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Integral Education: New Directions for Higher Learning

reviewed by Sean M. Avila Saiter – January 10, 2011

Title: Integral Education: New Directions for Higher Learning
Author(s): Sean Esbjorn-Hargens, Jonathan Reams, and Olen Gunnlaugson
Publisher: State University of New York Press, Albany
ISBN: 1438433492, **Pages:** 386, **Year:** 2010
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What is integral education? And what does this groundbreaking field have to offer the conventional pedagogy of higher learning today? Editors Sean Esbjörn-Hargens (John F. Kennedy University), Jonathan Reams, (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), and Olen Gunnlaugson (formerly Simon Fraser University, now Université Laval), explore these questions in their anthology *Integral Education: New Directions for Higher Learning*. They define integral education as “an emerging field that draws broadly from an array of mainstream, alternative, and transdisciplinary sources of knowledge” (p. 4) that encourages “multiple, even contradictory approaches” (p. 5). Integral education as described in this book is based on Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory. However, where the authors base their work on Wilber’s approach, they also go far beyond it. Given this initial definition of integral education, the editors offer 10 areas that delineate integral education:

- (1) Exploring multiple perspectives
- (2) Including first-, second-, and third-person methodologies of learning and teaching
- (3) Weaving together the domains of self, culture, and nature
- (4) Combining critical thinking with experiential feeling

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 SEAN AVILA SAITER teaches in the Department of Integral Theory at John F. Kennedy University where he also serves as the Program Coordinator for the department. He is completing his doctoral research on participatory sense-making and collaborative presence in higher education classrooms. His interests are in Human Science areas such as phenomenology, humanistic-transpersonal psychology, and consciousness studies. He is currently writing a chapter on the social phenomenology of Alfred

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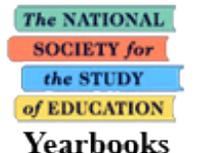
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Friends



- (5) Including the insights from constructive-developmental psychology
- (6) Engaging regular personal practices of transformation
- (7) Including multiple ways of knowing
- (8) Recognizing various types of learners and teachers
- (9) Recognizing “shadow work” within learners and teachers
- (10) Honoring other approaches to education (pp. 5-6)

The editors have gathered a comprehensive collection of voices championing a vision of education seeking to honor the *fullness* of what it means to be human in a complex world. Each contributor is eminently qualified to comment on the field from their unique domain, some with decades of experience and research to support their claims.

In a nutshell, the challenge that the authors of this text collectively face is that much of what we call education today is lopsided and based on outdated, culturally entrenched worldviews in desperate need of an integral (not just holistic or transformative) approach to educational research, theory, and practice. An example of this challenge is the overemphasis on quantitative assessment and performance benchmarks that are threatening to take over the educational landscape at the expense of humanistic values.

The best way to approach this text is as a sort of *teleological attractor* pulling the reader into a future vision of an education that many of us only dream of. While there are very practical examples offered, this volume represents an idealistic vision that is begging to be read, as many scholars and educators will likely be inspired by it.

This book contains four main sections: “historical contexts,” “distinct approaches,” “case studies,” and “looking ahead.” I have chosen to limit this review to key essays in each section that highlight the overall gesture of the book.

The first chapter is a general introduction to integral education by the editors. Following this is the first section, which explores the historical context in which integral education has been embedded over roughly the past century. For example, the chapter “Western-Islamic and Native American Genealogies of Integral Education” by Gary P. Hampson speaks to the need for education to address an increasingly diverse and globalized world. The discussion of

Schutz and Integral Theory for a volume called *True But Partial: Essential Critiques of Integral Theory* to be published by SUNY Press. He has written for *The Humanistic Psychologist* and *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, is an associate organizer of the Biennial Integral Theory Conference, Associate Managing Editor for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, and sits on the board of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences (SPHS). He lives in Berkeley, CA.

education in the Western-Islamic tradition, a perspective relevant to post-9/11, contemporary global and cultural issues, emphasizes that “integral approaches to education are neither new nor limited to Western cultures” (p. 29).

The second section “distinct approaches” contains five contributions. The essay “Integral Transformative Education: A Participatory Proposal” by Jorge Ferrer, Marina Romero, and Ramon Albareda offers a vision of a participatory educational model that demonstrates an organic and perennial process based on the four seasons and rooted in timeless practices. Also within this section is the essay by Matthew Bronson and Ashok Gangadean entitled “Encountering the (W)hole: Integral Education as Deep Dialogue and Cultural Medicine.” This piece is a stand-alone in a book already packed with strong contributions. The authors engage in a lively dialogue on divergent worldviews, psychological development, and meta-cognition while asking hard questions about the global context of education today. It is a visionary, inspiring, and much-appreciated anecdote to burdensome economic and political realities, narrow views of learning and intelligence, and the lack of viable research that weigh heavily on the current educational landscape.

The third section, “case studies,” contains seven essays. Each applies integral principles in the real world. For example, Nancy Davis’ essay “Matching Educational Intentions with Assessment” is the only contribution dedicated to educational assessment. Davis, an educator with extensive experience using and researching educational assessments, offers a novel way of using assessments in educational contexts based on Wilber’s Four Quadrant model. The final piece in this section is perhaps the most well-rounded case study depicting integral education in practice. Sue Stack’s essay entitled *Expanding Our Vision in the Teaching and Design of University Science –Coming to Know Our Students* provides the reader with several concrete examples of her research into the challenges of teaching physics to undergraduates at a large research university.

The essay with possibly the greatest popular appeal is a dialogue between Alexander Astin and Jonathan Reams, “Spirituality and Integral Thought in Higher Education.” Astin is a legendary figure in the field representing over four decades of groundbreaking research and scholarship in higher education. Astin and Reams discuss several areas in higher

education in North America that most readers can relate to. For example, Astin highlights how the perception of “being smart” in academia distorts our lives:

Working all these years in this field I have become convinced that one of our hidden shared values, which to me is what culture is, is how important it is to be smart and to appear smart. So smartness has a very high valence. (p. 339)

This view and other broad strokes contribute to an essay well worth the time to read.

It is asking a lot to say that we need to be educating the whole person while paying attention to (not to mention actively teaching from) multiple perspectives and multiple ways of knowing. However, this much anticipated volume is chock-full of examples, both old and new, of the plurality of ways in which this approach has been successfully explored, tested, and implemented. This book will likely be relevant to a wide variety of educators interested in non-traditional approaches that address multiple ways of learning and knowing. It covers the theory, research, and practical application of such approaches and provides a much-needed forum for anyone who is interested in getting a “lay of the land” in integrative and alternative approaches to higher education. I think educators of all stripes will find something of value in this anthology. In short, I highly recommend putting *Integral Education: New Directions for Higher Learning* at the top of one’s reading list.

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