Transformative approaches to teacher education:

Becoming holistic educators in “unholistic” settings

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This chapter will explore the experience of students that were enrolled in the MA program in Holistic and Integrative Education at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), a program that has worked with eleven cohorts over a period of more than 15 years, recognized by its students and the professional community as an exemplar program in transformative education (e.g., Duerr, 2003). As part of our program students take six program courses over a two-year period as a cohort, typically consisting of a diverse group of 15 to 25 students of varying professional contexts, ages and experience. To introduce this chapter, I will quote one student’s account of her professional setting,

Imagine my shock . . . to find that most of the theories of educational leaders were de-emphasized in favor of political agendas . . . and teaching to the test in order to get school dollars. Proven curriculum and pedagogies were discarded in favor of drilling, pre-scripted curriculum, and anthology readings from the class text. . . . ***I was a holistic teacher in an unholistic environment*** [emphasis added].

Unfortunately, this description describes the type of professional setting in which most of our educators work. This chapter will focus on our students’ journey and their transformation from near hopelessness to confidence in their ability to create a holistic learning environment in an “unholistic” professional setting, or how embodied and transformative approaches to higher education can be implemented in a setting in which many of the students experience stress connected with their work environment, financial situation, and/or family responsibilities. Specifically, I will first briefly discuss our context, and then focus on our pedagogy, including a discussion of our framework and a discussion of the transformative components of the program, especially our focuses on their vision of education, nourishing their inner lives, and building a supportive learning community, all clarified with quotes from students. Finally, I will discuss possible implications of this study of an “embodied path to wisdom and social transformation” for other contexts.

Context

CSUSB is one campus in the state supported California State University system, and is a federally recognized Hispanic serving institution with approximately 64% female students, 40% Hispanic students, 28% Caucasian students and 11% African American students. Approximately 62% of the first time freshmen students are first generation college students. Many of our MA students experience stress connected with their work environment, financial situation, and/or family responsibilities. A number of our students work in public schools performing poorly on standardized high stakes testing that have adopted methods inconsistent with a holistic philosophy. To clarify, one student in the tenth cohort describes her situation entering the program,

I started [my first year teaching] as a second grade teacher and got very personally involved with my students’ stories and worked very hard to connect their learning environment with their own life experiences. This took a lot out of me but I figured this was the way it needed to be. . . . My student’s needs came before my own needs. . . .That first year I drove an hour to work, worked between 10 and 12 hours a day, drove another hour home and then worked some more. . . . I still loved teaching though. As I gave my students top priority in my life, the balance of my marriage, children, friends, extended family and self suffered. I saw a future of burn out . . . Professionally, there was a lot of pressure to perform. Achievement on the standardized tests was the focus of my district. Administrators were constantly in my room and meeting with me . . . I put a lot of pressure on myself as I worked to make sure every student . . . worked to meet my ideals. . . . The team of teachers I worked with, for the most part, were burnt out . . . I considered that I might be headed towards that direction myself.

It seems appropriate to briefly describe the transformation of this student two years later,

[Attending to my needs] used to make me feel guilty but now I can separate from the guilt and allow my own needs to become a priority when it is essential. By allowing myself to be connected to my own needs, I can see how I am more aware of my students needs and can help them to find ways to get their needs met. . . . What I discovered is that inside of me lies who I am . . . . Discovering and accepting my true self as a teacher and human being has been one of the most powerful lessons . . . throughout this journey.

She then quotes Emerson, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

To further clarify, I will describe one student’s response to an assignment to experiment with methods that might nourish her inner life. She had practiced yoga in the past and thought this would be nourishing for her. This student had no time for this assignment with her perceived responsibilities. She already woke up at 6 am and was unwilling to get up earlier. Reflecting, she realized that she arrived at work an hour before the students arrived, and decided that she would spend about 5 minutes practicing yoga at home each morning before leaving, resulting in her arriving at school a little later. This little adjustment made a significant difference in her day.

These quotes certainly are not a description of all our students and the schools in which they work. Some enter the program with significantly less demands on their personal life, and some work in supportive professional settings; however, the descriptions give a sense of the specific characteristics of our setting that are an appropriate focus for this chapter, specifically how embodied and transformative approaches to higher education can be implemented in a setting in which many of the students experience stress connected with their work environment, financial situation, and/or family responsibilities.

# Framework and methodology

In this section, I will (1) explain briefly my spiritual perspective, given that it is the major influence on the framework and methodology; (2) define some necessary terminology connected with my spiritual perspective; and (3) discuss the conceptual framework for our pedagogy. My approach for integrating a spiritual perspective in my professional work has been primarily influenced by two factors. First, I have had a regular spiritual practice, both as a student and facilitator since 1975, at which time, after completing my doctoral work and exploring different approaches to spiritual growth, I joined a spiritual group in Boston primarily in the Gurdjieff/Bennett tradition. I felt attracted to the comprehensiveness and consistency with my experience (and other teachings that I respected; e.g., Buddhism) of the theoretical approach, as well as the emphasis on applying the theory in the midst of our daily activities. In 1979, I completed a nine-month residential course completed by 76 students internationally, and included internationally known guest teachers, such as Sonyal Rinpoche (Tibetan Buddhist), Sheik Sulieman Dede (Mevlevi Sufis in Turkey), Sheik Muzzzafer Ozak (Helmeti Sufis, Turkey), Dr. Edith Wallace (psychotherapist), and Venerable Dharmawara Mahathera (Buddhist). Jelaleddin Loras, the son of Sheik Sulieman Dede, was a student on the course and trained a group of the students, including myself, to perform the Sema, the turning ritual of the Mevlevi Sufis, during his father’s visit to the course. From 1982 to 1995, during my time in Connecticut, I facilitated a group for adults in New Haven, and initiated a support group of such facilitators in New England that met a few times a year to discuss and refine our approaches.

Second, in 1997 a combination of events indicated to me that the time was appropriate to explicitly focus on identifying the implications of a spiritual perspective for education, especially public education, in my professional work. As part of my research and professional work in this focus I created and directed the Spirituality and Education Network, which conducted collaborative research (e.g., London, 2002; London et al, 2004) and organized six working retreats and an international summit, “Reclaiming Wholeness: Welcoming an Integrative Vision and Transformative Practice in Education,” attended by 67 invited leaders in the field. In addition, I created and assumed a leadership role in the Spirituality and Education sig (special interest group) in AERA (American Educational Research Association) that has acted as a forum for sharing research in the field.

# Terminology

In this chapter, I will try to limit the terminology involving spirituality to the concepts necessary to understand the framework for this study. The definitions given here are primarily influenced by the work of Bennett (e.g., London, 1998, 2001, or Bennett, 1961, 1964) and work with the Spirituality and Education Network (e.g., London et al, 2004). I will define three distinct yet interdependent components of our experience as humans, Spirit, Soul or Being, and Body or Function. I am not denying the possibility that at some level of Being the three can be seen or experienced as one. However, for understanding our ordinary experience, including our experience as educators, the division into three components seems useful. The first component of our experience, the world of Function, is associated with the functioning of the material or conditioned world; that is, the processes that are predictable, observable and objective. Function includes the ordinary workings of thinking, feeling and bodily movements -- not what a person is, but rather what we do. This definition of the world of Function is meant to be consistent with the use of the word Body in the sense of Body, Spirit and Soul.

Second, we need to recognize that there is a component of our experience that cannot be reduced to the functioning of the conditioned material world that is a nonmaterial source of meaning and value for our lives. We will label this source as Spirit. As we are defining it, Spirit does not do things; it is that which impels or is the impetus for the action. The action itself is a functional process. The fact that Spirit is connected with the unconditioned world makes it difficult, if not impossible, to clearly define Spirit. Bennett (1983) states this difficulty well,

With … [Spirit] there is the great difficulty which we are always up against that makes it so hard to know what to say. Whether there is [Spirit] or not [Spirit] is impossible to say. Even such simple questions as 'Does [Spirit] exist or does it not exist?' or 'Does it change or remain the same?' or 'Is it one or many?' turn out to be meaningless because we are looking at a thing to which that type of distinction is not applicable (p. 14).

Given the difficulty of defining Spirit, I will note that the wording “nonmaterial source” is meant to point in a certain direction, and (1) “nonmaterial” is not meant to imply that theoretically there cannot be a materialist interpretation of what I am defining as Spirit, just that right now those interpretations, to me at least, seem inconsistent with my experience, and (2) “source” does not necessarily imply an external source (e.g., transcendent source), but rather allows for an internal source (e.g., the True Self). This definition of Spirit implies an inherent mystery connected with the nature of Spirit. For the third component of our experience, we recognize the need for an instrument or a process to reconcile two otherwise incompatible worlds, the world of Function and the world of Spirit. We will label this component of our experience as Being or Soul. Being is connected to both worlds; Being can be understood as the instrument that allows our material body to receive and cooperate with impulses whose source is the world of Spirit. One interpretation of Being is that Spirit requires an instrument to be able to manifest (in certain ways) in the material world and that Being is that instrument. Being is the component of our experiences that enables, facilitates or undergoes transformation, awakening or unfolding; therefore, level of Being will be defined as a measure of our general ability to reconcile the world of Function and the world of Spirit. In many traditions, one level of Being would indicate a way of being in which there is no duality between the world of Function and the world of Spirit. In contrast, another way of being one is driven mostly by impulses from the world of Function (e.g., our ego, personality). The term “inner work” basically will refer to Soul work or work on Being, primarily our functional efforts to cooperate with impulses from Spirit.

To clarify the difference between Function and Spirit, Bennett (1961, 1964) discriminated between experiencing an awakening in a moment and then "interpreting" (a functional activity) that impulse to imply a certain action -- the actual moment of awakening is from the world of Spirit, but the interpretation and action taken (or not taken) is typically in the world of Function. The wording "cooperating with an impulse from Spirit" (or, “cooperating with Spirit”) in this chapter is meant to be consistent with terminology from a variety of spiritual approaches, for example, "cooperating with the Tao," "consenting to the Dharma," "being sensitive to the reconciling force," "listening to higher intuition," and "being an instrument of God's Will" (see London, 1998).

Pedagogical framework

With this background material, it is now appropriate to discuss the conceptual framework for our pedagogy. The pedagogy of the program has been deeply influenced by my colleagues and input from our students, especially Dr. Sam Crowell who has co-taught and planned with me for over 15 years, and David Reid-Marr who during the past few cohorts has taught our third program course which experientially examines the metaphor of teacher as artist. Some of the principles in this section represent my revision of material Sam Crowell and I co-wrote for professional presentations; therefore, I will use the pronoun “we” in this section. Although this section may not accurately represent Sam’s views, it seems more appropriate than using “I.”

A principle that we believe is essential is the need for the teacher to be open to, and cooperate with, what is needed. As stated by Doll (1993), "... ends emerge from within process itself; they are not external to it. This means that prior to the process' development the ends can be delineated only in general, even 'fuzzy,' terms” (p. 31). For things to work we had to be open to the needs of our students. We saw the primary method associated with this principle to be "not doing," approximately meaning that we were careful not to let our habitual patterns of teaching prevent us from seeing what was needed. This meant a disciplined strategy of planning learning opportunities that we considered consistent with our vision, yet allowing ourselves to be open to what was needed and perhaps not considered in our initial planning. In terms of the previously defined terminology, I interpret this framework to imply being sensitive to and cooperating with impulses from Spirit and engaging in the inner work that supports that cooperation at my level of Being. In addition, we have tried to implement a constructive post-modern pedagogy, particularly as implied by Doll (1993) and Oliver (1989), as well as allowing ourselves to be influenced by our work in identifying the implications of a spiritual perspective in education and studying transformative approaches to learning (e.g., London et al., 2004; O’Sullivan, 2002). We believe that post-modernist science reveals the inadequacy of modernism to explain a significant portion of our experience, and that our interpretation of a spiritual perspective clarifies what a post-modern pedagogy might mean in our context. Specifically, we see our pedagogy consistent with a spiritual perspective that acknowledges the role that Spirit and sacred experience play, including the principle that the educator needs to have a sense of the mystery of the Universe and the uniqueness of each person's role in the unfolding of that mystery. This implies that although colleagues, teachers, books, curriculum materials, methods of teaching and so on can all provide the teacher with valuable ideas, tools and support, ultimately each teacher must strive to understand his or her unique contribution, and develop a trust and confidence in his or her sense of what is essential in his or her teaching. Our interest is not in defining explicitly what a spiritual perspective is, rather we affirm its place and role in life. We invite theory to emerge from experiences, relationships and questions. Doll (1993) states, "These [post-modern] relations will exemplify less the knowing teacher informing unknown students, and more a group of individuals interacting together in the mutual exploration of relevant issues” (pp. 3-4). I will note that in our work with our students in integrating a spiritual perspective we do not ask or expect our students to subscribe to any specific spiritual perspective, and we make it clear that a materialistic or atheistic perspective can certainly be consistent with our framework and pedagogy. In fact, no student has ever complained that an activity or assignment was inconsistent or inappropriate given their personal beliefs. In addition, we and our students have found that the implications of this approach is appropriate in a public school school setting.

Research methodology

The research process being used in this study is a process for solving significant problems in a way consistent with a spiritual perspective (London, 2002). A significant problem is defined as a problem that requires a change in our level of understanding (our Being) for a meaningful solution or progress to occur (versus, for example, research that verifies or supports our present understanding of an existing concept). Approximately, the significant problem for this study can be stated as, “How can we facilitate a transformation in our students’ visions of education?” Briefly, the process describes not only the functional aspects of the research process, but also the dynamics of integrating our efforts (e.g., inner work) with cooperating with Spirit, and connecting with significance. One assumption of the process is that we cannot effectively address significant problems without recognizing the need for help from Spirit for a change in level of understanding to occur. The research process does not suggest specific procedures, but rather indicates the dynamics of how the specific procedures for addressing a given problem naturally evolve from the process itself, including the inner (soul) work of the researcher. Although theoretically the research process does not limit the methodology, I have limited the methodology in this study to procedures and processes recognized as appropriate in qualitative research (e.g., Lincoln and Guba, 1985), quantitative research (e.g., Maxwell and Loomis, 2003), and/or mixed methods research (e.g., Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Perhaps an appropriate label for this framework would be spiritual pragmatism, “A practical way of solving problems” (DeVinne, p. 973) without a fixation on views and theories, and with an understanding of the dynamics of the relationship among Spirit, inner work and our functional activities in the process of transformation. This is consistent with a Buddhist perspective,

The Buddha does not demand that we begin our spiritual quest by placing faith in doctrines that lie beyond the range our immediate experience. Rather than ask us to wrestle with issues that, for us in our present condition, no amount of experience can decide, he instead asks us to consider a few simple questions pertaining to our immediate welfare and happiness, questions that we can answer on the basis of personal experience (Bodhi, p. 83).

Briefly, in addition to our collaborative research for over 15 years that included major summative evaluations and collaborative planning typically on a weekly basis, this research drew primarily from three sources: final documentation papers by the students in the tenth cohort (over 160 pages), comments from the eleventh cohort’s summative evaluation, and a group documentation of the transformative components of the eighth cohort’s experience. The material was initially reviewed four times, each time refining categories and patterns, until I felt comfortable with the clarity of the patterns. After identifying the patterns, specific examples from students’ comments were selected to clarify the patterns. It needs to be noted that this is not a traditional qualitative study in that I was studying a program in which I was integrally involved for over 15 years and certainly had opinions concerning our approach. In addition, the program, in my opinion at least, has already been established as transformative based on consistent data from our students, studies and comments by other researchers, and my own observations. Therefore, the focus of this study was not whether the program was transformative, but what was the nature of the transformation, what contributed to the transformation, and what effect the transformation had on practice.

Pedagogy

Next, I will discuss three interdependent components of our program that are consistent with the above framework and were integrated into all six program courses: (1) students developing a transformative vision of education, (2) exploring how to nourish their inner life and the inner life of their students, and (3) developing a supportive learning environment. The major focus of our program is helping each student develop a transformative vision of education and clarifying how to implement that vision in their professional context. We expected their vision of education to be transformed, in the sense of “a transformation in your overall view of teaching, resulting in a significant change in the way you view teaching.” I will mention that 92 to 100% of our students in the last four cohorts have identified the program as transformative in this sense in their summative evaluation. In addition, many of the quotes in the following sections help explain the dynamics of the students’ transformation.

Vision of Education

In exploring one's vision of education we identified three key questions to address,

1. What is my vision of education? This question is primarily a matter of connecting with one's purpose in life particularly in the context of one's profession. Clarity for this question allows one to "see" or "notice" opportunities to move one's teaching toward practice more consistent with one's vision.

2. What practices and methods are consistent with my vision? Clarity for this issue allows one to have a variety of tools to use to teach in a way consistent with one's vision.

3. What is needed in my situation? Receptivity to what is needed allows you to "see" what is needed to reconcile your vision and methods with your actual classroom situation. This process requires the teacher to maintain a strong connection to their vision of education in the midst of the limiting nature of their actual classroom situation. The terminology "Seeing what is needed" is meant to be consistent with the described spiritual perspective, and does not refer primarily to what we would rationally plan, referring more to an intuitive grasp of what is necessary (e.g., cooperating with Spirit).

The students described the transformation of their vision of education in a variety of ways, summarized in four (interdependent) patterns in their descriptions. The first pattern was an increased feeling of empowerment and confidence in their teaching,

I’ve learned to be more confident in my understanding and abilities. This has transformed my attitude towards the educational process. I used to think that perhaps some of these tenured teachers in the school system were educational experts with their “drill & kill”, “practice ‘til it’s perfect”, and other mechanical methods. . . . I’ve learned that my understanding and methods are just as good.

A second student writes,

I feel lucky to have found a program that spoke to my soul as well as to my professional context. I find a consistency between who I am on the inside and in my personal life and who I am as a successful professional. . . . while I may sometimes feel alone on my campus . . . I am more confident taking risks . . . I am a more confident . . . teacher and feel empowered to grow professionally.

The second pattern involved a shift from an emphasis on the “end product” to an understanding that transformation is an ongoing process that will continue beyond the temporal end of the program. One student wrote, “The revival [of my teaching] is ongoing even as I attempt to describe my journey . . . and will continue beyond this program.” Another student writes, “The changes were transformative . . . I see them [my goals] differently now. My goals are part of an ongoing process.” The nature of this shift is caught in the following quote, “my vision has changed dramatically since I started this program. Although I started off as a holistic teacher years ago, I quickly fell into the trap of teaching to the test and producing test scores. This program has brought me back to the [holistic] frame of mind.” This quote captures a typical pattern for educators in our region that teach in schools overemphasizing testing results.

The third pattern involved a movement from lack of clarity to a clear vision of education and how to implement that vision in their professional setting. One student wrote, “My vision of education was made clear during the program and I find myself constantly finding random things that I can incorporate into my lessons that maybe other educators would never consider.” Another student writes, “The program was very effective in helping me to develop a vision of education that fit with my actual professional context, rather than having just an abstract idea of what an ‘ideal’ vision might be without knowing how to implement it in my classroom.” I will mention that both teachers were in teaching situations not supportive of holistic approaches to education – their clarity concerning their vision of education allowed them to determine how to integrate their vision in an “unholistic” institution. Student indicated the significance of requiring them to experiment in their professional context, “I felt extremely supported . . . throughout this process. I greatly appreciated that we were able to tailor every single activity to our own individual situation/context.”

The fourth pattern involved movement from feeling isolated in their professional context to understanding the “bigger picture.” The two examples I will quote relate to earlier remarks concerning our emphasis on a post-modern paradigm, describing movement toward a post-modern pedagogy in institutions “stuck in a modernist paradigm,” unfortunately a common occurrence in our context. One student writes,

Today’s schooling is so crippling to students and teachers alike. It is based on standardized testing and superficial curriculum. I felt guilty whenever I strayed from the modernist lesson plans and created lessons that taught life skills. This program did not relieve me of my guilt, but helped me to be aware of the feeling and to control my responses. If I am guilty of giving my students experiences that are meaningful, I do not retreat back to the terrible ways of the current education system; I continue to teach the whole child and nothing less.

A second student writes,

how I perceive my students . . . has gone from attending to what they produce to how they are going about it [i.e., process]. . . . My perception of curriculum has changed as well . . . My focus was on standards . . . . Now my perception of curriculum is transforming into one that views the environment and its inhabitants, the students, as the curriculum.

To give a more complete sense of their journey of transformation I will partially quote one student’s description of the six phases she went through in the program:

[Phase 1: Becoming Aware of Dissonance] began prior to the program. Initially, I expected the dissonance to “clear up” in subsequent classes but . . . this dissonance did not subside. But neither did it intensify. Rather, my awareness of it became sharper empowering me to move on to Phase 2 [Becoming Re-enchanted With Education]. The empowerment came in the realization that transformation would come from within . . . The dissonance in Phase 1 necessitated this second phase . . . that would lead to a transformation within me and enable me to formulate my vision of education.

[In Phase 2], Phase 3 [Learning to Nourish Myself ] was beginning to reveal itself. Becoming re-enchanted meant a new kind of involvement in my role as educator. The demands of a successful transformation into an educator whose pedagogy is holistic and integrative necessitate a caring of the self, physically and spiritually and so, I began to learn, or re-learn, how to nourish myself. . . . I was able to be more receptive . . . and thus, able to choose more effectively behaviors that would enable me to emerge as the educator I desire to be.

[Phase 6: Believing My Actions Are Connected to a Bigger Picture]: By this sixth phase, my senses were sharpened enhancing a transformation in my practices. Because of this heightened awareness, I am able to convey to my students the importance of interconnectedness. Previous to this, my teaching was more linear. . . . Now my teaching is more of a spiral; I connect what I teach to my students’ lives, spiraling out from the classroom and to the world beyond.

Students noted that a focus on developing the students’ ability to be present as a educator, including an emphasis on observation, facilitated transformation of their vision of education. We emphasized observation in the sense of “seeing” our actions in the present moment and then reflecting on the significance and implications of those observations. For example, I assign “No Time Assignments” which bring their attention and awareness to ordinary moments in which being present and aware can provide insights into our behavior (e.g., London, 2007). In one assignment, they observed how they listened to others; many were surprised to observe how seldom they actually listened attentively (e.g., “In this argumentative conversation I was thinking of what I was going to say next rather than attentively listening”). These observations led to experiments in which they deepened their ability to listen well to their students. A student summarizes the significance of the No Time assignments, “The no time assignments allowed for growth in ways that otherwise I would have never truly taken the time to focus on in my life. They were key in developing my sensitivity.”

Nourishing the inner life

A second major component of the program is a two-year curriculum focusing on the students’ ability to nourish their inner life and the inner-life of their students. Many of our students work in professional contexts that “create” obstacles to nourishing their inner life - a reality we address directly in our processing of relevant activities. One student describes her lack of nourishing her inner life on entering the program,

Previously, . . . I thought that the more I did, the better I would feel. I was spiraling downward. I was giving more than I was receiving, a very unhealthy way to live. . . . I was struggling to be there for my students physically, emotionally, and spiritually, but things were not working out. I was constantly getting sick and interrupting the precious moments with my students. The students were draining me of my emotions; they can be so needy because of the lack of love in their lives. Lastly, my spirituality had gone out like a fire that nobody attends to.

Later she writes about her experimentation,

to nourish myself, I had to find a practice that I was comfortable with . . . At first I tried going on mini-nature walks with my dog, but the routine became another item on my agenda and lost its power . . . . Then I tried driving in my car to and from work without listening to music and that worked . . . but eventually it lost its luster. Lastly, I have discovered a practice that had not occurred to me before. Whenever I felt stressed . . . I did something kind for someone else. . . . I actually felt nourished because my path was crossing with someone else’s and we were connected . . . These small acts of kindness became an ongoing practice.

An art teacher in the program illustrated and described the phases she went through in her process of nourishing her inner life in part of a booklet she created: (1) Label: Before I came to this program I thought “nourishing me” meant. Illustration: A beach with a palm tree on a remote island; (2) Label: Daily thing? Yet another thing I had to get done. Illustration: A “To Do” list of five items, third one, “nourish myself”; (3) Label: Then I went through a phase where I was reveling in the permission to be selfish. Illustration: A door with the sign “Go Away . . . Nourishing”; (4) Label: Finally, through time and the practices: way of life and a way of intention, consistently and with a level of relative ease. Illustration: The teacher walking up the school steps to the office, carrying material with the label “work,” thinking “I’m nourishing myself right now!”; and (5) Label: Life more peaceful and enjoyable; not living weekend to weekend. Illustration: The teacher sitting in the full lotus position, peacefully meditating, with images of typical school distractions in the background, not disrupting her internal peace.

Many students in describing both their development of a transformative vision and a process to nourish their inner life, mention feeling they were granted permission by the program both to experiment with their pedagogy and to nourish their inner lives. For example, one student wrote concerning nourishing her inner life,

Early in the program we were given an assignment to go find a place in nature and spend a minimum of twenty minutes or so a few times a week there. When this came up I was all giddy inside. Again wondering why I had never given myself *permission* [italics added] to just be outside doing nothing but being there . . . now if I am driving and am called by some place . . . I know that it’s O.K. to get out of the car and just be there for a while. I always feel better for having done it.

In the program courses we invited students to experiment with a variety of techniques as part of developing their own process for nourishing their inner life, as well as reflecting on the implications for their teaching. For example, we invited them to experiment with secular meditative practices (based on Miller’s work, 2010), body work, centering activities, walking meditation, being in Nature, the process of starting the day, and journaling. I have noticed three common patterns in this process: (1) Each student develops an unique process that works for them, many times including activities that were not introduced in class. (2) Most students report a qualitative difference in their process of nourishing their inner life, including, for many, a change from a view that time spent nourishing your inner life “interferes” with their need to spend time planning, to a view that such time is essential and, in fact, improves the quality of their teaching. (3) Students realize that nourishing their inner life is a continuing process, needing regular adjustment, and requiring discipline. One student explains how she applied these concepts to her job as a substitute teacher, a stressful job in her geographical location,

I like to begin a day of subbing by entering the classroom, finding somewhere to sit, and spending a few minutes meditating in the new and unfamiliar classroom. Since beginning this practice . . . I have found that my day as a substitute teacher goes a lot smoother. I feel calmer, and more connected to what I am doing. I no longer leave the schools exhausted and emotionally drained.

Students consistently noted the positive effect on their teaching,

What I realized when I started this program was how much I had been neglecting my inner life. What I also realized after continuous assignments regarding the subject was, how much more in tune I was with myself and that made me more relaxed and in tune with others. The walls came down and there was an openness that I think is critical for teaching and education.

Community

A third major component of the program is creating a supportive learning community. Two student quotes capture the positive effect of this focus, first,

The strength I received through this community of [holistic educators] is something I could not have achieved on my own. This cohort provided a place where my voice could be heard and where I could hear others’ voices as well. The exchange of feelings, ideas, insecurities, and wisdoms was the vehicle through which I gained confidence and inspiration.

Second, “The community we formed was a home for our souls.”

Many of our activities addressed this focus on community, three approaches were consistently identified by students as significant: (1) Quarterly retreats at the James Reserve in a lodge in a wilderness area, (2) the Mesa activity, and (3) activities involving art that were part of our third program course. Each program course includes a weekend retreat. One student captures the significance of the retreats,

I was reluctant to go to the James Reserve the first time. . . . I had many reservations: a group of strangers spending the weekend together, why is this necessary, couldn’t we accomplish what we need to do in a regular classroom, I went anyway. I still remember the feeling I had at the end of the first weekend driving home from the Reserve . . . It was a feeling of power, of contentment, relaxation, a bonding with my friends and with nature.

The Mesa activity was usually part of our first quarter retreat and, briefly, required students and faculty to bring artifacts that reflected who we were to place on a created “mesa” (i.e., a specially prepared table). This seemingly simple activity, combined with our initial establishment of community, elicited much deeper responses then we expected. One student tries to capture the significance of her feelings at the end of the Mesa activity, “It was at this moment that I truly saw each person and they saw me. It was more than a physical presence that permeated the circle, but a spiritual essence that guided us through an emotional experience that would forever bond us together.”

Finally, the activities of our third program course focusing on the educator as artist were consistently identified by students as being transformative. One student captures the understanding of the importance of process, “in art, the process is more important than the finished product. In a meaningful educational process this is also true.” The following statement concerns one of the activities and captures some of the initial hesitation of some students to engage in these experiential activities,

Our cohort created a mandala. It was an unexpected experience of unification and connection. Initially I felt stilted and disingenuous. I embarked on this task because it was part of the day’s agenda though I did not feel connected – yet. As I worked with my cohort, I discovered our actions revealed the ability of a group of people to come together and create something – individually and as one – in a peaceful and caring manner. The effect of this activity and my reflection was transformative, causing me to be more aware of providing opportunities for my own students to discover their connectedness to others.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the process of transformation for our students, focusing on some of the distinctive characteristics of our context, especially the fact that a good portion of our students work in “unholistic” institutions, and experience additional stress connected with time management, their financial situation, and/or family responsibilities. The chapter explored how our students were able to implement a holistic pedagogy in an “unholistic” environment, and manage their stress in a way that had a positive effect on their teaching and students. What in this case study might have implications for other settings and disciplines?

First, when we identify transformation as a goal, what might this look like? Generalizing the results from our students we identified four typical patterns: an increased feeling of empowerment and confidence; a shift from an emphasis on the “end product” to an understanding that transformation is an ongoing process that will continue beyond the temporal end of the program; a movement from lack of clarity to a clear vision and how to implement that vision in their professional setting; and movement from feeling isolated in their professional context to understanding the “bigger picture.”

Second, it seems appropriate to emphasize the importance of what we labeled as a constructive postmodern pedagogy, specifically the principle that recognizes the mystery of Spirit and the need to be receptive to what is needed and emerges in the moment as essential as careful planning. I need to emphasis the mysterious nature of the process of transformation and the fact that the journey with each cohort, as well as each student, was different and unique, with many unexpected twists and turns for which we could not possibly plan, that resulted in transformative outcomes that were not in the “lesson plans.”

Finally, despite the mysterious nature of transformative processes, I will attempt to identify a few specific approaches in terms that can be applied in other disciplines and contexts that might facilitate the process of transformation: (1) We implement a cohort model that emphasizes building a supportive learning community, especially over a substantial period of time such as one or two years. In our program the quarterly retreats in a wilderness setting and the activities that involved art were particularly effective. (2) We emphasize a focus on developing the students’ ability to be present in their profession, including an emphasis on observation. (3) A major component of our program is a focus on the students’ ability to nourish their inner life. For us, this focus included students experimenting with a variety of strategies and resulted in the following understandings: Each student needs to develop an unique process that works for them, many times including activities that were not introduced in class; students reporting a qualitative difference in their process of nourishing their inner life, including a recognition that time nourishing their inner life, in fact, improves the quality of their professional work; and students realizing that nourishing their inner life is a continuing process, needing regular adjustment, and requiring discipline. (4) We integrate an emphasis on process and integrating alternative modalities in activities, assignments and processing. This emphasis on process had many positive effects, including the fact that many students felt they had permission to experiment in their settings and to nourish their inner lives. (5) We require students to experiment in their professional context and reflect on the experiments. (6) The faculty instructors consistently engage in in-depth collaborative planning and continuous input into our process from students.

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