

The Dance of Spirit in AEPL and Beyond

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1991-1993: AEPL Begins—A New Rhythm in Teaching and Learning

I had just submitted my dissertation. Research for it had started with phenomenological experiences in the reading process but led to the role of emotion in meaning-making. As a new Ph.D. on the tenure track, I was looking around in composition studies to see where my interests could land. I wanted to create a rewarding research agenda that could make a difference and add to the knowledge in the field. However, I was growing frustrated over the lack of validation for research that advocated for a higher value of emotion in the writing process. Then I saw that a special interest group, “Beyond the Cognitive Domain” founded by Alice Brand and Dick Graves, was meeting at the 1991 CCCC. This group looked promising. About 150 other people apparently felt the same.

Only the front row chairs were open when I walked in just a minute or two the start of the session. Charlie Suhor and James Moffett sat in the front. Alice Brand began the special interest group meeting when she introduced herself and Dick Graves. They took turns inspiring us with their vision for the future, and we were delighted to affirm their goals. That was the first public seed for AEPL. At the 1992 CCCC, we met again. Alice, Dick, and Charlie presented their plan to form an NCTE assembly. What to name it? How to talk about it in a “safe” way, in a way to invite acceptance and to present our ideas to others as a legitimate strand of inquiry? As pioneers we understood risk, but we also aimed for significant change and a broader base for research in education and composition studies. At NCTE in 1993, we voted to accept the by-laws. We recognized the executive committee and welcomed AEPL as an official NCTE assembly.

Dick Graves’ charisma, experience, and dedication made him perfect as our first president. I think most of us would have followed him across the great Sahara if it meant our AEPL would grow. Dick was well known for his love of dancing, and I know for sure that we were willing to follow him to the dance floor as well as in his leading of the organization. As AEPL was being choreographed, I met Regina Foehr in 1991 in Boston, when we were placed on the same panel. I presented a paper about emotion then, but motivated by AEPL goals, I shifted my interests in 1993 to spirituality in education. AEPL had guided me to my niche, and it felt right to move to this new beat and to do so in the company of so many excellent teacher/scholars.

1994-1997: The Pace Quickens as AEPL Continues

The first time I collaborated with Regina, we co-authored, “Power Within: Spirituality in the Classroom,” a paper for a panel with James Moffett and Dick Graves at the 1994 NCTE meeting. This session was well-attended with an audience of over 100 people. Each of us spoke to the importance of spiritual approaches in teaching, and in one way or another we all were defining what that meant. During the question and answer session, I remember feeling challenged when skeptics spoke, yet comforted when audience members interjected answers in support. Naturally, we were delighted when

NCTE chose our panel for tape-recording and sales to conference participants. With this recording, NCTE seemed to validate our ideas; we felt encouraged to continue with this AEPL topic. I think all of us believed we were engaged in stimulating a paradigm shift within the academy, one that ushered in a whole-system transition that accommodated the whole learner. We advocated for a pedagogy that aimed at global change and one that allowed students to develop such qualities as love, compassion, patience, generosity, courage and wisdom.

Concern about the direction of educational trends created other organizations also concerned about the same matters which had drawn us in AEPL together. The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) was founded in 1989, and in 1990, a retreat of holistic educators wrote "The Chicago Statement on Education." This document defines holistic education and its principles. GATE, The Global Alliance for Transforming Education, directed by Phillip Gang, held conferences over the next few years. In 1991, they issued a paper titled "Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective." Outside of the United States, the first International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) was held in Israel. In Mexico, Dr. Ramon Gallegos was establishing a foundation that offered higher degrees in Holistic Education to teachers seeking a spirit-based pedagogy. These groups, along with AEPL, were radically arguing a whole-system change—one that acknowledges the spiritual side of learning.

AEPL leaders were aware that to expand beyond the cognitive domain in educational studies, we needed conference papers, articles, books, a journal, and maybe a conference of our own to support this expansion. In 1994, *Presence of Mind*, edited by Dick Graves and Alice Brand, was released, offering a thoughtful and clear expression of these radical ideas. Alice also led the organization in beginning *JAEPL—the Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, being very careful to maintain scholarly integrity to persuade the audience of our non-AEPL peers. The caution she exercised is strongly evident in "The Editor's Message" she wrote for the inaugural issue:

The theme of this first issue is Contemporary Composition Studies: Steps Beyond. What it does not mean is abandoning the solid armature of knowledge and skills. What it does mean is that we reflect our history but we question it. We resist its safety. Let me rephrase that. It means that we hold tradition up for scrutiny at the same time we push boundaries back, follow intuitions, test and record them . . . This journal is for all thinking-feeling instructors who learn and teach, so to speak, to the beat of a different drummer. (v)

Alice also was defining who *we* were and what we were not. I did the same thing with spirituality in education. The language of a spirit-based pedagogy felt risky and without any camouflage. So to me, her caution seemed timid. I yearned for us to boldly dance in this new movement with verve. Isn't this tension between junior and senior colleagues so typical? Alice had the future to think about, while I was just thinking about an immediate move. She was right. She taught me to re-vision the AEPL path, especially when coaching me through reviewing some of the first submissions to *JAEPL*.

The first AEPL conference, "Feeding the Mind, Nurturing the Spirit," Winter Park, Colorado, had James Moffett as the keynote speaker. In spite of severe health issues, he exuded wisdom and compassion for all of us in his humble way. The YMCA bunk beds and dorm style accommodations with shared baths were adequate but only slightly com-

fortable. I was just happy to have a roof instead of a tent. Once again, I found myself on a panel with Jim, Dick, Regina, and others. My talk, titled “Spiritual Points of Teaching,” reviewed basics for a spirit-based pedagogy. Scheduled for 5:00 p.m., this panel was set up in a room with large ceiling-to-floor windows that looked out over a Rocky Mountain range. The attendees were seated with their backs to the windows, while the speakers stood at a microphone facing the view. Before starting, I asked everyone to stand, to turn, and to gaze out the window. Someone switched off the lights. A communal “ah” swept through the room as we met the vast Rocky Mountain beauty. Together we stood. Holding spirit in silence. Afterward, a man—someone I didn’t know—hugged me and whispered, “Thank-you! Thank-you!”

Peak experiences of awe are essential to a spirit-based pedagogy, but we need to follow our intuition to welcome them when we can. This was my primary message in the ten minutes I used to speak. A woman in the audience challenged me when she asked “What is so new about this? Isn’t this what good teachers do anyway?” I answered, “Yes, that’s my point; spiritual experiences are already in our classrooms if we only will acknowledge them and try to invite them more regularly, rather than waiting for a rare opportunity.

At the 1995 CCCC in Washington, D.C., the AEPL workshop on spirituality led to proposing a collection of essays on spirituality in pedagogy. With a wealth of over seventy submissions, Peter Stillman at Boynton Cook Publishers assured us that “some books just need to get published” and strongly coached us through the process for publication. Two years later, *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner’s Whole Potential* was published in 1997, with the anchor of the collection being a modified essay from the first chapter of *The Universal Schoolhouse* by James Moffett.

However, changes slowed the tempo of the movement. Moffett’s death in 1996 was a heavy hit. He was truly irreplaceable, and our grief was deep. Additionally, Dick Graves wanted to pass the presidency on to someone new. His wisdom was demonstrated in showing us an organization is not one person, not one leader—it is a shared responsibility among all its members. Oligarchies live short lives; communities grow with nourishment that supports and enhances the spirit of its members.

Leadership is risky and not always popular, but when one is elected to lead, the members need to trust in the majority vote. I believe that trust is inherently a spiritual act which can motivate reflection and wisdom. In 1996, Regina Foehr, the new leader of the organization, moved the conference out of Winter Park into Estes Park. Some loudly resisted this move. Those of us who questioned the move thought it was disruptive of our spiritual home. But Estes Park provided more comfort and attracted more attendees. After a few well-attended conferences, AEPL’s stability, as well as its role in the academy, was established. Now while Estes Park will always feel like home, a change of scenery can rejuvenate our soul and bring new excitement into our community.

1997-2004: AEPL’s Next Moves

In 1997, Richard Fulkerson wrote a review of four books for *College Composition and Communication*. *Presence of Mind* and *The Spiritual Side of Writing* represented edited collections and were paired with two single-authored books, Nancy Welch’s *Get-*

ting Restless: Rethinking Revision in Writing Instruction and Susan H. McLeod's *Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom*. All four books dealt with affective issues and moved along a continuum from traditional accounts to radically expressive accounts: McLeod's at the traditional end and Foehr and Schiller's at the radically expressive end. Fulkerson claimed that these works were part of a "mini-groundswell," but he staunchly held to a traditional viewpoint by the end of the review (101). Maybe it was too much to think that Fulkerson would be "converted" to the AEPL view. We were happy that he was respectful and that he carefully considered our work. The CCC review meant that the work of AEPLers was being noticed and talked about. We saw a "mini-groundswell" as something significant.

Others felt the energy of this "groundswell." In 1997, Ron Miller released the 3rd revised edition of *What are Schools For?* Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* swept across the academy in 1998. Courage! AEPLers knew what that meant—and what it cost. In 1999, two very courageous AEPL collections were released: *Writing to Heal*, edited by Chuck Anderson and Marian McCurdy, and *Writing, Teaching, Learning*, edited by Dick Graves. The AEPL conference of 2002, "Writing and Healing: Toward Wholeness of Mind, Body, and Spirit," seemed to pull together everything AEPL had done so far. Many remarkable people contributed to this meeting, but I remember most the teachers from Columbine High School and ways AEPL members embraced them and loved them. I left that conference convinced that the AEPL message was being heard as well as motivating spiritual action.

Other activity confirmed that this "groundswell" wasn't confined to the U.S. The Nottingham Conference for Education in 2002 held its first meeting of twenty educators in the UK for two days in 1997, and that same year Jack Miller launched the first International Holistic Education Conference: Breaking New Ground in Toronto, Canada. In 2002, The Ministry of Education in Japan included three key words into their educational lexicon: "*kokoro-nokyoiku* (education for the heart and soul), *sogo-gakushyu* (integrated learning), and *tokushyoku, koseika* (the uniqueness of each school as well as of the individual person)" (Yoshida, 130-31).

Rachael Kessler's, *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School*, was published in 2000 with a forward by Parker Palmer, becoming the model for PassageWorks Institute, which she founded in Denver. Her book details "seven gateways" as a model for K-12 education that develops the inner life of students and teachers without ignoring standards. As Parker Palmer wrote, she addresses "the desire to truly engage and equip today's young people for effective learning" (qtd. in Kessler vi). Kessler's work that followed over the next ten years before her death has significantly contributed to the foundation for a spirit-based approach to learning. Her work continues today at PassageWorks Institute.

Linda Lantieri's edited collection, *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers*, came out a year after Kessler's and further demonstrated how a spirit-based approach could be manifested in a variety of ways. Speaking to this approach were contributors such as Parker Palmer, Rachael Kessler, Angeles Arrien and Geoffrey Canada. Again, we were presented with multiple voices in agreement that the inner life of the learner is essential for quality education and meaningful educational experiences. Holistic education, teachers with courage, spirituality in learning, writing

to heal, fresh systems of thought. It took on the appearance of a whole-system transition—one happening globally wherever pockets of people like those of AEPL were writing, meeting, making a difference.

By 2001, I had decided to serve AEPL more directly on the board and co-chair with Bob Root the 10th annual AEPL conference at Estes Park, “Mapping Nonfiction: Inspiring a New Sense of the Terrain.” Doing this work brought reflection to my own spirit, which surprised me in the way it not only contributed to my professional identity, but also motivated my intensive shift into holistic education.

At an AEPL workshop in 1999, I picked up a flier about the Breaking New Ground conference in Canada. I attended it in 1999, then offered a workshop on spirituality in 2001. Spirituality is the core of holistic education, and it was *expected* to be included in everything we did. Gradually, this conference became my next home base. In 2005, I took a break from AEPL conferences. Yet I never drifted from the journal, and never from my membership or loyalties to AEPL. As these early years passed, my presentations and publications on spiritual pedagogy earned me tenure and subsequent promotions in rank. My academic career had become an example of creating a sound scholarly foundation in the study and practice spirituality and education with success—this is exactly what AEPL and the push to publication was meant to do.

2014: Moving Along in the Presence of Others

Sustaining the Writing Spirit: Holistic Tools for School and Home is an accumulation of my research in spiritual pedagogy over the last twenty-three years. As is my custom, I was thinking of a book that would serve others. In this case, I thought of the teachers or parents who are new to holistic education and new to the idea that a spirit-based pedagogy is necessary for a peaceful future.

In 2013, Dr. Ramon Gallegos, founder of the International Foundation for Holistic Education, invited me to be a keynote speaker at the Foundation’s annual conference, The World Holistic Education Forum in Guadalajara, Mexico. My presentation, “Spirituality: The Core of Holistic Education,” was based on a new chapter just added to my book. With this talk, I had the opportunity to promote spirit-based pedagogy. Like Jack Miller, Ron Miller, Dick Graves, Peter Elbow, Parker Palmer, and others, Ramon Gallegos has cut new paths in education. His Foundation is a private organization, partially funded by the Mexican government, offering doctorate and masters-level degrees in holistic education and in meditation practices. While Ramon has written many books, a principal book translated into English is *Holistic Education, Pedagogy of Universal Love*. He sees holistic education as a social movement, rather than an educational one, and he seeks to spread the holistic vision across the world. People from twenty-five different countries, especially from Latin American, have attended the Foundation’s annual Forum, as have people from America, Asia, Oceania, Europe, and Canada. It is vital for those of us in AEPL to stay connected to others around the globe so that we are strengthened in our efforts to create change.

Today, I believe a spiritual pedagogy is founded upon and develops our wonder and awe of the infinite mystery of the cosmos, of all people and gifts of the Earth, and of our mental, physical, emotional and creative abilities. With this definition we can see that

spirituality is easily identifiable outside of religion; it is a flexible and varied topic that can sustain and enrich education. However, we still have much ground to gain before spirit-based education is more widely respected. As we continue to publicly talk about this, we also need to encourage national and international organizations to become proactive and make space on conference schedules for scholars who are working in the area of spirituality and education. NCTE is slightly better than it was 25 years ago. The Association for Supervision and Curricular Development, with its “Whole-Child” structure, embeds spirituality in their discourse, albeit too quietly. Increasing panel discussion, workshops, and sessions on the topic would make ASCD and NCTE stronger advocates.

Although spirituality in education is only one of AEPL’s pioneer topics, AEPL significantly contributes to keeping it in the national discussion. As strong as AEPL, if not stronger, are those in the holistic education groups. When we all move together by putting spirituality at the core of how we teach and what we research, we are sending the invitation to all educators to join our dance—a vital dance that functions in part to offset the damage imposed by the current craze for standardized testing. Perhaps the greatest threat to education is any complicity we contribute to this craze. AEPL and groups like it offset this because they beat to a tune of discovery that compels us to be positive change-makers in our schools. They validate and sustain us as we provide pedagogies that go beyond the cognitive domain. This is one reason that AEPL is essential, more so today than ever before. It pleases me greatly, and makes me proud, to see that AEPL, vibrant with a steady beat, keeps our spirit illuminated.



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Additional Resources

- ACSD. <http://www.ascd.org/Default.aspx>
- Alternative Education Resources Organization (AERO). <http://www.educationrevolution.org/store/>
- The Global Alliance for Transforming Education (GATE). <http://hent.org/gate.htm>
- International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC). <http://www.idec2013.org/>
- The International Foundation for Holistic Education. <http://www.ramongallegos.com/englishversions.htm>
- The International Holistic Education Conference. <http://www.holisticlearningconference.org/>
- PassageWorks Institute. <http://passageworks.org/>