

In recent months, during my review of many freshman student essays, I have thought deeply about the challenges we confront as educators. My educational philosophy centers on the notion that all efforts devoted to excellence in learning and teaching are enlivened by the constant quest for integration and reflection. Early in my tenure as dean, I led the process of developing a Conceptual Framework for our School of Education – it is titled *Weaving a Transformative School Fabric*. We have subsequently crafted all of our programs to “prepare graduates to function as socially conscious catalysts for change who create and sustain school environments where excellence is cherished and social justice flourishes.”

Our conceptual framework further highlights the importance of **reflection** for educational professionals. It is through reflection that we continually assess and reflect upon our professional practice in order to change and grow as life-long learners. Howard Gardner, in *The Unschooled Mind*, asserts that many of the inquiry-based strategies found within the scientific method seem to cultivate a reflective attitude. About the process of reflection Gardner tells us that regular discourse with our colleagues increases the possibility that our own stereotypes and misconceptions will be challenged and that eventually a more realistic and comprehensive perspective will begin to emerge.

Starting early in 2004, two of my administrative colleagues and I became thoroughly engaged in a three-year project on Integrative Learning sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CF) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The *Catalyst Project* is underway on our campus and we are studying several academic initiatives that promote **integration** – where students are encouraged to be “integrative” in their learning and thinking.

During Oswego’s summer 2004 Freshman Orientation program, we began the process of directing a cohort of first-year students to respond to a series of insightful essay questions. These questions ask them to reflect on their learning, explain how they have used their knowledge and skills, let us know if they perceive coherence and relevance in their educational experiences, and describe how they have been changed by their education. For the cohort of freshmen who attended the summer 2005 orientation program, we added a fourth question which asked them to identify specific “things” that motivated them to learn.

We know that once students enter middle school, and proceed through high school, and then into postsecondary institutions, they are required to interact with more peers and more teachers, and must also deal with heightened expectations for performance and individual responsibility. Leaving behind the safety and familiarity of elementary school self-contained classrooms, learners are increasingly challenged to “pull it all together” on their own and are expected to make sense out what often seems like a fragmented academic experience. Making these transitions first into middle school, next into high school, and then into college evokes a wide variety of emotions (i.e. anxiety, fear, excitement) and concerns for young adolescents who are becoming young adults. As faculty members in institutions of higher education, we can not afford to lose sight of this reality.

The AAC&U and the CF contend that “fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning – across courses, over time, and between campus and community life – is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education.” “Integrative learning often occurs as learners put theory into practice, ‘making meaning’ as they apply abstract concepts in practical settings.” In today’s contemporary institutions of higher education, effective educational professionals must consistently provide multiple ways for learners to be “integrative” – to connect classroom learning with real life experiences and responsibilities.

My involvement in Oswego’s Catalyst Project has reinforced my belief that contemporary college campuses represent one of our last remaining venues for safety, optimism, and hope – places where young adults can hone their integrative thinking skills, try new things, make mistakes, practice the act of serious reflection, be themselves, and discover new joys about living in a global society. I believe this work will ultimately help our students to become more engaged in their learning.

As we continue to ask students to reflect on issues related to teaching and learning, we anticipate they will become more “intentional” about their academic work. We imagine that faculty will become more focused on the process of integrative learning, and may be inspired to also be more reflective about their teaching methods and course modifications. In fact, recent conversations with several faculty members that several are already re-thinking and re-designing their course assignments in ways that require students to be “integrative” as they complete the required tasks.

As a member of a highly engaged administrative team at SUNY Oswego, I remain committed to my belief that EDUCATION is a lifelong endeavor – it remains an iterative and recursive process of integration and reflection learning and teaching integration and reflection learning and teaching integration and

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