

## Making Connections to the World: Some Thoughts on Holistic Curriculum

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The emergence of a postmodern civilization, with its many unsolved economic, technological, moral, and ecological problems, is a global phenomenon. The degradation of the earth affects us all. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of transnational corporations and their elite managers affects us all. Our amazing new powers to manipulate information, communication, consciousness, and the genetic structure of life ultimately touches every one of us, often in deeply troubling ways. As Jeremy Rifkin (1987) warned several years ago, this new global civilization threatens to fundamentally alter the relationship between the human being and the world. Everything that exists, everything our lives depend upon — food, water, land, knowledge, language, time, health, and consciousness itself — everything is being turned into a commodity. Someone — more likely, some vast impersonal corporation — owns everything we need and will sell it to us to make a profit. Everything is measured, packaged, or redesigned to make it more attractive or convenient. This new culture is now spreading around the planet; it is rapidly becoming a vast global monoculture.

Throughout human history, most people have earned their livelihood by engaging in physical labor, doing tangible work that produced whatever food, clothing, shelter, and security they could obtain. People's lives were regulated by the physical and biological environment: the climate, the terrain, the length of the day and season, the availability of resources. Their lives were given meaning by these tangible and vital connections to the world. By contrast, in this emerging postmodern society, millions of people sit for most of the day — and often during the night — gazing at computer screens and tapping on little buttons. By manipulating artificial electronic

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images, in complete isolation from the real physical and biological world, vast amounts of wealth are moved from region to region, from one nation to another, affecting the lives of millions and millions of other human beings and the habitats of thousands of plant and animal species. A growing number of people now have tremendous power, amplified by sophisticated technologies, to manipulate, control, alter, and seriously damage the biosphere. But because they are disconnected from the natural world and local communities and the primary sources of their food and wellbeing, they do not seem to have the ethical or spiritual sensitivity to use this power wisely, sparingly, or for the good of the whole.

We have reached a point in history where it is possible to alleviate the grosser forms of suffering. This is wonderful! It is a great achievement of the human mind and spirit. But now we need to ask why these new powers are not being used on behalf of all humanity and to preserve the sanctity of life on earth, but primarily to help those who are already excessively wealthy and powerful become obscenely wealthy and powerful. The arrival of this brave new world, this “new world order,” compels us to make a fundamental moral decision: Shall we continue to celebrate, indeed worship, the utilitarian, manipulative style of thinking that made global industrialization possible? Does it still serve us well? Or has it outlived its usefulness? Is it possible that it might be a tremendously destructive mistake to continue to treat the world entirely as a resource, as fuel for the omnivorous economic machine we have built? Is it possible that we must now tame and humanize the machine before we destroy the earth and ourselves with it?

Holism is a response to this possibility. Holistic thought is an attempt to reclaim the sense of connection to the world that utilitarian manipulation and advanced technology have steadily eroded and now, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, nearly wiped out. Holistic thinkers believe that essentially, by nature, the human being requires a sense of connection to the world. Our experience needs to be meaningful to us or else our lives are unfulfilling, no matter how comfortable we make them through material wealth or political and economic power. To the extent that people simply seek to enjoy whatever comforts and luxuries they can gather, even if they have gained them at the expense of other people and other living beings, then to that degree they are so much less human and act like merely clever animals. Every religious tradition, every mythology, many ethical systems, and much of our great dramatic literature, condemn this way of living as morally inadequate, psychologically deficient, or explicitly subhuman. Human life is fulfilling and

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meaningful only when we experience ourselves as being connected to the world — connected to the land, to a cultural heritage, to a living, striving community, to archetypal spirits and images, to the Cosmos as a whole.

The danger of our time is that in our cultural worship and personal pursuit of comfort, security, wealth, and power, we have become disconnected from these sources of meaning. By learning how to control virtually every aspect of the world, we no longer know how to dwell in its mystery. We seek to alter, improve, or commodify everything, and therefore we cannot see the world's intrinsic beauty, discern its inherent patterns, or hear its spiritual secrets. Meaning is no longer found through the soul by dwelling in the world with reverence, but imposed by the calculating mind, which assigns everything a value or a utilitarian purpose.

All of the leading holistic thinkers identify the crisis of our time as an epistemological crisis. We are not arguing against technology as such, or against capitalism in itself. We are saying that underneath our political, social, and economic arrangements, the way modern culture defines and understands reality itself is faulty, and this flawed way of knowing gives rise to distorted, we might even say cancerous, forms of technology and economic organization. Educational philosopher Douglas Sloan (1983, 24) refers to this as a “technicist” way of knowing. David Orr (1994, 33), one of the leading theorists of environmental education, attacks what he calls “technological fundamentalism.” Other holistic writers commonly identify “reductionist” or “mechanistic” ways of thinking and knowing as the primary problem of our civilization. All these terms point to the utilitarian, manipulative, objectivist, and overly rational ways of treating the earth and the life that inhabits it. So long as a culture sees only economic value in the world and pursues material abundance and comfort with no sense of restraint or regulation, that culture will be blind to the more genuine sources of meaning that connect the human soul to the Cosmos.

David Orr (1993, 33) identifies just what is missing in our distorted world view. “We need decent communities,” he says, and

good work to do, loving relationships, stable families, the knowledge necessary to restore what we have damaged, and ways to transcend our inherent self-centeredness. Our needs, in short, are those of the spirit; yet, our imagination and creativity are overwhelmingly aimed at things that as often as not degrade spirit and nature.

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This is to say that our considerable powers of intellect have served primarily to disconnect us from the world. Modern systems of education have fed these powers well, training young people how to gain knowledge over the world, knowledge at the expense of feeling, information without wisdom, facts without moral discernment. In the United States in recent years, technocrats in state after state have successfully forced educators to focus more and more narrowly on what they call “standards” — arbitrary packages of intellectual content that have little to do with deep understanding of the world but which give the technocrats useful data for evaluating and sorting students objectively. The increasing standardization of learning prepares young people to act aggressively, cleverly, and resourcefully in the job market and the competitive corporate world. It contributes little or nothing to decent communities, loving relationships, or ways to transcend self-centeredness. Holistic education is essentially concerned with these basic sources of meaning, and seeks above all to reconnect each person to the contexts within which meaning arises: the physical world, the biosphere, the family, the local community rooted in a history and a place, the culture with its many layers of meaning — artistic, religious, linguistic, archetypal — and the Cosmos itself.

How does holistic education connect people to the world? What is a holistic “curriculum”? Let me be very clear about this: There is no single method or technique for practicing holistic education. There is no “curriculum,” as modern educators use the term, that best represents a holistic worldview. To understand the meaning of holistic education, we need to recognize two principles: First, an education that connects the person to the world must start with the person — not some abstract image of the human being, but with the unique, living, breathing boy or girl, young man or woman (or mature person, for that matter) who is in the teacher’s presence. Each person is a dynamic constellation of experiences, feelings, ideas, dreams, fears, and hopes; each person reflects what Asian traditions call karma — a meaningful pattern of influences, actions, and thoughts that shape one’s possibilities if not one’s destiny. And as all holistic educators have emphasized, each growing child unfolds this cluster of possibilities through distinct phases of development, and at each stage the child needs the right kind of support, the right kind of environment, in order to move securely to the next. Maria Montessori (1963, 69-70) said it simply, “Follow the child!” Following the child is the true beginning of holistic education. An education that starts with standards, with government mandates, with a selection of great books, with lesson plans — in short, with a predetermined “curriculum” — is not holistic, for it loses the living

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reality of the growing, learning, seeking human being.

The second principle of holistic education is this: We must respond to the learner with an open, inquisitive mind and a loving heart, and a sensitive understanding of the world he or she is growing into. Now, this is indeed the hard part! A holistic teacher cannot be a technician, administering a series of workbook exercises or performing a script he or she learned in a teacher training program. A holistic teacher is acutely sensitive to the student's needs and, at the same time, acutely aware of the challenges and possibilities the world offers this person at this moment and in this place. How does the teacher act on this awareness? Again, there is no simple answer. We must constantly recognize the dialectic, the tension, between liberation and accommodation. In holistic education we want to free every individual to find his or her own destiny, to think and feel and do whatever he or she finds most meaningful and fulfilling; yet at the same time, we bring to our students the awareness that the world makes its own demands, and that for many complicated reasons of psychology, ecology, culture, history, politics, and many other factors, no one is totally free to follow one's impulses and desires. Meaning arises from the reflective engagement between person and world, and the holistic educator's job is to facilitate this meeting, to help it become more reflective, to help it touch deeper parts of the learner's soul. The growing individual takes the world into his or her experience, incorporates it, assimilates it, responds to it. This is what I mean by connection. The student comes to feel that he or she belongs in the world, and shapes his or her purposes accordingly, in relationship to it, in dialogue with it.

Holistic education does not simply instruct young people about what is true and what is false, what is correct and what is mistaken; holistic education enables the learner to inquire "What does this mean?" How is this experience, or this fact, or this advertising message related to other things I know? If I act on my understanding, how will that affect other people, or the habitat of other living beings?" Holistic education teaches young people how to care about the world, because we care about the world, and we care about our students. Nel Noddings (1992, 36), one of our wisest educational theorists, has written that "kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter. . . .Caring relations can prepare children for an initial receptivity to all sorts of experiences and subject matters." To learn in communion means to experience connection. Other people matter; their lives mean something to the learner. The natural world matters. Cultural heritage, social responsibility, and ethics matter. A person educated in this

way would not take actions that violate the integrity, rights or feelings of those who contribute so essentially to one's own identity.

Over the years I have studied many forms of alternative education, from Montessori and Waldorf pedagogy to free schools and homeschooling, from progressive education to critical theory. There are significant philosophical differences between them, but the most critical difference, I believe, is in how they define the relationship between freedom and structure. Some radical educators, such as A. S. Neill and John Holt, have told us that learning ought to take place in an entirely free manner. No one should tell another person what or how or when he or she should learn. Every child should be free to play, to explore, to experiment, to ask questions. Education springs organically from a child's interests and natural curiosity; there is no need for artificial structure. On the other hand, other educational pioneers, such as Montessori and Steiner, insisted that the growing child needs a particular environment, carefully planned and aesthetically designed, in order to activate and support the potentials latent at each stage of development. On the surface, these views seem to cancel each other out: Either we give children maximum freedom or we don't. Either we let them explore the world freely, or we tell them what they need to learn. In my view, however, holistic education transcends this dilemma, by finding value in both points of view. The two fundamental principles of holistic education work together in dynamic balance: We start with the child, not abstractly but in reality — with the living child. But then we respond to the child, guided by a sensitive awareness of the world. The issue is no longer freedom against structure, but freedom in a dialectic relationship with structure, or the individual person in meaningful dialogue with the school, or with society. The student is not constrained by alien forces, but gladly participates in a structured world to which he or she feels connected.

In this sense, a holistic "curriculum" is not a pre-established plan that the teacher brings to the classroom. Curriculum emerges from the interactions between teacher, student, and world. This idea — emergent curriculum — is one of the revolutionary concepts to come out of the progressive education movement. John Dewey (1964) wrote a century ago about the organic relationship between child and curriculum, and although he is not widely regarded as a founder of "holistic" education, no one has written more wisely about this relationship. As the child grows out into the world, his or her experience grows deeper; connections are made and become more meaningful. Education starts with this process of growth; it respects the quality of this experience, and it

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facilitates these meaningful connections. A holistic curriculum is a growing-young-person-in-relationship-with-the-world. The curriculum is not outside the student, but the student does not completely determine the content of the educational process either.

You might wonder, isn't there anything that a holistic educator would want to make sure to include in the child's learning experience? Even if we confidently assume, based on experience, that in the course of a student's meaningful discoveries he or she will adequately learn the so-called basic academic skills — writing, reading, and arithmetic — there are surely other skills or values that we believe to be important. David Orr, for example, has written eloquently about the desperate need for ecological literacy — an understanding of our interdependence with all living beings and the earth as a whole. In recent years, many holistic educators have embraced the notion of emotional literacy, as proposed by psychologist Daniel Goleman (1994) and others, meaning a person's ability to recognize and manage one's own inner life and behavior in constructive ways, and to solve conflicts peacefully. We also talk a great deal about social responsibility, and want our students to think critically about social, political, and economic problems, as Paulo Freire urged so passionately. But, are all these educational goals best considered as aspects of a "curriculum"? Should they be fashioned into "units" or lesson plans (let alone "standards") and presented to students as subject matter? I want to say no. I want to see them as reflections of our moral sensitivity as educators, rather than as static bodies of intellectual content. We bring ecological literacy, or emotional literacy, or social responsibility to our students through our own presence to them, our own way of being with them. If we are deeply concerned about the ecological crisis because we care about life on this planet, this concern and this caring will enter the educational dialogue with our students. Asking a school, or the local board of education, or the state government, to add our favorite causes to the curriculum will not result in meaningful, transformative learning for students if the teachers who administer this curriculum do not themselves care about these things.

Similarly, young people learn Shakespeare from teachers who are passionate about Shakespeare, and they learn chemistry from teachers who love science. It is not the curriculum that teaches them, it is the living reality of their teachers. This is just what Nel Noddings meant by saying that "caring relations" prepare students for academic receptivity. In

holistic education, academics are secondary to human relationship. Curriculum is secondary to connection, or direct experience rooted in caring.

We should look closely at several words that holistic educators often use to point toward wholeness and connection. These words are soul, spirit, and Cosmos. I have always insisted that holistic education is distinguished from other progressive or alternative pedagogies by its spiritual orientation, but it is never easy to explain what this means. When we say that the human being has a soul, we are suggesting that some vital creative force animates the personality. The sophisticated sciences of biochemistry, neurology, and even genetics cannot explain this force: When they try to contain it within the boundaries of their disciplines they are committing reductionism. Instead, to recognize the wholeness of the human being requires us to acknowledge that our minds, our feelings, our ambitions, our ideals all express some living force that dwells mysteriously within the core of our being. We cannot locate it physically; it is a nonmaterial reality, an invisible reality. Science, at least, conventional science, doesn't know how to approach it. But poets and mystics do. Like them, holistic educators treat the soul with reverence. In many contexts, the word "spirit" means something supernatural, something so foreign to our understanding that we make up an imaginary world to give it a home. But for holistic thinkers, having a spiritual perspective does not mean voyaging to supernatural realms or maintaining a blind faith in religious imagery. Spirituality can take religious forms, of course, and many people, including many holistic educators, have found inspiration in these forms. But just as the experience of inspiration is not the form, the experience of spirituality is not the same as religion and can exist independently of it. As I understand it, spirituality is a living awareness of the wholeness that pervades the universe. It is the realization that our lives mean more than material wealth or cultural achievements can provide; our lives have a place, a purpose in the great unfolding story of Creation, even if this story is so vast and so mysterious that we can only glimpse it briefly through religious practices or fleeting moments of insight.

Finally, when I use the word "cosmos," the root of the word cosmology, I am trying to suggest that the universe is not merely a vast collection of stars and galaxies that we can study through telescopes, but an interconnected whole that encompasses everything that exists and everything that *can* exist. Cosmology is an attempt to understand this wholeness, to provide an intellectual framework for the intuitive knowledge that everything we know is connected to

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everything else we know. Beyond these few words — soul, spirit, cosmos, and wholeness — I am speechless. The Tao which can be named is not the eternal Tao. It is a mystery. Let's leave it at that, and hold it in reverence.

So now I hope it is clear why I think it is futile to design a holistic curriculum. If the goal of holistic education is connection, then we are ultimately dealing with the soul, with spiritual experience, and with the unfathomable meaning of the Cosmos. We are trying to help our young people find a place deep within themselves that resonates with the mystery of Creation. And it is only when we, as educators, look deeply within ourselves and strive to embody wholeness in our own lives, that we will inspire our students to do the same. Our lives make up the curriculum. Let us work on ourselves, and our lesson plans will take care of themselves.

Holistic education, then, is a pedagogical revolution. It boldly challenges many of the assumptions we hold about teaching and learning, about the school, about the role of the educator, about the need for tight management and standards. Holistic education seeks to liberate students from the authoritarian system of behavior management that in the modern world we have come to call “education.” But ultimately holistic education is far more than radical pedagogy: It is an epistemological revolution as well. It demands that we take a hard look at the foundations of the emerging global capitalist culture — the “technological fundamentalism,” the worship of money, the assumption that the world is merely made of lifeless matter that is ours to manipulate and consume. This new paradigm, this new epistemology we call holism, challenges our addiction to violence, exploitation, and greed. When we embrace wholeness, when we recognize that the Cosmos is the ultimate source of meaning in our lives, then we will design not only educational institutions, but social, political, and economic institutions, dedicated to the nourishment and fulfillment of all human beings and the preservation of the ecosphere. To establish this profound connection to the world is to experience an incorruptible reverence for life.

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