

Whole Body Learning, Whole Body Yes!

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Abstract

This is a summary of the exciting embodied work that Turning the Wheel has been doing with K-12 students across the United States for the past 34 years.

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Imagine a room that is bright in its energy, full of the moment, joy, and connection. Live music adds to the liveliness, only instead of directing movement, the sound follows and reflects the movers, affirming the choices they make. There is structure, but it is open so that each participant gets to choose how they will interact with the prompts given. Each learner in this room is unique, and valued as such. Each student simultaneously absorbs lessons and expresses themselves, learning to support other learner's expressions along the way. Lessons of how to be community members, leaders, and citizens of the earth are plentiful, yet lecturing is absent. And because the experience is play-based and each learner is welcomed to *come as they are*, they want more, reinforcing the lessons at play and abolishing the notion of "classroom management".

We know that when learning occurs through the senses and engages the whole body/mind /spirit, it is a holistic experience. The whole student is

engaged when a lesson includes the social and emotional. If educators tie in the student's life experiences and external landscape, bridging one's innate curiosity with familiar foundational material, learning is full circle. Posing as many questions as answers, and offering cross-disciplinary, project-based experiences furthers rich and three dimensional learning. When our aim is to foster the development of imagination, collaboration, creativity, and self-awareness (all skills necessary to lead a productive, fulfilling life), it is holistic learning. Holistic education allows each learner to develop a sense of their own interests and learning styles, and ultimately, their own authenticity, so that they can offer their unique gifts to the larger community. It does not end after the test is completed, but ripens and deepens over the course of one's life.

We also know that holistic education is gradually finding its way into mainstream compulsory schooling. However, much of the curriculum still

being presented to students stems from a perceived need for skills that will help them contribute to the corporate/capitalistic system (or skills will get them a job), and/or involves an exhaustive process of memorizing and regurgitating facts. The latter, often unnecessary with modern facile access to information. Many schools still present compartmentalized, mandated, rote learning, rather than a holistic learning experience. The factory model of education's primary goal is to service the system through productivity. This antithesis to holistic education has maintained its foothold in compulsory schooling since the Industrial Revolution.

A development that many principals, parents, and education advocates consider visionary are specialty STEM schools. However, what about the parts of these young learners that live outside the categories of science, technology, engineering, or math? STEM schools may involve project-based learning, but do they draw-in all parts of the learner? They provide a foundation for young learners to work in a field, but have we lost the value of the humanities - of questioning, disrupting, exploring, connecting, of learning as a quest for what it is to be human? What about lessons that mirror life, where answers can be ever-changing, or even depend on the circumstance? *Cue self-referential learning / opportunities for self-awareness.* Are we teaching students to flow within the uncertainty of life and their own intuition, or are we leaping ahead to fields of work before the human being has had time to fully develop? If learning is simply accumulating skill sets to serve a categorized system, what happens to the whole child and their agency within, and connection to all that lies beyond that field? What happens to the value of the wide view, of connecting the dots, of outside

the box visioning, of less than obvious collaborations?

For those committed to holistic education, these kinds of questions fuel what we work towards every day. These are the ingredients of our collective stew, simmering through the afternoon and beyond, an impetus for change that considers individual development and how it informs the good of all, the value of the ability to reach across boundaries, and the possibility that the what really matters is how one approaches any task in life rather than what they roles they play or titles they hold.

A thoughtful educator asks, *How can one nurture the whole person?* Thirty four years ago, the founder of an unique organization that seeks to foster imaginative, risk taking, confident, collaborative, self-aware, and passionate learners did just that. Her burning question about how to nurture the whole person, and therefore reform communities and transform families one child, one program at a time, came from her own difficulty learning and relating. Even as a child, she knew there was more to education than classroom management and test taking. Alana Shaw has been answering this question for over thirty years through her non-profit organization, *Turning the Wheel (TTW)*. She has been working tirelessly to *be the change she wants to see.* Today, the organization has three branches and certified *Body Now* facilitators working in several cities around the country, infusing this transformative work into hundreds of schools, social service organizations, private gatherings, prisons, and events for over 35 years nationwide. They not only offer classes, but community performances based on the lives of the participants, and retreats and professional development for adult mentors. Turning the Wheel's work is a form of activism

that creates new paradigms for learning and relating, rather than reacting to and fighting against the state of compulsory education today. Their work fosters the room of bright energy that we imagine and hope for.

Turning the Wheel and its facilitators, each trained personally by Alana Shaw. From the Turning the Wheel website,

Using a working model that is based on inclusiveness, community engagement and collaboration, Turning the Wheel seeks to reconnect youth and elders to their lives and society; to encourage a collective ethic of caring for others and ourselves and to be a contributing force in fostering healthy, creative communities.

The means to this end happen through restorative works of performative art, utilizing movement improvisation, song, writing, play, and creative and reflective prompts for youth to explore.

At first glance, Turning the Wheel's work may look like that of an arts organization, but it crosses disciplines, and forges new paradigms for healing and creating community. It is a potent example of holistic learning that is inclusive of all learning styles, backgrounds, and categories of study. It weaves learning such that the outcomes reveal themselves differently for each person who the work touches.

Each exploration and outcome in a TTW program is unique to each learner, and occurs through the body to make lasting learning impressions. Each experience is community-based and deeply personal, excavating the authentic experiences and stories of the participants while exposing them to healthy ways to be part of a community.

After 35 years of working with thousands of groups, Turning the Wheel has witnessed that the body is the primary mechanism of change, and the deepest learning occurs through play. This type of learning creates what TTW refers to as "positive experiential reference points." Want to teach a concept like collaboration? How many gymnasium lectures have we all sat through, maybe to be inspired for a little while, but where the lessons ultimately fade away after the speaker leaves? By contrast, TTW gives students playful, collaborative experiences that create a reference point of joy that they will want to return to again and again. Collaboration is just one of the many life skills participants practice, woven fluidly into the TTW modality. Other skills Turning the Wheel fosters:

- Emotional/mental/physical awareness
- Safe risk-taking
- Visionary thinking
- Creative problem solving
- Healthy communication
- Positivity (TTW coined the "Yes Collective"), appreciation and gratitude
- Authenticity and internal guidance.

The work seamlessly weaves many facets of the gem that is holistic learning into the experiences it has provided for hundreds of thousands of learners nationwide.

Turning the Wheel's aim is to share this work with schools nationwide by offering experiences and workshops to changemakers like you in the schools. For more information about Turning the Wheel, go to www.turningthewheel.org. Certification programs and training for teachers, counselors and administrators to weave the work into their classrooms.

Author Bio

Lulu Delphine, M.Ed, LMT, RYT, Body Now Facilitator, is an artist of the spirit who facilitates collective healing and reimagining of habitual patterns and perspectives through somatic exploration, touch, creative practice and play. Her passion is to support clients and participants on a journey of self love, authenticity, poetic presence, fluidity of body, and community care. She believes we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Lulu has designed and delivered awakening embodiment play experiences to hundreds of diverse groups nationally, and offers private, holistic integrative massage therapy and energy medicine sessions to clients in Boulder, CO. She served as Co-Director and Facilitator of the Montana branch of Turning the Wheel and worked collaboratively with the Boulder branch of the organization for 11 years.