

Teachings From the Deep South: North-South Contributions to Integral Education

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Abstract: The present paper addresses the need to incorporate often ignored perspectives and formulations derived from what I refer to as the “deep south” into the field of integral education as currently practiced at the California Institute of Integra Studies (CIIS), in San Francisco, CA. The deep south, or the metaphorical conglomerate of wisdom ascribed to the global south and associated epistemologies, is used as a broad framework from which I propose, through the exploration of shamanic practices and symbols, the creation of an organizing vertical metaphor, a North–South axis of dialogue. I start with a brief exposition of the one of the main challenges that integral education faces, a cognicentric focus, and proceed to explore alternatives to it by addressing some repressed aspects of the field, the notion of multidimensionality, and the symbol of the *axis mundi*. The paper ends with an invitation for a marriage to take place between the East–West and North–South axes of knowing and learning as an adequate and necessary development for integral education.

Keywords: *Axis mundi*, indigenous wisdom, integral education, multidimensionality, North–South axis.

Introduction

Nowadays, the value of transformative, holistic, and integral approaches to education is slowly being recognized. However, in a society whose standards are dictated largely by the mechanistic paradigm of modernity, it is no mystery that our educational institutions still perpetuate recalcitrant biases based on fragmentary conceptions of self and world. In many spheres of our world—be it political, religious, environmental, or social—the detrimental effects of a fragmentary paradigm are deeply felt, but it’s in our educational systems that it’s actively passed on to future generations.

The concept of the “hidden curriculum,” advanced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970/2007), sheds light into the functioning of mainstream education. The concept posits that there is no such thing as partial education, meaning there are a number of deep structures guiding and informing the explicit curriculum. Students, mainly unconsciously, pick up a paradigmatic attitude from which their learning is navigated—a habit that spills over to their lives as a whole,

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affecting their relations with their bodies, their loved ones, other species, society, and ultimately, the world itself.

The linear demarcation between teacher and student and the mechanistic, flattened, purely objective understanding of the world, dwell at the core of the main challenges that integral education aims at correcting. As Mexican holistic educator Ramon Gallegos Nava (2001) succinctly puts it, “it is not possible anymore to educate human beings with a XVII century industrial scientific paradigm for a sustainable society of the XXI century” (p. 1). Yet, the issue of the kind of hidden values, habits, and ways of being that are implicitly perpetuated by more integral pedagogies, remains. Are there some subtle ways in which unfavorable ways of being are still reproduced in an integral educational setting? If so, what can we do to correct them, to heal them?

Cognicentrism and the Underworld

We can say that integral education is a balancing force that aims at bringing to the surface the wholeness of our humanity. Yet, given the different lineages at work in the integral education community (derived from the work of influential thinkers such as Steiner, Aurobindo, Gebser, Krishnamurti, Montessori, Wilber), a considerable variation and diversity is to be expected, enlarging the range of pedagogical options available and contributing to the resilience of the field. As such, although integral education as a whole agrees on the need to invite all human dimensions into the learning experience, there are at least three broad categories that serve to characterize the efforts of integral educators: mind-centered/intellectualist, bricolage/eclectic, and participatory (Ferrer, Romero & Albareda, 2005). Perhaps rather loosely and in spite of the nuances pertaining to each of the categories, one could say that the determining factor in this classification is the extent to which the pedagogical efforts champion the primacy of the mind and its associated rational-analytical faculties.

The tendency for inflating the role of the rational-analytical mind is widespread in Western education and is intimately connected to the extent to which the holistic nature of integral education can flourish. Often, the powers of the rational mind obscure and ultimately obstruct the exploration and refinement of the variety of intelligences (Gardner, 1983/1993) or developmental lines (Wilber, 2000) that constitute our being (e.g., emotional, somatic, spiritual, imaginal, sexual). As Thartang Tulku (1987) puts it, “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” (p. 80).

The biased and cognicentric approach present in integral education potentially wounds and cripples the spectrum of our human potential. It’s no wonder why it has been considered one of the most challenging obstacles for engaging in a more genuine integral pedagogical experience (Ferrer, 2003).

Ferrer goes on to say that the cognicentric bias creates a vicious, self-perpetuating circle, since participation of the non-rational dimensions commonly occurs through and is facilitated by the mind. As such, “these human dimensions cannot mature autonomously, and thus the need for their mental or external direction becomes permanently justified” (Ferrer, 2003, p. 26).

A way to tackle the aforementioned cognicentric vicious circle is to resort to the use of a spatial metaphor. For many of us in post-Enlightenment industrialized societies, the seat of rationality sits “up north” somewhere in our brains—Descartes’ *res cogitans* or thinking substance, carrying a deep seated assumption that this substance is directly associated with terms such as “real,” “truth,” and “objective.” Alternatively, other ways of knowing—loosely associated with everything the neck down and our creative organs “down south”—are considered non-reliable sources of acquiring knowledge.

At a socio-economic level, “the north” is associated with (over) developed countries and their predominant Eurocentric perspective that enables the distribution of corporate capitalism to the “the south” where economically poorer and marginalized populations are made dependent upon the north. In the south awaits the unconscious shadow of modernity in need of being emancipated, it becomes the mythical underworld. One can say that the first step to take in order to loosen the cognicentric grip in our educational efforts is to journey south to the underworld.

The journey southward is not an adventure to be taken lightly. Different sages and teachers throughout time have associated the downward movement with a process termed by Saint John of the Cross as the “dark night of the soul” (Bache, 2000; May, 2005; Underhill, 1974). Isolation and loneliness pervade the dark night and a sense of disillusionment and lack of direction abounds. Yet, it is deemed as a crucial and necessary journey into wholeness: “[hu]man’s task is...to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious” (Jung, 1989, p. 326). Hillman (1979) explicitly makes of the underworld (Hades) a cornerstone for his approach to all psychological endeavor, alluding to it as “a movement downward and inward, psychologizing ever further into Hades” (p. 208), for it is in Hades where humans find depth and meaning. In relation to education and the cognicentric approach to integral education, it is in the underworld that we find, as long-lost treasures, the repressed dimensions of our being and the possibility of including them in our endeavors.

The journey into the underworld of integral education may certainly be considered an initiation. From a cognicentric approach, the genuine opening to the diversity of knowing present in the “south” appears as an initiatory process in which the ordinary functioning of the mind undergoes a deep transformation. The direct encounter with previously repressed dimensions of non-Eurocentric epistemologies and alternative ways of knowing threatens the very survival of a cognicentric approach. The journey south presents a great heuristic and healing potential that diminishes the great strain that has been allocated to the rational-analytical qualities of the mind, enabling the appearance of a fresh configuration in which all of the human dimensions participate in the acquisition of knowledge.

The focus on the “south” by no means implies that the cognicentric north is evil or wrong. But is in the excess and abuse of one side of the North–South axis that potentially dissociative dynamics are perpetuated in our educational settings.

A dynamic balance and reunion of north and south is needed to gain a fuller access to the gifts that integral education has to offer, as represented in the ancient Incan prophecy of the eagle and the condor. The Incan prophecy beautifully conveys a long awaited reunion of the eagle—the

modern, materialistic, technological world of the north—and the condor—the world of the heart, of depth, and connection with nature and spirit.

We have been waiting five hundred years...now, in this age, when the eagle of the North and the condor of the South fly together, the Earth will awaken. The eagles of the North cannot be free without the condors of the South. Now it's happening...We belong to the evolution of nature in our physical bodies. But we also have a spiritual body that comes from the Sun...a Golden Sun burning with the fire of spiritual light. (Huayta quoted in Monacheshi, 2008, pp. 122-123)

The condor and the eagle, soaring free, cruising the skies, blessing both air and land, represent the heights of the human potential to which the native peoples of the Americas strive for—heart and mind collaborating in the service of integral education.

Multidimensional Education and the *Axis Mundi*

Central to our exploration lies the multiplicity of dimensions of the human learning experience. It follows that a key aspect of an integral education is to foster the activation of our various capacities of knowing and learning without the control and regulation of the mind. This activation resembles an act of surrendering to the flows and rhythms native to the non-rational dimensions. We can learn this surrendering from one of the most ancient and widespread human traditions, shamanism.

The shamans' engagement with the so-called "spirit world" made them, as historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1972) puts it, "technicians of the sacred" and masters of "ecstasy." Entering into ecstasy (Gr. *ekstasis*), shamans, commonly aided by a trance inducing techniques, are able to somehow project their consciousness and traverse mysterious realms of divine and human significance. Through time and direct experience, their journeying, commonly referred to as "shamanic journeying" (Harner, 1990; Ingerman, 2006) made the shamans invaluable repositories of the wisdom to navigate the multiple dimensions of existence.

Shamanic journeying is characterized by a recurrent symbol widely represented as the *axis mundi*: the axis of the cosmos or the world tree. The symbol, known since pre-historical times and found in most of the religious traditions of the world, signifies a passageway for the soul to travel beyond the material dimension as well as for pouring divine energies into existence. It is often depicted as a vertical link and connecting thread between heaven, earth, and the underworld. It takes various shapes including that of a ladder, a column, a mountain, a tree, a staff or a vine.

For the ancient Mayas (as for other Mesoamerican cultures), the *axis mundi* was represented by a cosmic tree named *Yaxkin* from which all life flows, generating the four directions of the cosmos out of its sacred center. In Norse mythology, the cosmic tree goes by the name of *Yggdrasil*, and in the Hindu tradition, the sacred tree *Asvattha* is equated with the Absolute or Brahman. Shamans perceive it as a roadmap, an organizing structure that allows them to move through the different layers of reality, making their travels to celestial and obscure realms possible.

We can see the value of the *axis mundi* for integral education if we invoke again a spatial metaphor. Judie Wexler (2004) proposed that in order to better understand integral education, it was useful to divide it in a horizontal and vertical dimension. The horizontal dimension deals with the “the way we integrate knowledge” (i.e., content, training, and mental inquiry) and the vertical dimension to “the way we integrate multiple ways of knowing” (i.e., special trainings and multidimensional inquiry)” (Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005, p. 309). It’s difficult to make a clear-cut demarcation between these dimensions, since it’s possible that they inform and enrich each other through their own strengths and weaknesses. One thing we can say is that the horizontal dimension is still guided by a cognicentric approach, whereas in the vertical dimension, our different intelligences emerge to the foreground, endowing it with a particular importance. For Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda (2005), “the greatest challenge of integral education lies in the facilitation of the vertical dimension of learning: multidimensional inquiry or integration of multiple ways of knowing” (p. 310).

As we have seen, the horizontal dimension of integral education does not deal directly with the multidimensionality of knowing. This dimension in turn promotes a horizontal mode of consciousness in which the ability to integrate different bodies of knowledge is advanced, bypassing the transformative potential of education that stems from being in contact with different dimensions of knowledge. Even more so, it could potentially lead to a disenchanting, fragmented, and flattened perspective of the educational process. As Jung (1955) tells us, “the irresistible tendency to explain everything on physical grounds corresponds to the horizontal development of consciousness in the last four centuries” (p. 177).

This reminds me of Edwin Abbot’s classic novel *Flatland*, in which the main character, the “square,” a two-dimensional being, struggles of making sense of the world after peeking into different orders of reality. It wasn’t until the square undergoes deep transformation that he was able to consciously see that his everyday life was a fragment of a more comprehensive world. He then realized, through his journeys to other dimensions, that he had the ability to enter into contact with those other aspects of reality and participate in them.

The vertical dimension of integral education is, I believe, appropriately represented by the *axis mundi*. As a universal representation of a vertical passage through which the human soul is able to journey and acquire divine knowledge, the *axis mundi* provides an understanding of multidimensionality and the possibility of accessing multiple ways of knowing. Shamans are considered “psychopomps” or soul guides due to their journeying up and down the world tree. The expertise gained through their multiple encounters with the numinous endows them with the ability to serve as mediators and guides between the subtle dimensions of the rich shamanic geography and that of everyday awareness. In our quest for honoring and enacting the different layers of our humanness in our education, we are in need of not only becoming aware of the multiple layers of our existence—as we have seen—but of learning how to access them.

The shaman considers each of the worlds that he or she visits as complete and full of mystery and value in and of themselves. Accordingly, he or she is required to make use of alternative ways of knowing in tune with the nature of the realm in question. The key to learn to access different dimensions of knowledge, as is the case in integral education and shamanism, is to

acknowledge that each and every dimension is endowed with its own logic, wisdom, and validity. This multidimensional approach would not only include

...the intellectual knowing of the mind, but also the emotional and emphatic knowing of the heart, the sensual and somatic knowing of the body, the visionary and intuitive knowing of the soul, as well as any other way of knowing available to human beings (Ferrer, 2002, p. 121)

Shamanic journeying understood as the navigation through, and participation in, the different dimensions of existence, is intimately connected with integral education. The sensibility and expertise that shamanic traditions have developed over thousands of years around their ecstatic capabilities can be of great value for teachers and students alike in search of eliciting multiple ways of knowing and inviting different dimensions to the pedagogical experience. For our purposes, the mysterious realms that the shaman visits can be equated with the multiple “worlds” of our being (i.e., emotional, somatic, spiritual, imaginal, sexual), creating a conscious conduit between, for example, the “somatic world” and its intelligence, and the rest of our being. Because our primary adherence commonly remains with “the cognicentric world,” the journey into the somatic world would create a non-ordinary state of consciousness. Thus, we can say that the skillful surrendering of the cognicentric approach in education can be done by means of shamanic journeying and its central symbol, the *axis mundi*.

The last key insight I would like to derive from the vertical metaphor of the *axis mundi* is that of the “center of the world.” According to Eliade (1961), the *axis mundi* is always found in the center of the world, a “place that is sacred above all” (p. 39), where all spiritual orientation is available to us humans. It is in the center where the sacred manifests in its totality and the divine forces of the cosmos merge with the here and now of our existence. Indigenous traditions around the world refer to the cosmic center as a circle, sometimes represented as “medicine wheels” or “sacred hoops.”

For the Huichol Indians of Mexico, the center of the world, *Teakata*, is where it all ends and where it all begins, it is the heart of the earth and the dwelling place of *Tatewari*, the grandfather fire. The words of Black Elk provide us with a clear understanding of the center as a sacred circle from which the *axis mundi* surges, “The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop....Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle” (in Neihardt, 2008, p. 155). The center is that inconspicuous part within us that a genuine integral education ultimately aims at developing an intimate connection with, a center that mimics the sacredness and interrelatedness of the world at a microcosmic scale.

There are at least three essential ways in which the *axis mundi* and shamanic journeying are of essential importance for integral education. First, they point us to the knowledge of the multiplicity of worlds, their associated states of consciousness, and their accessibility via shamanic journeying. Second, they stress the importance of actively participating in our educational efforts, that is, an integral learning experience becomes fully alive through direct experience. And thirdly, they point to the sacred place or ground that we draw our sustenance from and to which we are all called to “return.” Referred to as the “god within” by the Gnostics,

we all carry within us, tattooed on our souls by ancient fires, a sacred circumference, a dwelling of gods and reconnecting principle of divine nature.

Integral Education's Medicine Wheel

We have been exploring some key insights that the “deep south,” that is, the metaphorical conglomerate of wisdom ascribed to the global south and associated epistemologies, has to offer to integral education. This exploration has been done largely through the use of a vertical, North–South metaphor. Aware of the great influence that Eastern spiritual teachings have had in creating and advancing the field of integral education—as well as their pivotal role in the revival of spirituality in the West—the metaphor was chosen to lend some necessary attention to the teachings from the South. Although we have merely touched on the wisdom of indigenous and shamanic traditions, the deep south is also conformed by other embodied and earth-centered approaches such as numerous earth-based traditions from around the world and feminist spirituality. Overall, the teachings from the deep south would only aid the growth and maturation of the field of integral education by bringing to balance the East–West dialogue with a North–South one.

Indeed, balance and harmony are key organizing elements present in indigenous cosmologies. The shaman is in charge of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with different beings—plants, rocks, thunder, fire, animals, and the cosmos at large—to secure a dynamic, harmonic balance from which the wellbeing of the community depends. Similar to the Taoist unending dance between yin and yang, we find that in indigenous communities the notion of health is intimately connected to balance and harmony. For example, in Navajo, *hozho* is a word that connotes balance, harmony, and beauty. For the Q'eros people, *ayni* is a principle that is best translated as sacred reciprocity or harmonic exchange and balance. It is the main guiding principle of the Q'eros of today and of the whole ancient Andean tradition. Balance and harmony bring health, and health summons wholeness.

My brief treatment of one of the main shortcomings of integral education as currently practiced at CIIS, cognicentrism, makes it clear that there's an imbalance in need of being addressed. If we assume that this imbalance stemmed from the initial East–West dialogue that largely precipitated the inception of the field, the North–South axis could be seen as a necessary and balancing “medicine.” I believe that the tolerance and openness necessary for seriously giving way to the deep south along with its alternative ways of knowing, embodied, feminine, and earth-based epistemologies, in the integral education discourse is present and, to some extent, already taking place. One of the best examples of a more balanced integral engagement is Ferrer's and colleagues' participatory proposal (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, 2008; Ferrer, Romero & Albareda 2005; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008).

Not only would the confluence of the East–West, North–South axes create a more balanced and robust proposal for integral education, but it would bring about a much needed healing between traditions, cultures, and peoples, slowly moving toward actualizing the integral vision of education.

The resultant “integral education medicine wheel” would bring us closer to restore education to the status of a wisdom tradition. How amazing it would be for both students and teachers to enter together into a multidimensional, integral, tolerant, and diverse journey of learning and transformation. Imagine education as a revolutionary act in which the boundaries between school and life become blurred and, ultimately, we become students and teachers of the art of living. I strongly believe that this is possible. How amazing it would be to create and participate in a multidimensional model of education that leads us into healing and liberation, like a symphony beyond the mind.

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