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Integrating the ‘Other’ in Adult Education Curriculum: The Case of an Indian Tradition

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Abstract: In order to truly globalize the field of adult education, a de-centering of Euro-centric frameworks is needed as we simultaneously integrate non-Western knowledge systems in curricular offerings and theoretical development. This paper explores selected aspects of the philosophy and discipline of Integral Yoga, and presents an example of a curriculum innovation.

The literature in adult education reflects many attempts to broaden Western rationalist, positivist ways of knowing. Such perspectives include feminist interpretations, queer theory, transformative learning, and spirituality, all of which value a move toward greater empathy with the other. Less represented are examples of *how* learners can move to a more expansive view of culturally different perspectives on self (and by extension not-self). While there are newly emerging bodies of literature in adult education that bring our attention to a spiritual view of the world, this discourse may often be seen as an “add-on” to existing perspectives. In order to move beyond the duality of materialistic or spiritualistic understandings of self and not-self, we need to include frameworks that present a more holistic and integral view of matter and spirit.

An example of such a framework is Integral Yoga, one of many dynamic systems of thought and practice originating from India, which starts with awareness of the different parts of human nature, their character and movements, and a distinct consciousness of a divine nature. Integral Yoga emphasizes a discipline of self-inquiry and inner self-development by which one who sincerely follows it can in time transcend the notion of surface self, and experience the real Self that is deep within and high above the surface being; distinct, yet one with other beings. Individual liberty and a widest possible approach to self-inquiry are foundations of this discipline.

Through its focus on transcendence of the rigid distinction between self and not-self, Integral Yoga adds a new dimension to existing perspectives in adult education that value authentic understanding of the ways of knowing and being of culturally different others. In this paper we explore (1) some of the strands in adult education literature that value subjective knowing; (2) selected aspects of the philosophy and discipline of Integral Yoga; and (3) an example of a graduate curriculum that uses Integral Yoga as its foundational framework.

Subjective Ways of Knowing: Perspectives in Adult Education Literature

Today we find an increasing acceptance of the adult education perspectives that value more subjective and experiential ways of knowing and being. Such perspectives include the following.

Feminism and Critical Pedagogy

Dealing with difference is a recurring theme which underlies feminist strategies of knowledge construction and the exploration of power imbalances (Maher & Tetrault, 1994;

Tisdell, 1995). Within higher education, feminist and critical pedagogies aim at fostering inclusive learning environments that reflect gender, racial, and class composition of participants. Positionality is a way of problematizing issues of oppression and privilege inherent around gender, race, and ethnicity (Tisdell, 1998). Some of the “post-colonial” or Third World feminist scholarship highlights the binary opposition that structures identity in most Western thought, where the *self* is defined and “felt” in contrast to what is perceived as “not-I”. Such discourse challenges the traditional, Western notion of identity as unified, static and core, and posits a more fluid and contingent notion of identity formation (Anzaldúa, 1990, Trinh, 1990). It values plurality and tolerance for ambiguity within one’s own self, to help the small self transform into a total Self.

Transformative Learning

Critical reflection on underlying assumptions is central to the project of transformative learning (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1991, 1998; Taylor, 2000). An important aspect of transformative learning is critical self reflection (Mezirow, 1998), through which personal beliefs are subjectively reframed, leading potentially to personal and social transformation. Learners “try on” the other’s point of view through dialogue around personal knowledge, prior experience, and recognition of responsibility for their actions, choices, values, and connection with others.

Queer theory

Queer praxis works to dissolve binaries in order to open up possibilities to interrogate and celebrate fundamental human differences (Grace & Hill, 2001). Central to this process is querying categories, similar to transformative learning’s dialogical processes, to better understand human sexuality and to politicize these categories.

Pragmatism and radical phenomenology approaches

Yorks and Kasl (2002) argue for the power of presentational knowing, in which learners live within another’s point of view, grasping significance through imagery, emotion, and intuition rather than verbal, linguistic processes. Learning empathy within relationship, whole person and affective dimensions is more powerful than learning confined to conceptual, intellectual realm.

Spirituality

Spirituality in adult education is defined loosely around themes of development of self-awareness, a sense of interconnectedness, and a relationship to a higher power (Tisdell, 2000). Attending to “soul” in adult learning is an important aspect of group process, in recognition of the affective, spiritual, and transpersonal elements that transcend the rational and the objective approaches to transformative learning (Dirkx, 1997). It is the wholeness of learners’ lives, triggered by memories and images and embracing uncertainty, paradox, and ambiguity that stimulates learning that transcends ego and connects us to the other.

In summary, strands within adult education literature stress trying on the view of others, through dialogue and the exploration of affective, non-textual, and/or spiritual ways of knowing and learning. These perspectives emphasize subjective knowing, knowing of and by the self, and indicate a progressive attempt to expand the ideas of knowing and being to make them more inclusive and holistic. This is a progression in the trajectory of Western thought which has had a tendency to organize itself around opposing dualities, for example, reason versus faith, rationalism versus tradition, self versus other. The perspectives listed above indicate corrections to such dualism, and indicate wider acceptance of subjective ways of knowing and being.

In situations where the knower is trying to inquire into his or her own inner experience, the process of intellectualization of experience or “introspection” often results in unreliable

knowledge because “one typically looks with one part of oneself at another part of oneself. It is extremely difficult to watch oneself objectively without any bias, fear or expectation” (Cornelissen, 2001). Also, the particular theory or framework used to “situate” this experiential knowing adds another layer of bias to the knowledge.

As diverse peoples, societies, and cultures come closer, there is an increasing need for a dialogue of civilizations. Educational institutions and educators must look beyond the Western or Euro-centric frameworks to explore the diverse knowledge systems and intellectual traditions from other cultures and civilizations that can help expand our current understandings of adult development, of integration of inner and outer self, or transformation of small self into total Self. An increasingly globalized world calls for the development of integrative curricula that experiment with ways of knowing, being, feeling, doing and relating that give justice to a multitude of social, cultural and philosophical traditions.

Indian Traditions and Integral Yoga

In the rest of the paper we share one example of a curricular attempt that aims to broaden the learning opportunities by incorporating selected contributions from vastly complex, diverse, living and growing Indian knowledge systems. This attempt finds its roots in one particular knowledge system, Integral Yoga. Indian traditions include a long history of systematic and rigorous attempts to develop methods of going beyond our mental consciousness. Many of these methods are not just the result of logical reasoning and philosophical thought, but are based in rigorous experimentation by sages and *rishis* of India.

Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga is an approach that renews the ancient Vedic worldview for our present time. Sri Aurobindo was a 20th century philosopher-sage, mystic, poet, enlightened Yogi, social-political thinker, and one-time anti-colonialist revolutionary. Drawing on the wisdom of Indian traditions and texts dealing with metaphysics, ontology and epistemology and his learning in and of the West, he developed a philosophy and discipline which had for its goal not merely the fulfillment or self-realization or *moksha* of a few isolated individuals but the uplifting of the whole collective life of mankind. Integral Yoga emphasizes personal transformation as a way to act towards a deeper transformation of the evolving outer world with a goal to enable a progressive and fundamental change in individual and collective consciousness.

Based upon the broadest view of Yoga as a process of conscious evolution, Sri Aurobindo writes: “In the right view both of life and of Yoga all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga. For we mean by this term a methodized effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the secret potentialities latent in the being and highest condition of victory in that effort – a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence we see partially expressed in man and in the Cosmos... The true and full object and utility of Yoga can only be accomplished when the conscious Yoga in man becomes, like the subconscious Yoga in Nature, outwardly conterminous with life itself and we can more, looking out both on the path and the achievement, say in a more perfect and luminous sense: “All life is Yoga” (1948/2002, pp. 5-8).

Integral Yoga as a Framework for Graduate Studies Curriculum

Ideas of dynamic integration of matter and spirit, transformative learning and practice, future-oriented thinking, and dialogue of civilizations have inspired the Integral Knowledge Systems (IKS), an innovative academic space at Antioch University McGregor. The Integral

Yoga framework is our starting point for the development of IKS, located as an option within the Individualized Liberal and Professional Studies (ILPS) master's program.

A truly integral view of reality rises above all scientific and spiritual approaches and is capable of holding them all up in a comprehensive, higher order vision. In the true spirit of integrality we are open to and respectful of the large diversity of psycho-socio-spiritual philosophies and approaches. We strongly believe that excluding other systems of thought in any way would be against the very spirit of integrality. We welcome and invite perspective students to suggest their unique ideas and areas of interest for designing their individualized curricula.

The spirit of dialogue of civilizations is also reflected in the collaborative nature of course development within IKS. Some of these courses are developed and offered in partnership with Sri Aurobindo Center for Advanced Research (SACAR), a research and teaching institute based in Pondicherry, India. This emerging partnership between ILPS and SACAR is another way to bring the East and West together. The instructors for all IKS courses come from diverse academic, cultural, spiritual, philosophical and national backgrounds.

Integral Yoga and IKS courses

At present we offer a cluster of several graduate level courses that diversify the ILPS offerings by adding a new dimension of East-West synthesis, and provide a foundation for students interested in designing curricula that don't leave out the spiritual dimension to knowing and being. Examples of such fields include Integral (or Holistic) Healing & Wellness, Integral Yoga Studies, Integral (or Holistic) Education, Spiritual Psychology. Depending on the fit and student interest, these courses may also become part of individualized curricula in fields such as Adult Education, Human Development, Transformative Learning, Peace Studies, Comparative Philosophy, Cross-cultural Studies, Asian Studies, Psychology, Cultural Studies, etc.

In keeping with the ILPS spirit of individualized and flexible learning, all IKS courses combine student self-study and online discussion with the instructor. These courses involve a variety of learning activities that appropriately blend theoretical and experiential learning. Most of the currently available IKS courses are based on selected aspects of Integral Yoga philosophy and discipline. The aim of these courses is to achieve some intellectual understanding of Integral Yoga philosophy and practice, and to begin to integrate some aspects of it with which students feel an affinity. These courses involve reading Sri Aurobindo's primary works and secondary works by others. Students are encouraged to consider how the new ideas to which they are being introduced conflict with or harmonize with their previous or present viewpoints.

"No synthesis of Yoga can be satisfying which does not, in its aim...or in its method, not only permit but favour the harmony of our inner and outer activities and experiences in the divine consummation of both" (Sri Aurobindo, 1948/2002, p. 8). IKS would not be integral in spirit if it ignored the social dimensions of human experience. The course titled Integral Social Transformation is based in the social philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and examines the necessity of a spiritual transformation – of individual and society - as the only and permanent solution to the present day crisis of consciousness.

An integral social transformation supplements the various emancipatory and liberatory approaches, such as feminism, queer theory, race-specific epistemologies, by incorporating a much deeper understanding of inner freedom and by helping individuals discover a whole other way of being that is free yet in harmony with the Existence. These approaches could be seen as important steps in the path of individual self-discovery and also the spiraling evolutionary paths of social transformation, leading towards deeper inquiry of self and societies, and gradually

moving in the direction of higher and wider realms of individual freedom and liberation. Our future plans include exploring a course idea on themes related to Integral Feminism. Given the important role organizations play in our social lives, we may also develop a course on Integral Management. We also hope to soon offer a course related to Integral Education.

Challenges in Curriculum Design

Any attempt at curriculum design grounded in Indian inner sciences struggles with questions of narrowing down the content, organizing it into digestible chunks and presenting it in a manner that keeps the integrity of the content but allows the learner to connect it with the already existing (most likely Western) understandings of psyche and consciousness. There are also concerns of how living practices, traditions and philosophies are studied and taught both in India and especially outside India. There are genuine concerns of misrepresentation, appropriation, de-contextualization and even degradation of original ideas and sources. Some of this can be addressed by making these issues part of the academic discourse for learners and educators.

An academic paradigm that is heavily grounded in an epistemology of Objectivism, which as Palmer notes, “is morally deforming” and “is an unfaithful rendition of how human beings know the world,” (2000, p. 18) tends to see the experiential, inner knowing as less valid. This translates into several challenges related to the design of appropriate learning activities and pedagogy that help learners distinguish and experience various ways of knowing, including cognitive, affective, experiential, and contemplative. Given the individualized and distance-learning nature of the IKS program, and given that our students identify their own learning goals and instructors (with input and approval from program advisors), these issues pose additional challenges.

Curricular innovations such as IKS require an acceptance and celebration of the idea that true education requires a balanced and holistic approach that values both mind and spirit. It requires an opening of the minds and hearts to the idea that the Academy’s role is to not only help learners learn about theories and ways to apply, critique, and formulate theories, but that it is first and foremost a place where learners experience an opening of minds, hearts and souls.

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