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Notes from the Field

The Ecology of Education Learning and Playing with Integral Approaches to Sustainability Reflections on the Seminar Integral Education & Ecology of Next Step Integral

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What images come to mind when you think back at your time in higher education? What were the classes like? What moments do you recall feeling inspired? What kind of experiences do you remember killed your enthusiasm very effectively?

In this *Notes from the Field* I will reflect on the newly emerging field of integral studies and its application to education. To make it come alive I will briefly describe what was integral about the design of a seminar I attended this summer on integral education and ecology. I will focus on the process and methods used in the seminar and how that helped offer a more integral learning experience than your average scientific conference. Lastly, I will translate that to recommendations for teachers in our Dutch higher educational settings.

Applying an Integral Approach to Education

We have recognized now that it is not only someone's knowledge that makes her a good professional. We have developed competence based education in which we consider knowledge, skills and mindsets in a meaningful context that resembles the real world. This is a huge step, but it can still be approached from only the outside of the students. We, the educators, can feel we have to instill the knowledge, skills and mindsets in the student by creating a learning environment that is the most conducive for competence building.

What often gets overlooked is the huge force and importance of the inside experience of a student—the motivation, inspiration, talents and meaning-making. This is one of the leverage points that the integral approach adds to education. It does take teachers who are willing and able to show up and disclose their own inspirations, worldviews and development.

Another useful part of an integral approach is that it consciously includes both the inner (experience) and outer (behavior) of the individual and of the collective. The collective inner dimension conveys the effects of culture, values and norms and the collective outer dimension refers to systems, and systems of systems. Also the synergies between the inside and outside dimensions of individual and collective get cultivated, because there can be no inside dimension without an outside manifestation. Why is this useful? Because it shows that the inner and outer dimensions of individual and collective are always co-arising and ideally are all addressed and critically studied in an inspiring learning environment.

What does this all look like in practice?

Applied to an international seminar on Integral Education & Ecology that I participated in last August 2010, this means providing participants with a learning-ecosystem conducive to openness and exploration, to sharing and inquiring, to critical reflection and good food and great surroundings. There was a great natural environment, with welcoming staff. The first few exercises in smaller groups were designed to go deep fast in personal reflections on the current state of being and the reasons for coming to the event. Sitting in a small circle close together, we finished open sentences like “What I am curious about is...” while just listening to one another without getting into a discussion. Within half a day everyone was at ease and safe enough to be unsafe to explore the edge of their development and to share challenges and future visions. It was a learning environment that is alive, in the midst of the breathtakingly beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains, with a natural pool and good food. It provided a dynamic balance between collective group sessions of dialogue and sharing, high level presentations by experts, and quiet reflective moments. It provided a schedule and it explicitly stated that we needed to take care of our own needs. It was fine to skip a session and do whatever was needed most—a walk, a swim, a phone call or email. After four days of being a learning community in a great learning eco-system, I learned some cool new approaches to sustainability and education. I became clearer about my current vision and mission as an educator and mostly I made connections to much fascinating research and interesting people. I am sure that many formal and informal collaborations will come out of this. With more and more knowledge available online, learning environments need to focus on creating connections to the inner dimensions of the self by fostering inspiration and reflection and between people.

Translated to a University Setting

What this experience speaks of is the need to examine our collective mindsets about why we have the tables in a row, why we turn off the lights and start the powerpoint presentation that puts everyone to sleep. Nothing wrong with rows of tables per se or with presentations with beamers but there is a certain time and place for it, depending on what goals we have at that moment. We say we want to encourage students to form their own opinions, be confident in working with others and to be the best they can be. Let’s honestly answer this question: is putting them in rows in the dark watching presentations and the next moment throwing them into group work with no proper guidance really the best we can do? Imagine for a moment being a student in a program like that. What would you love about it? What would you hate? What would you change?

Next to approaching education in a meaningful context and addressing knowledge, skills and inner disposition, I stress the importance of creating an inspiring learning-ecosystem with lots of personal responsibility as well as very clear rules and expectations. First and foremost, it is important for us teachers to show up and be present with our students, to experiment with disclosing more personal inspirations and professional struggles and to ask for advice from the students once in a while. Let’s be slightly more courageous every time we get in front of a group and ask ourselves ‘What’s the most strategic thing I can do with my set of talents at this time?’ Isn’t that what we would want them to do as a graduated professional?

About the Author

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