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Literature Review

Fostering A Holistic Approach to Online Learning Within Higher Education

Marie-France Héту

Student #: 23994106

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Instructor Oksana Bartosh

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Fostering A Holistic Approach to Online Learning Within Higher Education

Adult education is rapidly changing, and in the past decade a holistic approach to learning has become quite popular, (Duerr, Zajonc and Dana, 2003) based on Mezirow's (2000) initial transformative learning theory. (As cited in Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007) This literature review will explore the connection between a holistic approach and learning, focusing on documentation that looks at different ways of interpreting and fostering a holistic approach to learning within higher education. By correlating and analysing findings, this review will consider implications of fostering a holistic approach within online learning environments, and determine further research needed on this topic.

Relevance of Topic

Since 2004, most of my studies have been conducted online where I have witnessed many changes to learning environments. At first, I experienced cold and isolated environments, providing few opportunities to make meaning of my learning. Then, I became exposed to learning environments that were more holistic in nature, offering a better balance between affective and rational ways of learning. Finding the latter learning experience more rewarding, I began to investigate how a holistic approach to learning supports a learner's experience. (Based on previous unpublished undergraduate essays, Brock University, 2008, 2009) The purpose of this review is threefold, firstly to peruse existing literature that explores the place of a holistic approach in the context of learning; secondly, to provide an opportunity to advance my knowledge in this area and further my educational interests; and thirdly, to serve as a

platform on which to base my future research proposal on fostering a holistic approach to online learning.

This topic is also quite relevant, as more and more higher learning institutions are recognizing the need for integrating spirituality within curricula. (Duerr et al., 2003) For example, higher learning institutions are establishing programs that embody principles of relationship, process, wholeness, self-organization, integration, creativity and non-linearity. (Duerr et al., 2003) This review could also generate interest for course designers and educators alike who wish to better cater to learners' individual needs within an online environment.

Methodology

This review will be based on primary and secondary literary sources, essentially taken from peer-reviewed papers and articles found on Scholar portals, as well as a book on the subject matter. This literature will be analyzed in order to firstly, define a holistic approach to learning based on transformational and spiritual principles; secondly, examine how a holistic approach can support a learning experience; thirdly, analyse the implications related to fostering a holistic approach to online learning. This will be followed by an examination of literature considering the importance of fostering a holistic approach within higher learning establishments. Finally, this literature review will provide a synthesis of the findings and suggestions for further research.

Defining a Holistic Approach to Learning: Spirituality and Wholeness

The term 'holistic learning' is often interchangeably referred to as transformative, reflexive, and experiential learning, and linked to spirituality in the sense of 'wholeness'. (Duerr et al., 2003; Thisdell and Tolliver, 2003) In order to begin considering the

connection between spirituality and learning, it is first important to define the term “spirituality”. Perusal of literature revealed quite a few definitions of this term; however, there is some common ground where most agree that spirituality is ecumenical - above all religions; it is an element that is abstract, that some define as nourishing the core, bringing wholeness. Duerr et al. (2003) define at the heart of holistic learning: intuitive, imaginative and contemplative practice; while Thisdell and Tolliver (2003) determine spirituality is synonym to a holistic approach, where “Spirituality is about a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things.” (p.374) In their article, *“Claiming a Sacred Face: The Role of Spirituality and Cultural Identity in Transformative Adult Higher Education”*, Thisdell and Tolliver (2003) conducted a study on the role of spirituality; they examined the role of identity among a multicultural group of 31 adults, and findings suggest that spirituality is culturally grounded and a relevant approach to pedagogy. The authors suggest that these types of environments allow for the exploration of the cognitive, affective or relational, as well as the symbolic and spiritual domains.

A Holistic Approach: Synonymous With Transformational Learning

In order to define what a holistic approach means in a learning context, it is also important to understand in what philosophies it is grounded. According to Bierema (1996), holistic, individual development is grounded in humanism, systems thinking and adult learning theory. Wang and Sarbo (2004) note that according to Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) as well as Rogers (1969), adult educators should follow the humanistic and progressive approach to foster transformational learning.

Consequently, the term ‘transformational’ learning becomes synonymous with that of a holistic approach and needs to be further defined. According to Baumgartner (2001) it is a learning process that is at once intuitive, holistic and contextually based. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl, (2006) define transformative learning by the way learners can at once relate to and conceptually frame their experiences using a good balance between affective and rational ways of knowing.

Fostering A Holistic Approach Within a Learning Space and Learning Process

Merriam and Caffarella (2006) describe holistic development where adults are given adequate space and support to learn, thus it is important to define what this means. According to Cranton and Wright (2008), who studied how adult literacy educators fostered transformational learning, six main themes are important from their study, “[...] creating a sense of safety, trust between educator and learner, developing a sense of possibility, helping learners overcome fear, discovery of the self, and acknowledging the whole person.” (p.33) Why then is fostering a holistic approach to learning important? Bierema (1996) believes that individuals that learn within a holistic environment are well-informed, knowledgeable, critical-thinking adults who have a sense of fulfillment.

According to Merriam and Caffarella (2006), transformational learning is based on the humanistic perspective, where a holistic approach to learning embraces the idea of self-actualization, personal growth & development serving as a catalyst for the critical reflection process. Cranton (2002) expresses that it is up to the educator to encourage critical self-reflection by providing varied opportunities for students to question their assumptions and perspectives. Thus, many current theorists of transformative learning generally agree that a catalyst presenting ideas from more than one point of view is

essential in bringing about transformational learning. In this way, the learner may question their perspective based on their experience, and thus develop critical thinking.

Online Environments: Implications For Fostering a Holistic Approach to Learning

Surprisingly, I was not able to find literature specifically related to fostering a holistic approach to online programs within higher education forums. Nonetheless, based on previous findings, I can hypothesize that the humanistic and andragogical fundamental principles supporting affective and relational aspects of knowing, are likely just as important within online environments.

According to Tisdell et al. (2003), affective and relational aspects of learning is viewed as connecting with peers and linking ideas to experience through the exploration of the cognitive; meaning the reading, sharing and discussion of ideas. Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006), also describe creating a learning environment conducive to whole-person learning and working with learners within that environment. According to Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006), creating an empathic field to facilitate a transition into a more holistic learning context is essential, where identifying with others through experiential learning provides a way of being heard. These findings require further reflection: What kind of activities could offer an environment allowing students to be open to learning and creative in sharing? Furthermore, how can students be 'heard' when they communicate through writing? Perhaps by sharing their experiential knowledge within an empathic field (posts, forums live chats etc.) Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006)

According to Tisdell et al. (2003) it is important to factor in the idea of raising consciousness, generating imagination and creativity, and in the process allowing a learner to connect with their surrounding world. The article "*Journal Writing and*

Learning: reading between the structural, holistic, and post-structural lines.”, by Mannion, (2001) provides important insights on the use of journaling as a learning tool to foster critical thinking. This study provides feedback from a small survey given to a one-class group to see how they felt after journaling. I do not believe findings from this short ethnographic study can be used to generalize journaling provides students with a better learning experience. However, it can show that journaling helped them use their critical thinking skills and make connections to their learning with their own experiences. Thus, one can theorize that the same level of awareness could be created within online environments, or that at least journaling is worth further investigation.

Since little research has been done in the domain, ideas on how to foster a holistic approach to online learning remain speculative. Consequently, many questions remain concerning how holistic elements could successfully be applied to an online environment. These findings reflect on the need to pursue research on this topic. Firstly, to investigate and evaluate how online learning environments are perceived by students; and then based on these findings, conducting studies to determine how online environments can be constructed to better support their needs based on a holistic approach.

Fostering a Holistic approach within Higher Learning: Challenges and Possibilities

Many universities have recognized that fostering spirituality is beneficial, because it enhances self-awareness in learners and leads to a better understanding of ourselves. (Duerr et al., 2003) Although there is growing interest in fostering spirituality within AE, there are still hurdles to cross, such as convincing Academia that a holistic approach to learning is a worthwhile way of knowing. (Zinn, 2004) Baumgartner (2001) points out that critical reflection on the theory of transformational learning, and discussions to better

understand this approach, are continuing and necessary; reinforcing the need for further study in this domain. It must also be noted that not all educators are ready to instigate transformational learning, since it means teacher-learner relationships can sometimes become sensitive. (Merriam and Caffarella, 2006)

Possible Implications of Findings

After analysis of researched documentation, I was able to come up with a clearer definition of a holistic approach. Firstly, that this learning approach can be defined as the core, the wholeness within oneself and the interconnectedness with all things. Secondly, that spirituality within learning is essentially described as a method of constructing knowledge through symbolic process and reflection; and that transformational learning is created through the exploration of experiential contexts.

Beyond defining a holistic approach to learning, I came to the conclusion that many theorists and researchers feel there is a need for fostering a holistic approach within higher education. Zinn (1997), reminds us that spirituality is at the root of adult education already within many liberal, progressive, learner-centered theories and programs in many universities. I concluded that many educators, theorists and researchers expressed the need to provide the learner with a space where consciousness is raised, creativity and imagination encouraged, and awareness stimulated in order for the learner to interconnect with himself and the outer world. (Tisdell et al. 2003) Yang (2003) clearly explained that without the integration of emancipatory learning, based on spiritual principles, the process of making meaning cannot take place.

One central theme came up through this literary review, the importance of nurturing the whole person, including the spiritual and emotional dimensions. Perused

documentation demonstrated it is important to continue pushing beyond the present educational system and convincing Academia that fostering a holistic approach within higher education is essential to learning - and benefits everyone in the long run.

Hopefully, this literature review will encourage students, course designers, peers, administrators, and educators within online forums to reflect on the idea that learning is central to our being and needs to be holistic in nature. This review will perhaps also create awareness within Academia concerning learning spaces and processes that reflect holistic practices. Based on the findings in this literature review, I look forward to presenting a research proposal on fostering a holistic approach to online learning within higher education.

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