A Manifesto of Holistic Education
A Declaration for Unity and Personal Choice

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This manifesto places unity and personal choice at the foundation of a holistic philosophy to ground program development and pedagogical practice. Unity is seen as a political communal endeavor while personal choice is seen as an intellectual and/or emotional decision. Since the overlap of unity and personal choice inevitably occurs, separation of these two is paradoxical and persuades us to witness and accept the holistic nature of life. Furthermore, as life is holistic, it follows that learning is, as well, since all life stages are founded on learning and growth, even at the end of life when we engage death and dying. Human-ness exists because we learn. We learn from others who have learned before us and then share with us; we learn with others when we are together in the same stage experiencing responses to specific exigencies. We learn from ourselves when we contemplatively reflect on our thoughts, emotions, and actions. As we become members of any community, whether that is small and momentary, or larger and longer lasting, we experience unity with others who are like-minded. Our choices to belong, reject, speak out, or remain silent are initiated by a societal hegemony that exerts energy on our actions. Such societal exigence tends to be more universal across life than we generally admit. It is experienced by all cultures around the globe albeit its form may manifest differently. It also occurs in varying degrees across and within differing venues, that is to say, for example, that the medical field varies from the educational field, both vary from the culinary field, and so it occurs on and on across all venues. Yet, in all venues, unity and personal choice exert a holistic nature into each.

While my personal and public growth as a professional educator is deeply influenced by like-minded colleagues, I explore ideas and make declarations below which I believe, even as I recognize that they may or may not be shared by others. These declarations reflect a conjoining of mind, body, and spirit that happens when we elicit our whole being. They are not presented as a “comprehensive” treatise; they are presented as a complex instantiation of knowledge that has grown out of association and practice. As an educator, employed in a traditional state university, I push against isolation, coercion, competition, and privilege that reigns in the majority of schools now existing. I use holistic education to push. From within a traditional educational system, a holistic approach is a political counter-cultural action that I choose, but it is also a philosophy to live by. I choose it, because teacher and learner are one, because learning is reciprocal, and because limitations imposed by societal roles that have historically assigned power to teachers while withholding it from students must be resisted, if not eradicated. I choose holistic approaches, because they are quicker to bring forth happiness and joy, and they can form a more peaceful cooperative learning environment that evokes the best each and every person can give and receive.
Unity

Holistic education is essential to an international populace seeking peace, social justice, and sustainability. To promote an international paradigm shift into holism, various tenets, now espoused and promoted by holistic educators, should lead curricular change in all schools.

First: We need to recognize and proclaim that spiritual approaches to learning, as well as living in wholeness, naturally promote the development of compassion. When we function from a platform of compassion, much follows: for instance, respect for each other and for life; caring for the planet and for nature; recognition of knowledge and wisdom; embracing human growth as an innate condition; and a strong value for peace and justice.

Second: We need to recognize that the public and the personal each impose discrete conditions of exigency that control choice and either invite or restrict unity. Since we are thinking human beings, differences exist in ways we solve problems, the values we use as the basis to justify decisions, and the goals we set in any given situation. The cultures from within which we live also apply pressures that turn our activities in the directions they move. For example, if we aim to teach a certain style or amount of writing within a determined timeframe, these conditions will shape decisions to do so.

Third: We have to open our eyes and see, now! The framework used to set boundaries for any pedagogical activity is a result of societal pressure, whether that framework is set by others or by ourselves. We never are free from such pressure, so it is more efficacious to see why, how, where, and when that pressure influences our decisions. If we see it, then we can make choices about ways to create within it or, if possible, to make changes to it that are aligned with holism. To see such complexity requires reflection, dialogue, and time to consider what we learn. Of course, this means we have to make time for discernment and then more time to set goals, take actions, and experience the outcomes. Often, our goals, actions, and experiences flow pleasantly along, leading to greater levels of holism and unity. But then, during other occasions, great courage is necessary, especially if we are prompting change in the status quo. Community support for our goals and actions have a direct influence on our experiences. If holistic education is to flourish and unite us more strongly than currently is the case, we have to see what works “on” us so that we can promote the necessary paradigm shift that reshapes coercive and restrictive frameworks.

Fourth: We have to keep talking to one another and encouraging each other to activate and sustain our energy as we create holistic approaches in education. We must work against isolation and create opportunities for like-minded people to be supported by one another. This is vital, not only between individuals, but also between groups. The international holistic education community is growing, but it needs to be stronger and we need to be more unified. Such unity arises out of contact with one another. This is why we need to sustain our holistic education conferences and support those leaders who organize them. We need to continue and build support for written and electronic publications that forward holism. We should accept invitations to join dialogue groups whether they meet face-to-face or on the Web. We should start these groups. In this way, hope and activism is inspired in each of us and we are strengthened.

Fifth: The most challenging goal we share is to change the way we think of and use time. To do this, we must be attentive to time and understand how it drives us as we work alone or in community. We also must be willing to consistently resist habits formed by societal conditioning. Almost everyone is “strapped for time” or, at least, we frequently tell ourselves and others this. Yet, time is mostly an illusion that we are taught to believe has power. As children, we had little awareness of time. A day, a week, a month seemed endless. Years appeared even longer. Then time shrunk as we were conditioned to more and more personal responsibility brought on by societal expectations identified in developmental (st)ages. We learned not to “waste” time. Daydreaming became taboo. Relaxation or pleasure was regulated to “down time”. We learned to slot pleasure into non-work events. We learned to “relax” only after “work” was finished. Before we knew what was happening to us, we completely believed that we only had a specific time allotted to get that something done,
say in 30 minutes, even if 30 minutes did not fit. In other words, we learned how to block out time. The greater the amount we accomplished the more “productive” we believed we were. This perception of time is a controlling force in education and learning for joy and happiness as a “human right” was replaced with learning for productivity, grades, and job preparation. Holistic educators attempt to offset this view, or to soften its effects, for example through age-mixing in schools or cooperative project based learning agreements chosen by learners. Holistic educators attempt to reclaim learning for joy and pleasure. We aim to bring learners back to a “time-less” frame of reference so that learning can be experienced as a “natural” human activity that lies outside the societal constraints of time-management. This means most of us have to slow down and reset our internal clocks or, even better, throw them out. Personal choice empowers us to do so.

Personal Choice

Personal choice sustains and promotes unity when we accept certain fundamental ideas to support the advancement of personal choice. The ideas listed below are far from comprehensive, but they form a platform from which to grow.

First: We seek to excite others into self-selected learning activities that evoke small and/or large improvements in the world. How do we do this? We do it through unity with others and personal choice. We recognize that the whole person is in relationship with: the emotional or affective; the physical; the intellectual; the social; the aesthetic (love of beauty); the spiritual. We understand that wholeness is fully experienced only in the soul, and we build new programs on these precepts. Ron Miller has said that “Holistic education is founded upon a deep reverence for life and for the unknown (and never fully knowable) source of life: whether this great mystery is described in religious, psychological, ecological or philosophical terms, a holistic approach tries to answer its call, rather than shape it to cultural or ideological specifications” (Miller, 1997, p. 221). With this in mind, holistic programs rely less on measurement, as they rely heavily on responding to human needs such as compassion, justice, equality, sustainability, happiness, and well-being.

Second: Holistic educators promote humanistic skills, not only job skills, because we believe that humanistic skills apply in all life challenges, which include the personal and the professional venues. We suggest that life (and thus learning) be seen through a spiritual lens that scopes out the whole person as a being of extreme potential and possibility—a person who is a life-long learner and a creative decision maker for positive action to support the greater good within any situation. We seek to elicit awe and wonder, joy and pleasure, knowledge and skill, connections between all people, and a pedagogical base that promotes human justice and equality across the globe.

Third: As stated in the introduction of this manifesto, personal choice is an intellectual and/or emotional decision. It is also activated by circumstance, opportunity, and desire. Obviously, personal choice, rather than coercion, stimulates self-initiated learning and motivates the greatness within each person. As educators, we design frameworks with space that inculcates the development of selection skills. We engage spirit and rely on multiple ways of knowing: verbal, visual, emotional, physical, intellectual, social, environmental, and spiritual. Students learn to discern what constitutes a negative or positive choice given the set of circumstances they face. Personal choice leads to positive and penetrating experiences that further enhance an individual’s love for learning as well as a willingness to self-initiate learning in school and out of school. We learn that our choices activate emotional and cognitive responses. We learn to analyze, speculate, question, imagine, wonder, and create. Creative thinking followed by selected action can lead to wonder and awe; on this path spirits soar and skills are honed. We are energized with a joy and happiness that fuels our willingness to shout “bravo”, and/or to face challenge, hardship, even failure. When failure or hardship do arrive, we reflect and inspect it to select where we can revise our choices in order to be strengthened, to move forward, and to do what we had determined to do. This is basic to human nature, but pedagogical practice,
and even program development generally, are shaped by coercion instead of personal choice. This happens because those who think they know more move within a top to bottom hierarchy (which they sustain) that privileges them through their status, position, authority, or advanced training. Most traditional educators are in this camp. I am, and I know it; but, I resist it. I want a new camp, a holistic camp that helps me find freedom and helps me bring such freedom to students. A holistic pedagogy based on personal choice and creativity works for me; it has worked for my students, too.

Fourth: Personal choice is inherently a creative act. As a creative act, we can see choice as a process as well. When we are faced with choosing anything, we automatically size up the situation, weigh the pros and cons that face us, and speculate about the ramifications of one direction or another. We might talk to others for advice. We might look to the past to compare or contrast similar events. We might reflect on our expectations to determine if they are reasonable, plausible, or too risky. In any instance of personal choice we “weigh in” to make a decision. If the choice is small, inconsequential even, we do not spend a lot of energy on it. But, if the choice is important, vital even, then our energy is heavily and carefully invested. The same process occurs in program development, albeit usually in a communal way. Most new programs in the developing stages are shaped in committees, by groups of people who have interest in the endeavor. They come together to “create” something new, something worthwhile which will be recognized and valued by others. Of course, interests greatly vary, but they are always driven with an eye to the future and with an eye to “improve” quality of life for those people whom the program engages.

Fifth: Future program development should be grounded in creativity. Creativity, as a self-motivated action that connects the individual’s inner life with exterior social and environmental exigencies, is a process. We know this from all the current findings in the field of Creativity Studies. Processes are “learned”. We can teach creativity once we understand an easy approach to it. George Ainsworth-Land claims that creativity proceeds in steps:

1. It arises out of physical need.
2. Analysis and evaluation are activated.
3. Synthesis for new knowledge occurs
4. One’s whole being comes into play with the conscious and unconscious minds.
5. Reason and intuition, (inner and outer) are subsumed into a kind of meta-consciousness.
6. The self is part of a larger reality.
7. Finally, we build a new perceptual order (Zohar & Marshall, quoted in Lantieri, 2001, p. 17).

Those who “create” strive to bring about something new and original into the world. Creative acts from poets, artists, musicians, architects, writers, chefs, carpenters, and others are easy to spot. Unfortunately, we generally do not assign the label “creative” to an analytic decision or a product not associated with the arts.

Seventh: All decisions are creative acts. If we accept this truth, then we automatically broaden the usage of creativity to any area of life. Moreover, since all decisions are creative acts, it means that all people are creative beings. We can expand our capacity for using creativity so that it is a daily gift that fuels our actions. Creativity can function as the avenue that renders greater unity between our inner and outer life. As a source of strength and inspiration, it can become our cornerstone and well of sustenance.

Eighth: A foundation in creativity automatically links us to transcendence and transformation. This means we must teach students to recognize the powerful moments that show them deeper dimensions in life. As we develop new programs, we must create conditions for students wherein transcendence is invited and may occur. Holistic educators know that spiritual experiences may happen in the classroom and that learners need them. As we come to a meaningful understanding of our spirit, our inner and outer lives are no longer isolated, but integrated into a wholeness that fosters full
awareness of our decisions and actions. This leads to wisdom and optimal community involvement. We seek wisdom, not just increased knowledge. We advocate for global equality and sustainability, not just momentary gratification. We root practice in happiness and well-being for all.

Conclusion: New programs should rely on a variety of practices that foster choice and unity. For example: meditation, loving kindness, environmental respect and stewardship, compassion, silence, collaborative learning, community building, social activism, problem solving, and multiple ways of knowing serve this goal. But practices have to be carefully selected to meet the teacher’s strengths and the students’ needs. As in any other developmental endeavors, objectives, goals, and principles must be articulated and accepted by those responsible for implementation. Processes of review and evaluation for the purpose of refinement and improvement should be ongoing. Education at its best is always dynamic, heartfelt, and true to its mission to awaken leaners to their highest potential as well as to their highest level of self-motivation. When we focus on choice and unity, we can both activate and protect such dynamism. We can learn; we can grow. We can keep spirit at the core of education.

References
