Teaching, Learning, and Spirituality in the College Classroom

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A range of recent developments in the U.S. higher education landscape is provoking a heightened focus on spirituality and religion in the academy. For example, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), best known as the administrators of the CIRP Freshman Survey for over 40 years, is conducting a major research project, *Spirituality in Higher Education* (www.spirituality.ucla.edu), drawing data from over 112,000 students and 40,000 faculty at over 420 institutions. Defining spirituality in broad strokes (as the "interior" and "subjective" aspects of our lives, that which reflects the "values and ideals that we hold most dear," gives us "meaning and purpose," and invokes "inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical"), the project's reports show that significant majorities of both students and faculty place a high priority on cultivating such qualities within the academy. For example, a large majority (74%) of students are searching for meaning and purpose of life, and believe that college should play a strong role in this development: more than two-thirds see it as essential or very important that their college enhances their self-understanding, and almost half say it is essential or very important for their college to encourage their personal expression of spirituality. Results from faculty show a similar interest in spirituality: 81% consider themselves to be spiritual persons, and 69% actively seek opportunities for spiritual development; a majority

of faculty believes that enhancing students' self-understanding (60%), developing moral character (59%) and helping students develop personal values (53%) are essential or very important goals of an undergraduate education.

Similarly, *College Learning in the New Global Century*, part of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Liberal Education and America's Promise* project, insists on the importance of engaging students in the "Big Questions." Initiatives such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's *Integrative Learning*, Wellesley College's *Education for Transformation*, the Ford Foundation's *Difficult Dialogues*, and ventures supported by a range of other foundations (including Teagle, Templeton, and the Fetzer Institute), are spurring colleges and universities to cultivate discussions about meaning, value, and purpose, and to develop practices that allow for the integration of mind, heart, and spirit in higher education. A growing number of articles, books, and conferences on these issues give further evidence of their increasing importance in the academy (e.g., Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, Diamond, Hoppe & Speck, Jacobsen & Jacobsen, Tisdell).

Despite the interest and value that both faculty and students seem to hold for spiritual development, over half of the students (56%) in the HERI survey reported that their professors *never* provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life, and only 55% are satisfied with how their college experience has provided "opportunity for religious/spiritual reflection." Thus, while students want support in their quests for meaning and purpose during college, few are finding it in their interactions with faculty. This may be due, in part, to the fact that attending to this kind of development in the academic setting calls traditional forms of authority and security into question. As Robert Connor (2007) describes, "The Big Questions . . . are intimidating; they seem to press us to move beyond our professional expertise and force on us an unfamiliar discourse. In this area, we are not confident about our mastery. Why can't we leave these questions to some other set of experts--the moral philosophers maybe, or the clergy, or the writers of pop-psych books? Let me teach what I know." Indeed, many academics consider spirituality to be a private matter that has no place in the classroom. While it may be appropriate for spirituality to be an object of analysis in a

religious studies course, the argument goes, what place could it possibly have in, say, mathematics?

Moreover, the use of "spirituality" as a broadly inclusive term can, in fact, be confusing and even alienating. Goodman & Teraguchi (2008) point out that some students "see spirituality as primarily concerned with religion" while for others, "spirituality invokes inner development or existential well-being," and or for still others, "is not a relevant concept at all." With this lack of a clear definition, they claim, "students, faculty, and staff will find themselves talking past each other when attempting meaningful conversations about difference." Thus, an "'all-inclusive' definition of spirituality actually conflates two separate terms: religion and psycho-social development. Because of the conflicts associated with the term 'spirituality, we believe it is time to retire the spirituality framework and address these two components separately."

Even if we narrow "spirituality" to refer to Goodman & Teraguchi's second category of inner development (including such dimensions as reflection, creativity, and core values), questions still remain: what forms might the support of such development actually take in the classroom? What pedagogical practices might foster (or inhibit) explorations of meaning and purpose, for both students and faculty? Can (and should) such development ever really be assessed? The following are strategies designed to be useful to faculty as they begin to address these questions.

Incorporate discussions of meaning and purpose.
Students are keen to hear faculty's reflections on questions such as: Why do I do what I do? What difference do I think my profession makes in the world? What meaning or purpose does my scholarly field have for me? Carnegie Mellon University recently launched a well-attended seminar program called *Big Questions*. This program brings faculty into campus dormitories for small group discussions that "explore compelling, provocative and inspiring questions related to finding purpose and meaning in our complex world," and thus help students "identify and develop their personal values." Even if the main learning objectives of a course don't center on inner development, faculty periodically can situate their subject matter within these larger frameworks, thereby deepening everyone's

engagement.

Cultivate student-focused pedagogies that make room for multiple forms of exploration.
Encourage a variety of collaborative and active learning formats, such as journals, visual images, role plays, film or music clips, or concept mapping; all are possible entry points for students to both access and express insights that operate in a register other than the purely cognitive, rational or verbal. The mere use of such practices, of course, is no guarantee that classroom environments will be fruitful sites for explorations of meaning and purpose; however, by *not* incorporating student perspectives into the pedagogical mix, such discussions are less likely to happen, or less productive if they do. For faculty interested in pursuing or refining strategies for student interaction and inclusion, centers for teaching and learning, as well as the wealth of books, articles and web resources on these issues, can offer ideas and support.

Engage knowledge that is experienced and applied in the world beyond the academy.
Extend the classroom walls. Experiential learning opportunities, such as service learning, internships, and study abroad can provide learning environments that are dramatically more effective than campus classrooms for exploring issues of meaning and purpose. Campus Compact (2007), a national coalition of over 1000 college and university presidents, offers an impressive set of initiatives and resources to faculty interested in developing community service, civic engagement, and service-learning into their scholarly work.

Create a framework for assessing development.
While it may seem impossible or inappropriate to assess and evaluate students' spiritual or inner development, developing at least a framework for articulating the kinds of growth that faculty are trying to support can be useful. Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (2005) describes six facets of understanding and development, including perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge, with accompanying rubrics that map learning trajectories within these domains.

Safeguard time for reflection.
The academy abounds with frenetic attempts to be the quickest, the biggest, the best. Such pressures certainly contribute to the strong desires, expressed in the student and faculty data from HERI and elsewhere, for time and space to reflect, ponder, and make meaning. Some faculty make a point of taking a brief walk before giving a lecture, or making sure to take long slow breaths or sips of a beverage during their teaching, all in an effort to slow down and be present. Similarly, beginning class with a moment or two of quiet can allow both instructors and their students to settle in, focus, and thus engage more deeply and creatively with the people and issues present there. In a similar vein, taking a few minutes after class (before rushing off to the next meeting or project) to quietly reflect on what occurred there, can sustain and replenish faculty. Finally, consider establishing a ritual for the last day of your course, allowing both you and your students to share ways in which the course has intersected with broader issues of meaning and purpose.

The terrains of spirit, meaning, purpose, and value are indeed difficult to traverse, particularly within the complex, multicultural environment of today's universities. Nonetheless, national research is showing that both faculty and students yearn for the opportunity to bring those elements of their lives into conversation in the academic setting. The strategies above offer a starting point for what will be, inevitably, an individual journey for each person--but one which can benefit from being shared, over time, in community.

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