

Towards Holistic Education: A Challenge for Education Philosophy

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Introduction

The purpose of my paper is to present some arguments and approaches that are related to holistic education. This is a term that brings together different approaches. Why holistic education?

- ... because we need to engage the whole person, not just part of her
- ... because we need to engage whole persons in community
- ... because there are many ways of learning and knowing
- ... because wholeness is the essence of Christian faith
- ... because the work of the ecumenical movement is for wholeness
- ... because we need to learn to live together in wholeness.

These have been markers and starting points of a resource book on HE that we produced for the WCC.

The need for holistic learning has been recognised from earliest time especially in religious traditions. Today we face a renewed debate about HE in many different regions and contexts that argues against mainstream education, focused nearly exclusively on rationality.

What is HE based upon?

“Holism asserts that everything exists in relationship, in a context of connection and meaning – and that any change or event causes a realignment, however slight, throughout the entire pattern.” (Ron Miller)

Connectedness is a key word for HE. Behind HE is the quest for a caring community, personal and social healing, cooperation and peace.

The debate about holistic education takes place in a world where knowledge and ways of knowing become increasingly fragmented. Life opportunities, seen from an economic perspective, are created by knowing a lot about a small area of knowledge. Approaches of holistic education have in common that they can sharpen a critical view of the prevailing dominant approach to education and can help to develop significant alternatives which serve the student as well as adults in a meaningful way.

Working in a church based institute for educational research and being involved in European networks of Religious Education one of my concerns deals

with education that takes account of religion, spiritual development and inter-religious education. It is my starting point that developments in holistic education and in religious education can be brought more closely together for mutual benefit.

The German scholar Helmut Peukert speaks about two different modes of learning (2002). One mode of learning adds something to an already existing scaffold of knowledge and orientation and another mode transforms in a radical sense our perspective of reality and our self-understanding.

Transformation is needed when human beings and also societies are in a situation of crisis. Peukert discusses a possible relationship between transformational education processes and religion. He argues for a critical approach to education and religious education that enables the crossing of boundaries about interpretations of reality, about the Other and about oneself. Very often education for transformation is closely linked to HE.

1. A journey from 'either-or' to 'both-and' logic

Any power point presentation depends on a binary logic that is based on two digits: 0 and 1. No computer system would be possible without using this binary logic.

Binary logic is at the heart of all digital forms of communication. It uses the numbers 1 and 0 arranged in different sequences to exchange information. Boolean algebra is the basis of computer systems.

Without binary logic we would neither have computers nor many of the gifts of modern science. This has clearly infiltrated our daily life and we cannot ignore it.

But binary logic can also mislead us when it continues as the dominant philosophical orientation for our thinking and acting, especially as a basis of education.

It is an example of an *either-or thinking* that has given us not only the benefits of a computerised world but also a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life.

Many examples for *either-or thinking* can be identified when we differentiate:

Inside versus outside

Interior versus exterior

Subjective vs. objective

Mind vs. brain

Idealism vs. materialism (*idealism: mind as the central perspective of seeing the world; materialism where matter shapes the world view*)

Introspection vs. positivism (*inner processes versus those things where only facts matters*)

Hermeneutics vs. empiricism (*interpretation versus facts*)

Etc.

These terms often represent conflicting approaches to knowledge that are often seen as disconnected. A central task of the holistic education approaches to my understanding is to deal with the tension between the existing binary logic *either – or* and in supporting an alternative logic that can be named *both-and* logic.

Any integral approach based on the *both-and logic* is to honour and incorporate both of the mentioned parts.

When we try to bring things together in the area of education philosophy we can refer to developments in other academic disciplines, theories and approaches, where the search for a more integrated view can be found. An example in social science is the approach of Ulrich Beck, a well known German sociologist who has developed an alternative view on developments in the so called second modernity or reflective modernity that can overcome a dominant binary thinking also in the field of social science. Beck names his approach the cosmopolitan view that acknowledges the otherness of the other but also of us (Beck 2003, 2004). Other developments took place in physical science, systems theory, ecology and related areas where the *both-and-logic* became increasingly important.

Helmut Reich: Theory on relational and contextual reasoning

“I would argue that rigid adherence to either/or thinking has impeded the full realisation of the potential of psychology, education and religion, among other fields, and has hindered better resolutions of societal problems.” (2002, 4)

Niels Bohr (1885 – 1962), physicist and Nobel Prize winner, one of the giants in the development of Quantum Mechanics, has stated the principle of complementarity: “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”

This quote defines a concept that is essential to thinking the world together – the concept of paradox. If we want to know what is essential, we must stop thinking the world into pieces and start thinking it together again. This can be underlined by a statement that represents an integrated view that is common to those who share the aims of HE:

“We are creatures of *both* reason *and* emotion, mind *and* body, matter *and* spirit” (Riley-Taylor 2002, 67, italics in original)

2. A concern of Religious Educators

An integrated view is also a concern of religious educators in Europe. I can illustrate that by quoting a paper from a European conference for RE teachers that was held in Järvenpää/Finland last year (2004):

For many school systems throughout Europe the beginning of the new millennium has brought a questioning of the mechanistic and materialist approach to the planning of the curriculum that has dominated much of the recent past. There has developed an awareness of the need to educate the whole person in a more integrated way that goes beyond the narrowly cognitive. RE can make a major contribution to this process, stimulating not just the children's brains, but also their emotions, their spirits and their sense of community.

3. Where is the problem? Broken Paradoxes

Parker J Palmer, teacher trainer and lecturer in Higher Education, analyses the current situation in education. He states that the world of education is filled with 'broken paradoxes':

- We separate *head from heart*. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think.
- We separate *facts from feelings*. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today.
- We separate *theory from practice*. Result: theories that have little to do with life and practice that is unformed by understanding.
- We separate *teaching from learning*. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk.' (Palmer 1998, 66)

Is this the situation we are dealing with as teachers and educators in the classroom or in other contexts?

The task is then: How to develop paradoxical thinking?

How to overcome either-or thinking and create both-and thinking? How to bring things together?

"When a person is healthy and whole, the head and the heart are both-and, not either-or, and teaching that honors that paradox can help make us all more whole." (Palmer 1998, 64)

The integrated view of holistic educators is based on some basic principles of HE: The human being is a complex existential entity. Therefore

- (1) Human development occurs in different dimensions: intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, spiritual.
- (2) Spirituality means: reawakening students to a sense of awe and wonder
- (3) Holistic education cannot be reduced to any technique.

(4) Connectedness as a key principle

4. Interconnectedness of different areas

Modernity has brought up a high level of differentiation of several spheres and sciences that deal with subjective and objective aspects in a singular or collective mode. Bringing these modes together in a map we can use a model of Ken Wilber who differentiates four areas, four modes of knowledge:

I – self and consciousness, subjective state (Theorists investigate interior consciousness, as it appears in individuals, e.g. S. Freud, C.G. Jung, psychotherapy)

We – Culture and world view (inter-subjective structure; shared values, perceptions, e.g. Thomas Kuhn, Max Weber, Hans-Georg Gadamer)

It - (objective) brain and organism (upper right: individual viewed in an objective, empirical “scientific” fashion; Skinner, Locke, empiricism, behaviourism).

Its - (objective) social system and environment (systems theory, Parsons, Comte, Marx)

Holistic thinking tries to show that each aspect correlates and actually co-evolves with all the others “for the simple reason that you cannot have an inside without an outside, or a plural without a singular.” (Wilber 2001)

5. Support from other areas

When we deal with holistic approaches to education we should be aware that there are developments in other areas as well (see Schreiner 2005). And it seems to me that we as educator have not yet carefully analysed how these other developments can support our search for a more HE.

Quantum physics. Holism in quantum physics is said to refute atomism, which has been predominant in modern philosophy of nature.

Deep Ecology, a paradigm that starts with the basic understanding that human beings and nature are not separated. The task is to explore the immanent values of all living beings. (Arne Naess)

Biology; evolution theory; definition of a living system as an autopoietic network.

The movement towards a new ethics. The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff demands that rationality should be opened up in two directions, to affectivity, attentiveness and to spiritual experiences that relates to the whole and to mystics so that “ethics should not degenerate to a cold war of regulations.” (Boff 2000, 2002)

Feminist movement; eco-feminist theory, exposing androcentric practices at the root of both social hierarchy and the destruction of nature.

Teaching and learning theories: Concepts that argue for the existence of several intellectual competencies (Gardner 1999), exploring of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996), constructivism and its implication for learning (Grimmitt 2000) are slowly influencing the thinking about teaching and learning. (see also Oxley 2002).

Contemporary approaches to holistic education should become more aware of some of these findings and connect them with their view of education.

6. A critical view on holistic education

One critique has to do with the concept of holistic as such: Wholeness itself cannot be contained by any system of thought, even by holism, no matter how elegantly we express it! "Wholeness must be experienced as a living reality, as the Tao [The way, according to Chinese philosophy, beyond words. Only in this way can we remain open to the complexity and paradox of the world as it essentially is." (Miller 2000a, 116f).

The defence of personal subjectivity in different phases of holistic education "neglected the cultural and political dimensions of education and human development ... An apolitical educational theory – a view of education that does not take into account the force of culture – is incomplete and ungrounded in the realities of the human condition." (Miller 2000, 79)

It seems that one way to develop HE is to take account of a diversity of progressive traditions and discourses in education that are yearning "towards connectedness with others, the natural world, and the cosmos; yearnings we may refer to as spiritual: that aspect of human consciousness and will that yearns towards meaning, purpose, and connectedness." (Oldenski & Carlson 2002, 1).

7. Different parts of a journey from *either-or* to *both-and*

HE can be seen as a journey that is aware of the spirit, the mind, emotions, the individual in community.

Key areas for our enterprise

For Parker Palmer teaching and learning require a community 'that can help renew and express 'the capacity for connectedness at the heart of authentic education.' (1998, 89)

In his books he presents several models of community in education that give flesh to the image of teaching that is a guiding idea for Palmer: 'to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.' (90)

And he further explains:

'The community of truth is an image of knowing that embraces both the great web of being on which all things depend and the fact that our knowing of those things is helped, not hindered, by our being enmeshed in that web.' (99)

10. Why even attempt the impossible?

The American philosopher Ken Wilber has expressed his concern about an integral vision that can support a movement towards a holistic perspective: "So why even attempt the impossible? Because, I believe, a little bit of wholeness is better than none at all, and an integral vision offers considerably more wholeness than the slice-and-dice alternatives. We can be more whole, or less whole; more fragmented, or less fragmented; more alienated, or less alienated – and an integral vision invites us to be a little more whole, a little less fragmented, in our work, our lives, our destiny." (Wilber 2000, xii).

Perspectives

More dialogue is needed between the different areas of education and holistic education. There is a need to find collaborators in analysing the existing situation of broken paradoxes and to develop models of education guided by a more holistic approach. The area of religious education seems to me an appropriate field for being included.

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