

Getting the Essence Across

Dr Keith Beasley describes an approach to Teaching & Learning that, automatically, introduces students to spiritual principles.

A major challenge for academics, teachers or others attempting to bring a spiritual dimension into mainstream education has been the very ideas they're trying to get across: that the intellect, the facts and theories on which the educational system is based, is but one facet of what students need to be 'taught'. Paradoxically, it is the very essence of spirituality, a deeper dimension to life and thus to knowing, that creates a barrier to teaching it.

However, as many of those who have travelled along a spiritual path would probably agree, paradoxes need not be a problem. On the contrary: by facing and embracing the paradox, so a deeper understanding, an inner knowing about a subject, is obtained. This article describes how, by utilising a range of recent developments in Teaching & Learning (T&L), any teacher of any topic can transcend this paradox . . . and thus bring the essential essence of human's spiritual nature to bear with their students.

Threshold Concepts

In their now ground-breaking paper of 2003, Meyer and Land introduced the idea of Threshold Concepts: that many subjects contain a particularly difficult concept for students to grasp and, until they have crossed the threshold of understanding, the subject will remain, effectively, unknown. Such a threshold concept undoubtedly exists in the T&L of spirituality. That the mind is capable of thought beyond the rational and that such a mode of consciousness is important in living full, meaningful and successful lives is certainly troublesome to many, particularly those conditioned to the objective focus of conventional educational methods and content. Thus, unless and until lecturers can find a way of assisting students to 'get' this fundamental aspect of a sacred, mystical or psychic dimension to life, they are unlikely to make any progress in bridging the gap that often exists between academic and mystical paradigms. Thankfully a number of other developments in both T&L and in research methodology provide useful approaches that can be utilised in transcending the paradigm gap.

Experiential Learning

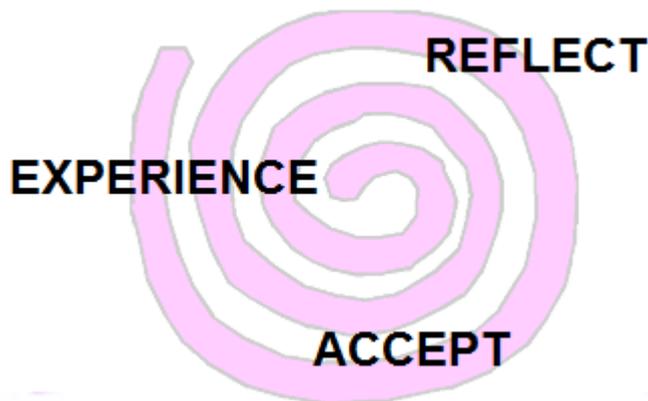
It has long been known that each individual has different preferences in learning style: some learn quickly and easily through voice only, others rely on visual cues and others require a kinaesthetic learning scenario.

The need to engage a student beyond word and theory, was brought to prominence by David Kolb (1984). He identified that learning is best considered as a process which could be seen as having four phases:

- Concrete experience: any first-hand, personal, experience of something new or different.

- Reflective observation: contemplation on this experience, relating it to one's inner understanding of life and other, prior experiences.
- Abstract conceptualisation: rational integration of the new experience into one's inner model of reality.
- Active experimentation: testing out the model through experimentation; seeing if it holds up in practice, in the real world.

Although it could be argued that not all stages always take place or that the cycle could start at any point, few would deny the underlying validity of such a model of personal growth or of an individual's learning process. To embody an experience or fully assimilate a new concept, it is necessary to integrate the experiential and intellectual understanding of a subject . . . and that usually requires some sort of reflection, even if not undertaken as a conscious activity. This is illustrated in the diagram below.



What is particularly important to emphasize in this is that teaching the intellectual words and concepts related to a subject is not sufficient for learning to occur. Filling the mind with ideas does not, of itself, constitute learning. This is true of any subject and particularly pertinent in topics concerned with mysticism or non-rational consciousness

In the *Network Review No114*, Steve Taylor presented another important facet in getting across the gist of topics spiritual: when teaching of matters beyond words, one has to utilise teaching material that themselves have a depth beyond the literal meaning of those words. Poetic words, as Taylor demonstrates have the ability to take the reader, even students in a conventional learning environment, into a different mental space. The essence of the spiritual is just that: it cannot be wholly described in words that are taken literally.

Although words such as 'ineffable' are used to describe mystical/spiritual experiences, there can still be an assumption that words are both necessary and sufficient in teaching subjects that are, basically, non-rational in nature. My own personal experience, confirmed by my doctorate studies, suggests that neither is realistic. When teaching Reiki, for example, there is little doubt that it is the attunements (the transmission process between Master and student) and the demonstration Reiki treatments that are most likely to give a student the real 'feel' for the subject. Words may help them to place the experience within an intellectual framework, but it is the personal, whole-body, non-local experience, that enables the essence of the subject (in this case Reiki) to be known . . . through direct apprehension. As those who have fully engaged in the experiential sessions at *Mystics and Scientists* conferences over the years will probably affirm, to appreciate the inner, deeper, nuances of 'the ineffable' is only possible through an ineffable experience.

Such a contention is by no means restricted to teachers of healing, martial arts or other Eastern practices. Philosophers, for example, renowned for disagreeing with each other and for continual debate, are generally agreed upon one thing: as William James puts it: "Knowledge about a thing is not the thing itself" (James 1902, p488). Whether one uses a precise definition or broad description of an experience, the actual experience is always far more than the description of it: even everyday experiences have a depth and breadth to them that is impossible to portray in words.

It is then tempting to ask: if words are insufficient, why does conventional T&L rely, almost exclusively, upon words? Partially it will be the inertia of our word-based approach to education. But reluctance to relinquish an attachment to words probably comes largely through fear: of being different, of working in a less conventional manner. Whilst such fears were probably well founded a few decades ago (see, for example Hay 2011 – the story of Alister Hardy, the founder of the Religious Experiences Research Centre - RERC), today there is a much greater awareness and acceptance of the need to embrace the subjective nature of human-beings. B. Alan Wallace in *The Taboo of Subjectivity* (2000) provides an excellent explanation as to why objectivity became so all embracing . . . and why educationalists and scientists now need to embrace the subjective. Such trends are not only to be seen in T&L developments as discussed above, but also in recent advances in research methodology.

Participative Enquiry

There are experiences and experiences: ones that come within the realms of rational comprehension and those that do not. To grasp the notion of a transcendent reality, one needs, even more than with 'hard' reality, to experience it first-hand. One also needs to allow the experience to change ones ideas and attitudes. Even in an academic research context, the inter-relation between doing research and a commitment to personal growth is now an acknowledged epistemology. Such an approach is the essence of Action Research or Participative Enquiry (see, for example Reason, 1994 or McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996).

My own involvement in a major UK Research Council funded project illustrates these points admirably. *'The experience of worship in late medieval cathedral and parish church'* was an innovative research project funded by the AHRC/ESRC *Religion and Society* Research Programme. By enacting medieval worship (as we think it would have been circa 1530) it was hoped to shed new light on the process by which sacred spaces, texts, artefacts and music become an act or worship, i.e. a religious experience. The enactments took place during 2011 at Salisbury Cathedral and at St Teilo's Church, part of St Fagans National History Museum in Cardiff: see www.experienceofworship.org.uk and Harper, Barnwell & Williamson (forthcoming).

As the project administrator, I not only had a role (as a medieval carpenter) in the enactments, but also analysed the diaries kept by the participants during their weeks at St Teilo's (see Beasley, 2011 and Beasley, Aveling & Moss, forthcoming). I was particularly interested in whether any sacred moments had been experienced and, if so, what had enabled that state of mind. Despite this being a research project, many of the

academics involved did find themselves having profound periods: moments of direct apprehension of the experience of worship. Some obtained this through engaging with the music, some with the striking wall-paintings at St. Teilo's. But another common theme emerged from a number of enactment accounts: the importance of engaging with the worship beyond words and their meanings. For example:

The freedom from the text enabled me to engage more in private prayer. (Diary 201).

and

Very meditative environment – didn't focus on words, just relaxed in the sound of worship. (Diary 209, Tues pm).

Whilst one cannot conclude much quantitatively from such a small sample, it is clear from these examples that obtaining the experience resulted from not engaging with words. Rather the worshipful state, a mode of consciousness beyond the rational, is more readily obtained by stepping aside from words and their meanings. Within an academic research project this is a significant observation and one which offers much hope of bringing spiritual essence into educational environments.

What was also often stated in the diaries, was how the whole project experience would require much reflection to fully unpack, and how it would undoubtedly lead to changes in how individuals viewed both the research process and their own worship practice. Thus, the requirements of action research had been met: direct involvement in the subject was enabling deep personal reflection and possible changes of mind. Learning and knowing cannot be separated from an individual's personal growth process, whether as researcher, student or tutor. In essence, a human, spiritual being is constantly on such a path to fulfilment, whatever one's role in life.

Ways of Knowing

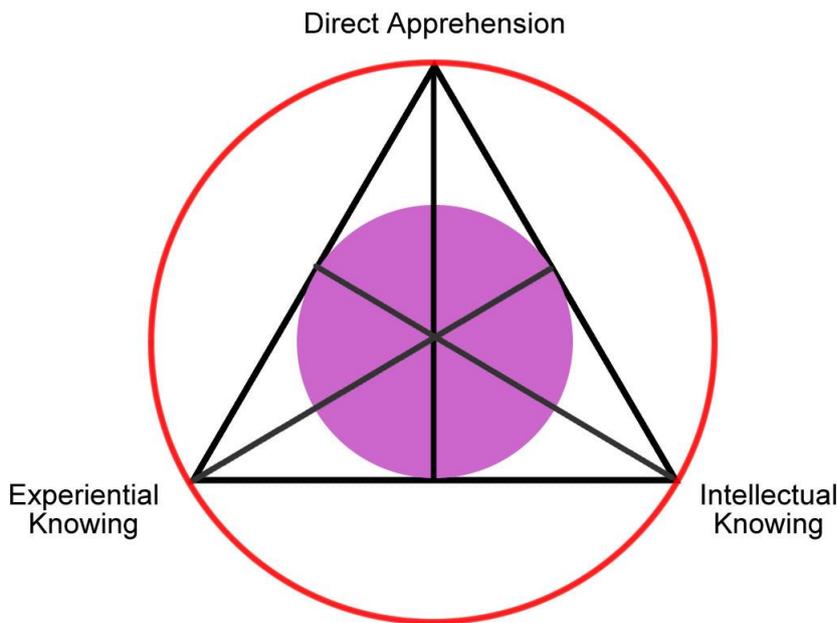
Even with experiential learning and action research however, it may still be difficult for students conditioned to factual data or conceptual information to grasp the essence of a spiritual reality. In my own doctorate research (see Beasley 2013), I explored the value (or 'fruits' as the RERC describe them) of not just single but multiple spiritual, mystic or otherwise transcendent experiences. Analysis of accounts of my contributors, corroborated by theoretical under-pinning from across disciplines, confirmed that the more frequently an individual had a transcendent experience the more it helped them to embrace the possibility of consciousness beyond the rational. In short, the more someone is willing to embrace a transcendent state and willing to know through direct apprehension, the more open they will become to further transcended states.

From Kolb has already come the importance of integrating intellectual knowing with experiential knowing. He also emphasises the importance of a reflective stage, which one might equate to what I call 'direct apprehension' or an inner knowing, beyond rational understanding and personal sensory experience. Whilst Kolb didn't express it in

these terms, one might rephrase his learning cycle as '3 Ways of Knowing', as summarised in the table below:

Intellectual Knowing	Experiential Knowing	Direct Apprehension
Facts, theories; conceptual knowledge	Practical skills; realities of daily life	Deeper meaning; inner knowing
Taught through words	Experienced through senses	Sensed with whole body
"Logically . . ."	"In practice . . ."	"It just feels 'right'"

From this it can be seen that the spiritual dimension of reality has an associated mode of knowing, which might be called 'direct apprehension'. Thus, the means of knowing about spiritual knowing requires that the associated mode of knowing is utilised: we cannot



truly 'know', in the spiritual sense of the word, unless and until we have had, first-hand, personal, direct apprehension experiences.

Furthermore, to truly know, to embed knowing in our daily lives, requires an integration of these 3 Ways of Knowing as illustrated in this diagram. At each apex of the triangle, are

the three modes of consciousness. At any given time, depending where an individual may be on a learning cycle, one or the other may predominate. Sometimes however, conditioning or desire may hold us, unnaturally, at one apex or another, leading to a block to deeper knowing. This I summarise in the table below.

Intellectual Knowing	Experiential Knowing	Direct Apprehension
Benefits = Grounding		

Grounding in established ideas	Knowing for oneself	Obtaining a cosmic perspective
Risks		
Stuck in an 'Ivory tower'	Sensationalism; 'animal' reflex	"Away with the fairies"

When a student has become attached to theory or belief, then grounding in the spiritual, through a direct apprehension learning experience, would be beneficial. Conversely, if an individual has become attached to the numinous quality of direct apprehension, then a practical or intellectual exercise would provide appropriate grounding.

Integrated knowing, and effective T&L, thus requires a balance, over time, between these three Ways of Knowing. This leads (the central, purple zone in the diagram) to 'being in the zone', in the flow, as widely acknowledged by Taoists and sports coaches alike. If world champions have benefitted from applying such wisdom, it seems only reasonable for educationalists to do so too.

Discussion

Bringing all these ideas and practices together can provide teachers and lecturers with an extremely powerful approach to teaching of any subject. Combining the established value of Threshold Concepts with the insights behind transcendent consciousness enables the essence of any topics to be 'taught' in a manner beyond conventional T&L epistemology. Whilst still unusual in academic institutions, such a focus on personal self-exploration and on embracing direct apprehension as a means of knowing, is seen as essential in the transmission of any mystical tradition or martial art, for example. Here the passing down of wisdom through intimate master: disciple relationships is an accepted and vital ingredient.

Far from the conventional, detached tutor: student relationship of Western universities it may be, but that does not make it inappropriate. The best lecturers, those chosen by students to receive teaching awards, or receiving top marks in student satisfaction surveys are just those who throw themselves mind, body and soul into their subject and into their teaching. They know that sharing a personal story related to their topic may be just what it takes to help students understand the gist of whatever the subject happens to be.

From the perspective of members of the SMN (for example) looking to promote a spiritual perspective to their subject, combining the '3 ways of Knowing' with Threshold Concepts and experiential learning offers many advantages. Such an approach is already being pursued for on-line T&L as I shall now outline.

Accelerated Learning Lectures

At the BodyMind Institute, a global on-line educational course provider for subjects related to health & well-being, the value of utilising recent developments in T&L alongside integrated knowing within on-line course provision has led to a whole new series of courses. ALLs, Accelerated Learning Lectures (or Lessons), are typically hour long audio-visual presentations embracing all of the features outlined above. Designed to provide the essence of a subject, they deliberately avoid jargon and discipline specific detail to present just the essence of the subject. The aim is to encourage and enable students to personally embody and embrace the subject from within; to know the spirit of the topic, rather than to learn facts or theories.

Within a given ALL, all 3 Ways of Knowing will be utilised in an integrated and balanced way. For example in my ALL on *Mindful Presence* I include reference to Mindfulness from the academic perspective, practical examples of relevant personal experiences . . . and an actual meditative, exercise. Together, in a way that would not be possible relying on just a single way of knowing, they provide the holistic essence of the subject. The threshold concept, that mindful presence is a mode of consciousness beyond the rational, is not so much explained to a student as provided to them to embrace and experience.

At the time of writing it is too early to report on the success of ALLs (associated technical issues are being resolved), but the positive responses from tutors have been encouraging. Subject experts in the holistic health and well-being field understand, only too well, the limitation of talk and chalk teaching methods. They, having embodied the spirit of holistic well-ness, know that the process of learning, knowing and growing, has to come from within.

Conclusions

An approach to T&L has been presented that not only offers efficient and effective means of teaching any subject, but highlights how spirituality . . . and ideas such as transcendent modes of thought and holistic ways of living, can be brought into mainstream education: not as subjects but through an approach to T&L that emphasises depth and inner knowing. By teaching the essence of a subject, rather than just its facts and theories, so the spirit of the topic . . . and thus spirituality generally, is transmitted from tutor to student.

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With a background in Quality & Reliability in microelectronics research, Keith Beasley is also a Reiki Master and author of 'Reiki - Without Rules. He is a visionary and tutor at the BodyMind Institute, actively involved in their development of Accelerated Learning Lectures (see www.bodymindinstitute.com). He is currently applying the ideas in this paper in the teaching & coaching of soft-skill: www.onereality.co.uk.