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Book Review: Integrative Learning - International Research and Practice

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Book Review

Integrative Learning: International research and practice

Daniel Blackshields, James Cronin, Bettie Higgs, Shane Kilcommins, Marian McCarthy and Anthony Ryan (eds.) (2015)

How can we make higher-education curriculum relevant for diverse learners? Such a question lies at the heart of the conceptualisation of “integrative learning”. Building on work developed in America in the late 1990s and continued through research including Huber and Hutchings’s (2004) seminal *Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain*, Klein’s (2005) *Integrative learning and interdisciplinary studies* and Higgs, Kilcommins and Ryan’s (2010) *Making Connections: Intentional Teaching for Integrative Learning*, this edited book, *Integrative Learning: International research and practice*, perpetuates the development of a shared language around understanding integrative learning.

Early in the book, concerns are raised about the structure of higher-education programs that may be perceived by students as a set of disparate courses (subjects) that emphasise discipline-specific content and provide little that is naturally, personally meaningful. To avoid transference pedagogical models and offer rich, student-centred experiences, this book introduces the concepts of integrative learning and intentional teaching. Integrative learning focuses learners on making connections across knowledge domains, various contexts and time. For the book editors, it reflects an umbrella concept to describe a range of scholarly teaching and learning activities that support students in making connections with their learning. The premise is that such connections do not *just happen*; they are planned, implemented and evaluated through intentional teaching.

The authors outline the contributions of this book as continuing to develop a shared language of integrative learning, albeit not a unified one in light of diverse contexts and applications, and to highlight the complexity in which teaching, learning and curriculum are navigated. To address the former, the book aims to widen the doors on the conversation by introducing international perspectives and practices through 22 illustrative case studies. Each chapter is written by practitioners engaging in action research and scholarship across disciplines, countries and teaching roles to offer a variety of individual, collaborative and university-wide approaches.

The cases presented traverse disciplines as well as countries, to offer a range of reflective and descriptive narratives of integrative learning practices. Medical or health disciplines and disciplines drawing on aspects of creative arts, such as music, improvisation or drama, feature strongly. Certain approaches, techniques or strategies are endorsed for promoting integrative learning. These include problem-based learning (Chapter 3), learning agreements (Chapter 6), seminar or peer-learning opportunities (Chapter 9), community-based research (Chapter 19) and the curriculum vitae for workplace learning (Chapter 22). The cases range from assessment, classroom and subject practices to initiatives that target the whole university. For example, at an institutional level, and focusing on teachers’ professional development, Allen in Chapter 2 argues for the use of ePortfolios as a means of promoting creative teaching and reflective practice; similarly, Mangan and Fitzgerald (Chapter 12) introduce teaching teams as a vehicle for reflective, professional development.

The book is pitched at an audience of academics and researchers in higher education and those generating higher-education curriculums. Given the focus on curriculum, this targeted readership seems appropriate; however, the more general principles of intentional teaching might also lend themselves to a broader network of teachers, educational leaders and practitioners.

Overall, academics who are invested in improving their teaching practice in higher education will benefit from the values and intent of the book and the possibilities it offers to transform practice. Readers will find it easy to say “yes” to pertinent statements and agree with the vision of learner-centred pedagogy, engagement of practitioners in their own teaching and learning scholarship and reflection and university-wide curriculum reform. For those who have advocated for intentional teaching that supports students in making connections, this book offers a common conceptual base and language to further engage in the conversation.

However, the potpourri of diverse case studies may be too widespread to be as effective as it could be. Closer attention might have been paid to offering key questions, thoughts or ideas throughout the chapters to enable a deep, integrative learning experience for the reader. This could include providing templates or resources to share or extend teaching and learning scholarship, and to help readers adapt ideas from the local practices described in the cases to their own personal contexts.