

The Integration of Living and Learning: Perspectives on Seeking Wholeness in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs

By Jane Fried

Living and learning cannot be separated from each other, yet our institutional structures and pedagogical approaches often encourage their division. Professor Fried presents a narrative on the integration of living and learning to draw connections between the work of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. She argues that when learning involves thinking, feeling, and making meaningful connections between knowledge and life, a campus can become truly integrated. In this way, learning takes on a spiritual dimension if students experience the wholeness of their own experience as they learn.

*“The purpose of organisms is to organize and what human beings organize is meaning”
(Parks, 2000, p.19).*

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been an upsurge of expressed student interest to discuss spirituality on campus (Lindholm, Astin & Astin, 2006). Yet, the traditional structure of higher education as well as the epistemology of most of our teaching and learning processes impedes discussion of spirituality. This divide calls for the integration of living and learning on our campuses that can be better achieved through seeking wholeness between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

Spirituality, for purposes of this article, refers to a sense of personal meaning, an interior awareness of the larger context of life, a feeling of wholeness that can emerge from conversation but can also emerge wordlessly through experience. Based on this definition, spirituality can be supported by religious practice, but is often divorced from formal religion and experienced in natural settings and in other kinds of human behavior that involve loss of ego awareness such as helping other people, feeling profoundly understood by another, or participation in musical performances.

Professor Julian Stern (York-St.John's University, in conversation) described spirituality as the experience of oneness beyond duality. However, both our positivist epistemology as well as our university structures in both Academic and Student Affairs emphasize duality and minimize opportunities to experience oneness or even coherence within an academic context. On most campuses across the country, academic faculty have resisted participating in spiritual discussions, at least as part of their classroom process, for at least three reasons:

- 1) Most lack training in the content of this kind of discussion;
- 2) Many believe that discussion of spirituality and personal beliefs has little to do with their academic discipline; and
- 3) The larger American context is generally not supportive of discussions of spiritual beliefs and practices in public, tax-supported settings. Separation of church and state is honored as often in the breach as in the practice, but the Constitutional mandate generates confusion about what can and cannot be discussed in classrooms of public universities and colleges.

From a Student Affairs perspective, there is also some confusion about appropriate venues for discussion of spirituality and about the relationship between spirituality and religion. While some Student Affairs preparation programs include courses on spirituality and spiritual development, this is not yet a widespread practice. Overall, the only professionals on many campuses who seem willing to guide discussions of spirituality are clergy and Chaplain's Offices, and this approach immediately resurfaces the church/state conflict.

Based on our current context of higher education, this article explores meaningful ways that members of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs can recognize and support cross-campus collaborations in order to promote students' spiritual development on campus.

A DIVIDED CAMPUS

From neurological research, spiritual feelings seem to be experienced through the right side of the brain (Taylor, 2008). When the Western academic world adopted the Cartesian duality as the foundation of its epistemology, knowledge accessed through the right side of the brain was excluded from formal learning. Functionally, cognitive learning was separated from experiential learning and operationally Academic Affairs was separated from Student Affairs.

This split is also mirrored in university processes that separate living from learning. Cultural and operational barriers impede awareness of wholeness throughout most universities, making it very difficult to imagine how to address student concerns about spirituality. Currently, no universally accepted language to describe whole learning experiences for students exists, causing little awareness that wholeness in learning must employ processes that integrate learning experiences throughout the entire institution.

In my teaching experience, when students say they want to talk about spirituality, they are hoping for personal experiences of wholeness and are not generally thinking about sectarian religious practice or belief. They often want to know how what I expect them to learn fits into the larger story of their own lives, why this information matters, how and where to use it. The implied question is “Why should I care about this”? They are looking for the “*AHA!*” experience – an experience of wholeness based on learning information and instantaneously seeing it fit into the kaleidoscopic wholeness of their lives, a moment of insight. From this perspective, all learning has the potential to be spiritual because almost everything a person learns, sooner or later, can be placed into a much larger context of personal and collective meaning.

Additionally, the meaning-making function of consciousness provides humans with a sense of wholeness. Meaning-making is characterized as an emergent function, one that occurs when all contributing processes are coherent. Jensen (2000) asserts that the factors that trigger meaning making are 1) relevance, 2) emotions and 3) context. “*Relevance* signals that new information is connected to previously acquired knowledge. *Emotions* are signaled by neurochemical responses the function of which is to ‘tag the learning as important.’ *Context* sets up the pattern-making processes that relate current knowledge patterns to more extensive neural fields” (p. 281).

If we think that learning should be associated with meaning-making and that the meaning-making process stimulates a sense of wholeness, then the meaning-making function should provide clues to helping students experience something which has loosely been referred to as spirituality. Yet, these foundational experiences and the content that stimulates deeper learning may or may not be discussed in classrooms in keeping with faculty discretion or unwillingness to approach spirituality as a topic of conversation. Similar hesitations and fears also exist in a Student Affairs context, further increasing the divide between living and learning.

CREATING INTEGRATED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Based on this existing divide, the emerging question then becomes, *How do we arrange learning experiences so that the meaning-making process is likely to occur?* In universities typically characterized by duality in their epistemology and their operations, what elements need to be rearranged so that students are more likely to have meaningful experiences in which they perceive relevance, emotional engagement and contextual significance?

One possible approach is to consider the entire campus an *integrated* learning community. Many schools and colleges consider themselves learning communities, and many are concerned about identifying learning outcomes. There are far fewer campuses that think of learning from an integrated perspective, identify specific learning outcomes, and then design learning experiences that connect academic learning with the rest of student life so that integrated outcomes are based on integrated inputs (Keeling, ed., 2004).

Several key elements should be considered if an institution begins to address these questions. The first is the structure of academic requirements usually referred to as *general education*. Faculty members need to reconsider the fundamental assumptions that govern the organization of these requirements in each institution: *Why are particular courses and particular areas of study required of all students and what relationship exists among them? Do faculty members who teach in different departments spend time discussing the interdisciplinary implications of their work or even create interdisciplinary courses that focus several disciplines on the understanding and analysis of a specific concern?*

Another concern is the familiarity of the Student Affairs professionals on a campus with the general education requirements and their ability to help students see connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they are doing in their lives on campus. *Do members of the Student Affairs staff understand why the general education requirements exist or how faculty members think about them? How are the content in these courses relevant on a broader scale outside the classroom?*

The second area of concern is in the integration and application of academic learning into student life. Almost all functions of Student Affairs have learning implications, some of which also appear in formal coursework. The most obvious learning areas exist in leadership training, peer advising, and group work, which all connect experiential learning to real-world applications. Coursework that integrates service learning or leadership theories can then be connected to out of class experiences to apply these topics in new ways and draw connections for students.

In conversations with students, the opportunity exists for Student Affairs professionals to ask, "Are you learning anything in any of your courses that might help you solve this problem or address this issue more effectively? Have you read any novels lately where one of the characters faced a similar situation? Are you taking an anthropology or sociology course? Is anything you're learning there related to what's happening in your residence hall?" All of these probing questions further connect learning to living.

Moreover, Student Affairs training programs also often connect to academic areas of study so that students learn to connect theory and practice, thus beginning to create a larger framework of meaning. Some relevant disciplines for these topics include political science, sociology, human development, interpersonal communications, and anthropology. Opportunities to connect any of the humanities to analysis of student life experience also abound. A favorite quote from one of my undergraduate professors, "The reason we study literature is because there are no human zoos" (Hagopian, in conversation), has shaped the way I teach my own students about developmental psychology.

Additionally, the use of novels to understand human behavior is gaining credence in Student Affairs graduate programs (CSPTalk listserv, 2009). This movement should be extended so that Student Affairs staff and faculty members from appropriate departments regularly meet to discuss the intersection of their work, to connect theory to practice and living to learning. These classroom connections, co-curricular

experiences, and personal conversations begin to create opportunities for integrated learning experiences with classroom conversations directly connected to and integrated with out of class experiences.

The third element of integrated learning is *reflection*. Reflection as it seems to be currently practiced consists of a few questions, a brief conversation, and perhaps a journal entry within a group that has shared a common experience. In order to help students create meaning from the integration of academic learning and experience, reflection should be well designed, on going and conducted by both Student Affairs professionals and their academic colleagues. It can be connected to a specific course, to a series of courses across disciplines and/or to a set of experiences related to the context of these courses.

Reflection adds a third dimension to theory and practice – a sense of personal meaning. The ultimate reflection questions are often, *So what? Who cares? Why does this matter...to you or to anybody else?* When students begin to address these questions, both in solitude and in conversation, genuine meaning-making emerges. Students integrate new information, anchor this information in a setting of relationships and emotional engagement, and, finally, place the new feeling/thinking experience in the larger narrative of their own lives, addressing, if not answering, the question about *mattering*. This process does not – and cannot – occur in any formal, documented manner when epistemology is positivist, when learning is considered synonymous with cognition alone, and when it is divorced from context and meaning in students' lives.

PERSPECTIVES ON INTEGRATED LIVING AND LEARNING

Burns B. Crookston (1973), an early pioneer in the student development movement writes:

What is needed is to transform education so that it neither focuses on subject matter requirements and syllabi nor attempts to fit the student into a cultural heritage, but becomes a model of human development that teaches students the processes of discovering what is known and applying that knowledge to a deeper understanding of self, of enhancing the quality of relationships with others and of coping effectively with the world (p.52).

Here, Crookston identifies the processes by which learning information, placing it in context and integrating knowledge into personal development and meaning systems far before anybody ever watched these processes occur in an fMRI scan. His intuition was accurate.

Xavier LePinchon (2009), noted geologist and spiritual author, also comments on the essential unity of human experience and meaning making from his complementary perspectives. As a young geologist, he studied apparently separate rock formations. With experience and reflection, his insights evolved until he was able to see the entire

earth as an integrated living system by realizing that the tectonic geological plates of the planet actually move in response to deep forces as yet undescribed and unobserved. He was ridiculed for his early observations and has subsequently been honored for the insight that changed the way geologists understand the earth.

Le Pinchon has compared his awareness of the oneness of the planet to the oneness of human experience by describing his connections with other suffering people. During his work with Mother Theresa, he cared for a dying child. In one moment he felt such a profound connection with that child that his sense of separation disappeared. He compared that feeling to Jesus' teaching, "As long as you do this for one of these, the least of my brethren, you do it for me" (Matthew, 25:40). LePinchon reasoned later that if there is unity in any aspect of experience, there is also unity everywhere as his words express:

We have to be educated by the other. Our heart cannot be educated by itself. I mean, my heart cannot be educated by myself. It can only come out of a relationship with others. And if we accept to be educated by the others, to let the other explain to us what happens to them, how they feel, which is completely different from what we feel, and to let yourself immerse into their world so that they can get into our world, then you begin to share something which is very deep. You will never be the person in front of you, but you will have created what we call communion, the capacity to share at a very deep level. And I feel that that is the essence of life (Interview with Tippett, 2009).

Like the above excerpt expresses, we learn as whole human beings, and when we learn with our whole selves, we often describe these experiences as spiritual. These experiences can also be described as a coherent awareness of cognition, affect, activity and meaning making, but spiritual is a term that is more likely to resonate in this conversation. LePinchon learned about the unity of life both through his analysis of geologic shifts and his experience of feeding a dying child in Calcutta. Learning is always an integrated process even when we use dualistic, or purely cognitive methods in our teaching.

Currently, our academic structures do not support the whole learning process as we now understand it. The issue facing all of us who are responsible for learning in our institutions is finding ways to rearrange our relationships, structures, and processes so that intentionally integrated learning occurs more often than it might if we left this experience to chance. Experiencing wholeness and a sense of unity or communion is a spiritual experience. This is a new paradigmatic way to think about learning. It is now widely known that problems that were once insoluble under an old paradigm disappear when a new paradigm emerges (Kuhn, 1962). We are at such a moment in higher education.

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