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Holistic Learning Theory: More than a Philosophy

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Abstract

Keywords

Learning theory;
Holistic education

An educational philosophy identifies and clarifies a set of values and understandings with respect to education that are based on a set of beliefs. A theory is a way to explain a set of facts and understand phenomena. Philosophies are conceptual. Theories are practical. Holistic education is a philosophy of education; however, it is also a robust theory of learning that should be included with the other theories of learning. This article describes holistic education as an educational theory.

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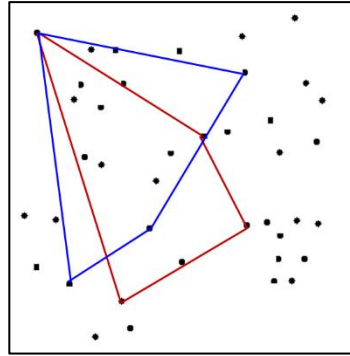
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Educational research is used to create the theories upon which we design educational policies and practices. Theories help to organize relevant empirical facts in order to create a context for understanding phenomena. Put another way, a theory is a way to explain a set of facts. If reality were a dot-to-dot picture, a theory would be a way to connect a set of data dots (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theories connect a set of data dots



Theories are built, not on a single research study, but on a collection of data gleaned from a variety of different research studies. Robust theories are well substantiated, connecting a wide variety of data dots, all of which have been confirmed through experiment and observation. Weak theories connect only a few data dots and leave many facts unaccounted.

Theories are the lens through which reality is viewed and interpreted. Holistic learning theory is a robust theory based on a wide variety of research from a variety of perspectives. This theory explains a set of facts and helps us understand the phenomenon called learning through the lens of holistic education. The purpose of this article is to bring a bit of clarity to what holistic learning theory is or might be.

Holism and Interconnectedness

Holistic learning theory is the theory upon which holistic education is based. These terms are used interchangeably in this chapter. There are many views on what holistic learning theory is or might be. This article provides an overview of some of the common elements.

Theory of Holism

Holism is derived from the word *holon*. A holon is something that is simultaneously a whole and a part. That is, each little part contains the whole within. For example, the smallest bit of physical matter contains the building blocks for the universe in the same way that each individual cell in our body carries the DNA of the whole person.

The theory of holism is based on the concept of a holon. This theory states that the universe and all entities within are made up of integrated parts that do not exist independently of the whole. As such, we can never come to know the whole of reality by isolating variables in order to examine small parts. In other words, science cannot understand how the universe works by taking it apart in the same way one would take apart a mechanical clock. Instead, universes and all the entities within them are a system of systems in which the parts interact and interconnect with each other. As such, the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. Thus, any entity (universe, human, school, student, classroom, curriculum, concept, or subject matter) is best understood by examining the principles that govern behavior within the system. That is the

theory of holism.

Interconnectedness

Holistic learning theory is based on the theory of holism. There are differing views of what holistic learning theory is or might be; however, one unifying principle is the interconnectedness of all things (Clark, 1991). This is the same principle of interconnectedness that is found in the field of quantum physics where all things in the physical universe are said to be interconnected at the quantum level (Al-Khalili, 1999; Talbot, 1991). *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 within greater systems and greater wholes. The idea of interconnectedness is also illustrated in systems theory, which views the universe and all things within it in terms of interconnected systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). According to this theory, reality is a unified whole comprised of self-organizing systems that are both interactive and interdependent. This is why it is said that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the globe can cause a hurricane on the other side. Any change in one entity or part of the system will bring change in all. Thus, all entities within this reality should be perceived in terms of patterns, connections, interconnections, and relationships all interconnected and influencing each other.

The idea of interconnectedness can also be illustrated in Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1938). The collective unconscious is a part of the human psyche that is shared by all (Jones, 1999). 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) 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 our existence in the physical world and our place in the cosmos. They can also be used as guides on our inner journey towards oneness of consciousness. This oneness, also called individuation, is an integration of the conscious and unconscious mind that leads to self-actualization (Jones, 1999).

To Educate

Educate comes from the Latin word *educere* which means to draw forth. To educate, 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 inherent within each student. And just like humanistic educators, holistic educators perceive all humans as having a natural desire to learn and a tendency to evolve to their highest states.

Education as Transformation

From a holistic perspective, true learning is said to have occurred when educational experiences elicit a transformation of consciousness. This transformation, in turn, leads to a greater understanding of and care for self, others, and one's environment. Consciousness here is that of what we are aware, both internally and externally. Learning can thus be expressed in

terms of personal transformation as it relates to the expansion of consciousness. We can transform ourselves and ultimately the world around us by transforming our consciousness. This transformation can occur internally by noticing greater dimensions of self and externally perceiving the interconnection of all things.

For example, we have within us both evolving and devolving traits. The evolving traits are those that serve to enhance our growth. These are traits such as humility, love, self-respect, fortitude, concentration, diligence, equanimity, and non-violence. The devolving elements are traits that impede our growth. These are traits such as anger, greed, hatred, ignorance, pride, and self-centeredness. Evolving and devolving traits create emotional states from which thoughts arise. Since thought in some form precedes action, educational experiences that enable students to develop the evolving traits are an important part of helping them transform into beings who are better able to nurture self, others, and their environment.

Transformation also occurs during learning experience in which students and teacher are engaged in what Abraham Maslow (1968) called peak experiences. Here, there is a change in consciousness as both teacher and students have an intense focus and total attention to the moment. There is a sense of knowing that goes beyond the lesson and a distortion in the perception of time. One senses interconnectedness, where the borders between self and the universe seem to dissolve. Here the teacher and learner become one as both are transformed by the experience. These types of experiences do not occur often; however, master teachers can describe them. And, as master teachers gain additional knowledge and experience, these types of experiences occur more frequently.

Defining Holistic Learning Theory

Holistic learning theory recognizes the interconnectedness of all human dimensions, including intellectual, emotional, physical, social, imaginative, and transpersonal dimensions. Real learning is said to have occurred only when all dimensions are addressed. Holistic learning theory also recognizes the interconnectedness of all things including self, others, and one's environment. Recognizing this interconnectedness, holistic learning theory identifies intelligent acts as those that would nurture or give to self, others, and one's environment. Unintelligent acts would be those that break down such interconnectedness by harming or taking from self, others, or one's environment.

Based on the ideas described here, a definition of holistic learning theory would be a theory that explains learning as a change in consciousness that occurs as a result of instruction, experience, or reflection that in turn leads to the furtherance of intelligent acts. Intelligent acts are those that serve to nurture and give to self, others, and one's environment.

Characteristics of Holistic Education

Holistic education has its historical origin in the work of Rudolph Steiner, John Dewey, and Maria Montessori, among others. Below are described six characteristics. These are not exclusionary; rather, they are a place to start the cognitive journey:

1. **Holistic education nurtures the development of the whole person.** Like humanistic education, holistic education seeks to help students grow and develop in all dimensions: intellectual, emotional, physical, social, imaginative, and transpersonal dimensions. However, unlike humanistic education, holistic education recognizes the transpersonal element (see below).

2. **Holistic education promotes relationships.** These relationships can occur between learners, teachers, people in the community, or people living in other parts of the world. Holistic education would value any type of interpersonal connection that could be used to enhance learning. In a school or classroom, holistic educators would move away from authoritarian, top-down relationships, based on power and authority, toward more equal relationships based on principles of respect and a shared set of values. Instead of using power to control students, relationships would be used to invite students to cooperate in creating an effective learning environment and meaningful learning experiences.
3. **Holistic education seeks to incorporate real life experiences with learning.** Instead of studying an abstract, academic world defined by somebody else, learning is linked to students' lives to the greatest extent possible. This would include things like experiential learning or service learning in which real world problems, experiences, and situations are infused into the curriculum and used as the basis of students' learning.
4. **Holistic education enables learners to critically examine and define their own values and views.** Students' learning includes experiences in which they are able to critically examine established ways of thinking, seeing, and knowing. The purpose of these reflective examinations is to enable students to identify and then begin to internalize their own views and values.
5. **Holistic education recognizes the transpersonal element.** The transpersonal element is part of self transcends the self (Tart, 1996). It provides access to a complete range of conscious states and enables perception of the seamless connection between self, others, and the universe, sometimes known as oneness. This experience of oneness is what Buddhists sometimes call the ground of being (Hanh, 1998) or what quantum physicists call implicate reality (Goswami, Reed, & Goswami, 1993). Here, you see yourself as one living being in the context of all of life and you see all of life in the context of one living being.
6. **Holistic education recognizes the interconnectedness of all things.** As stated above, reality can be perceived in terms of systems in which everything within each system is connected to and interconnected with all other things including those within all other systems.

Connections

A holistic education framework is based on the principle of interconnectedness. It uses the curriculum and other educational experiences as vehicles to develop three kinds of connections: Intrapersonal connections, interpersonal connections, and transpersonal connections.

1. **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 transpersonal self. 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.
2. **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.

3. **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 connections invite students to be fully in relationship with themselves, others, and local and world communities, and to see and experience the interrelationship of all things.

Final Thoughts

An educational philosophy identifies and clarifies a set of values and understandings with respect to education that are based on a set of beliefs. A theory is a way to explain a set of facts and to understand phenomena. Philosophies are conceptual. Theories are practical. Holistic education is a philosophy of education. Holistic learning theory is a robust theory of learning. It explains a wide array of research-based facts and helps us to better understand the phenomenon known as learning. It should be included with the other theories of learning.

No single theory is all-encompassing. Holistic learning theory should not be adopted to the exclusion of other learning theories. However, it should be included and incorporated with other learning theories to inform your teaching practice.

Holistic learning theory is the basis of holistic education. Holistic education understands learning as a change in consciousness that occurs as a result of experience. This change enables one to better nurture self, others, and the environment in which one lives. Holistic educators perceive the ultimate purpose of our schools to be the transformation of students, teachers, society and ultimately the world (Miller, 2000; Palmer, 1993; Nava, 2001; Nakagawa, 2002).

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Appendix

Video Mini-Lectures Related to Holistic Learning Theory

Holistic Education 1: Overview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q96sv2YRj7I>

Holistic Education 2: Humanistic vs. Holistic Learning Theory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yIX8pfaUmQ>

Holistic Education 3: Whole-to-Part Instruction

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33Ja275f5g8>

Holistic Education 4: A New Paradigm

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z18HgUoUQCE>

Holistic Education 5: The Whole Person

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKP88Gaos80>

Holistic Education 6: The Teacher

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDC4MXINMcI>

Learning to Teach - A Holistic Model

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wljeiHR_azc

Montessori Education: Overview

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wb_aL1LeIU