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Shared Understanding?
Cross-Faculty Dialogue on the Challenges and Opportunities in the Emerging Focus on Spirituality

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Abstract: This article presents the voices of six full-team faculty members in the faculties of education and social work within the Canadian university context who are interested in teaching courses that address an aspect of spirituality as part of the core content. Through our dialogue we had the opportunity to explore the hopes and the challenges of striving to be an undivided academic. We explored if and how our interest in integrating spirituality into our teaching practice emerged; how we understood spirituality and how this translated into our course content; and how spirituality was understood and valued by our respective students, faculties, universities and our disciplines.

Introduction

Recently, Zajonc (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010) reflected on the need to overcome the divide between spirituality and higher education at an institutional level and an individual level as an academic. We need to find a way to an “undivided life where meaning and purpose are tightly interwoven with intellect and action, where compassion and care are infused with insight and knowledge” (p. 56). As an academic immersed in adult learning and adult education I resonate with Zajonc’s desire to live an undivided life where a holistic way of teaching and engaging in research is valued. While there is a gradual acceptance in the inclusion of pedagogical approaches that honour different ways of knowing such as somatic, affective and spiritual dimensions (Griffin, 1986; Dirkx, 1997; Miller, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; English & Tisdell, 2010), spirituality as overt content area of teaching and research is still greeted with some caution and hesitation. Indeed, according to Dillard, Abdur-Rashid & Tyson (2000), Tisdell (2000), Shahjahan (2009, 2004) and Palmer and Zajonc (2010) venturing into this arena as an academic could be risky business in a university culture that places emphasis on positivist ways of conducting research. “Academics may fear that their spirituality will be ridiculed within the confines of academe as an embodied practice or discourse” (Shahjahan, 2009, p. 122). However, I affirm Palmer’s (2010) critique of the argument that spirituality and academics do not mix and as he posited that religion and spirituality are essential to our understanding what it means to be human. Higher education should be at the forefront of helping students engage in deeper intellectual engagement.

Despite the risky business of teaching and researching in the area of spirituality in secular university settings, there are those of us working in the academy who have taken up the call to the undivided academic life by teaching courses that implicitly and/or explicitly incorporate spirituality within the content so our students may engage in a holistic education that takes them on an outer and an inner journey. A survey conducted by Duerr, et. al. (2003) was a first attempt at documenting such “academic programs and other initiatives in North American
universities and colleges that incorporate transformative and spiritual elements of learning” (p. 177). As well, Fleming and Courtney (2006) and Hunt and West (2007) engaged in research that explored the connection between spirituality and the work of adult educators, including those who are faculty members in higher education settings.

This article contributes to the emerging discourse as it presents the voices of six full-team faculty members in the faculties of education and social work within the Canadian university context who are interested in teaching courses that address an aspect of spirituality as part of the core content. Through our dialogue we had the opportunity to explore our hopes and challenges of striving to be undivided academics. Specifically we explored if and how our interest in integrating spirituality into our teaching practice emerged; how we understood spirituality and how this translated into our course content; and how spirituality was understood and valued by our respective students, faculties, universities and our disciplines.

**The Process**

Participants in this cross faculty dialogue represent six contributing authors for an upcoming book (Groen, Graham, Coholic, 2012) that develops a cross faculty understanding on the emerging focus on spirituality in higher education. The dialogue, occurring in two smaller groups with representation from both education and social work, explored our own personal experiences and understandings about teaching coursework that addressed some aspect of spirituality. The dialogues, occurring via teleconference, lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded. Each colleague reviewed how their voice was represented in this article.

The approach of cross faculty dialogue was chosen as it provided a comfortable framework in order to share our lived experience of teaching in the area of spirituality as opposed to examining in a more abstract and cognitive fashion our understandings about spirituality and its place within higher education. Moreover, dialogue, in providing such a space for multiple perspectives and stories to be shared, allowed for the possibility of deeper collective meanings (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991) across our two faculties. Finally, I believed that the use of dialogue would provide a sacred space offering congruence between the topic of our conversation and the process of our conversation. “The heart of a spirited epistemology is respect for dialogue. Everything in your design moves toward the dialogue as a plant moves toward the sunlight” (Vella, 2000, p. 11).

**Findings from our Cross Faculty Dialogue**

*Introducing My Colleagues*

Jack Miller, Professor in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, has been making connections between spirituality and education in his coursework for the past twenty five years. The course Holistic Curriculum, launched in 1985, was his initial foray and three years later he introduced a six week component on meditation into the required coursework. In 1998 Jack began teaching the course Spirituality and Education and he “gave them a much broader choice where they would identify some kind of spiritual practice that they would do. Not necessarily meditation. Some of them would keep a journal or work or a relationship from a mindful or conscious kind of perspective.”
Ian Winchester, Professor of History and Philosophy of Western Thought in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, began to offer the course *Mind and Spirituality* several years ago. His course is one of several course offerings in the area of spirituality and education offered in this faculty. The catalyst for such a strong focus in this area was Dr. Tad Guzie, professor of Religious Education and well known and respected Jesuit theologian. His course, *Spirituality in a Postmodern Era*, was first taught in the mid-90s and soon “had many students and many followers.” In turn it became the corner stone of several other courses such as *Spirituality of Teaching Excellence, Spirituality of Inspired Leadership*, and my course, *Spirituality in the Workplace*.

Susan Cadell, Associate Professor in Social Work and the Director of the Manulife Centre for Healthy Living at Wilfrid Laurier University, indicated that “there’s still a fair amount of stigma around social work and spirituality” in her context. “I’ve had colleagues approach and whisper that they are interested in spirituality but do not feel able to air that in a meeting.” She has found a valuable collegial support network for her interest in connecting spirituality to social work research and practice. “Just after I graduated I went to my first *Canadian Society for Social Work and Spirituality Conference* which turned out to be the very first one ever and so I got involved in the committee and have been a happily fulfilled member of that committee ever since.”

John Coates, Professor in Social Work and Director of the School of Social Work at St. Thomas University, indicated his interest in spirituality converged with his academic life in the early 1990s when he was asked to develop and instruct a policy course on international policy issues. While engaged in research for this course, John determined one of emerging themes in the literature was an increasing interest in spirituality. John’s ongoing engagement in spirituality and social work has been constant over most of the past two decades and included assisting his friend and colleague Professor Brian Ouellette in evaluating a course entitled *Spirituality and Social Work* (for several years the only regularly offered social work course on spirituality); co-founding, with three other colleagues, the *Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work (CSSSW)* in 2000; and helping to launch an annual local conference for students that explores how spirituality might inform social work practice.

Sarah Todd, an Associate Professor of Social Work at Carlton University for the past nine years, saw the connection between her work as an academic and spirituality early on. “My interest in spirituality came while I was at school … spirituality was linked to the curriculum through service and that connection really sold me.” Within her faculty there is little focus on spirituality in the social work curriculum. As a result, she is increasingly concerned that “when curriculums are getting squished and our schools are trying to be progressive and trying to establish priorities about what is most important, spirituality tends to slip off the page.”

*Why Spirituality?*

Our wish to pursue spirituality in our teaching practice and our research revealed a multifaceted understanding of spirituality that valued interconnectedness with others and the universe and a quest for holism, particularly the desire to move beyond the cognitive way of understanding and engaging the world typically manifested within our university settings. As Ian pointed out:

We’re not permitted to look at ourselves in our own way say after the fashion of the Buddhists which I would say is the first person way. You look into yourself to try and discover what it is to be a human being, what the range of your emotions are and how you can gain control of those if you wish to.
Susan pointed out that while spirituality has always been an important part of her life, she experienced convergence between her personal and professional life through her research. “For the past five years a big part of my research life has been palliative care and you can’t do palliative care without including spirituality.” For both John and Sarah, the emphasis on interconnectedness was a central component of their understanding of spirituality. John’s perspective on spirituality reflected his research on ecology and social work: “I come at spirituality from a – I’m going to call it – as cosmological place in the sense of the evolution of the earth as a sacred entity and humans having a place” and Sarah’s understanding of interconnectedness reflected the intertwining of social work and activism. Finally, returning the collective concern of all of us that the emphasis of our curriculum, and within our faculties and universities, is becoming too instrumental and problem based, Sarah and John see the necessity for instilling a deeper awareness and sense of meaning and purpose within their students that is situated in wisdom and an orientation “that as spiritual beings we are all interconnected and responsible for each other” (Sarah).

**Spirituality and Coursework within our Faculties**

As we began contrasting and comparing the place of spirituality within the curriculum of our respective faculties and professions of education and social work, common to all of us was our students’ desire to incorporate spirituality within their course work. Indeed Ian and I, colleagues in the same faculty of education, as well as Jack, have noticed a consistent trend over the past decade; graduate courses that have the word “spirituality” in the title are quick to fill up and those of us teaching these courses receive numerous requests from students to add extra spaces to our classes.

Shifting to social work, it was the students’ interest in spirituality that initially propelled John Coates’ colleague, Dr. Brian Ouellette, deceased in 2005, to develop one of the few courses in Canada that explicitly linked spirituality to social work. Almost all students who attended the undergraduate Social Work program at St. Thomas University, during the decade it was offered, chose to take this course as one of their electives. However, in 2006, without Professor Ouellette, and with a curriculum shift in the undergraduate social work program, the course, *Spirituality and Social Work*, was dropped as a regularly offered elective. The ending of this course reflects a larger Canadian trend in the field of social work as John, Sarah, and Susan all indicated that there are very few if any courses that focus on spirituality and social work because of the large number of courses the social work accreditation process requires. However they do not believe that the removal of specific courses on spirituality and social work excuses their respective faculties from infusing it within the existing social work curriculum. John, Susan and Sarah were each able to point to specific ways they incorporated spirituality into their curriculum. For example, Susan pointed out:

> We have a course here called *Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression* as a response to a need to represent diversity in curriculum. That’s a really logical place to have, as part of its discussion of diversity, a discussion on the diversity of religion, spiritual teachings and points of view.

**Spirituality as a Research Focus within our Faculties and the Profession**

The varied level of acceptance of coursework related to spirituality mirrored the level of receptiveness for its inclusion into research within our respective faculties. While Susan, Sarah and John are all able to find support through the *Canadian Society for Social Work and Spirituality*, Susan experienced resistance in her home faculty and for Sarah, research on
spirituality is perceived as peripheral in her department. For John, several social work faculty members at St. Thomas incorporate spirituality into their courses and their research. However, a number of CSSSW members and recent PhD students have reported that they were actively discouraged from focusing their dissertations in the area of spirituality.

In contrast, Jack, Ian and I are working in faculties hospitable to such explicit connections. For Jack “there are now a number of people who are moving into this area (research and teaching in spirituality) … My colleague Michel Ferrari is establishing a Centre for Wisdom Studies which includes several University of Toronto faculty.” However, both Ian and I are now standing at a cusp of change again within our faculty of education and wonder if current paradigm and structural shifts within our faculty will be as supportive of the inclusion of spirituality within our teaching and research.

While probing the level of hospitality of our respective faculties we widened the net to focus on the broader professional field of education and social work; a location where we all feel some tensions. In schools Jack has experienced a varying reception to his work. “I do a lot of work with Catholic schools and I do a workshop called Education and the Soul … when I broach that with public school people, they just back away.” All of us felt that part of this caution could be derived from a fear that the introduction of spirituality in within our practice in education and social work might infringe on people’s religious beliefs and understandings. “What one does is characteristically avoid the conversation in so far as there is a religious connection with spirituality … whatever direction you take, people worry that you’re going to offend somebody” (Ian).

Susan affirmed that her experience in the practice of social work was similar. “We purport to be about person and the environment and do holistic assessments of people but often our assessments of people’s environments don’t include any sense of any kind spiritual and/or religious direction.” John elaborated on the field’s movement away and toward spirituality. “Social work, in its early efforts to be seen as a profession, became secularized and rational and gave decreasing attention to spirituality and religion. However, for social work in Canada, especially since 2000, religion and spirituality are increasingly part of social work discourse but are still far from being central.” Even though the field of social work has a long way to go, John, Sarah and Susan all believe opening up more dialogue is critical.

**Concluding Thoughts**

My hope in arranging dialogues with Ian, Susan, Jack, John and Sarah was to create space to share experiences and observations with other colleagues who believe that spirituality should be an important component of their lives as academics. I came into these dialogues focused on my colleagues and if and how spirituality was a basis for their teaching and research. However I am now left with a more expansive point of view as our conversation widened to consider our students’ perceptions and experiences and our university contexts.

Regardless of whether or not there is an explicit focus on spirituality within coursework, many of our undergraduate and graduate students are interested in connecting spirituality to their studies. This spiritual quest amongst our student population mirrors the findings of a recent study (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010) that found, while religious engagement amongst students declines somewhat during undergraduate years, their spirituality shows significant growth. Therefore, we need to continue to take up the challenge to cultivate space within our classrooms.
where students are able to share their struggles and challenges as they engage in the deeper issues of meaning and purpose within their lives. Shahjahan (2009) indicated:

we see that students are going through journeys that call many of their normalized perceptions into question … spirituality is important in the process of teaching and learning for pedagogues who are challenging their students’ normative thinking. (p. 130)

As we seek to support the undivided lives of our students by widening our pedagogical approaches beyond those that only favour the intellect to incorporate the physical, affective and spiritual, there is varying receptiveness within our faculties and our universities. Indeed as revealed by my colleagues in social work, recent accreditation adjustments have demanded an increase in courses that are problem based and context specific, leaving little time for varied instructional approaches and courses or content of a spiritual nature. For Ian and I, at the University of Calgary, it is disappointing to note that in all likelihood, all of our graduate courses focusing on spirituality in education will not likely be offered anymore effective summer 2011.

Turning to the research agenda of spirituality in social work and education, I believe that there is room to be hopeful. The majority of us noted hospitality for our research agendas in this area that can only increase in presence with the Canadian Centre for Social Work and the Wisdom in Education Centre being established at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. And yet there is some caution amongst us as the discourse in some of our faculties and across all of our universities continues to question the validity of research that does not stay within the confines of intellectual engagement and a positivistic worldview.

References


