Making Connections Through Holistic Learning

Holistic educators do more than prepare students for the workplace. They prepare students to make a better world.

John (Jack) P. Miller

After the recent tragic events in United States schools when students have killed other students, we may ask ourselves how such terrible things could happen. Child psychiatrist Lawrence Stone (Peterson, 1998) believes that the troubled children never developed the ability to empathize with others. But are these children alone in their inability to feel compassion?

Generally, our society and our schools value competition over compassion. So often we hear that the main goal of schooling should be to prepare our students to compete in a global economy. The recent emphasis on testing and standards also stresses personal competition in schools. But do we want students who are clever and compete well on tests or students who have compassion for all forms of life and a sense of responsibility that goes beyond personal achievement?

In seeking to nurture the human spirit as well as to improve academic ability and performance, holistic learning attempts to provide a broader vision of education and human development. Three key elements assist in this process: balance, inclusion, and connection.

Balance

Our classrooms must find a balance between various learning emphases, such as individual learning and group learning, analytic thinking and intuitive thinking, content and process, and learning and assessment. Influenced by the work of developmentalists such as Piaget, educators in the 1960s and early 1970s emphasized how students learn. This led to such approaches as open education, active learning, and learning centers in the classroom. At that time however, schools did not stress student assessment, and some educators saw the need to raise academic standards. Today the balance has swung the other way. We seem more concerned with testing what kids have learned than with nurturing the learning process itself. From a holistic learning perspective, we need to balance learning and assessment rather than to favor one over the other.

Inclusion

Poet Carl Sandburg said that the worst word in the English language is exclude. In holistic learning, we want schools and classrooms to include students of diverse races and abilities. Therefore, we need a wide range of teaching and learning strategies. Let me explain by describing three kinds of learning.
First, transmission learning involves a one-way flow of information from the teacher or the textbook to the student. The focus is on accumulating factual information and basic skills. A second form of learning is transaction, characterized by greater interaction between student and teacher. This form focuses on solving problems and developing cognitive skills. Students examine a broad range of problems and issues.

A third form of learning is transformational. Here, the focus is not just on intellectual development, but also on physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual growth. Significant connections develop between the student and the subject matter. This type of learning often nurtures the student's inner life through such approaches as storytelling and the arts.

From a holistic perspective, educators should balance all three approaches. Holistic educators do not take sides in battles between traditionalists and progressive educators or between whole language and phonics advocates. Instead, they seek an inclusive framework that lets the teacher use a variety of approaches. If a classroom focuses on only one type of learning, then the child's development will be thwarted. If the teacher uses all three approaches, he or she can develop a rhythm among these forms of learning to make the classroom vital and interesting.

Connection

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

—Walt Whitman, "There Was a Child Went Forth"

Walt Whitman beautifully conveys the essence of holistic learning—the child connects with his or her environment so that learning is deeply integrated. Connections among school subjects, among members of the school, to the earth, and to the self all reflect holistic learning.

Connections among subjects occur on different levels. For example, the teacher can link a novel to its historical time period. At another level, subjects can be integrated around major themes. For example, students can explore the theme of personal identity by linking literature, history, art, music, and even science. Students can then discover what Dewey referred to as the unity of knowledge.

Students must also see the classroom as a learning community where they can work collaboratively with other students in cooperative learning groups. Listening carefully to students and showing respect through small acts of attention build a sense of classroom community. The school itself should also be a place where people know one another and feel a sense of responsibility toward the total school environment. Invitational education (Purkey & Novak, 1984) is another approach that involves all school staff, including secretaries and custodians, in creating a welcoming atmosphere. Students should feel connected to the community surrounding the school as well. This connection can be fostered by involving community members and parents in the life of the school and by sending students into the surrounding community to work on various projects, for example, to interview elderly people on local history.

Another important connection is the student's relationship with the earth. I visited an elementary school in Japan where students planted a small forest on the school grounds. Students ventured out into the surrounding area to identify the different types of trees, and then they selected some trees for planting. The students developed a relationship with the "home" forest and even wrote poems about the trees (Tezuka, pp. 10–11).
Trees in the Home Forest
I saw trees in the ground.
They are moving as if they are dancing with snow.
Don't they feel heavy
When they have snow on their branches?
—Yakuri Kazama

Home Forest
Trees in Home Forest
Dead trees
They are covered with snow.
They look as if they were saying, "It's cold."
They seem to be saying to the neighboring trees:
"It's cold." "I hope spring comes soon."
The trees are good friends
—Rie Sato

As with planting a forest, students can deepen their connection to the earth by taking care of flowers or vegetables in small gardens around their school.

Another way to foster the earth connection is to read indigenous peoples' literature. Once, when visiting a Catholic elementary school, I observed a classroom of students sitting in a circle. In the center was a copy of the Bible and a book entitled Earth Prayers, which contains different statements on the earth, including those by native peoples. Here is an example from Earth Prayers.

Grandfather,
Look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.
We know that we are the ones
Who are divided
And we are the ones
Who must come back together
To walk in the Sacred Way.
Grandfather,
Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion, and honor
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other.
—Ojibway prayer

Finally, students should connect with their deeper sense of self, the source of wisdom and compassion. If we are to build a less violent and more compassionate world, we need to nurture this deeper sense of self in our children. Legends and myths often convey in rich images how a hero or heroine overcomes a narrow sense of self and reaches that deeper self, maturing into a full, complete human being. Science can also have a role in developing this part of ourselves. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (1992) describe an approach called the Universe Story, in which students study about the development theories of the universe. Studying the Universe Story awakens our sense of awe and wonder and encourages us to approach life with reverence.
The Holistic Teacher

In holistic learning, teachers must also nurture their own deeper selves. I encourage teachers to set aside time during the day to develop their inner life. Activities like gardening and meditation allow us to make the transition from a calculating to a listening mind. Another technique is mindfulness. We stop trying to do three or four things at once and simply give all our attention to one task. When asked how she did such great things, Mother Theresa answered, "I simply do small things with great love." When we focus our attention on one thing at a time, we change how we view teaching. As one teacher in my class wrote,

As a teacher, I have become more aware of my students and their feelings in class. Instead of rushing through the day's events, I take the time to enjoy our day's experiences and opportune moments. The students have commented that I seem happier. I do tend to laugh more, and I think it is because I am more aware, alert, and "present," instead of thinking about what I still need to do.

In a way, holistic learning is a return to basics. It asks us to focus on what is ultimately important in life. It asks that we see our work as more than just preparing students to compete with one another. Although we still must teach skills to ready students for the workplace, we need a broader vision of education that fosters the development of whole human beings.

References

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John (Jack) P. Miller is Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and Facilitator of the Holistic Education Network for ASCD. He may be reached at OISE UT, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, ON M5S 1V6 Canada (e-mail: jmiller@oise.utoronto.ca).

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