

Evolving Dimensions of Integral Education

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of integral education as a way to prepare students for the complex, rapidly changing global environment in which they will be living and working. It contends that education must help students focus both internally and externally if they are to be effectively prepared. The experience of the California Institute of Integral Studies is used as a case study to discuss key dimensions of integral education.

Keywords: Contemplative practice, diversity, education, holistic, integral, interdisciplinary, transformative.

Introduction

In this paper I will be examining the concept of integral education using the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) as a case study. CIIS is a university based in an integral worldview and created out of a critique of American society and higher education. Now, over 40 years later, we are in another turbulent time in which we are considering if and how higher education prepares students for the future. As the 2007 report on *College Learning* by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has put it,

In this global century, every student—not just the fortunate few—will need wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary knowledge, higher-level skills, an active sense of personal and social responsibility, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge to complex problems (AACU, 2007, p. 11).

AAC&U looks to liberal education to provide this; I believe that the innovations that come out of the integral and transpersonal approaches have the potential to move us even further toward the kind of transformation that is needed.

Integral Education

Over the last few years at CIIS we have spent a lot of time discussing what we mean by integral education as we practice it in the 21st century. As part of this discussion we have gone back to our roots to look again at the goals and philosophies of our founding as well as at the multiple realities of our present day university. The schools, programs and faculty that make up academic life at CIIS are interconnected by common mission, history, values and concerns.

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Our integral education project has focused on identifying common dimensions without creating a statement of orthodoxy. Being careful to leave room for creativity and innovation, there is no CIIS checklist against which every program is to be measured but there are dimensions that each program expresses. The dimensions are the visible manifestations of the holistic education we strive to provide; they emanate from a mission that strives “to embody spirit, intellect, and wisdom.” Part of our understanding of integral is that it allows for dialogue between incommensurable truths and for the holding of paradox. In the face of pressures to tie everything together, it allows for the recognition that this is not always possible or desirable.

In writing about education at CIIS, I want to focus on a few key aspects:

- What it means to provide an accredited education that includes the spiritual aspects of human life;
- The dimensions of integral education we have identified; and,
- The implications of the higher education context in which we do this work.

Underlying academic life at CIIS is a worldview that holds that the spiritual dimension is important; as an educational institution we seek to embody the spiritual as part of the intellectual. As a university we must make sure that we provide our students with the knowledge and thinking skills central to advanced education. As an integral university we want to do more; we want to also support them in exploring their interior lives and the intersections between that and their academic work.

There is a creative tension here as we try to hold the paradoxes that arise out of competing paradigms. The two do not fit together seamlessly but, I believe, it is in the tension between them that our most creative and important work arises. As an accredited university we have to meet the expectations of the dominant paradigm. Those goals sit side-by-side with other more transformational aspirations. In combination we have the potential of addressing the knowledge and characteristics needed in these complex and rapidly changing times.

We have identified five dimensions of integral education:

- Multimodal, valuing different ways of knowing;
- Integration of intellectual rigor and personal (including spiritual) growth;
- Transdisciplinarity and integrative;
- Social relevance and interface with the external world; and,
- Space for difference in the curriculum and classes.

One could argue, and I would agree, that these dimensions are found in varying degrees in many higher education institutions. However, I contend that the worldviews that form the context for them at CIIS differentiate them from similar practices in universities formed by other world views.

Brant Cortright, in his book *Psychotherapy and Spirit*, asks what transpersonal psychology looks like in psychotherapy, “Is it shown by what the therapist does or how the therapist is?... Are there some common principles, methods, guidelines which characterize a transpersonal

approach?” (Cortright, 1997, p. 7). I think the same questions can be asked about education that is transpersonal or integral. Is it shown by what the educator does or by what the educator is? While it is easy to focus on techniques, it is not the techniques that are definitive. Instead, I think that it is the worldviews that are definitive. It is what the educator is.

Spirituality and Higher Education

The incorporation of the spiritual into higher education is not without its controversy. This kind of inner work has been regarded as personal and subjective, and so as unrelated to the reasoning and logic that are more appropriately the domain of education. There is also some concern that the incorporation of spirituality is code for a religious litmus test or a denial of science. On the other hand, learning is never solely an objective enterprise. What people learn and how they understand what they learn is always related to previous ideas and existing conceptual frameworks.

Spirituality is clearly important to American college students and faculty. Over half of American college students place a high value on integrating spirituality into their lives and more than two-thirds report having had a spiritual experience (Astin, 2004). Spirituality is not only important to the students, survey data indicate that 40% of American faculty can be described as high in spirituality (Lindholm & Astin, 2006, p. 69). Can we really ignore this as we try to educate students for the future in a world that is highly complex, rapidly changing, and increasingly globally interdependent? Why would we even want to?

Dimensions of Integral Education

Multimodal, Valuing Different Ways of Knowing

A place of creative tension here is to offer students opportunities for the rational, cognitive learning that is basic to higher education while also pursuing approaches that open students to new and creative awareness. Higher education by its very nature emphasizes cognitive learning and understanding expressed in words. While we increasingly recognize the prevalence of multiple forms of intelligence reflected in different learning styles, the college classroom tends to address learning from a verbal perspective and students have to be able to present their ideas in written form. Contemporary reform dialogue is framed in terms of improving learning outcomes, providing students with opportunities to enhance their learning through application, analysis and evaluation.

Classroom practice at CIIS of course includes lecture, discussion, small group work and project based experiences. In addition to all of these conventional approaches to learning that are found at any American university, one will also find meditation, movement, drama, art, and poetry used as ways to bring students into the present and open them to different kinds of learning and consciousness.

Some of these approaches to knowing now fall into the category of evidence based practice—there is effectiveness research that connects them to student learning. We know, for example, that meditation can increase learning and memory. We know that other approaches can help

people access their preconceptions and work with them in a way that opens them to new learning. These approaches can be used as techniques to achieve better learning outcomes and also as ways to support deeper awareness and learning that incorporates the ineffable. Education here seeks to help people integrate the interior and exterior dimensions of life and in doing so provides for stronger and more lasting learning and sense of personal responsibility.

A survey of 2001-2010 CIIS graduates confirmed that students experienced this dimension in their education. The percentage that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement is provided in parenthesis.

- My education included multiple ways of knowing, including experiential learning, collaborative learning, and the use of media and art. (92.4%)
- My education expanded my approaches to learning and helped me appreciate the approaches of others. (91.3%)
- My education facilitated the integration of body, mind and spirit in a significant way. (88.1%)

Integration of Intellectual Rigor and Personal (including Spiritual) Growth

Higher education is explicit in its expectation that intellectually rigorous learning is an outcome; typically that goal for rigorous learning is articulated in cognitive and rational terms. There is usually also an implicit expectation that students will grow in other ways during their years in college.

As part of integral education, we see the two as being inextricably tied together not just as occurring on parallel tracks. Academic work is seen as fostering personal growth and personal growth is seen as fostering academic work and growth. Self-reflective papers and contemplative, experiential and participatory experiences within the classroom all connect personal growth with growth in understanding, knowledge and thinking. Learning is supported by helping students make explicit their beginning understandings and frameworks and by helping them reflect on their own understanding and the connections they make. The theory of education is a holistic one that integrates the personal and the intellectual and seeking to go to deeper levels of understanding and transformation. As bell hooks (1994) has written,

Our work [as teachers] is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 13)

Many students come to CIIS as a step in a perceived journey toward increased self-discovery and awareness. These transpersonal goals are important in connecting faculty and students as co-creators. Our challenge as an educational institution is to keep personal growth and intellectual rigor in balance; in this we are different from more traditional educational institutions in which the intellectual is abstracted from the personal.

Here our tension is that in seeking to make room for personal and spiritual growth we need to also be attentive to ensuring that our students are offered rigorous intellectual work and are encouraged to think critically. It is in the balance of the two that we are at our very best as each strengthens and deepens the other.

The techniques that access multiple ways of knowing typically also support personal growth and development. In utilizing them in a context of rigorous academic learning they also support the latter. Thus much of what we do out of transpersonal understandings also act to enhance learning and better prepare students for the contemporary world.

Returning again to the graduation survey data, there was very strong support for statements specifying that graduates had experienced this dimension.

- My education facilitated my personal growth. (95.9%)
- My education facilitated by intellectual growth. (93.6%)

Transdisciplinarity and Integrative

Education at CIIS seeks to be integrative across disciplines and educational experiences. Just as the problems and key questions of the contemporary world do not fall into neat disciplinary boxes, inquiry does not fall into neat boxes created by courses and semesters. We want our students to be able to pursue questions that transgress boundaries and to seek new ways to bring ideas together. The focus comes to be more on the inquiry than on the discipline. Such a focus on inquiry and integration is one way to address the fragmentation of knowledge that has been created by the division into disciplines and subdisciplines. At the same time, it is vital that students go deeply enough into some area of study that they have the conceptual frameworks with which to organize their ideas. Of CIIS recent graduates, 83.5% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: My education prepared me to engage in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry.

Social Relevance and Interface with the World

According to Haridas Chauduri (1977), integral education is “education which is based upon the concept of the total man [person] and education which is based on the total human situation, the global situation” (p. 78). The integral, holistic tradition at CIIS supports an approach that does not separate learning from preparation for action in the world. Increasingly, students come to CIIS who want to make a difference and seek the tools to be able to do so. Course material connected to meaningful action in the world, group work and opportunities to apply learning to real-world settings also build knowledge and understanding that goes beyond preparation for a particular task at a particular time. Action is framed by theory and imagination.

To give one example: last fall we opened our Clinic Without Walls, an attempt to bring psychological services into housing projects in San Francisco. Unlike our other clinics, this one does not wait until people decide they need/want to come for therapy and make an appointment. In this clinic, students build relationships and community within public housing to open people to the possibility of therapy and to provide it within the community. Graduates indicated

agreement or strong agreement with the statement: My education made meaningful connections between theory and practice (89.4%). A still significant, but smaller percentage agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, CIIS activities and events beyond the formal classes added value to my education and helped me to see its relevance (65.8%).

Space is provided for difference to live in the curriculum and classes

Difference is not something that we can ignore in the world today. Again as Haridas Chaudhuri wrote:

Mankind can no longer be divided into exclusive segments so that the fortune of one will not affect the fortune of the other. We live in a world of shrinking dimensions with people of different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds coming together. As it is commonly phrased, either we swim together or we sink together. (Chaudhuri, 1977, p. 77)

If we are to be able to live together we need to be able to better understand each other and to bridge our differences.

Difference is also about different frameworks, ideas, experiences, and ways of understanding. We want to support paradox and different kinds of inquiry as well as respect for cultural, social and economic difference. This work requires inclusion of the personal. The combination of personal and intellectual work can facilitate understanding of difference and the development of skills to work with responsibility in an increasingly diverse world. Without that we run the risk of bringing people physically together and making them more aware of difference without supporting them in learning to feel comfortable with, or understand, difference. However, engaging in this way is not without its challenges.

What happens when ideas, backgrounds, beliefs are in conflict? In an environment that seeks to affirm the individual there is some pressure to maintain an atmosphere that is not conflictual or angry, to smooth over difference in support of feelings of safety and harmony that can actually undercut building understanding. We struggle to see conflict as an opportunity for learning and to develop the skills to deal with and hold difference. Difference may be the most challenging dimension in relation to spiritual worldviews found at CIIS. As Marianne Williamson (1997) has emphasized, "It is our unity and our diversity that matter, and their relationship to each other reflects a philosophical and political truth outside of which we cannot thrive." (p. 72). And yet, the universality that is emphasized out of our spiritual worldviews at times seems to lead to a downplaying of the importance of difference, especially in terms of considering the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It is not uncommon to hear a CIIS student say, I am spiritual, I have moved beyond diversity, not recognizing that worldview does not negate power and class dynamics. At the same time, 83.4% of the graduates indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement: My education helped me to respond to cultural and ideological diversity by giving me the opportunity to reflect on my own positions (class, gender, sexual orientation, age) and to build connections with others who are differently positioned.

The Higher Education Context

All of American higher education is asking itself questions about how students learn and how to help them learn better. That concern has led to new attention to university teaching and to considerable attention on access, graduation, job preparation, accountability and the measurement of learning. I contend that it is going to take more than reform and increased accountability to prepare our graduates for the demands of this century. It is going to require transformative practice that situates the individual in his/her education.

The concerns have led to demands on universities to demonstrate that their students have learned and to demonstrate what they have learned. At a time when we need people who can think critically, creatively and integratively, the pressure is to show what our graduates know rather than how effectively they can think, or how imaginatively they can apply. While college faculty members generally believe they address the key learning areas and college students generally believe they have acquired some proficiency in these areas, the limited actual outcome data do not support these perceptions.

The data indicate that students are graduating college without high level proficiency in such areas as writing, mathematics, and critical thinking. Such data are compelling and are driving a lot of the accountability and testing momentum currently at work in the US.

However, the needs of this century go much further than that. When we start considering complex learning outcomes such as integration of learning, inquiry, critical and creative thinking, and individual and social responsibility, innovative practices and thinking are needed. We know that it is not enough for people to be able to repeat information; they need to be able to formulate questions, find information and organize and apply it in new ways.

In educating for resilience and resourcefulness, we have to consider the holistic development of our students. While there are many lists of what people are going to need to be able to thrive in this century, a higher education is needed that provides students with the basis for future learning and action and helps them reflect on their own actions, responses, knowledge, relationships and culture. These are exciting challenges and fit well with the strengths of an integral approach to education.

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