

HOLISTIC LEARNING THEORY

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This is an excerpt from my book: *Education Psychology: Theories of Learning and Human Development* (2014). National Science Press: www.nsspress.com

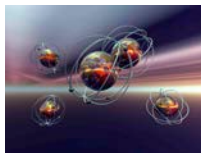
HOLONS, HOLISM, AND HOLISTIC EDUCATION

Holistic learning theory reflects the latest findings from quantum physics as well as ancient ideas related to shamanism, Gnostic Christianity, and perennial philosophy. Holistic comes from the word 'holon' which is a whole that is also a part. That is, each little part of the whole contains the whole within. For example, in the smallest bit of matter is found the building blocks for the universe in the same way that each individual cell in our body carries the DNA of the whole person. We could no more understand the universe by examining only bits of physical matter than we could understand a human being by studying only bits of his or her physical matter. Humans and universes are much more than a sum of their physical parts.

Holism and Interconnectedness

Holism is a thesis that states that the universe is made up of integrated wholes that cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts. We can never come to know the whole of reality by isolating variables in order to examine small parts. Science cannot come to understand and explain how the universe works by taking it apart the way one would take apart a mechanical clock. Any entity (human, universe, sheep, school, classroom, curriculum, concept, subject matter) is best understood by examining the principles that govern behavior within the system.

Holistic education is based on theories of holism. There are many philosophical and practical derivations of holistic learning theory; however, one unifying principle is that everything in the world (or in the universe) is interconnected (Clark, 1991). We see this principle of interconnectedness in quantum physics where all things in the physical universe are said to be connected at the quantum level (Al-Khalili, 1999; Talbot, 1991). Indeed, at this level there are not individual physical things; rather, there are only many physical manifestations that are variations on a single, unified cosmic theme which the Buddhist mystic Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) calls the Ground of All Being or what physicist David Bohm (1980) calls implicate reality.



Quantum is a term used to denote the smallest physical unit or thing that can still be recognized. At this level, there is no fragmentation, only parts that are interconnected with greater systems and greater wholes. The idea of interconnectedness is also illustrated in *systems theory*, which views the universe and all things in it in terms of interconnected systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). From this perspective reality is a unified, organizing whole comprised of self-organizing systems that are both interdependent and interactive. Any change in one entity or

system will bring change in all. Instead of perceiving the world in terms of individual humans, entities, governments, societies, corporations, schools, or curriculum, it is perceived in terms of patterns, connections, and relationships all working together and influencing each other.



The idea of interconnectedness can be illustrated in Carl Jung's concept of the *collective unconscious*. The collective unconscious is a part of the human psyche that is shared by all (Jones, 1999). An illustrative metaphor might be to think of it as psychic cyberspace to which we are all connected. Here, every thought, action, and emotion ever experienced by humanity is embedded and available to us in the form of *archetypal images*. Archetypal images are those images formed around patterns within in the collective unconscious and birthed into human consciousness as symbols and motifs (Pearson, 1989). Carl Jung (1938) and then later Joseph Campbell (1968) described a common set of archetypal images that appear in mythology, fairy tales, stories, literature, dreams, art, and religions throughout the world. These help us understand the nature of existence, the physical world, and our place in the cosmos. They can also be used as guides on our inner journey towards oneness or atonement (at-one-ment). This oneness of consciousness, also called *individuation*, is an integration of the conscious and unconscious mind (Jones, 1999).



Finally, the principle of interconnectedness is manifest in a holistic education framework in the design of curriculum and other education experiences (Johnson, 2006). These are used as vehicles to develop three kinds of connections: Intrapersonal connections, interpersonal connections, and transpersonal connections.

- **Intrapersonal connections.** Curriculum and other educational experiences are used to connect with and understand the central self. The central self is the part of you beyond the ego that some might call the soul. Intrapersonal connections can help students to understand themselves, solve problems, make decisions, and come to know the world using intuition and emotion in conjunction with knowledge and logic.

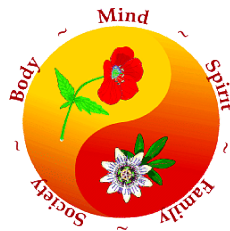
- **Interpersonal connections.** Curriculum and other educational experiences are used to connect with and understand others. Interpersonal connections can help students develop social

and other interpersonal skills with the goal of understanding and learning to live in relationship or harmony with others.

- **Transpersonal connections.** Curriculum and other educational experiences are used to perceive and understand the world in terms of inter-related systems and interconnected experiences. This might take the form of global education where students see how their daily lives affect or connect with others around the world. This might also take the form of ecological education where students describe their impact on and relationship with the environment. Transpersonal connects invite students to be fully in relationship with themselves, others, and local and world communities and to see the interrelationship of all things.

Holistic Education

Holistic learning theories see each human entity as a system of interacting dimensions and not as simply a body with a brain and spinal cord. As such, holistic educators seek to educate the whole student. They strive to help students grow toward their full potential in all dimensions: intellectual, emotional, social, artistic, moral, psychological, physical, aesthetic, creative, intuitive, spiritual, and others. Humans are not empty vessels to be filled with a predetermined body of knowledge. And they are certainly not circus seals to be trained to perform certain academic skills on command. Instead, humans are thinking, feeling, emoting, creating, intuiting beings that use all these traits to come to know and act upon the world.



Modern schools tend to limit the educational experience to those dimensions accessed by knowledge and reason; yet, most humans learn, solve problems, and make decisions using the full dimension of their being. It is in these fuller dimensions that some of the greatest innovations in human history have come about. Sadly, these are the very traits that traditional education ignores: creativity, nonconformity, originality, imagination, reflection, exploration, risk-taking, entrepreneurialism, and intuition (Harman & Rheingold, 1984). Holistic learning theory would incorporate all of these traits in helping students learn the knowledge and skills necessary for them to fully develop and successfully act upon their worlds.



TO EDUCATE

Holistic educators seek to educate in the truest sense of the word. Educate comes from the Latin word *'educere'* which means to draw forth. To *educere*, the root derivative of educate, is to bring out something of potential which is latent or indwelling. For holistic educators, ultimate

truth resides within each individual. Knowledge and skills are seen as a means toward this end (ultimate truth), and not an end in and of themselves. Holistic educators then teach knowledge and skills with the goal of bringing out and developing qualities that are already there. This is the exact opposite of what happens in the majority of modern schools. Here the goal is to simply put in what somebody else has determined to be a necessary body of knowledge and an important set of skills. Also, holistic educators perceive all humans as having a natural desire to learn and a tendency to evolve to their highest states (Rogers, 1969). To educate is to design educational experiences that align with these natural desires.



Learning, Transformation, and Consciousness

From a holistic perspective, true learning is said to have occurred when educational experiences elicit a transformation of *consciousness* that leads to a greater understanding of and care for self, others, and the community (world and local). Learning can thus be expressed in terms of personal transformation as it relates to the expansion of consciousness. This is a type of learning that can be described but not always quantified. Consciousness here is not some mystical, new-age entity of which to be afraid; rather it is simply what we are aware of, both internally and externally. We can transform our selves and ultimately the world around us by transforming consciousness. This can occur externally by acquiring new knowledge, having authentic experiences, and learning skills that are used to act upon the world. Consciousness can be transformed internally by what we choose to give our attention to.

The Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) describes our store consciousness as having both wholesome and unwholesome seeds within our store consciousness. The wholesome seeds help and uplift us. These are traits such as humility, love, self-respect, non-craving, non-anger, fortitude, concentration, diligence, equanimity, and non-violence. The unwholesome seeds are heavy and imprison us. These are traits such as anger, greed, hatred, ignorance, pride, and doubt. We have a choice in every situation as to which seeds receive our attention and thus, become watered. Seeds create emotional states from which thoughts arise. Thought precedes action, thus, the fourth step of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, right action (good), is dependent on our attention (right-mindedness and contemplation). Therefore, focusing on internal states (consciousness) is an important part of helping students and teachers transform into beings that are better able to nurture the self, others, and the environment.

Transformational teaching is the highest form of teaching. Here one is teaching from his or her authentic self (instead of a teacher's manual), and both students and teacher are moved to a higher place. Teachers often discover moments of what Abraham Maslow (1968) called peak experiences. These are instances where the lesson or class seems to unfold effortlessly. Consciousness changes during these peak experiences. The teacher and often students have an intense focus and total attention to the moment. There is a sense of knowing that goes beyond the lesson and also a distortion in the perception of time. Maslow also describes a change in perception where one senses interconnectedness, where the borders between self and the universe seem to dissolve. Here the teacher and learner are one in that both are transformed and

being transformed by the experience. This is a type of optimal performance that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) describes as a flow state. Here consciousness is perfectly ordered and organized. There is an effortless flow of psychic energy as all information that comes into awareness is totally congruent with the goals of that current teaching experience.

Main Features of Holistic Education

Holistic education has its historical origin in the work of Rudolph Steiner, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Abraham Maslow. Current writers and practitioners in the holistic education movement include Jack Miller, Ron Miller, Parker Palmer, Aline Wolf, James Moffett, Ramon Gallegos Nava, Rachael Kessler, Jeffery Kane, and Nel Noddings. Briefly stated, holistic education is a philosophy or view of education that consists of three main features:

1. It seeks to address the whole person: mind, body, emotions/soul, and spirit (Nave, 2001). Spirit and spirituality are defined in a non-religious or non-sectarian context here.

2. It is based on the principle of interconnectedness. It seeks to help students see the whole instead of fragmented parts (Nakagawa, 2000). In this sense, it seeks to blur the lines between school reality and outside reality. It also tries to blur the line between subject areas, employing integrated units that might include social studies concepts and skills as well as those found in science, reading, language arts, math, and the arts.

3. It recognizes and values a variety of ways of thinking, seeing, and relating to the world. In so doing, holistic education seeks to find a balance between intuition and logic; creative and critical thinking; the arts and science; measurement, assessment, documentation, and description; and the individual and the greater community (Miller, 2001).

Ron Miller's Essential Characteristics of Holistic Education

Ron Miller (1991), one of the recent strong voices in the holistic education. In addition to the features above, he describes four essential characteristics of holistic education:

1. Holistic education nurtures the development of the whole person. It is not just concerned with developing the human intellect or getting higher scores on bubble-tests. Like humanistic learning theories, holistic education seeks to help students grow and develop in all dimensions: emotional, psychological, creative, social, imaginative, physical, intuitive, and spiritual as well as intellectual.

2. Holistic education involves relationships. These relationships occur between learners, teachers, and other adults in the community. To relate means to make connections, in this case, interpersonal connections. Instead of an authoritarian, top-down relationship based on rules, power, and authority, holistic educators seek to create more equal relationships in the school and classroom based on principles of respect, community, and a shared set of values. Instead of using power to control, they use relationships to cooperate in creating meaningful learning experiences.

3. Holistic education is concerned with life experiences. Instead of a narrowly defined curriculum focused on mastering basic skills in order to achieve higher aggregate scores on standardized tests, holistic education is concerned with engaging in the real world. Instead of studying an abstract, academic world defined by somebody else, holistic educators seek to engage students in their real life worlds, to the greatest extent possible. Students' own curiosity and quests for personal meaning become the new scope and sequence.

4. Holistic education enables learners to critically examine and define their values within a personal, cultural, and political context. Instead of a curriculum that simply replicates and promotes an established cultural or historical perspective, holistic educators seek to create learning experiences whereby students are able to examine established ways of seeing.

The purpose of this examination is to neither reject or project cultural traditions, institutions, and values on students, rather, to enable students to identify and internalize their own views and values.



THREE VIEWS OF TEACHING

There are three common views of what constitutes teaching: teaching as transmission, teaching as transaction, and teaching as transformation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Three views of teaching.

	Transmission	Transaction	Transformation
guiding philosophy	positivism	constructivism	holism
psychological basis	behaviorism	cognitive psychology	transpersonal psychology
role of teacher	supply students with designated body of knowledge	help students transact with knowledge to create personal meaning	create transforming conditions and experiences, enable students to perceive connections, and encourage inner exploration
role of student	passively receive information	interact with information	use information and experiences for self-transformation; reflection and search for meaning; discover and develop talents

Teaching as Transmission

This view perceives teaching to be the act of transmitting knowledge from Point A (teacher’s head) to Point B (students’ heads). This is a teacher centered approach in which the teacher is the dispenser of knowledge, the arbitrator of truth, and the final evaluator of learning. A teacher’s job from this perspective is to supply students with a designated body of knowledge in a predetermined order. Academic achievement is seen as students’ ability to demonstrate, replicate, or retransmit this designated body of knowledge back to the teacher or to some other measuring agency or entity. From this perspective standardized tests are considered to be an apt measure of students’ learning. While there are instances when this approach is useful, this text does not support it as a general teaching philosophy.

Teaching as Transaction

This view perceives teaching as creating situations whereby students are able to interact with the material to be learned in order to construct knowledge. Constructivism is an educational philosophy consistent with this view. Here, knowledge is not passively received, rather, it is actively built up or constructed by students as they connect their past knowledge and experiences with new information (Santrock, 2004). And just as each student's past knowledge and experiences are different, so too is the interpretation, understanding, and meaning of the new information that each ultimately constructs.

Teachers are not expected to pour knowledge into the heads of learners; rather, they assist learners in their construction of knowledge by creating experiences where students' old information can transact with new information to create meaningful knowledge. Academic achievement from a constructivist perspective is seen as students' ability to use this knowledge to solve real-world problems or to create products or performances that are valued in one or more cultural settings.

A common constructivist learning strategy is to help students generate what they know about a topic before a lesson. This helps them to strengthen the connection between known and new. Generating prior knowledge can be done through the use of advanced organizers, anticipatory sets, or pre-questioning. To be consistent with this approach, this text generates prior knowledge through the *Thinking Ahead* sections at the beginning of each chapter.

Teaching as Transformation

This view perceives teaching as creating conditions that have the potential to transform the learner on many different levels (cognitive, emotional, social, intuitive, creative, spiritual, and other). Transformational teaching invites both students and teachers to discover their full potential as learners, as members of society, and as human beings. The ultimate transformational goal is to become more nurturing human beings who are better able to perceive the interconnectedness of all human, plant, and animal life (Narve, 2001). Holistic education is an educational philosophy consistent with the transformative view (Miller, 1996). Learning is said to have occurred when these experiences elicit a transformation of consciousness that leads to a greater understanding of and care for self, others, and the environment. Academic achievement from this perspective is seen as discovering and developing your unique talents and capabilities to the fullest extent possible. Academic achievement also involves becoming aware of the multiple dimensions of self and expanding one's consciousness.

Learning can take place using all three views or approaches. This textbook, however, emphasizes the idea that the most powerful and sustaining learning experiences are created when transactional and transformational approaches are used predominately.

IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provided just a brief overview of holistic learning theory and holistic education. Holistic learning theories should not be adopted to the exclusion of other learning theories. All learning theories should be used to inform your teaching practice and to help you develop your professional and personal repertoire.

“The function of education is to create human beings who are integrated and therefore intelligent ... Intelligence is the capacity to perceive the essential, the what is; and to awaken this capacity, in oneself and in others, is education” (Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti said, 1953 p. 14).

Summary of Key Ideas

- *Holism* is a thesis that states that the universe is made up of integrated wholes that cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts
- Holistic learning theory is based on holism.
- Holistic learning theory emphasized connections and interconnectedness.
- To educate, according to holistic learning theory, is to draw forth innate qualities that currently exist within the individual.
- Holistic learning theorists see the purpose of education as transformation of consciousness.
- Three views of teaching include: teaching as transmission, teaching as transaction, and teaching as transformation.

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