Reconsidering Our Definition of the "Whole Student": An Argument for an Authority-Based Approach to University Education

By: Paul Hanstedt

Questioning Ignatius

This essay begins with a lingering dissatisfaction over the idea of the “whole student.” A few years back, I heard a keynote speaker talk about the “six touchstones” necessary for educating whole students: intellect, spirit, the physical, the emotional, and . . . well, to be frank, I don’t recall the other two. But I do remember this speaker’s overall argument: “If we educate all these components,” this college president, or dean, or provost argued, “then we have truly educated the whole student.”

Except, of course, when we haven’t. The fact is, this model of education has been around for a long time, dating back at least to St. Ignatius of Loyola. And for at least the last fifty years, American (and some international) universities have been deliberate about structuring a “whole person” approach into their curricula; indeed, we’d be hard pressed to find the college that doesn’t require phys ed or that doesn’t encourage students to take at least one course that nods in the direction of ethics or philosophy or religion. And there are many, many schools that require fine arts courses and attend to wellness and whatever else those final two categories are that we wish to include on our list of six or five or seven essential components necessary to educating the “whole student.” And still we produce tens of thousands of graduates a year who enter the workforce convinced that the purpose of their college education was merely to increase their lifetime incomes.

The purpose of this article is not to dismiss the metaphor of the whole student. On the contrary, in a political and economic climate that seems intent on educating as many students as cheaply as possible and as quickly as possible, an educational model that pushes back is ethically imperative. We need to insist that the complex biological, sociological, psychological wonders that are our students are acknowledged, always, as more than just names on a spreadsheet or swipes of a monetized ID card.

My goal here is to rethink the metaphor of the whole student, reshaping it to assure that the “wholeness” we’re aiming for actually matches our highest ambitions for the individuals in our classrooms. Further, I’d like to argue that redefining this metaphor has a subtle but significant domino effect throughout tertiary education, restructuring nearly everything that we do—and more importantly, that we have our students do—in the classroom.

An alternative definition

Another story: At a recent workshop on assessment and course design, a department chair stood up and said, “Well, obviously we don’t want our graduates to be the line workers—we want them to be the line managers.” It was a powerful statement, and many in the room nodded their heads. Nevertheless, several of us questioned this assumption, wondering if perhaps our academic work wasn’t driven by more meaningful goals for our students. Maybe, we wondered, what we want is for our graduates to walk into the room, look at the line workers, look at the line managers—and then wonder if there isn’t a better way. Or look at the social worker and
look at the welfare recipient—and wonder if there isn’t a better way. Or look at the political left and the political right—and wonder if there isn’t a better way.

This questioning, and any consequent action, perhaps provides a much better example of what “wholeness” means than the traditional, Ignatian model. In this second definition, “wholeness” is less quantitative than qualitative. The end goal is a student who isn’t afraid to engage what Carol Geary Schneider, president emerita of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, refers to as “unscripted problems”—that is, problems that their education may not necessarily have prepared them for, problems that don’t play by the traditional rules, problems that others might not even perceive as problems. Further, this “whole” student is capable of not just identifying and questioning these problems (often anchored firmly in the status quo), she is able to analyze them in deliberate ways, propose thoughtful solutions, and enact those solutions.

This newer definition of wholeness—a student who is able to engage in the world and change it in thoughtful ways—comes much closer than the Ignatian model to what drives our work as faculty. In other words, what keeps us going despite long hours, moderate pay, and an increasingly rancorous public discourse about university education is the belief that our efforts help to make the world a better place, that we’re working with students to develop in them a sense of their ability to rethink and reshape their fields in positive ways—and, by extension, to rethink and reshape the world.

This isn’t to say that we necessarily believe that all our students will be the next Einstein, the next Toni Morrison, the next Max Weber. At the very least, though, I feel comfortable arguing that most faculty wish to place all students in the position where they understand that it is their obligation to participate in the world in meaningful, powerful ways—and that they have the ability to do so.

**Nuts and bolts, part I: Authority**

All of this is a very nice vision, of course; very few would argue with the idea that students should leave college with the capacity to engage in positive change. But how to achieve it?

Almost reflexively, most institutions and academic programs respond to this question with a very simple assumption: Content Knowledge + Skill Knowledge = Thoughtful Change.

While the acquisition of content knowledge and skills are crucial for arriving at the goal of positive change, the kinds of complex challenges I’m discussing here require more than that. Simply put, if content and skills were enough, education would be there already, particularly after the rise in standardized testing that the United States has experienced over the last two decades.

In the end, content and skill knowledge must be augmented by an attitude, a disposition, a sense of one’s ability and right to enter the world not as a mere cog in the machine, but as a thoughtful, competent individual who, when the situation calls for it, is able to step forward to ask questions and propose solutions that may lead to the reinvention of the machine. Something along these lines: Content Knowledge + Skill Knowledge + Attitude = Thoughtful Change.

To a generation of faculty wary of a culture—real, perceived, or otherwise—of “entitled” students, this may seem like a risky venture. With that in mind, it’s important to note that what we are after here is more than
“confidence” or “agency.” After all, one can be confident without necessarily being correct, or even informed. Similarly, agency, the ability to act upon the world and reshape it, does not necessarily require wisdom or forethought; a sixteen-year-old driving a car the wrong way down a one-way street has agency. But certainly we hope for more than that from our students?

Instead, I would like to posit the term “authority.” Key here is the idea that authority looks both forward and backward: it implies authorship, the ability to write and rewrite, to shape, to create. At the same time, this ability comes from something: authority is granted, given, earned. The content and skills students acquire during their years in college are crucial: they are part of what creates a sense of authority in students. What we teach them matters.

Perhaps then, we’re not looking for a single equation, but two simultaneous, perhaps even slightly contradictory, equations: both Content Knowledge + Skill Knowledge = A Sense of Authority and Content Knowledge + Skill Knowledge + A Sense of Authority = Thoughtful Change.

That said, how we teach our students is also crucial in the development of authority. If what we’re talking about is a kind of authorship of the world, it follows that the learning process that prepares students for this kind of active, thoughtful response to the problems we face today must allow them to practice these skills. In other words, the only way to truly develop authority—a sense of one’s right to engage the world in a meaningful manner—is to practice it. Constantly. From the start. In ways at first small, then increasingly large. In ways that are perhaps less complex (though never simple!), and then increasingly more complex. In ways that allow students to fail, fall down, and pick themselves back up again. In ways that allow students to learn how problems are solved—with deliberation, creativity, resilience, collaboration. In ways that allow them to understand that they are capable of solving problems—and that solving problems leads to a rewarding relationship with the world and with themselves. In ways, in short, that allow them a sense that this is what it means to live to their fullest capacity as human beings.

Nuts and bolts, part II: Pedagogies

So what does this mean in practical terms? What it doesn’t mean is that content disappears from a course or is shoved to one side: without a sense of the what of a course, the how is impossible. If the equations I’m creating here are accurate, authority is not possible unless it is grounded in knowledge.

That said, mere acquisition of knowledge is not enough. Very few students will be able to sit in a classroom for thirteen weeks, passively taking notes, and then in the final week of the term suddenly become active and, voila!, demonstrate the perfect capacity for active engagement with the course content—much less with the complex problems of the world. Placing a focus on the type of students we wish to graduate will require changes in the kinds of projects we assign, the types of exams we give, our day-to-day pedagogies, the structure of our courses, and, indeed, in some cases, the very structure of our curricula.

How can we change our paper assignments so that students are less able to gloss the authority of others (the instructor, outside sources) and must instead struggle to articulate terms, problems, and solutions in a language they themselves have mastered—and, in a way, even created? How might we supplement exams that require content knowledge with exams that require students to solve problems they haven’t encountered before? How might this require us to rethink our grading strategies and grading scales? How might we ensure that the skills
required to write papers of this nature or take exams of this kind are practiced throughout the course—in ways ranging from low to high risk—so that our students can learn how failure and struggle are essential steps in true learning?

On a larger scale, it’s easy to see how an authority-based approach to education explains the need for signature projects, problem-based course design, service learning, internships, and other pedagogies that blur the artificial lines between “learning” and “world.” In each of these, students are pushed away from the controlled environment of passive learning into situations where they must engage with the unpredictabilities of life beyond the textbook. Indeed, considered through this lens, we gain a further understanding of why George Kuh’s “high-impact practices” have such an impact: it’s not just that these practices allow students to be “engaged,” it’s that these particular kinds of engagement push students to enter the room, to assess the situation, and then to ask not “What would my professor do?” but “What, based on my learning, should I do?” And only through engaging in this kind of thinking and problem solving—repeatedly, in multiple settings both in and out of the classroom, at increasing levels of difficulty—can our students be expected to leave college with a sense of their right and ability and obligation to engage in the complex challenges facing us right now.

Conclusion

In the end, then, perhaps this redefinition of Whole Person Education is less a radical shift than a fine-tuning. After all, active pedagogies, alternative paper assignments, high-impact practices, problem-based course design—none of these things is new to our vocabulary.

At the same time, I would argue that this shift in definition—from wholeness as a quantified checklist to wholeness as a state of mind, a quality of engagement with the world—is valuable in that it keeps us, individually and institutionally, honest. If ensuring that all our students attain wholeness is as simple as checking off several curricular boxes (mind, body, spirit, creativity, and . . . and . . . ?), then almost every student would leave the university with a sound sense of who they are, of their purpose in life, of their ability to fulfill that purpose. There seems to be little evidence that this is the case.

If, on the other hand, we embrace an authority-based definition of wholeness, a definition that insists that knowledge and skills must be augmented with a sense of being that allows us to use those skills, then our feet are held to the fire. For we know that this sense of authority, this sense of the human right and ability to engage in the complex problems of the world in meaningful ways, is not easy to come by. In order to get our students to this point, we need to rethink what we do—and what we have students do—in our classes on a daily basis. And we need to rethink the kinds of exams we give and the projects we assign. And we need to rethink how we structure our courses. And our majors. And our departments. And, perhaps, our institutions.

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