

# Book Review: *Flourishing in the Holistic Classroom* by Lisa Tucker

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## Abstract

*Flourishing in the Holistic Classroom* represents an important contribution to the Holistic Education literature. In it, Lisa Tucker clearly ties together some of the most important voices from the canon of this field. With surgical precision she analyzes the limitations of traditional contemporary, bureaucratic educational models. Going well beyond elucidating the core principles of Holistic Education, she takes us on a journey. This is a journey filled with side-trips; we see powerful exemplars of how these principles can live in our practice as educators. This is a story of hope and optimism. It is an invitation to each of us to utilize our individual “egg tooth” to collectively crack open the hard shell of education’s constraining dominant pedagogy. We are encouraged to first travel inward and then open wide... even wider, to embrace an expansive cosmos of possibility.

Keywords: Spirals, inner and outer knowing, holistic education

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In her outstanding new book, *Flourishing in the Holistic Classroom*, Lisa Tucker takes the reader on a metaphoric journey along the spiral of a nautilus shell. Tucker clearly identifies the outdated assembly line, linear model of education and urges us to consider an alternative way of conceiving of the teaching and learning journey. We spiral in toward an exploration of the rich inner life of both teacher and student. Then, having touched this soft core, we spiral back out into connection with others, community, Earth, and the cosmos.

Holistic education is built on a foundation that includes some heady principles such as quantum theory, and what some might describe as esoteric spiritualism. This book makes a significant contribution to the field by coalescing a concise and coherent understanding of holistic education that incorporates the existing scholarship and then fleshing out how these principles can apply in practice using concrete lived examples. The work is simultaneously elucidating and inspiring.

Tucker begins the book with a powerful analysis and critique of contemporary industrial and consumerist approaches to learning. This, Tucker identifies as a linear “assembly line” approach. The objectives are pre-defined and rigid, and the educator ushers the students (products) along towards these inevitable outcomes. In a way that is consistent with the

richly metaphorical prose of this text, the author equates the need to evolve a new pedagogy with the emerging chick’s need to break free from the confining egg that provided an appropriate habitat for an earlier stage of development but is no longer adequate to nourish growth. Just as the chick cannot grow beyond the severe and absolute limits of its shell, our educational vision, processes, and methods have been deformingly constrained by our adherence to an outdated system created from an antiquated world view.

Tucker goes on to describe a personal vivid dream, one regarding the discomfort and pain of shoes that don’t fit as a source of inspiration for her new vision of education, one that is holistic, expansive, and spacious. Hers is a vision that restores the balance between inner and outer ways of knowing. Tucker describes post-secondary education as being particularly rooted in an objectivist and reductionist paradigm that is built on the concept of separation. It is a paradigm crying out for the recognition of relationship, so sorely lacking within The Academy. In this setting where the author has worked for decades with preservice teachers, subjective knowing and holism are risky, as they are seen as weaknesses by the established hierarchy. Tucker suggests, we must cultivate a full and authentic teacher presence. Teachers must be guided and presented with models that remember our wholeness and inner selves and that prize interconnectedness, interdependence and compassion.

The author refers to the work of Ron Miller and his definition of Holistic Education as a pedagogy of balance, inclusion, and connectedness. Community building, an essential part of any more holistic paradigm, must include collaborative learning, hospitality, and deep listening. Tucker provides a beautiful example of an eight-day period at the beginning of her classes that focuses on this kind of community building as a goal. Collaboration through cooperative games and initiatives and personal storytelling; hospitality through simple greeting, smiling, and sharing food; and deep listening through practicing silence, partner exercises and mindfulness practices are all illustrated in this portrait of the formation of a learning community.

Referencing the work of Parker Palmer, as well as Jack Miller, Rachel Kessler, and Katherine Weare and Thich Nhat Hanh, Tucker explores the introduction of mindfulness, meditation and contemplative practices that can connect both learners and teachers to the soul, the spirit, and the self. She suggests that we need to be vulnerable and encourage vulnerability from others. We must acknowledge fear and make space for and encourage dissipating and overcoming the fear that limits such authenticity.

At this point in the book, we reach the innermost point of the spiral along the nautilus shell, what Tucker refers to as “the seed,” that is the inner lives of teachers and students. “Flourishing,” within this space, Tucker says, requires self-esteem, vitality, and optimism, and we must reach towards this interiority as a prerequisite for achieving these three necessary conditions. Many examples of how this may be done are explored. The Arts, for example, can give greater access to other-than-cognitive dimensions. Our educational models must allow for and facilitate a search for meaning, a sense of relatedness and connection to self, to other, and to something larger. There must be a sense of sacredness, of transcendence, of self-knowledge and of connection with Earth.

As we explore and bring forth the interiority of teacher and learner, and as meaning and relevance is created, then students can connect with peers and with subject matter more deeply. And here we begin to spiral back out along the shell. Tucker includes an inspiring chapter on inquiry-based learning, a project-based and open-ended approach where students can try out their ideas and cognitive schema within a context where it has been established that their whole being is welcome and expected to be fully present. Here, traditionally “progressive” methods such as self-assessment, peer coaching and workshop models can be practiced with profound richness and holism. A powerful example of an Arts camp provides the texture for how this “voice and choice” approach can be achieved.

Tucker concludes this book with two beautiful chapters. The first of these tells a personal narrative of how her journey has

progressed through higher education and has allowed her to access her own creativity and live fully into the principle “you are who you teach.” (Palmer.)

And finally, Tucker leaves us with an invitation to join this movement towards embodying a more holistic vision and approach to education. She urges us to take advantage of the opportunity to recognize that we are each an intrinsic part of the cosmos. And as such, we should practice education with reverence for the sacredness of this work.

## **References**

- Tucker L. (2021). *Flourishing In the Holistic Classroom*. University of Winnipeg Press.
- Palmer P. (1998) *The Courage To Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Josey Bass.

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