

The Holistic Curriculum in Higher Education

Keynote address [edited] presented at the Annual Scientific Conference
Abai Almaty State University, 30th April 2008
by Michael Schemmann

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. — Aristotle¹



Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen

The headline news on the front pages of the business sections today are all about the turmoil in the financial markets, the credit crunch, and of banks hoarding cash in order to maintain their liquidity. The central banks, in particular the Federal Reserve in the United States, the Bank of England, and the European Central Bank, are pumping hundreds of billions of dollars, pounds and euros into the markets to keep commercial banks afloat, bailing out securities dealers, lending government securities, pulling all the plugs just to keep the global financial system from collapsing from within. Without the high-powered money of the Fed, the BOE and the ECB, to replace the commercial bank's book money, there is no question in my mind, the world of finance, especially its treasured payment system, would have experienced melt down in the fall of 2007, or the spring of 2008 at the latest, of the scale similar to what happened in physics by way of a nuclear explosion at Chernobyl in April 1986; except in New York, London, and Frankfurt by way of implosion.

The Fed's chief banker at the time (1979–1987) was no other than the austere and almost unapproachable chairman, Paul Volcker, a man of sterling integrity, of brilliant parts, endowed with great energy and untiring industry, very *haute banque*, and the power to create money and regulate banking under authority of an Act of Congress dating back to the year 1913.

Volker finally agreed, after several failed attempts by the White House, to meet the newly elect president of the United States at the Treasury Department, not at the independent Fed. The president's opening line at their lunch became part of Ronald Reagan's legend. He said mildly to Volcker, "I'm curious. People are asking why we need a Fed at all." Volcker's jaw dropped.²

A similar question asked by President George W. Bush, a Harvard University MBA, to the president of a prestigious post-secondary institution of higher education today would

raise quite a few eyebrows, not that Bush is totally incapable of such a blunder. My question to my audience today is exactly this: “Do we still need universities at all?”

But it will be asked in response, are we to have no institute of higher learning? Are our young people to be deprived of the resource of education and training found so convenient? Where are professors and lecturers going to find employment if universities are closed down and go out of business. I would simply answer, they already have.

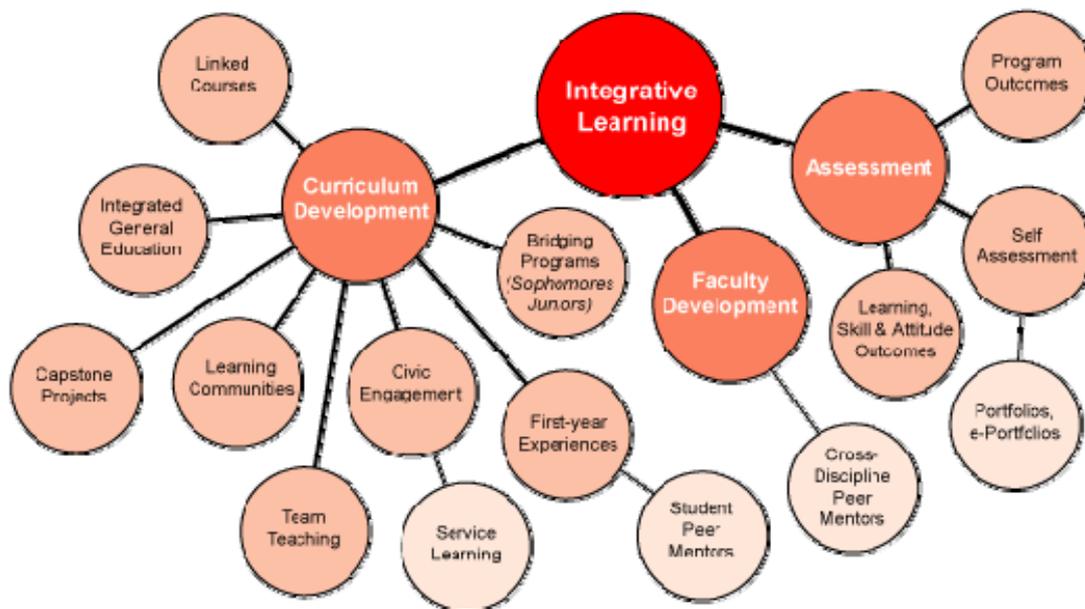
Trade schools would take over to educate and train students to become licensed accountants. In Canada, the Institutes of Chartered Accountants in the nine provinces have been doing so for half a century and more, turning accounting apprentices called “articled students” into competent licensed professionals. Polytechnic Institutes do the same for a wide range of disciplines from mechanical, construction all the way to information technologists and planners. The same is true for investment advisors, stock exchanges trades and international bankers turned out by the Canadian Securities Institute and banking schools in Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. All of these disciplines are included in today’s universities’ curricula with the only difference in outcome that the degrees conferred are academic, whereas the institute’s certificates are professional. The professionals are already employed, the academics are looking for jobs. All things being equal, the boundaries are blurred.

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s in America, big “changes in the economics of academic life began to be felt, identified by some as a catastrophe in the making and by others as a new era with potentially huge gains for the university. Some critics identified the changes as a new *corporization of the university*.”³

I am a university professor in Asia by pure choice and passion, partly because of the autonomy and intellectual freedom that I enjoy, despite the low pay compared to my profession requiring extensive training, partly because I am too old to retire, because retirement has a twist: it needs to be learned. Many hardworking folks of my Swiss-German culture retire into a beer glass and perish. My friends and associates from my banking years and public accounting practice are mostly retired, or are too busy making or loosing money.

I draw my inspiration and energy from the roots of a holistic education in Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf Schools in Basel, Switzerland and Kassel, Germany and a senior year as a foreign exchange students in high school in Wayne, in Philadelphia’s wealthy suburb on the Pennsylvania Main Line,⁴ followed by a bank apprenticeship and ten year’s of on-the-job training and promotion, until I entered business school and eventually university to take out an MBA and then a PhD and became a Certified Public Accountant in the State of Washington, USA.

According to Ron Miller (1999), a holistic education is based on the premise that each human finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world and spiritual values such as compassion and peace, trying to encompass and integrate multiple layers of meaning and experience rather than defining human possibilities narrowly.⁵ Holistic education’s key historical contributors include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Johann Pestalozzi, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Rudolf Steiner, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Carl Jung, to name a few.



Source:

[Wikipedia Image](#): Integrative learning concept map.gif

From concepts presented in: Huber, M. T., Hutchings, P., & Gale, R. (2005).

Integrative Learning for Liberal Education. peerReview, Summer / Fall.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/integrative-learning-concept-map-gif-1>

According to Abraham Maslow, education with a holistic perspective develops every person's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potentials, helping students to be "the most they can be" through self-actualization.

Holism (from *holos*, a Greek word meaning *all, entire, total*) is the notion that all the properties of a certain system (social, economic, mental, linguistic, biological, chemical, and so on) cannot be determined or explained by its component parts alone.⁶

The South African statesman, Jan Smuts (1926), defined holism in his book, *Holism and Evolution*⁷, as the tendency in nature to form wholes that are greater than the sum of its parts through creative evolution.

Emile Durkheim's concept of holism opposes the notion that a society is nothing more than a collection of individuals. Louis Dumont (1984) contrasts holism to individualism as two different forms of societies: modern humans living in an individualistic society, whereas ancient Greeks could be qualified as holistic, finding identity in the whole society.⁸

In science, holism led to "systems thinking" and its derivatives like "chaos" and "complexity" that are so complex that their behavior appears to be "new" or "emergent" and cannot be explained by the element's properties alone.⁹

In economics, the holistic theory takes into account how the "innovative system" evolves over time. "Knowledge and know-how, know-who, know-what and know-why are part of the whole business economics. These models are open, and consider that it is

hard to predict exactly the impact of a policy measure. They are also less mathematical.”¹⁰

In holistic admissions evaluating applicants, universities “replace grids of grades and test scores with more individualized reviews of student candidates, increasing diversity and retention.” Holistic admission does not ignore SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores, but integrates such factors as leadership skills, community participation, non-traditional learning ability, realistic self-assessment and others.¹¹

In the philosophy of language, semantic holism states that the meaning of an individual word or sentence can only be understood in terms of its relations with a larger body of language, even a whole theory or a whole language. In the philosophy of mind, a mental state may be identified only in terms of its relations with others (*mental holism* or *holism of the mind*).¹²

Universities today, especially so called “Western-style” American and Canadian universities, offer a curriculum based on a students’ choice of a specialization or concentration, and many elective courses within that concentration, not always resulting in diversity because of overlap. My experience as a professor and student advisor reinforces the belief that students choose on the basis of convenience rather than curiosity or special interest. More often than not, students enroll in a course whose instructor is popular, appealing or “easy”, or based on their friends’ availabilities and time conflicts because they enroll in pairs of two or even groups. The administration conducts regular student popularity contests, masquerading as scientific evaluations of a professor’s teaching effectiveness.

The disciplines laid out by the founding father of it all, may give us direction for what constitutes a holistic education. Let us have a good look at subchapter, *Higher Education*, in Plato’s *The Republic*.¹³

Having traced the whole course of education in Part III, in the final chapter 28, Plato fixes the ages for males entering on each successive stage.¹⁴

- Up to 17 or 18 years of age, the early training in literature, music, and elementary mathematics is carried out with as little compulsion as possible.
- Intensive physical and military training for two subsequent years leaves “no leisure for study.”
- From 20 to 30 years of age, a select few will go through advanced courses in mathematics outlined in Chapter 26, namely
 - Arithmetic
 - Geometry
 - Solid Geometry
 - Astronomy
 - Harmonics
- From 30 to 35 years of age, after a further selection of students, studies will be given wholly to Dialectic, and especially to the ultimate principles of morality.
- From ages 35 to 50, practical experience of life will be gained by public service in subordinate posts.
- At age 50, the best will reach the vision of the Good and thereafter divide their time between study and governing the state as the supreme council.

Education is almost a lifelong thing. “The body is most fully developed [at] from thirty-five years of age, the mind at about forty-nine,” writes Aristotle in this *Rhetoric*.¹⁵

Plato concludes, writing in the form of a dialogue:

“Difficult it may be, but possible, though only on the one condition we laid down, that genuine philosophers — one or more of them — shall come into power in a state; men who will despise all existing honors as mean and worthless, caring only for the right and the honors to be gained from that, and above all for justice as the one indispensable thing in whose service and maintenance they will reorganize their own state.”

“And how will they do that?”

“They must send out into the country all citizens [excluding slaves] who are above ten years old, take over the children, away from the present habits and manners of their parents, and bring them up in their own ways under the institutions we have described. Would not that be the quickest and easiest way in which our polity could be established, so as to prosper and be a blessing to any nation in which it might arise?”

“Yes, certainly; and I think, Socrates, you have satisfactorily expressed how, if ever, it might come into being.”

“Have we now said enough, then, about this commonwealth and also about the corresponding type of man; for it must be clear what sort of person we shall expect him to be?”

“It is clear; and, to answer your question, I believe our account is complete.”

Plato’s scheme, as he called it, today conflicts with the United Nation’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, Article 26(3), in that “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

The Brothers of Saint Gabriel, arriving in Thailand from France over a hundred years ago, enrolled orphans in their Assumption College in Bangkok, colleges that now exist in every major city, clothed, fed and educated them. These formerly disadvantaged children eventually became the Kingdom’s leading civil servants, being multilingual and capable of implementing modern ways and customs in the service of their king, former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra (2000-2007), being a notable one among them.

In conclusion: ours is only the world driven by unchangeable principles, and given the history of mankind, we can only wish for, hope for, and do our best.

The universe unfolds as it should — Max Ehrmann (1927). *Desiderata*.

¹ *Quotations by Aristotle* at <http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/Quotations/Aristotle.html> 14/04/2008

² Alan Greenspan (2007). "The Age of Turbulence. Adventures in A New World." New York: The Penguin Press, p. 93

³ *Academia*. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. "The Idea of a University: John Henry Newman." <http://www.wikipedia.com> visited April 16, 2008

⁴ My classmates included the sons and heirs of the Pew family's "Sun Oil Company" (Suncor), established private bankers, corporate lawyers from Wyeth Laboratories and other inherited wealth. What I thought was the American dream turned on journeys to the South and the slums of New York and Philadelphia, but the ideal so impressed me that I returned four years later, becoming an "Transatlanticer" moving incessantly between Central Europe and North America, eventually settling in the Pacific Northwest, and since 2001 in Southeast Asia. My children of whom there are six, are native Europeans, Americans, Canadians, and a little Eurasian girl age three who is Thai.

⁵ *Holistic education*. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <http://www.wikipedia.com> visited April 16, 2008

⁶ *Holism*. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <http://www.wikipedia.com> visited April 16, 2008

⁷ Jan C. Smuts (1926). "Holism and Evolution." McMillan

⁸ *Holism, supra*

⁹ Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). "General Systems Theory. Foundations Development Applications". Allen Lane, 1971

¹⁰ *Holism, supra*, citing Joseph Schumpeter and Michael Polanyi

¹¹ Scott Jaschik. "Making Holistic Admissions Work." *Inside Higher Ed*, March 2, 2007 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/03/holistic>

¹² *Holism, supra*

¹³ *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Francis MacDonald Cornford, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. London: Oxford University Press, 1941

¹⁴ *The Republic of Plato*. Pages 256-263

¹⁵ *Quotations by Aristotle, supra*