Pedagogy consistent with a holistic approach: Ten key principles

Bob London

E-mail: rlondon@csusb.edu

Abstract

This article attempts to identify some key principles and suggestions for implementing a holistic approach to education in a traditional public school setting; specifically, I will identify ten suggestions and comment on each. It feels necessary to discuss the context that generated the outline of this article. This article concerns the experience of students that were enrolled in the MA program in Holistic and Integrative Education at California State University, San Bernardino, a program and approach that has been implemented with twelve cohorts over a period of more than 20 years, recognized by its students (e.g., London, 2013, 2019) and the professional community as an exemplar program in transformative education (e.g., identified as one of three exemplar transformative programs in higher education in Duerr, 2003).

The basis of the paper is the experience of students that were enrolled in the MA program in Holistic and Integrative Education at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), a program and approach that has been implemented with twelve cohorts over a period of more than 20 years. Students took six courses over a two-year period as a cohort, which typically consists of a diverse group of 15 to 25 students of varying professional backgrounds, ages and experience. As the director of the program and instructor in their last program course, I was planning one of their last classes. As part of their sixth (and last) course, the students were asked what was needed in their opinion to bring effective closure to their journey in the program. One need mentioned was to bring closure to the content component of our program. A class devoted to discussing the essential implications of our course work was suggested. I went to bed that night, two days prior to the relevant class, with no clear sense of how to address this need. I woke up about 2am and had the clear idea to brainstorm some principles and guidelines and select ten of them to discuss with the class. I took a few minutes to brainstorm some ideas and then counted them, and interestedly I generated exactly 10! At that point I had the clear sense that I should be satisfied with these 10 and not try to refine them any further. I will note that in the actual class I briefly introduced the 10 principles and then had them work in small groups to discuss the principles and generate at least one question and one addition to the list – the resulting discussion and processing was well received by the students and me! For this article, I have kept the original 10 principles, resisting the temptation to revise and refine the list, and have restricted myself to limited commentary for each principle. Given this "methodology", this article does not reflect the depth of research and investigation typical of a professional article; however, I believe the depth of my experience attempting to implement a holistic pedagogy over 20 years, the feeling connected with the insight into the preparation for the class, and the positive reception to the class on the part of the students, supports me in hoping that this article may be useful as presented to some readers and act as a starting point for other readers to explore this topic more in-depth. It should be clear that I am not making a claim that the ten principles are the most important principles for a holistic educator, or even that each or any of the ten principles is essential or necessary for a holistic approach to education, but rather that these ten principles provide a useful foundation for a discussion of what is essential for any educator's practice.

The Ten Principles

Principle 1. In the beginning of the school year, identify one to three areas of interest that you would like to focus on for the entire school year. For example, the focus could be general, such as integrating cooperative groups. Or the focus could be related to a subject matter area; e.g., understanding the heuristic of problem reduction in mathematics. These are topics that you would want to keep in your awareness throughout the school year, hopefully opening you to opportunities to integrate the focus into your required curriculum, or to address the focus directly.

This type of focus typically is facilitated by a conversation with your students over the course of the school year. For example, as a secondary mathematics teacher I integrated what I labeled as a curriculum of nonroutine problems (see London, 2004) into the traditional high school mathematics curriculum. Briefly, for instructional purposes a nonroutine problem at an appropriate level of difficulty has the following characteristics (London, 1995): (a) The problem requires three steps to complete: problem recognition and orientation, trying something, and persistence; (b) the problem allows for various solutions and requires students to evaluate a variety of potential strategies; (c) a good solution requires the student to use one or more mathematical problem solving strategies such as finding a pattern and generalizing, generating and organizing data, manipulating symbols and numbers, or reducing a problem to an easier equivalent problem; and (d) every student is able to "solve the problem."

In summary, this principle suggests that you take time in the beginning of the school year to consider what it is you are passionate about and would like to make a focus for you and your students over the course of the school year, considering what that might look like in the beginning, middle and end of the school year; and considering in general how you might integrate that focus throughout the school year.

Principle 2. Identify 5 to 12 questions that you believe are important to consider when planning a unit (e.g., 2 – 4 weeks of material).

In my experience, the planning of a unit (versus a daily lesson) allows for the educator to more easily reflect on the larger picture versus the immediate demands of the daily lesson. For example, in looking at a unit of mathematics instruction it is usually easier to identify an opportunity to emphasize problem solving or to integrate cooperative groups perhaps once or twice in the unit versus considering how it fits in a given one-day lesson. Of course, what this

principle would look like depends on your professional context and philosophy. For example, a secondary subject matter teacher may have one set of questions to consider, in contrast to an elementary teacher who may have some questions that apply to all subject areas, but also have a few questions that relate just to different subject matter areas. If well implemented this approach increases the likelihood that what you believe is essential in education will be reflected in your teaching.

Principle 3. Ask yourself: Am I nourishing my inner life in a way that facilitates me being present for my students and colleagues?

I have found that perhaps the most significant factor that determines whether an educator can be effective in implementing a holistic approach is their ability to be present while teaching. This effort requires discipline and focus to nourish the educators' inner life, for their well-being and that of their students. Starting with the eighth cohort, I integrated a two-year "curriculum" focusing on nourishing their inner lives – this focus required them to experiment with several methods (e.g., meditation; receptivity to Nature), reflect on the process, and develop a process that works effectively for them. I have noticed a few consistent patterns in this work (London, 2019): After two years, there is a qualitative difference in their understanding of what it means to nourish their inner life. For example, initially many have the view (perhaps unconsciously) that it is not appropriate to spend time focusing on their inner life – more time planning lessons would be a better use of time. By the end of the two years, they understand the value of nourishing their inner life, including the positive effect on their teaching, and take time to reflect on what they need. The majority of MA students see a clear connection between their ability to nourish their inner life and the quality of their teaching. For example, one student commented (London, 2019), "What I realized when I started this program was how much I had been neglecting my inner life. What I also realized after continuous assignments regarding the subject was, how much more in tune I was with myself and that made me more relaxed and in tune with others. The walls came down and there was an openness that I think is critical for teaching and education." Each student seems to develop an unique personal approach that creatively integrates the strategies they were exposed to in the curriculum, as well as unique components that fit their life and needs. I believe that the component of the curriculum that requires them to reflect on their experimentation and consider what works for them facilitates this development.

Principle 4. Can I integrate a cooperative group activity that emphasizes higher-order cognitive and/or affectiveness in my teaching at least once every two weeks?

This principle is the only one included that concerns a specific teaching method and is the only method that we require our students in the MA program to demonstrate competency by effectively implementing a lesson(s) involving a cooperative group activity focusing on higher-order cognitive and/or affective processes. The rationale for this requirement is that cooperative groups properly implemented have been demonstrated to be effective in over 1,000 studies, and cooperative groups are one of the few methods that have withheld the test of time. We believe that every educator should at least have this tool available to them. In particular, the focus on developing group skills and on developing positive interdependence is consistent with a holistic approach . One definition of cooperative groups (versus group work in general) emphasizes the following four characteristics necessary to be able to label group work as cooperative group work: (a) promotes positive interdependence; (b) emphasizes developing group skills; (c) allows for individual accountability; and (d) includes a processing component. In addition to this brief definition, the reader can consult the following three sources (of many) for a more in-depth treatment of cooperative groups: Cohen (1986), Johnson et al. (1993) and Sharan & Sharan (1992).

Principle 5. How can I collaborate with other educators to improve the quality of my teaching?

In my opinion, one of the strangest characteristics of most schools in the United States is that they not only do not encourage collaboration, but also, in many cases, discourage it. I label this characteristic as strange given the fact that both commonsense and research obviously support the hypothesis that given a reasonable motivation to collaborate, two or more educators planning and implementing a lesson or unit are very likely to implement a better quality lesson or unit than just one educator planning the lesson or unit. The MA program is a good example of this assessment. Sam Crowell and I have collaborated and team taught for over fifteen years and know that the result is much better than if one of us (or both of us without collaborating) taught the courses. Of course, in our case and typically, the commitment to collaboration (e.g., we typically met weekly to discuss pedagogy) required more time from us planning than if we did not collaborate. For example, for every two courses we co-taught, each of us received credit for teaching one course, although typically we invested at least the amount of time needed to receive credit for two courses we taught individually.

This principle asks you to reflect on the question "How can I collaborate with other educators to improve the quality of my teaching?" For example, is there at least one colleague in your professional setting that you can talk freely to about pedagogy? If not, are there alternatives available to you for collaboration? You need to ask yourself how you can organize your day in a way that you have time for relaxed, meaningful collaboration with others. I will emphasize here a counterintuitive principle that creating time for nourishing your inner life and meaningful collaboration, even if individual planning time is reduced, actually improves the quality of your teaching!

Principle 6.

How can I integrate student input into my teaching process?

Many times educators have the view, consciously or unconsciously, that they are solely responsible for the planning of their lessons and the effectiveness of their lessons. Of course, the educator is usually actively considering the students' needs and attempting to plan a lesson that is responsive to the diverse needs of her/his students; however, it seldom occurs to the educator to directly involve the students in the process in a meaningful way!

This principle suggests that we need to understand the role of student input (as well as input from colleagues, parents and community leaders) as a valuable and essential component of our teaching. Specifically, we need to understand that in addition to facilitating the establishment of a supportive learning community, student input can significantly increase the effectiveness and quality of our instruction. For example, many times when I prepare an assignment or activity that requires the students to respond to questions or topics that I generate (typically with little or no input from students), I include a component that requires them, typically in small groups, to generate one to three questions or comments. The discussion of the questions almost always deepens their and my understanding of the lesson.

Another example of this principle is the approach of a second grade teacher that I respect that integrated whole class discussion when a significant classroom environment or management concern arose. For example, one year she was concerned with some recess behavior that she observed that she believed was not healthy. She introduced her

concern to the students and facilitated a class discussion of possible ideas for improving the situation, resulting in a positive resolution to the situation. Generally, in my opinion, this type of approach results in a qualitatively better resolution than if the teacher generates the resolution based primarily on her/his reflection, even when the reflection is sensitive to the needs of the students.

One suggestion connected with this principle is to ask yourself the question at least once every two weeks (perhaps as one of your unit planning questions for principle 2), "Can I give the students an opportunity for meaningful input into the curriculum or classroom decisions in the coming two weeks (or unit)?"

Principle 7. Do I welcome naturally occurring dissonance in my classroom and curriculum? Do I integrate regular opportunities for growth in problem solving, coping and other higher-order skills/processes in my teaching?

Typically, when we plan learning opportunities for students concerning new concepts or skills we attempt to ensure that the process of understanding the new concept or skill is not only effective, but also smooth in the sense that we try to avoid unnecessary difficulties or obstacles in the student's understanding of the new material. Of course, at times, we introduce a new topic with a problem or dilemma in order to facilitate deeper understanding of the topic or create a motivation to explore the topic. I would suggest that such an approach to integrate a problem solving situation or a dilemma to explore concepts when properly implemented can be very effective; however, I would equally strongly suggest that a significant component of the curriculum needs to facilitate the student understanding transformative learning and the natural occurrence of dissonance in that learning, and helping the student understand healthy ways of allowing oneself to remain in the dissonance until understanding or transformation occurs. This principle suggests that we need to consider facilitating the student's ability to effectively face situations that naturally involve dissonance as an essential component of the curriculum – not just as a method to facilitate student's learning of concepts. I would suggest that this component needs to include at least two elements: (a) naturally occurring dissonance in the student or students' lives, including dissonance that naturally emerges in the classroom and (b) planned curriculum that addresses problem or coping situations that would probably generate the type of positive dissonance to facilitate transformative growth for many students.

A template for the appropriate pedagogy for this type of curriculum (both naturally occurring and planned) would need to include provisions for ensuring that the dissonance is at the appropriate level of difficulty; and that the processing allows for adequate discussion of the process of solving the problem (e.g., what obstacles did you encounter; how did you address them? Did you experience discomfort, and how did you handle your discomfort?). Also, we can ask if there are natural issues in the classroom, school setting or community that facilitate such a focus. For example, classroom situations that generate dissonance for the teacher and/or some of the students such as the example in 6 above in which the teacher facilitated the discussion of playground behavior that was causing her dissonance, as well as some students. In contrast, if the teacher "resolved" the issue on her/his own without involving students, the outcome in terms of student behavior may be the same (or even better), but the students would not have the experience of solving a problem and processing the experience. Gordon's method (Gordon, 2003) of one-to-one conversations with students to resolve a behavioral problem with the student having the primary role in the process is another example of facilitating this type of problem-solving ability. In addition, techniques such as role-playing, role-taking. and simulations provide an opportunity to facilitate this type of growth if properly implemented – for example: Is the problem at the right level of difficulty for students? Is there a supportive opportunity to process the experience?

Principle 8. Do I facilitate my students moving toward living in a way consistent with the implications of the Earth Charter?

Much of the literature, as well as curriculum developed consistent with a holistic philosophy, is fairly independent of questions concerning the content of the curriculum. For example, when we discuss establishing a supportive learning environment, we seldom discuss the content that is being taught in the supportive learning environment. We may emphasize concepts such as teaching the whole child (mind, body, emotions and spirit), the value of student input in the curriculum process, holistic approaches to the assessment of students, etc., but we seldom focus on what content is being taught during these processes. I believe the strands of the Earth Charter provide a good framework for ensuring that content essential to a holistic approach is considered in making curricular decisions. Briefly, the four strands of the Earth Charter are: (1) Respect and care for the community of life; for example, care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love; (2) ecological

integrity; for example, protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life; (3) social and economic justice; for example, uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities; and (4) democracy, nonviolence, and peace; for example, promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace. For more information on the Earth Charter, visit https://earthcharter.org/.

This principle suggests that we ask how to integrate a focus on the different strands of the Earth Charter in the prescribed curriculum. For example, we can ask, "Are there community projects that are consistent with a focus on the Earth Charter?"

Principle 9. Do I actively involve parents and other community members (or organizations) in my curriculum and instruction?

Many educators tend to unconsciously see the responsibility for the education of their students to be solely their responsibility and do not consider parents and other community members to be valuable resources to be developed. The average teacher seldom invites other people into the classroom, believing, again perhaps unconsciously, that she/he is expected to take full responsibility for planning and implementing the education of her/his students. This principle suggests that we should actively reflect on how and why we can more fully integrate the resources of the local and nearby communities into the process of providing a meaningful education for our students and school community. For example, for many cohorts, early in their course work we show a videotape, Pilgrim's Voyage that documents Steven Levy's fourth grade class in 1992 and his incredible implementation of a student-centered (see Levy, 1996, for examples). The major theme of the school year was the life of the pilgrims. Throughout the documentary of the school year (as well as follow-up interviews two years later) whenever you were observing the classroom or students involved in activities outside the classroom, there were always at least a few additional adults not employed by the school supporting or directing activities. For example, students designed and built their desks and chairs, using only the tools that were available to the pilgrims. A woodworking expert from the community voluntarily facilitated this project, giving instruction and advice that Levy probably would not be able to provide with the same quality.

In planning our curriculum and instruction, we can ask ourselves some basic questions such as: How can parents contribute to your classroom? What skills or experiences do they have that may be useful? How can you welcome parent and community involvement in your classroom? How can I find out what resources are available in the community? Are there volunteers in the community we can recruit, such as retirees, student teachers and other university students, nonprofit organizations, etc.?

Principle 10. Do I integrate an emphasis on alternative modalities in my teaching?

For the purposes of this article, I will not try to define in-depth "alternative modalities." Here, "alternative modalities" will just refer to ways of processing and interpreting our experience other than analytical reasoning, oral arguments and expository writing, including but not limited to intuitive knowing, the visual arts, movement and other somatic approaches, contemplative approaches, etc. To clarify the intent of this principle, I want to briefly describe three approaches to integrating alternative modalities in the educational process. The first approach is simply no integration – unfortunately, this is an approach that has become increasingly more common, either as a philosophical decision by the individual teacher or as an implicit or explicit direction of the school administration. Perhaps an assumption of this approach is that integrating alternative modalities would interfere with the learning of the required curriculum, or slow down the process without benefit.

The second approach involves a simple integration with a primary purpose of increasing student interest in or understanding of the content focus of the lesson. For example, for a book report, in addition to the written portion, the teacher could require a drawing illustrating a key component of the book. Or students could select a portion of a historical event to act out as part of the processing of the material. Research supports the hypothesis that this type of integration properly implemented can deepen students' understanding of concepts and content. In addition, again if properly implemented, this approach helps students see the value of alternative modalities in making sense of their experiences.

The third approach recognizes the importance of the alternative modalities in the "Education of the whole child," e.g., we are better able to create meaning in our life when we have a wider variety of modalities (and corresponding competences/skills using those modalities) with which to explore our experiences and make sense of those

experiences. In addition, this approach sees an understanding of the different modalities in the student's life as a primary content focus of the educational process; that is, an emphasis on alternative modalities versus a simple integration with a primary purpose of increasing student interest in the content focus of the lesson.

The purpose of this principle is to recommend an emphasis on alternative modalities versus a simple integration with a primary purpose of increasing student interest in the content focus of the lesson. Here I will discuss three examples of questions we might ask when planning curriculum that together indicate one example of an emphasis on alternative modalities consistent with this principle: (1) Can alternative modalities such as movement, visual arts, poetry, etc. be effective in teaching the required curriculum? (2) Can alternatives modalities become a normal part of the completion and processing of projects; e.g., students pick from a variety of formats to report on their work. (3) Are students becoming comfortable with a variety of modalities, including movement, visual arts, and journaling? That is; are students improving their abilities to use alternative modalities to understand their experiences and create meaning in their lives?

Conclusion

I believe these principles can act as an initial basis for an educator or group of educators to discuss what they believe to be essential in their teaching that can be used as an effective tool in planning and implementing a holistic approach to education. Indeed, my students and I saw these principles as useful in defining our personal visions of education, as well as providing a framework for implementing our visions in our professional contexts.

References

Bremer, J. (1971). *The school without walls, Philadelphia's Parkway Program*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Cohen, E. (1986). *Designing group work*. Teachers College Press.

Duerr, M., Zajonc, A. & Dana, D. (2003). Survey of transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 1 (3), 177-211.

Gordon, T. (2003)**.** *Teacher effectiveness training***.** Three Rivers Press.

Johnson, D., Johnson, R. & Johnson, E. (1993). *Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom*. Interaction Book Company. https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Interaction_Book_Company.

Levy, S. (1996). *Starting from scratch: One classroom builds its own curriculum*. Heinemann.

London, R. (2004). What is essential in mathematics education. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 17(3), 30-36.

London, R. (2013). Transformative approaches to teacher education: Becoming holistic educators in 'unholistic' settings, in J. Lin et al. (eds.), *Re-Envisioning higher education: Embodied pathways to wisdom and social transformation*, pp. 77-94. Information Age Publishing.

London, R. (2019). Nurturing the inner life of the educator. In J. Lin, T. Culham, & S. Edwards (Eds.), *Contemplative pedagogies for transformative teaching, learning and being*, pp. 69-84. Information Age Publishing.

Sharan, Y. & Sharan, S. (1992). *Expanding cooperative learning through group investigation*. Teachers College Press.