

Toward a Model of Integral Education

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Over the last ten years, articles and projects voicing concern about American PhD education have joined those that highlight the limitations of a system of undergraduate education that seems increasingly unresponsive to the needs of students and a rapidly changing world. The questions being raised suggest that it is time to rethink the teaching practices and administrative structures that characterize “mainstream” higher education. This article describes approaches that have been developed at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), an institution that emerged out of the 1960s, an earlier period of questioning. These approaches have evolved over time into the current model of integral higher education being practiced and refined at CIIS, a model that I will describe in this article. In discussing this model, I will also address how this unique experiment in higher education can inform efforts to reform the American academic establishment in general, despite the inevitable constraints on institutional change.

As most critics would acknowledge, the dominant model of higher education in the United States has hundreds of years of tradition and success to look back upon. This combination makes change that much more difficult. While higher education has seen little modification in structure or method over several hundred years, the following factors have altered dramatically: the need for people with college degrees, the diversity of the population, the amount of knowledge, and the rate of change in knowledge. The debate about higher education has been framed by these societal changes as well as by a belief that too many students flounder in college or graduate school without being sufficiently prepared for the world they are encountering. It has challenged colleges to think about how students learn as well as about how and what they teach. It has led to innovation, but that innovation has most often been small-

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scale and sporadic rather than comprehensive. Vartan Gregorian, among others, has suggested that focused interventions alone will not address the problem:

The fundamental problem underlying the disjointed curriculum is the fragmentation of knowledge itself. Higher education has atomized knowledge by dividing it into disciplines, subdisciplines, and sub-subdisciplines—breaking it up into smaller and smaller unconnected fragments of academic specialization, even as the world looks to colleges for help in integrating and synthesizing the exponential increases in information brought about by technological advances. (2004, B12)

The American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) *Greater Expectations* report (2002) similarly concludes that innovation is needed to support students in becoming integrative learners and recognizes that the structure of higher education makes such change difficult.

The CIIS approach developed out of recognition of the limitations of traditional higher education and out of a belief that bringing together ways of knowing developed in the East as well as in the West would strengthen both education and society. The integral phi-

losophy of Sri Aurobindo and Haridas Chaudhuri (the Institute's founding president) provided the framework for these goals. The philosophy advocated by both men suggested an approach to life focused on wholeness rather than on fragmentation. The vision emphasized the unity of mind/body, body/spirit, and person/cosmos. In applying integral philosophy to education, Chaudhuri emphasized two things: educating the whole person and educating about the total human situation (Chaudhuri, 1977). While these may sound like common higher education goals found in

many mission statements, they take on somewhat different meaning when viewed through the lens of integral philosophy. Chaudhuri believed that people are enmeshed in a dualistic view of the world and that this dualism limits their ability to understanding true unity. Education, he thought, could help people see past this dualism and on to the ultimate unity that exists, despite the observable differences that loom so important to us. This led to an emphasis on making connections and looking for unifying principles.

Since the nondualistic view 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. On a personal level, there was an emphasis on education as a way to actualize spiritual and intellectual potential (by addressing both the empirical and spiritual selves), and to have learning become not just a set of words but a “vital force in our course of living” (Chaudhuri 1977, 79). As Chaudhuri pointed out, we can teach people something without them actually believing it, without them making it a “dynamic force in our actual life” (79). To do the latter, what is taught must become part of the inner consciousness of the individual, informing the spiritual and emotional levels as well as the cognitive. Such “deep learning” is foregrounded as an explicit outcome of any integral education. This is an approach to education that is not content to foster rote acceptance of a preordained canon. It engages the deepest aspects of the learner’s psyche and the search for a meaningful and ethical life in the context of scholarly and professional preparation.

These powerful ideas resonated well with the needs of faculty and students seeking an educational institution that would offer an alternative to more traditional settings by emphasizing community and welcoming the subjective and personal into scholarship and the classroom. The ideas were also sufficiently abstract as to allow for multiple interpretations and expressions, thus creating an environment that encouraged innovation. Integral philosophy and the alternative education movement have both contributed to the evolution of CIIS, with the institution at its healthiest

when there is equilibrium between the two. The tension between them has helped keep CIIS from becoming tied to an orthodoxy that could limit creativity and connection to the wider higher-education world on the one hand, and from becoming overly open to too many unconnected ideas, thereby diluting its impact and threatening its long-term sustainability.

In recent years the faculty at the Institute has been in dialogue about the nature of integral education in relation to their own work. The faculty’s intention has been to make more explicit the integral context without creating a formula to which all would be expected to adhere. We are committed to not having a uniform definition that would serve as a basis for the evaluation of all programs and faculty. Such a commitment has enabled us to keep the focus on the type of education we are seeking to provide and on the learning environment we are seeking to create rather than on evaluating “degrees of being integral.”

Underlying the educational endeavor at contemporary CIIS is a dedication to providing opportunities and experiences that aid students in their personal growth and transformation and a belief that a good education is both an intellectual experience and more than an intellectual experience. The integral approach that has evolved over time builds upon transformational and intellectual goals with an emphasis on wholeness, reflection, and action in the world. The integralist emphasis on the importance of spirituality is reflected sometimes in explicit content but more often in the practices that arise out of the belief that learning best occurs when students’ internal lives are engaged. As Jim Ryan observes, it is the spiritual framing of integral philosophy that is most apt to create problems for Western educators. It is one thing to talk about nondualism, it is another to act as though the spiritual and objective realms are not appropriately and necessarily separate. The word spirituality brings forth concerns about academic freedom, pressure to conform to particular religious doctrine, and doctrinaire views of reality. Yet, questions of meaning, mission, and purpose are central to our lives as teachers and learners. As

bell hooks has written, teaching becomes a sacred vocation when we

believe that our work 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. (1994, 13)

The model of integral education that has evolved at CIIS seeks to support all aspects of the growth of our students. Additionally, it postulates a connection between a faculty member’s work as a professor and that which is of central importance in their lives as individuals. In allowing faculty and students to be overt and explicit about questions of meaning and purpose, the Institute encourages members of its community to encounter each other as whole and authentic human beings.

One way to approach engaging the whole student is to make the teaching heavily experiential, with the students being asked to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs as they learn new theoretical material and to consider the extent to which their experiences fit with those theoretical approaches. This creates a learning environment in which a considerable amount of personal and interpersonal work is done alongside, and in support of, the more usual intellectual development. The self-reflection that is expected provides a support for the student’s developing understanding of the subject matter. The effectiveness of this approach is supported by research on learning which finds that students best learn new concepts and information when their previous understandings are also engaged (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). Individuals make sense of new information in light of what they already know and believe, and in doing so they construct knowledge (King 1994). Any learning environment that seeks to actualize individual potential needs to be structured in a way that encourages students in their construction of knowledge. Learning is a personal activity; by inviting in subjective work, we are inviting students to engage with both the new material and their previous understanding and so making it more likely that they are able to merge the

two. It is tempting to think of this as a matter of technique but, more fundamentally, it is about the relationship the professor is willing to have with the subject and the student. A professor teaching in this way has to be willing to engage with the students' developing understanding and subjective experiences and to allow these to be reflected in the pace and structure of the course.

The interplay between self and subject can be achieved in a number of ways. Students may be asked in small groups to recount an experience connected to a theory being presented and discuss how that experience can be understood, or not, by the theory. They may be asked to keep a journal in which they write about their reactions and their own developing connection to the material. They may be asked to meditate or respond via art or movement. They may be asked to write reflective papers in which their own experience and understanding are examined in light of the course material (or vice versa). They may be asked to write research papers in which they are expected to make their own subjective stance explicit to the reader. Attentiveness to the students' subjective experience is a powerful way to have them engage with new learning and integrate that learning with previously held ideas. However, balance between the self and subject is essential in creating such a learning environment. The goal in opening up to the personal is to create an environment that enables deep learning and personal transformation.

One risk is that personal work, especially when pressing and emotional, can swamp the intellectual content if the intellectual goals are not made clear and the professor is not alert to the possibility. 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.

The wholeness that is core to an integral education is not only about personal wholeness, however, it is also about the wholeness of knowledge. It is this aspect that responds to the previously cited challenge posed by Gregorian and has led to the organization of programs around issues of importance rather than around single disciplines. The resulting interdisciplinary programs by their very nature (at least in their early stages) lead to thinking and learning that is integrative. The theories, paradigms, and methodologies of the various disciplines carry with them different understandings of reality and do not generally fit together in neat and simple ways. Thus, bringing together different disciplines creates a push toward integrative thinking and learning as a way of making sense of disparate knowledge sets and worldviews. In these early days of interdisciplinary work there is considerable need to develop ways to bridge the different disciplines. Once those bridges are created, however, there is not necessarily the same intrinsic pressure for integrative thinking; once routinized, an interdisciplinary program can thus create its own force toward fragmentation.

There are a number of ways to structure interdisciplinary programs. At CIIS we take three different approaches, all of which attempt to connect the program to a larger, nonacademic reality, and to cultivate systemic thinking and a holistic approach to the subject matter. In some cases a single discipline remains primary but is enhanced in connection with another discipline (for example, psychology and drama) or set of disciplines (for example, psychology and expressive arts). For other programs, inquiry about a particular global issue stands at the center with multiple disciplines aligned so as to facilitate inquiry into the issue. In one such program, students learn to look at the current environmental crisis through the lenses of philosophy, religious studies, and the sciences. Intentionally interdisciplinary, these programs engage students with the conceptual frameworks and methods of several disciplines. The goals include building students' capaci-

ty to evaluate and synthesize and to create new perspectives and knowledge. Since coherence is not always possible, such programs also encourage being able to acknowledge contradictions and paradox.

Another type of approach crosses disciplinary boundaries and is organized around inquiry. This type of program is focused around the tools of cross-disciplinary inquiry rather than around a limited set of disciplines. The belief is that regardless of the nature of the inquiry, if researchers are well grounded in varied methodological approaches and equipped to unpack the epistemologies of the various disciplines, they need not be confined to a few preselected disciplines. Such a transdisciplinary approach is more focused on the integration of knowledge than it is on the knowledge base of any set of disciplines. It addresses Gregorian's structural question in the most fundamental way by standing outside the usual disciplinary boundaries. The CIIS program in Transformative Learning and Change is structured in this way. It offers students the opportunity to look at change at multiple levels and in different ways. These types of cross-disciplinary structures can help provide students and faculty with schema more oriented toward looking at issues as wholes and can help make them more aware of the epistemologies underlying each discipline. The approach seems to work well for graduate students going into industry. It can be problematic for those going into higher education, in that coming from a program without a clear disciplinary home, it may not be obvious where they fit once they leave graduate school.

All interdisciplinary programs face the challenge of ensuring that students have sufficient depth of knowledge in subject areas to provide a basis for seeking connections and integration, and that they can graduate in a reasonable period of time. This is a large task given the explosion of knowledge and an essential task given that students need extensive knowledge and conceptual schemas around which to organize that knowledge if they are to be able to retain, retrieve, and apply it (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). Programs that seek to connect to the big picture are struc-

tured around these kinds of conceptual schemas at the same time that they are challenged to provide sufficient depth of knowledge around each area. Moreover, to succeed in an academic marketplace that is still geared to disciplinarity, students must be even more rigorously prepared than are their traditional counterparts. They must be equipped not merely with a critique of the status quo, but with sufficient background knowledge and understanding of the norms, so that the critique will register and make a difference to others who are operating within the dominant paradigm.

Integral thinking is stimulated, or not, by the way faculty teaches and in the assignments they develop. There is tremendous and real pressure in any course to cover the material and to give students sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge to think with it and build upon it. Students generally cannot see the synthesis and integration that have gone into creating a coherent lecture, so it is not sufficient to model integrative thinking. Faculty needs to act to help make it a habit of mind for students. The use of both discussion and silence is relevant here. Using discussion to stimulate integrative thinking is not simply a matter of throwing it open to discussion, but it also requires asking integrative questions:

How does this fit with what we learned before?

What are some possible solutions?

How would this seem from the perspective of _____?

How does this theory connect with your experience?

This seems deceptively easy, but faculty members tend to have had more experience with giving a good lecture than with asking good questions. Asking challenging questions raises the possibility of having to stand in front of the room in silence while waiting for a student to respond—a daunting challenge. Likewise, opening up the classroom environment in this way allows



students to ask challenging questions of the faculty. Faculty at CIIS is likely to begin discussions by giving students time to reflect on what they heard, think about the questions, and to write or draw their responses before starting to speak. The stage can also be set for integrative discussion through the use of guided meditation, using images and experiences of connectedness to set up an expectation for integrative thinking. Another structural approach toward wholeness can be found in applied opportunities such as problem-based learning, practica, fieldwork, research projects, and community service. As soon as one moves out of the classroom into the community, the artificial boundaries around knowledge become less relevant. Such settings challenge students to bring together their learning as they address real problems.

A more conceptual way to help students situate themselves in their learning is provided by metacognition, an awareness of how learning happens. Providing students with ways to understand, monitor, and assess their own mode of learning supports them in deepening that learning, in making connections, and in personal transformation. Portfolios provide a way to foster metacognition by asking students to reflect back on written products they have produced over their graduate career, seeing what they have learned (and have not learned), the interconnections between their learning, and how they have changed and developed over

time. The process helps students set and refine their own learning goals and identify areas for further attention. As one student wrote in her final portfolio for her MA in anthropology: “As I was pulling together artifacts and finding examples of my own ‘best work,’ I could actually see my growth over time, especially how much my critical thinking and ability to express complex ideas had matured. I also saw where I still needed to develop as a scholar, researcher and activist.”

Portfolios at CIIS are often part of a culminating or integrative seminar that is directed toward helping students pull together their educational experience into a coherent whole. The mere fact of having such courses at the end of a program signifies to the student that integration of learning is a goal and an expectation. Often, they are designed to help define the transition from student to professional, by helping students identify and articulate what they have learned. This may be done in the form of the examinations, papers, and oral presentations typical of higher education, but the integration may also appear in activities, such as the self-revelatory performances of drama therapy. In the latter the student is asked to dramatize a personal struggle in a manner that both displays it and is self-healing.

The contemporary CIIS connection to Aurobindo and Chaudhuri is not one of dogma, but of fundamental ideals around wholeness that can be seen in the learning environment and in the structure of academic programs. The philosophy has been a strength for CIIS by facilitating an environment that supports deep learning and understanding leading to synthesis and integration as well as to creativity and integration. It has been a useful tool for focusing attention inward on the education and personal transformation of the students and on the teaching and scholarly work of the faculty. The inward focus has enabled the creation of a learning environment and institution attuned to mul-

tifaceted personal growth and, like all focus, has enabled another type of fragmentation, that between CIIS and higher education in general, and points to the limitations inherent in any change we make to educational institutions.

Our alumnae still have to go out into a world that understands teaching and learning organized around disciplines. Innovations have to be made in a way that enables them to explain to others how their education addresses some of the limitations of more traditional education. It is not sufficient to provide an excellent education; it is also essential to be able to place that education into the context created by the traditional and familiar. For any educational reform to work it must enable graduates to situate themselves within the society. An integral education thus faces the challenge of creating an educational environment supportive of wholeness and in


conversation with more traditional education so that students and faculty can bridge the differences.

The (still not completely fulfilled) promise of such an education in a time of great fragmentation—when an “us versus them” mentality predominates—is to offer the university as a “third space” where people can bracket the usual boundaries between disciplines, nations, and religions, and discover how to enact a more humane, pluralistic, and sustainable world. The story of integral education at CIIS is useful to recount because it profiles the challenges and opportunities of a community striving to enact a better world as well as a different way of organizing teaching and learning. The most inspiring aspect of the example for others may lie in the attempts of this ever-changing group of people to embody in practice a world where diversity of all sorts is a resource,

where respectful dialogue across the seemingly irreconcilable fissures of our times is a matter of daily practice.

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