

Integral Education for a Conscious Evolution

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Consciousness is “an awareness of self, knowledge of one’s own existence and that of the objective world … a presence that is always there (Damasio, 2003, p. 184). This awareness of ourselves and our world, includes our thoughts, feelings, sensations, identity and worldviews (Schlitz, 2005, p. xl). For the purpose of powerfully connecting an integral education with the evolution of consciousness, consciousness is also viewed from an extended epistemology.

There are four theoretical models, which provide a way of relating to consciousness that supports the understanding of integral education and its contribution to the expansion of our awareness. Kegan (1994) delineates levels of thinking that represent qualities of consciousness. First level thinking has a single-point focus on what is immediately present; second level thinking focuses awareness of the self and one’s own needs; third level thinking includes awareness of one’s self in relation to others and fourth level thinking expands the awareness to include a worldview that is systemic and complex, i.e., a consciousness that is aware of itself at the level of system (pp. 94-95).

Wilber (2000) has invented a powerful context for engaging with conscious-

ness. His quadrant model includes the levels, i.e., matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit and the facets, intentional (interior-individual-subjective), behavioral (exterior-individual-objective), cultural (interior-collective-intersubjective) and social, systemic (exterior-collective-interobjective). This framework highlights the integral mindset and its multi dimensional relationship with consciousness, including all aspects — the inside and outside and the singular and plural.

Combs (1996) proposes three levels of organization of our experiential lives that further our understanding of consciousness. He has incorporated prior work done by Tart, Gebser, and Guenther in his levels (p. 257). The first level is states of mind, which contain feelings, emotions, moods, etc., the second is states of consciousness, which comprise experiential conditions such as dreams, ordinary awareness, meditation, etc, and the third is structures of consciousness, i.e. how the world is experienced and understood by human beings. The mental, physical and integral are examples of consciousness structures (pp. 257-264).

Beck (2002), through his Spiral Dynamics interpretation of the evolution of consciousness as eight spiraling and dynamic stages, points to the inte-

gral and holonic quality of the development of consciousness. Each phase represents 1) the prior ‘living layer,’ 2) the increased levels of complexity in both our external and internal worlds, and 3) the breakdown and reorganization that is inherent in life’s dynamics. The spiral starts with stage 1) instinctive/survivalistic values and moves through 2) magical/animistic, 3) impulsive/egocentric, 4) purposeful/authoritarian, 5) achieivist/strategic, 6) communitarian / egalitarian, 7) integrative, and finally to 8) holistic (p.1). This explanation brings clarity to how consciousness has evolved throughout history inside of cultural, religious, social and economic influences. Claire Graves introduced the theoretical framework of Spiral Dynamics and offered this thinking about how to relate to the transformations in our consciousness.

The psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating, spiraling process, marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as man’s existential problems change (as cited in Beck, 2002, p.1).

How we educate has everything to do with how effectively individuals and cultures develop themselves in the face of life’s dynamics, e.g. expanding their

perception of themselves to include the deeply nuanced self that they are, and an ability to move their attention from themselves to others and their environment and ultimately to their world. Our education lays the foundation for our ability to confront and successfully relate to the breakdowns and reorganizations necessary to evolve our consciousness to subordinate lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems.

The premise of Integral Education presented here is consciousness develops and manifests through various domains of intelligence, uniquely as physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Spiritual intelligence (SI) is often related to as the “creator” of consciousness (Combs, 1996), a context of connectedness - the individual with him or herself, the individual and the collective, the inner and outer, the silent and expressive, the abstract and practical, etc. Our subjective experience of consciousness is represented through out mental intelligence while our objective experience of consciousness is revealed through our physical acuity (Chopra, 2005, p. 206). Emotional intelligence provides communication and relational channels, i.e., the conduit between subjective and objective experiences of consciousness. The development and integration of our mental, emotional, spiritual and physical intelligences brings greater understanding of our inner states of being, the vast network of communication throughout the body as well as expanding our experience of the outer world as well, i.e. our deep connections to one another, nature and all other life forms.

There is much correlation between integral education and its stated purpose with Kegan’s levels of thinking, Wilber’s quadrant model that integrates levels and facets of consciousness, Combs’ states of mind, stages and structures of consciousness and Beck’s Spiral Dynamics directed toward the integrative and holistic stages of human development..

Integral education lays the foundation for an integral worldview by providing a consciously created cultural narrative which can powerfully help architect our 21st century world. A new quality of worldview literacy is being born, bringing with it a transformed philosophical context. Our current global culture

is no longer served by our historical ontological, epistemological, axiological and relational contexts, (Laszlo, 2005); (Senge, et al., 2004). The past approaches to education with their ensuing ways of thinking and being, values, beliefs, behaviors, relationships, etc., have created a world in which there are extensive examples of lower levels of both individual and collective consciousness. Examples of this are the state of the world economy, e.g. consumption, borrowing and lending practices; unscrupulous business dealings, e.g. banking, real estate, corporate; media manipulation, a disregard for the earth’s energy crisis and global warming; economic and human inequality, wars, prejudices and suppression of others. They illustrate Kegan’s second level thinking focusing awareness on the self and one’s own needs, minimal aspects of Wilber’s Quadrants, the intentional (interior-individual-subjective) and behavioral (exterior-individual-objective) and the lowest levels of Beck’s spiral - the instinctive/survivalistic and impulsive/ egocentric stages of values consciousness. The integral worldview is not only a way of knowing and thinking, it is also a way of being, behaving, valuing and relating. The understanding and expression of the integral worldview promotes “a transdisciplinary perspective that emphasize[s] the intrinsic order and interdependence of the world in all its manifestations” (Banathy, 1996, p. 1).

Many scholars representing divergent viewpoints, ranging from science, business, medicine, education, spiritual communities, the arts, etc., have been advocating for some time that our collective cultural consciousness is insufficient for the world we are living in, e.g. Chopra, (2005); Laszlo (2005) H. Smith (2001); Maturana (1999); Senge, et al.,(2004); O’Sullivan (n.d); Pert, et al., (2005) Miller R. (2000), Mitchell (2004); J. Miller (2006); Ray (1996); Hock (1999); Wilber (2003); Eisler (2002); Morin (2002).

Thomas Berry (1999), one of our recognized sages, was a historian and custodian of the wisdom of cultures and religions, from both the Eastern and Western traditions. At the same time, he had a depth of understanding of and appreciation for science and its ability to

inform us from many different angles. His call to us at this time came from his deep commitment to the evolution of our collective consciousness. He declared,

We need to reinvent the human at the species level because the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions either individually or collectively. What is needed is something beyond existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human: giving shape to ourselves (as cited in Swimme & Berry, 2005, p. 578).

Berry, from the wisdom of his octogenarian perspective, saw the necessity of societal reinvention, not only because of the lack in our existing traditions, but also because of the inseparability of who we are with the quality of future we are capable of bringing forth.

Our own future is inseparable from the future of the larger community that brought us into being and sustains us in every expression of our human quality of life...emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, sense of divine, as well as in our physical nourishment (as cited in Swimme & Berry, 2005, p. 580).

Berry is joined by others whose voices give strong resonance and resolve to their commitment to a transformation of consciousness. Jean Houston (2000), an integral scholar; psychologist, philosopher and spiritual activist, says we can no longer wait to reinvent a story to equip us to live in a world that today is no longer served by former ways of knowing and being. O’Sullivan (n.d.), professor emeritus of transformative learning, represents that perspective as he points to our fractured cosmology, i.e., “our loss of a coherent conception of ourselves, our universe, our relation to one another and our world” (p. 7). He envisions integral education as a way of shifting our consciousness to a planetary context. Clark (1997), another advocate of the integral approach to education, critiques the current established educational structure as not being equipped to cope with the speed and complexity of the major changes taking place in the world today. He, like O’Sullivan (n.d.), R. Miller (2000) and J. Miller (2006), also sees the systemic, integral perspective as needed to encompass and educate for the multiple purposes of education,

within individual, relational, communal, global and planetary contexts.

Morin (2001, 2002), another esteemed elder voice of philosophical wisdom, has contributed his knowledge of complexity, culture and paradigm creation to the reconstructing of education for the future. He understood that our current paradigms of “fragmentation, disjunction, separateness, which are reflected multi-dimensionally, make it impossible to grasp that which is woven together” (p. 38). We require a “paradigmatic change in the way we organize knowledge” (p. 29), “we need a paradigm compatible with complex knowledge to crystallize and take root,” (p. 28). He distinguished a paradigm as the promotion and selection of master concepts of intelligibility to be integrated into a socio-cultural discourse which can alter the collective awareness.

Integral education offers a new paradigm for education that serves the depth of complexity in a world whose boundaries extend far beyond its parameters. We are in a world that is, as Morin defined it, “complex, multidimensional, planetary, global, transnational and polydisciplinary” (p. 29) and requires an extensive shift in consciousness in order to be sustainable. Morin’s views in the domain of complex thought parallel much of the foundational philosophy of integral education. The “complex is that which is woven together,” (p. 34). What has been missing that is now being revealed is a paradigm that can truly embody the level of complexity that exists today—a complexity paradigm. This complexity paradigm creates an interdependent mesh that weaves together and binds unity and multiplicity (Morin, 2001), the interior and exterior, the individual and collective, and the cultural, social and systemic (Wilber, 2000). The manner in which paradigms initiate and take root is through individuals as they experience, sense, learn, know, think, converse and act. Paradigms are interiorized and culturally inscribed, most often through education (Morin, 2001).

An integral education provides ‘master concepts’ that inscribe a different quality of interiorized paradigm; one that reinterprets and expands the idea of “culture” by interconnecting unity and multiplicity, exterior and interior, individual

and collective, social and cultural, and local and global. Integrality in education promotes identities that are whole at many levels of human expression from individual to planetary. Attention on the ontological quality of education, expressed in the development and integration of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual intelligences, provides a foundational interwoven and resilient ‘network’ of intelligences – a wellspring for consciousness.

McCraty, Atkinson & Tomasino (2001) have found that

Consciousness is impacted by the degree of mental and emotional coherence experienced. When they are out-of-phase, overall awareness is reduced. Conversely, when they are in-phase, awareness is expanded. This interaction affects us on a number of levels: Vision, listening abilities, reaction times, mental clarity, feeling states and sensitivities are all influenced by the mind and emotions integrating and coordinating (pp. 51-52).

An integral education is purposefully designed to focus attention on the students’ awareness of themselves, through an approach that attends to the development of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual domains. This self-awareness, through an integrated education, self reflective exercises, practices and conversations, naturally grows an ability to consciously attend to the surrounding world. An example of the impact these programs have had on their students, their community and the way they think and act toward one another, came from an observation a parent made about how an awareness accessed through the body shifts the consciousness of the student *and* the community in which the education is taking place.

She remarked after observing a class in Awareness through the Body,

I saw that they love to move and be together by moving their bodies and experimenting [with] things. They [would] see that actually their body is the same as their friend’s body and there is no difference and that it is the same matter. This is very interesting to see that they understand this. They could be able to respect the others as themselves.

She followed with a second observation, relating the expanding awareness of the students’ and their relationship

with their own bodies to the resulting consciousness in the community.

I have to add that around here, there was never an incidence of violence, never mistakes or hurting each other. I never have experienced that in all these 13 years we are here. There is even no talk about it that they would like to hurt someone. They were able to respect the others as themselves.

Linda Olds (1992), as a psychologist and system theorist, validates this observation as she relates to the “body as a context for knowing.”

Our knowledge from its onset is also embodied, embedded in our kinesthetic relationship with reality and in the connection of our bodies to the physical world. Our bodily based experience of moving and interacting in the world impacts our ability to understand our world as much as our abstract intellectual thinking (p. 8).

Another integral program provides weekly opportunities for young people to come together to learn and practice silence, contemplation and meaningful, connecting communication with their peers. These sessions educate students in a respect for life and human beings and learning to hold in high regard the experiences and expressions of others. Times vary from 15 minutes for elementary, 30 minutes for middle to 1 hour for high school students.

One student offers this personal account of her experience,

It is one of the few chances that we have to escape the hectic pace of our world and to think about things that matter. It does not take long for superficial thoughts to yield to deeper ones. It is a time to think about problems that we are facing personally, or those that the world is being confronted with. It is a time to think about what we believe in, and what we stand for. With none of the usual distractions influencing us, the meetings are a time when we can truly think for ourselves. We are not only taught to think for ourselves, but we are also given the power and responsibility to follow our hearts. (Note from Student Council Meeting, 2003)

A parent adds her perspective,

Our children are so inundated with graphics images, extracurricular activities, pleas to “hurry up,” “do this” and “stop that.” What a refuge these meetings together offer them. It offers a chance to shed outside pressures and listen to their inner voices, to commune with their peers and

teachers during times of celebration and sorrow, to reflect and to dream. The result I believe produces individuals who are mature, insightful and inquisitive. (Note from Parent Council Meeting, 2004)

These practices create a self knowledge and trust from an early age. The peer groups engaged in this quality of silence, listening and speaking provide human beings with direct experiences of their relatedness and connection with themselves and other people. Powerful, authentic listening gives rise to powerful authentic speaking; powerful listening and speaking give rise to a more powerful conscious engagement in life. Parents of students in integral programs comment, The teachers are educated to relate to the children through their higher self. They work hard to see the children in that spiritual place ... allowing children to become themselves ... giving them room to grow up and find themselves rather than trying to be someone they are not.

The attention paid to the development of emotional intelligence (EI) in the integral education curriculum is extensive. The schools work with students to learn to handle upsets among themselves, develop meaningful relationships among peers and teachers, to care for one another and instill a powerful sense of who one is in their own right. An environment of respect, trust, authenticity and acceptance is the reality created.

The physical structure of the body is powerfully impacted by experiences like these SENTENCE? ‘growth processes require an open exchange between the organism and its environment’ (Lipton, 2008. p.16), ‘living in safety and love effects the body and mind’ (Lipton, 2008. p.13), and ultimately the quality of awareness of both individuals and communities. Integral education literally supports the growth of a different quality of physical structure.

Consciousness expands through purposeful everyday practices and conversations that sharpen awareness of self and others. Conversations create our reality. Reality, inside of an integral education approach, takes on an inclusive nature, a both/and quality as opposed to the either/or dualism, e.g. separateness, fragmentation, that has been engrained in our current educational reality, that

we so often take for granted as ‘the way it is.’ Stephanie Pace Marshall (2005), an internationally known educator, shares her experiences in this discourse.

The nature and quality of our children’s minds will shape who they become, and who they become will shape our world. Unfortunately, the world now being mapped into the minds our children is one of scarcity, fragmentation, competition, and winning. Our current story conceives learning as a mechanistic, prescribed, and easily measured commodity ...This narrative could not be more wrong. (p.12)

Engaging in conversation inside of an integral educational context supports a conscious evolution. “There is a different view of the world - a different view of the self and of others—a different worldview ... as consciousness evolves” (Wilber, 2000, p. 132).

Our world today requires a different kind of human being: one who can think, create, imagine and act, with flexibility, adaptability and resiliency, in an extremely complex world; one whose spirit is vital and engaged and whose body is vibrant and healthy; one who can feel deeply and ‘be present’ to life, i.e., be aware in the moment and know how to move with and coordinate action in a highly diverse and accelerated world (Adams, 2006). Educating within an integral framework provides the foundation to develop and integrate the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual intelligences in order to go beyond our existing educational traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect: giving shape to ourselves – reinventing ourselves at the species level (as cited in Swinme & Berry, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to invite readers to acknowledge the current levels of consciousness being created in our communities, states, nations and world through education as it exists today. It is time to tell the truth about how much our current educational philosophy – rather than expanding our consciousness, e.g. opening up our ability to self reflect, to see and discern our world – keeps us myopic and unconscious, hiding behind concepts, presuppositions, interpretations and justifications learned in our schools.

We have a choice to make. Is it the

transformation of our relationship with and approach to education or a fast paced world filled with chaos, complexity and possibility that does not have a sufficient level of collective consciousness to engage intelligently with it?

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