Integral Education at the California Institute of Integral Studies

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Abstract: There is a unique higher education institution, California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), in San Francisco, CA, which asserts that they are a leader in integral education. Integral education is a progressive model of educating that honors (a) the multidimensional nature of students’ experience, intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual, (b) multiple ways of knowing, and (c) a commitment to social and environmental justice. This article offers an historical and theoretical overview an integral education at CIIS. At the core of this work is the aspiration to share the characteristics and distinctness of an integral education currently in practice at CIIS, with the objective of inspiring educators to reflect on how they learn and teach.

Keywords: Integral Education, Progressive Education, Spirituality in Higher Education

Whole-person Education Models and the Prevalence of “Integral”

Integral education is a philosophy of education that can be likened to a whole group of novel educational models. “In one sense integral has become a generic attractor for progressive (or reform or alternative) educational theories of all flavors.”1 Although all are distinct in their own right, all share similar values with each other. An extensive review of overlapping principles and practices worth noting found in progressive pedagogies follows, but these will not be discussed at length here. These themes concerning the practice and principles of progressive education have been articulated by Murray and include the honoring of: (a) the philosophy of holism, (b) multiple intelligences, (c) creativity, (d) constructivism, (e) developmentalism, (f) zone of proximal development, (g) meta-learning, (h) adaptivity/individualization/differentiation, (i) learning by doing, (j) situated learning, (k) empowerment and liberation, (l) the ethical classroom, (m) transformative education, (n) community/service-based learning, (o) lifelong learning and emergence, (p) teacher presence and embodiment, and (q) participatory/action-based curriculum development and research.2 In addition to these, most progressive models strive to honor multiple learning styles, and the complexity and multidimensional nature of the human experience. Environmental and social justice issues come into the foreground of awareness in these progressive approaches as well. Students are encouraged to be both globally and locally minded, and the interpersonal realm is a welcomed aspect of student experience too.3

Additionally, there seems to be an inherent spirituality in these types of whole-person approaches, due to the systems thinking that is at the core of a more holistic education. In other words, “to understand anything is to understand its relationships to larger ‘wholes’”4 and

2. Ibid., 36–38.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 4.
the largest “whole”; which has relationships to everything; the ultimate “more” from which all the “less” derives was described as the absolute, the sacred, or some form of ultimate order...For many holistic educators, these perennial truths expressed in their general form rather than a particular cultural form was the key to the spirituality that must be part of every education.6

Spirituality in higher education is not limited, however, to holistic or whole-person models, and is shown for example in the longstanding traditions in Jesuit higher education in the United States.

Put simply, an integral education could be defined as a holistic education—an education for the whole person. However, upon conducting a Google search7 for “whole-person education,” it becomes apparent that the use of this language for describing a higher education experience is not exclusive. For example, today Boston College offers graduate students a whole-person education workshop series as a part of their teacher training; Wake Forest in North Carolina, Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, and Hong Kong Baptist University in China also all use the same language to describe what type of education they offer students. More results showed that schools and universities who offered a “whole-person education” were referring to the inclusion of science and faith in a higher educational context. Moreover, Jesuit models of education in the United States have long been concerned with the multidimensional nature of learners and have always welcomed the spiritual dimension of students’ experience into their classrooms and curriculums. What is more is that the contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber offers his own take on integral education at his Integral Institute in Colorado based on his unique integral vision, which can be summed up in his all quadrants, all levels model (AQAL).8 However, despite the prevalent use of the word “integral” and the notion of “whole-person” to describe an educational framework, the integral education at CIIS is one-of-a-kind and historically antecedent to the others.

Integral Education at California Institute of Integral Studies

The California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), a post-secondary and graduate school in downtown San Francisco, CA, offers a unique experience in higher education. Rather than solely developing students’ intellect and assessing such capacities, CIIS aspires to nurture students’ simultaneous development along multiple lines of intelligence. By explicitly including the affective, experiential, and spiritual dimensions of human experience, alongside the more traditional cognitive and pragmatic aspects of learning within the context of higher education, and by honoring the subjective dimension of individual experience in the curriculums and classrooms, CIIS strives to educate students in a more balanced way.9

Moreover, what makes the integral approach to education distinct at CIIS is that it is rooted in the integral philosophy of Aurobindo Ghose and Mirra Alfassa, who were later known as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.10 Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri, who wrote one of the earliest dissertations focused on the Integral Yoga and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, brought this integral educational vision to life in the United States when he founded CIIS over 45 years ago.11 As such, an

6. Ibid., 5.
examination of the integral worldview that underpins the vision of integral education at CIIS becomes necessary.

**Ontological Assumptions of an Integral Worldview**

The aim here is transparency, to make explicit the conception of the world or philosophy of life that the integral education under consideration is grounded. An integral perspective of the world assumes that the nature of reality is non-dual, multidimensional, holistic, and evolutionary. First, in contrast to the centuries old mind/body separation dilemma, an integral worldview understands the nature of reality as a body-mind-spirit continuum; there is no separateness, only interconnection. Moreover, in spite of this essential unity of being, each dimension manifests in a spectrum of qualities and distinct characteristics, and thus, an integral worldview also assumes the multidimensionality of existence. Thirdly, an integral worldview is one of the earliest expressions of the philosophy of holism, which is a philosophy that (a) asserts all parts are inseparable from the whole, and that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (b) recognizes the urge toward wholeness as primary, and (c) holds the belief that human beings seek to actualize this primary, innate potential. Lastly, an integral worldview accepts an evolutionary perspective of life. This notion begs questions like: what if the human being is a transitional being, not the final product? What if human psychological and spiritual growth is the locus of an evolution of consciousness? What if it is a dynamic process without any preconceived limits?

To encapsulate the integral worldview and how it inspired the integral education model being practiced at CIIS, Dr. Chaudhuri, the founder of the Institute, declared there is a holistic impulse, an integrative urge of our total being [to reconcile opposites, an urge] in which instinct and intellect, passion and reason, impulse and law, emotion and thought, self and society, psyche and cosmos intermingle in an all embracing organic relationship. The great challenge of our time is to restore this organic relationship with sound educational methods.

Today CIIS asserts that it is a leader in integral education because the educational methods that are practiced there seek to embody the restoration project that Chaudhuri spoke of over four decades ago.

**Integral Education in Practice at CIIS Today**

Integral education is an emerging educational ideal. Specifically at CIIS however, the integral educational approach is distinct because the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was influential in the founding of the Institute. To this day those same aspirations and allegiances are strived to be upheld. As noted elsewhere here, integral education at CIIS is one for the whole person, mind, body, and spirit. More than that, integral education at CIIS includes honoring the interconnectedness of all life experiences. Figure 1 represents the recognition of interconnectedness at CIIS.

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The figure shows the interconnectedness of life experiences. The individual is shown rooted in the experience of culture, and the figure was created intentionally to look that way because culture is something that one is born into, and thus it is what grounds human experience from the outset. The interpersonal and ecological aspects of human experience emerge as a person engages with their environment, the world, and the people that surround them, and as such these aspects are depicted in figure one at either side of the individual. The global perspective is found at the crown of the image, since it is a perspective that a human being must develop over time. As a person learns more about different people and cultures outside of their own, the capacity to see all human beings as part of a global community and as one human family becomes possible. The spiritual dimension of human life is all pervading; hence the figure attempts to reflect that by encompassing and underlying all other dimensions. An integral education at CIIS facilitates the awareness of both the multidimensional nature of being and this interconnectedness of the said dimensions.

An integral approach to education at CIIS also honors multiple ways of gaining valid knowledge, for example, intuitive, somatic, vital, intellectual, and so on, and the multidimensionality of the human experience, for example, physical/body, emotional/vital, mental/rational, humanistic/spiritual realms. Fostering global awareness, nurturance of understanding and acceptance, and a celebration of diversity are ideals espoused by CIIS when they offer an integral education and the method also “attempts to surmount the contradictions and antagonisms inherent in ordinary human cultural and philosophical positioning.”

Furthermore, CIIS maintains that the integral educational model offered adheres to seven commitments, which form the basis of the teaching philosophy of all the programs at the Institute:

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[CIIS] practices an integral approach to learning and research…affirms spirituality…commits to diversity and inclusion…fosters multiple ways of learning and teaching … advocates sustainability and social justice…supports community…and strives for an integral and innovative governance.17

These commitments are advocated by all programs and all schools within the Institute. However, as mentioned earlier, many progressive schools and programs across the United States espouse similar sentiments in their mission and vision statements; what makes CIIS stand apart?

The Legacy of CIIS: Aspirations and Historical Roots

As previously noted, the integral education at CIIS is underpinned by an integral worldview, which can be traced back to the integral yoga and philosophy of Mirra Alfassa and Aurobindo Ghose, more commonly known as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Integral yoga is not a religion or dogma, but could be considered an intentional way of life that is harmonious and creative. “It emphasizes the need for a balanced integration of the physical, emotional, intellectual, ethical, and religious aspects of personality.”18 The path of integral yoga actually has no prescribed method or set of practices; anyone can begin wherever s/he finds her/himself, if the will and intention to recognize and honor aspiration not motivated by egocentrism is present. In other words, “integral yoga reaffirms the Hindu ideal of participating in life as an instrument of the eternal.”19 Moreover, this way of living life adheres to the notion that there is a unity in the diversity of life, that each person is on his or her own path of unique self-discovery, and each person is not only unique on the physical level, but possesses an even more unique set of soul values and qualities that must be actualized in life. As such, “integral yoga looks upon the body as an immensely valuable means of self-fulfillment and self-expression…Even after the full realization of the Divine, the body has to be used as an instrument for expressing the divine will in society.”20

More briefly to review, integral yoga offers no prescribed path, it meets students wherever s/he is in her/his own development, and honors the individuality and uniqueness of each psycho-spiritual unfolding. Integral yoga is about cultivating an embodied spiritual attitude or way of life, with the ultimate end being not personal salvation but “the collective liberation of mankind.”21 What is more is that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lived under the premise that human beings are capable of changing human nature and the world itself by participating in individual and collective spiritual practice, and that human beings can cooperate intelligently with the creative evolutionary force inherent in the universe.22 These modern day sage philosophers also asserted that education must be a living evocation of the powers of the mind, spirit, and will of the human being.23 The historical context of CIIS is important to note because it is this integral yoga philosophy and view of life that makes CIIS’ integral education stand out in the integral crowd. More specifically, through the recognition and concentrated development of five aspects of human existence simultaneously, the physical, vital/emotional, mental, psychic/soul, and spiritual/transpersonal, an integral education strives to foster balanced

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19. Ibid., 40.
20. Ibid., 42.
21. Ibid., 43.
development, in addition to heightening one’s ecological and social awareness. This particular integral approach to education was brought to higher education in the United States by Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri, with the blessing of Sri Aurobindo, over 50 years ago.

Dr. Chaudhuri’s Vision of Integral Education

Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri was the founder of the California Institute of Integral Studies and anyone who knew him would attest to his inspirational presence. He explained that “there are five inseparably related aspects or dimensions of human personality as follows (a) the physical or bodily aspect; (b) the socio-ethical aspect; (c) the instinctual-emotional aspect; (d) the cognitive-pragmatic-vocational aspect; (e) the religious-mystical-humanistic aspect” and added that these dimensions are an “indivisible unity.” Furthermore, Chaudhuri noted the division of intellect from spirit had caused a rift between people and to redeem harmony human beings must (1) understand religion better and divest it of sectarianism, cultism, dogmatism, and other-worldliness; (2) “Focus on the essential truths and values common to all great religions…experience the oneness of all existence;” (3) dedicate oneself and one’s actions to aspiring the will of the divine; (4) recognize that both science and religion “are relatively valid conceptual models useful for effective organization of the multitudinous facts of experience;” and (5) abolish dualistic thinking tendencies. The recognition and active engagement with the dimensions of being outlined by Chaudhuri, as well as the intentional pursuit of his suggestions concerning the reconciliation of the split between intellect and spirit underpin his view of an integral education. In fact, his heart-felt passion can be sensed upon reading his call for change: “The time is long overdue that this spirit of wholeness or completeness is made the cornerstone of a new educational policy.” Aspiring towards the transformation of human consciousness and the integration of all aspects of being is still the bedrock of CIIS’ educational objectives, and it is alive and thriving in the hearts of the Institute’s students.

Implications

CIIS pioneers a unique model of integral education, one that offers a glimmer of hope to a humanity in crisis, not only ecological and economical, but existential as well. Further, an integral education at CIIS has the potential to heal individuals with a will to learn, in service of the greater good for all beings and the planet, and was believed by the founders to be a potential venue for the evolution of consciousness. CIIS, in fact, “was created out of a critique of American society and higher education” and as such, must innately posit a solution, one which has been historically and theoretically outlined in this paper.

In a past commencement address to CIIS, Parker J. Palmer, co-author of The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, speaks of this new vision in practice as “nearly unique in higher education” and “revolutionary” in that it is an education that takes the inner world as

24. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 50.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 52.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 53.
serious as the outer world. 36 “The story of the California Institute of Integral Studies is a living case study—a work in progress that documents that a university can maintain academic credibility and institutional accreditation while challenging the prevailing dualistic educational model.” 37 Thus, the education offered by CIIS must be investigated more thoroughly. As CIIS’ founder Haridas Chaudhuri proclaimed, “education is indeed the most effective agency by which genuine change of human consciousness and enduring transformation of human behavior can be accomplished.” 38 In order to start conversations with more traditional institutions and educators, integral education at CIIS ought to be explored more deeply to assess its merit.

Conclusion

The purpose of this manuscript was to distinguish the integral education model at CIIS from other progressive models of education. This venture was undertaken to remind educators, institutions, students, and researchers of the conversation around progressive models of education in general, and to offer greater exposure to one progressive model in particular which has been in practice for almost five decades. The exposé was also in service of inspiring educators to reflect on how they learn and teach. What is also revealed in this review of literature is a gap in assessing such novel models of educating. While there is much to say with regard to the theory and ideal nature of these models, researchers would find a treasure trove of data if they chose to explore students’ and faculty experiences of these sorts of educational models. Thus, in addition to informing, this manuscript could serve as inspiration for future research in higher education in the United States.

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