 2005, p. 20). In many ways, his focus on liberating students to discover their own truths prefigured the work of Paulo Freire (2008), whose critique of the “banking” model of education has had global influence.

Aurobindo, well ahead of his time, also advocated ideas that would later be associated with movements such as feminism and postmodernism. For instance, he asserted a belief in multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing. According to Reams (2010), Aurobindo valued “an integration of what were previously considered as paradoxes, a capacity to see previously disparate perspectives as interconnected” (p. 8). Unlike most of today’s postmodern thinkers, however, for Aurobindo these truths went beyond socially-constructed perspectives to also include the truths of the body and the spirit.

Integral education, sparked by Aurobindo’s philosophy, has from its outset recognized and honored the spiritual dimensions of the individual. It is based on the belief that “there is a mode of consciousness available to us that is qualitatively different from our common, ordinary, rational, everyday consciousness” (Reams, 2010, p. 8). By accessing this mode of consciousness—through meditation, art, or reflective writing, for instance—students and faculty tap into another source of knowledge that complements and enriches academic learning. Teachers who use integral methods might, for instance, interweave scholarly analysis with contemplative reflection; lectures with movement practices; or classroom discussion with sacred ritual. Such integrative practices support students’ capacity for deeper learning and transformation.

Aurobindo's emphasis on an individual's potential for transformation did not negate the importance of our social worlds. As Wexler (2005) notes, “since the nondualistic view [of integral philosophy] did not separate the Divine from the material world, there was also an emphasis on action in this world as an expression of our inherent spiritual nature” (p. 31). Indeed, Aurobindo's integral philosophy included a belief in cultural evolution driven by psychologically and spiritually mature persons who would herald a new, harmonious society.

As I mentioned above, numerous other thinkers have taken up the concept of “integral” education since Aurobindo’s time. While the integral tradition has become vast, I would like to summarize here what I see as the core practices of integral educators, who strive to:

- Create spaces where the numinous dimension of existence can be explored without forwarding any particular religious or philosophical dogma.
- Engage students’ inner lives in a way that supports their psychological and spiritual drive toward wholeness.
- Embrace multiplicity, paradox, and uncertainty while encouraging their students to do the same.

- Foster hope in the possibility of both individual and social transformation.
- Provide tools for students to explore deeper questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives.

Notably, this list includes an emphasis on the cultivation of social as well as individual growth. Indeed, Aurobindo was an anti-colonial revolutionary who fought for India's independence from British rule. His teachings were not apolitical. However, as they made their way to the US, integral ideas became practiced in a way that has generally privileged an individualistic perspective over a collective one. This stems in large part from the relatively privileged social status of early adopters of this framework, as well as the individualism inherent in Western capitalist society. It also derives from the fact that integral education was taken up with great zest by psychologists, who are primarily trained to look at individuals in the context of their family and interpersonal dynamics, rather than at macro-systems. Wexler (2005), Academic Vice President at CIIS, has acknowledged this danger in integral education:

Another risk is that the emphasis on the personal may create the illusion that everything is personal and individual, with little recognition given to the impact of society, social roles, or power dynamics. Thus, for example, the discussion of diversity in this environment faces particular challenges related to the emphasis on personal development. We hear white students talk of their spiritual work as having enabled them “to move past diversity” without recognizing the cultural and social constraints that make such transformation impossible in terms of life in contemporary society. (p. 32)

Wexler's comment affirms my own experience with students at CIIS, particularly those from privileged racial or class backgrounds. Given the tendency toward privatized notions of psycho-spiritual growth in the West, I assert that educators must actively bring in a social and political analysis to remain true to the vision of integral pedagogy. The insights and strategies emerging from feminist pedagogy can be invaluable here, and I turn now to an overview of this tradition.

Feminist Pedagogy

In contrast to the self-focused idea of “transformation” that is espoused in many integral classrooms, the feminist pedagogical vision is one of widespread social transformation. Such transformation involves a restructuring of the relationship between the genders, at minimum; more and more feminist educators today hold a wider vision that involves a radical transformation of gender, sexuality, race, our economic system, and relationship to the earth. Feminist educators view the classroom as a site where students can become critical thinkers who question the status-quo and who develop deeper insights about social and political relations. With an expanded understanding of the world and their place in it, students can develop the necessary agency to change it.

The history of feminist pedagogy is rooted in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. While women were entering the halls of higher education in ever-increasing numbers, they realized that the content they were learning continued to be developed and taught by men – predominantly white men. Examining higher education curricula of that era, feminists “observed that sometimes women were missing altogether, sometimes women appeared only in images that

reflected men's perspectives, and sometimes women's activities and everything considered feminine were devalued" (Boxer, 1998, p. 52).

Feminists developed alternative sites of knowledge production, coming together in "consciousness raising" groups where they discussed their experiences of sexism and developed shared analyses of patriarchal oppression. These leaderless groups, where women sat in a circle to share their lived experiences, came to emblemize feminist education and greatly influenced the structure of women's studies classes. Podiums and formal lectures were supplanted by students sitting face to face, engaging with each other and with course texts in a dialogical manner. The teacher's role morphed from "expert" to guide and facilitator; students were invited to view themselves as co-creators of knowledge (Boxer, 1998; Fisher, 2001).

Feminist pedagogy evolved in conversation with critical pedagogy, a tradition based in a critique of capitalist power relations. Critical pedagogy challenges the class based inequalities that have been perpetuated through mainstream education. Paulo Freire is widely considered the father of critical pedagogy; here, Shaull (2000) summarizes Freire's perspective on education:

Education [for Freire] either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

The critical tradition brought to feminist pedagogy an expanded focus on class and political economy. Meanwhile, feminists of color stressed the importance of racialized power relations, and helped move feminist pedagogy away from universalizing women's experiences.

All of these influences helped bolster the feminist insight that that one's social location and access to power profoundly shape what one knows and how one sees the world. Feminist educators challenge the concept of academic "objectivity," "see[ing] it instead as a mask for bias" (Boxer, 1998, p. 73). Suspicious of androcentric and Eurocentric biases in scholarship, feminist teachers seek to uncover the stories and realities of women, people of color, and others who have been marginalized or oppressed.

As issues of race, class, and sexuality came more to the fore in feminist classrooms, female students could no longer see themselves as simply targets of patriarchal oppression. White, middle-class, and heterosexual students had to reckon with their privilege in a complex system of power-laden identities. The feminist educators' job, then, became not only one of empowering women students but also of challenging them to recognize their privileges.

Even as feminist pedagogy has evolved over time, what remains distinctive about it is its recognition that matters previously considered purely "personal," are, in fact, collective and political concerns:

Topics that had been considered strictly "personal," such as how a woman felt about her body, how sexual violence or sexual pleasure affected her, the consequences of marrying and having

children, what it meant to become educated, how to deal with problems at work, at home or outside it, all became the focus of intense discussion [in consciousness raising groups, and later in feminist classrooms]. (Fisher, 2001, 29)

Such “personal” concerns become a central focus point for feminist organizing because they reveal broad social patterns such as gender-based violence, economic inequities, and limiting gender roles. The first-person narratives of women help illuminate systematic and institutionalized imbalance of power structured by gender, race, and class. Historical and political context is integrated with narratives of lived experience to develop feminist theory and praxis.

To sum, feminist educators:

- Believe that education can and should inspire social transformation and the undoing of patriarchal systems.
- Engage students in historically situated analyses of power and privilege.
- Embrace narratives of personal experiences as sources of knowledge and alliance building.
- Support students in unlearning internalized oppression and internalized privilege.

Like integral educators, feminist teachers ask students to bring their whole selves into the classroom—but this “whole self” is understood not as “mind/body/spirit” but rather as a socially and politically situated self. Whereas the integral educator’s goal may be to examine patterns in the human psyche or in spiritual experience, the feminist educator’s is to do so in the context of social and political patterns.

However, in my view, feminist pedagogy in the secular academy has suffered from being steeped so deeply in a materialist analysis of oppression that the numinous dimensions of life have been marginalized. Helen LaKelly Hunt (2004) points out the irony that many feminist sites that welcome discussion about some of the most intimate aspects of our lives—sexuality, for instance—still consider spirituality a taboo topic. Thus, while inviting students to bring their embodied experiences into the classroom while negating their spirits, feminist educators may inadvertently reproduce the split between the “private” and the “political” that they decry. Bringing an integral lens to bear on feminist education can, therefore, help feminist pedagogy better fulfill its vision.

Women’s Spirituality at CIIS

While women’s spiritual experiences remained marginal to feminist discourse at large, they were centered in the emerging women’s spirituality movement of the 1980s. Spiritual feminism grew out of the same mix of consciousness-raising and political activism that motivated secular feminisms. But while many secular feminists adopted the Marxist view of religion as simply the “opiate of the masses,” spiritual feminists looked deeper. They agreed with secular feminists that patriarchal religions upheld women’s oppression. However, rather than casting out religion altogether, spiritual feminists insisted that the spiritual impulse preceded patriarchy, and that the practice of woman-affirming spirituality held the key to transforming it.

The Women's Spirituality program at CIIS, founded in 1992, grew out of this women's spirituality movement. Scholars and practitioners took the feminist query "what happens when women ask the questions?" (Boxer, 1998, title page) to the realms of religion and spirituality. What they found was that the world's historical religions have been preponderantly developed for and by men, and specifically the elite men of any given society. Moreover, these religions have sustained the structural oppression of women and as well as women's own internalized oppression.

Many of these scholars focused on uncovering suppressed knowledge about ancient Goddess and mother-centered societies around the world. Others reclaimed female spiritual leaders and woman-affirming teachings within the existing traditions. Regardless of their approach, what united them was the conviction that transforming symbol systems and religious worldviews were key to women's liberation.

Pedagogically, Women's Spirituality at CIIS shared with women's studies a focus on linking the personal and political, bolstering women's agency, and transforming androcentric curricula. However, the focus on interior, spiritual experiences made this program distinct from women's studies programs and is why it found a home at CIIS. Though Women's Spirituality had different intellectual roots than the integral tradition, both shared the belief in the interrelatedness of mind, body, and spirit.

Students in our program have been supported in excavating their own relationships to patriarchal symbols and tropes, and in exploring an alternative, embodied, and relational sense of the female Divine. At the same time, they have increasingly been challenged to analyze the complex social and political systems that affect the concrete lived experiences of women—and of all genders—today.

Integrating these two modes—the spiritual and the political—has been a creative challenge. Even as faculty in the program strive to break down the binary between the two, we are embedded within a wider discursive terrain where the spiritual and political are split. The texts we rely upon often stress one domain over the other, as do many of our academic associations. Given this cultural splitting, it is perhaps unsurprising that different students come to the program with interests more strongly in one realm or the other. Some of our students have expressed a desire to study women's spirituality without having to study feminism, unaware how the two have always been intertwined. Others, meanwhile, have been drawn to us primarily because of our focus on social justice, and enter the spiritual discourse more tentatively.

In addition, the program itself has gone through a significant evolution over the years. The original program was focused more on women recovering their agency as those who had been oppressed through patriarchy. Primarily Euro-American, these women held significant racial and class privilege despite having experienced significant sexism in their lives; such privilege allowed them to focus primarily on healing from oppression. As more working-class women and women of color joined the program, the recognition that women, far from being innocent victims of an undifferentiated patriarchy, also colluded in the oppression of other women, came to the fore. Thus, finding ways to raise students' awareness of their own privilege or oppressive attitudes became increasingly important.

Meeting these pedagogical challenges has led me to reflect on how to best integrate the interior and psycho-spiritual dimension of integral teaching with the relational and political dimension of feminist teaching. By uniting these two traditions, we can foster deeper transformation than is possible with either alone. In the following section, I outline some of the core premises of this integral feminist pedagogy.

Integral Feminist Pedagogy

The first premise of integral feminist pedagogy is that both educators and learners are multidimensional beings who must be engaged as both spiritual and political agents. As feminist and critical perspectives have demonstrated, we are each situated within specific social, historical, and political locations that shape our experiences and our standpoints. However, an integral feminist perspective suggests that we are each also situated within a specific metaphysical worldview that both reflects our sociopolitical location and shapes how we respond to it. In this view, even atheism has its own set of metaphysical presuppositions and is culturally and historically specific.

In the Women's Spirituality program, for instance, we discuss how exclusively or predominantly male images of the Divine have helped create a social system that privileges male experience. We also examine how spiritual practices that help individuals tap into their own inner wisdom may support liberation from patriarchal conditioning and authority. In some classes, we might explore differing beliefs on how metaphysical tools such as prayer or ritual might influence material reality and social conditions.

This engagement with students as spiritual and political beings leads to my second premise, which is that social justice education must address students' inner worlds. Coming into consciousness about systems of oppression brings with it a multitude of emotions as well as deep questions. Students' grief, anger, and shame about the violence and oppression in our world often lead to questions about meaning and purpose. For instance, they may strive to make meaning of collective suffering and reflect on their desires to be agents of change. Some students wonder what they can believe in when they came to realize that so much of what they have been taught is based in oppressive ideologies. By providing a space in which students can have an open dialogue about these types of questions, educators can help foster students' ability to access their own inner wisdom as they struggle to make meaning.

The third premise of an integral feminist pedagogy is that psychospiritual maturity requires one to awaken to issues of oppression and injustice. Esborn-Hargens et al. (2010) note that integral education includes "shadow work". They write:

We also have learned the importance of students and teachers become more self-reflective and increasingly aware of their trigger points - what makes us reactive, dismissive, or shut down to ideas and other people. By learning to look at what we do not want to see in ourselves (and others) we become more compassionate and open to learning. This is an ongoing process of owning our projections, minimizing idealization, avoiding the tendency to split things into good and bad, catching ourselves when we are rationalizing away our responsibility and so forth. (p. 6)

Much of the discussion of shadow work in this type of literature focuses on our projections within interpersonal relationships; while valuable, this literature has yet to attend to the role of relationships of oppression and dominance that also comprise our "shadows." By creating a space wherein students can openly explore how systemic oppression has become steeped in all our psyches, we can develop non-shaming ways of decolonizing attitudes.

A specific example from one of my classes can help illuminate this point. I teach a course titled *Building Conscious Allyship*, which introduces students to a broad scope of social justice issues in a way designed to build empathy, reflection, and the desire to foster change. While the content of the class is primarily on understanding how oppressions from racism to ableism operate on both macro and micro levels, the process involves deep inquiry work and dialogue. At the end of the term, a thirtysomething year old white student, whom I'll call Jennifer, wrote the following:

So, my own internalized shame story about being white in a racist society can be an entry point for consciousness, or, without awareness, it can serve to generate reactions that numb me into reproducing the very conditions that create the feeling ... What one discovers about consciousness, however, is it's not just the bright light shining; the light reveals all that has heretofore been concealed. The shadows. The unseen. The pushed away. In our desire to be allies to one another, we will invariably and inevitably butt up against those places in ourselves (be it our privilege, our complicity, our own victimization, our silence, our betrayals of self and other, etc.) that we might rather not meet. (unpublished manuscript, n.d.)

She continues with a reflection on how her spiritual life necessitates the work of unlearning oppression:

If my primary spiritual task includes remembering myself as whole, divine, and holy, and thus to re-member (bring into the body and into membership/ community) the divine Source in all beings, then it is also my task to explore where (and how and why) I am resisting that truth through participation (unconscious as well as conscious) in and the recreation of structures that oppress anyone or anything in my name. (unpublished manuscript, n.d.)

As Jennifer's reflections so beautifully capture, psychospiritual transformation and social transformation are not separate spheres; they can be one and the same. By refusing to privilege politics over inner spiritual work, or vice versa, integral feminist educators can facilitate students' processes of making their own connections between these entwined dimensions.

The fourth premise of my integral feminist model, which follows from the first three, is that we must understand the human drive toward healing and wholeness as a collective rather than purely private endeavor. When understood in collective terms, healing and wholeness are no different than justice and liberation. As Cornel West has famously stated "justice is what love looks like in public." Too often, students are asked to engage issues of oppression in a disembodied, academic way that leaves little room for the creativity of their spirits. When we open up the possibility for them to see that their own spiritual well-being is intricately tied to the well-being of all, West's statement becomes an embodied truth.

Conclusion

This paper put forth a vision of an integral feminist pedagogy that interweaves the best practices of integral pedagogy with those of feminist pedagogy. The histories of both traditions reveal a focus on multiple truths, embodied experience, and social transformation. However, the integral tradition as understood in the contemporary West has too often been apolitical, while the feminist tradition has been “aspiritual.” In the Women's Spirituality program at CIIS, we challenge the split between the political and spiritual and we encourage students to recognize how the two realms have always had mutual influence. Based on my experience teaching in this program, I articulate four key pedagogical premises of an integral feminist paradigm. I contend that this paradigm can support a process of deep psycho-spiritual and political transformation.

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