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Whole-Person Learning: Lessons from Integral Health-Care Practitioners and Their Implications for Adult Education

Gabrielle Pelicci, Ph.D.

*Knowledge is not a matter for the head alone, but for the heart and spirit,
the body and mind; an adventure for the whole of our human being.*

*The integration of all aspects of an individual
prepares one for collective knowledge,
a new knowledge...*

Tarhang Tulku, 1987, pp. 80, 164

For over a decade, I've studied the humanities, education and Complementary and Alternative Medicine. It began as a personal interest and transformed into a professional one. As an undergraduate psychology student, I explored the mind and the various methods of psychotherapy. During graduate school, I became exposed to eastern philosophies and religions, and I began practicing meditation as a means to quiet the mind and bring my life into balance. As I followed this path, it led to several trainings in holistic studies including a massage therapy program, a yoga teacher training and a certification in Healing Touch, an energy-based approach to health and healing.

During my doctoral program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), I compiled all the knowledge and experience I had accumulated into a dissertation. For my research study, I interviewed six women healers. The purpose of this study was to uncover the learning experiences of Integral Health-Care Practitioners in order to construct an education system based on integration, collaboration, and whole-person learning. After studying the text for several months, six themes were developed: Importance of a Support Network, Multiple Ways of Learning and Self-Transformation, Nature as a Teacher, Energy as a Teacher, Integral Approach, and Purpose Driven Life. Once the themes were identified, I proceeded to weave the analysis of the life stories with the current literature and create a cultural, historical and social context for the themes identified in the life stories. This process of working with each theme to create a clear and coherent presentation lasted about 18 months and went through several transformations as the data became more integrated into my thinking.

For the purpose of this paper, I want to explore the lessons learned from the participants and the implications for adult education. The first theme, Importance of a Support Network, teaches us that support networks provide companionship, resources, inspiration, guidance, connection and stability in times of hardship. The current research on healthcare reports that social relationships serve important social, psychological, and behavioral functions across the lifespan (Berkowitz, 2002; Ornish, 2006; Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Gathering with others also reduces the risk of disease, death, and physical impairments. Not having close friends or confidants is as detrimental to health as smoking or carrying extra weight (Berkowitz, 2002). In an educational setting, adult learners can increase their support network by participating in learning communities and mentorship programs during the course of their studies so that they have the necessary support for their growth and development. Learning communities have been shown to increase student retention, improve academic achievement, increase student

involvement and motivation, and enhance student development in a variety of educational settings. Mentorship programs in an educational setting have similar benefits to learning communities.

With regards to Multiple Ways of Learning and Self-Transformation, becoming an Integral Health-Care Practitioner requires mindful learning, informational learning and transformational learning. It requires the ability to grow beyond cultural conditioning and the conventional paradigm to embrace a holistic worldview. It requires continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. And it requires the ability to not only change *what* we know but *how* we know. In an educational setting, multiple kinds of learning including mindful learning, informational learning, and transformative learning, can be integrated into the adult education curriculum to arm the adult learner with knowledge that she can use for her own self-development. Tools for the reflection process including meditation, yoga, journaling and dialogue will foster self-awareness, mental clarity, and help the adult learner to express, organize and evaluate her thoughts. The process of learning can also be facilitated by engaging in intention-setting, goal-setting and learning to see obstacles as opportunities for growth. Addressing the personal process of transformation through learning and not just the content of the learning will serve to better prepare the adult learner for the transformative learning experience.

With regards to Nature as a Teacher, the women in the study had many extraordinary experiences and learned several significant lessons from nature. Several researchers from diverse backgrounds including science, anthropology, philosophy and metaphysics have written about the sacred and intelligent power of nature (Abram, 1996; Tompkins and Bird, 1989; Chopra, 1989; Goodenough, 1998; Roads, 1990; Sahtouris, 2000). The education of the adult learner should emphasize the connections between the adult learner, the body and nature to create a holistic and balanced educational experience. In order to foster a relationship with nature, the adult learner should be educated about the ecological nature-based worldview and participate in experiential nature-based exercises. There are several organizations including the Council of All Beings and the Sierra Club which help individuals to find meaning and transformative power in nature. Traveling to various places in nature such as mountains, ocean, and desert would greatly enhance the adult learner's awareness of the ways in which diverse environments change our sensations, experiences and perceptions. Engaging in interactive exercises to practice letting go of the socially constructed, isolated self would also help the adult learner get in touch with her interexistence with all forms of life and understand the holistic worldview.

For the fourth theme, Energy as Teacher, energy is defined as the life-force that is part of everything that exists and sustains living beings (Brennan, 1987, 1993; Hover-Kramer, 2002; Joy, 1979). Concepts of energy can be found in many cultures including India (prana) and China (chi). The participants in this study describe energy as a force that is creative, moving, fluid, reproductive, generational and spiritual. They experience it as colors, tingling, vibration and connectedness. Directly connected with the life-force energy improves our health, brings forth inner creativity, and brings us great joy in being alive (Keeney, 1997). Contemplative practices are one way to get in touch with the life-force energy. Contemplative practices can be a gateway into the deeper dimensions of learning (Robinson, 2004) and can improve attention, concentration, academic achievement and reduce stress (Shapiro, Brown & Astin, 2009). Exploring contemplative practices gives adult learners the resources that they can use not only to connect with energy but also to become more engaged and less overwhelmed with their studies.

For the fifth theme, Integral Approach, we learn that an integral healer is someone who is transformed, deeply changed, healed and whole, expanded in consciousness, uses personal development and self-care and a holistic lens to view the world (Khanna, 2004; Wilber 2004). This philosophy could easily be adopted by an integral education program for adult learners and could be implemented through individual and group work. Todd Jennings (1997) highlighted the way that integral education "promotes learning and teaching in non-fragmented ways that embrace notions of holism, complexity and interconnection" (p.1). This approach educates adult learners for being flexible and adaptive in an unpredictable and changing world. It gives them a whole-person experience of learning that integrates all aspects of the human being – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual – and prepares them for a new knowledge.

With regards to the last theme, a Purpose Driven Life, one of the most frequent failures in education is that students rarely say that they find studying to be intrinsically rewarding. This is a critical problem. One of the most straightforward conclusions of research from the past two decades is that extrinsic motivation alone is likely to have precisely the opposite impact that we want it to have on student achievement. Teaching adult learners how to make choices that fulfill their calling and assisting them in creating a life that is abundant with meaning and value should be the mission of adult education. If it is observed that a student does not have a passion for what they are learning, that student should be encouraged to explore other avenues that may lead to a more purposeful or fulfilling life. To increase motivation in an educational setting, adult learners could be given choices of courses, assignments, and projects during their study. They could be involved in the decision-making of what they learn and how they learn to increase their sense of control. Collaboration will manifest from their involvement in the learning communities and meaning will come from helping them to create goals that are relevant and significant to them. There are also great exercises that can be extracted from resources such as Adrienne's (1999) book, *Finding the Purpose of Your Life*, to achieve this objective.

In conclusion, in order for us to be more successful as educators, we need to make education more rewarding and meaningful for adult learners. The lessons learned from Integral Health-Care practitioners can help us to create a whole-person education system that addresses the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of adult learners, giving them the necessary support framework for their growth and development and allowing them to experience great joy and creativity while they are learning. In my own teaching at Sober College, UCLA and the California Institute of Integral Studies, I am guided by the themes in this study and I have seen great results. Not only have students increased their academic achievement, but they have changed their priorities, managed their time differently, reconnected with others and reported that the courses were life-changing. We have a great opportunity to learn from the lessons contained in the life stories of integral health-care practitioners and to share those lessons with adult learners so that we might create a better education system, a system based on integration, collaboration and whole-person learning.

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