



A Call for Spirituality in Academia

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Abstract

This position paper provides a general overview of Spirituality in Academia by developing the following themes: a) outlining the distinctions between spirituality and religion, highlighting that these terms are different constructs, being neither synonymous nor coterminous, but not excluding a broad and strict definition of Spirituality (Griffin, 1988) that can mitigate their antipodal nature, allowing the individual the freedom to forge her own notion of spirituality; b) describing spirituality in academia based on Astin's (2004) carefully worded definition; c) exploring the diametrically opposed relationship between spirituality and science that has relegated the spiritual side of teaching to an exiguous state; d) arguing why spirituality in academia is germane in the 21st century class or teaching environment thanks to popular pedagogical trends like student-centered learning, transformative learning, and online learning; e) looking at three educator perspectives toward the classroom (rentership, ownership, and stewardship) that have an effect on educator attitudes and roles in the classroom; and f) discussing what spirituality looks like in practice in the classroom. Finally, educators are called to action to embrace contemplative/mindfulness practices in their academic work in and out of the classroom for the benefit of all stakeholders in academia.

Keywords

Spirituality, spirituality in academia, professoriate spirituality, contemplative practices, mindfulness

1. Introduction

In 2015 in Lima, Peru, I conducted a doctoral research project that focused on professoriate spirituality, a topic that falls under the current research paradigm of spirituality in academia (SIA), which in turn is a sub-branch of the more mature spirituality at work (SAW) or workplace spirituality (WS) research movement. During the process of handing out surveys to professors and quickly explaining the nature of my research, the initial reactions and comments I received drew my attention. For example, I would get comments like "Oh, how interesting! What religion are you?" or "I'm sorry. I can't take your spirituality survey because I'm an atheist." These all-too-common comments made me realize that the construct of SIA was totally unfamiliar to, or at best misunderstood, by the hundreds of professors to whom I talked—a confusion that is understandable considering the close semantic relationship between the terms spirituality and religion.

The purpose of this position paper is twofold. The first is to give a general overview of the construct of spirituality in academia and the second is to inspire teachers to embrace spirituality (i.e., contemplative practices and mindfulness) in their academic lives so they and their students can enrich and deepen their human relationships and learning experiences in and out of the classroom. To achieve these goals this paper will develop the following themes: a) outlining the distinctions between spirituality and religion, b) describing spirituality in academia, c) exploring the relationship between spirituality and science, d) arguing why spirituality in academia is needed, e) looking at three educator perspectives to-

ward the classroom, and f) discussing what spirituality looks like in practice.

2. The Distinction between Spirituality and Religion

For a better understanding of SIA, it is important to discuss the distinction between the terms spirituality and religion. First, these terms perhaps fall in the same general semantic field, but they are neither synonymous nor coterminous. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) made this point stating:

Spirituality is different from religion: it is about an individual's journey toward wholeness, whereas religions are organized communities of faith that often provide meaningful community rituals that serve as a gateway to the sacred. But because there is a spiritual dimension to all religions, spirituality and religion are interrelated for many people, particularly if their conscious manifestation of spirituality takes place primarily in the context of an organized religion. (p. 38)

There is a binary opposition between spirituality and religion (viewing religion as 'bad' and spirituality as 'good') that permeates spirituality literature (Carrette & King, 2005). Shahjahan (2010) argued that "such a binary conception ignores the fact that both religion and spirituality are socially constructed terms that vary, depending on their social and historical context" (p. 478). Beringer (2000) reminded us that "even if religion is rejected in delineating spirituality, this must not be coterminous with rejecting the metaphysical" (p. 159). It is this point that David Ray Griffin took into consideration when discussing his dualistic definition of spirituality.

Griffin (1988), an American professor of philosophy, religion, and theology, envisioned two distinct definitions of spirituality, broad spirituality and strict (or true) spirituality, and he distinguished these two notions of spirituality on four premises:

- 1) what is considered to be sacred or holy in a person's life or in a cultural paradigm; i.e., what is of ultimate importance, meaning, or value;
- 2) who/what "God" is;
- 3) whether an individual or culture consciously commits to realizing "God" in everyday life; and
- 4) whether one's individual or a culture's worldview acknowledges a non-material, non-physical realm or realms or an "otherworldly" dimension or dimensions. (p. 1)

The elegance and utility of this dichotomous definition of spirituality is that every person is free to include or not include "God"—an ineffable, other-worldly, meta-physical being—to her personal understanding of spirituality.

In conclusion, spirituality and religion are different constructs that are neither synonymous nor coterminous and people are free to choose whatever aspects of spirituality that best suit their individual needs.

3. Describing Spirituality in Academia

To gain perspective about SIA, one must first look at the larger framework of workplace spirituality and its harbingers. It was in the 1980s and 1990s that the idea of integrating the notion of spirituality into the workplace really started to take off. Jennifer J. Laabs (1995), one of the most active voices for spirituality at work in the 1990s, stated "the spirituality-at-work movement asks more questions than it answers. But one thing is certain. Something spiritual is creeping into the workplace, and it seems to be gearing up to be more than a trend" (p. 64). A few years later, when trying to explain the major reasons corporate America became interested in spirituality at work, Ashmos and Duchon (2000) discovered:

- 1) The downsizing, reengineering, and layoffs of the past decade, which have turned the American workplace into an environment where employees are demoralized;
- 2) The fact that the workplace is increasingly seen as a primary source of community for many people because of the decline of neighborhoods, churches, civic groups, and extended families as principal places for feeling connected;
- 3) The increased access to and enhanced curiosity about Pacific Rim cultures and Eastern philosophies. Philosophies such as Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Sufism encourage meditation and emphasize values such as group loyalty and finding one's spiritual center in every activity;
- 4) The fact that aging baby boomers are moving ever closer to life's greatest uncertainty—death—and thereby develop a growing interest in contemplating life's meaning;
- 5) The fact that there is increasing pressure of global competition, which has led organizational leaders to realize that employee creativity needs nurturing. (pp. 17-18)

From their research these authors defined workplace spirituality as "the recognition that employees have an inner life

that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community” (p. 137). This succinct definition has become one of the most widely used definitions for workplace spirituality research and I will show that it is also instrumental in the description of professoriate spirituality as well.

The modern SIA movement in education started in the 1980s. In 1980 Parker J. Palmer published a book called *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. In this seminal work on authentic education, Parker expounded on the importance of infusing heart and mind into the soul of education; Malviya (2011) believed this book marks the birth of the modern spirituality in academia movement. By the 2000s, a large body of research into student spirituality had emerged, but there was little research examining professoriate spirituality. Astin (2004) started to champion the cause for spirituality in academic research that focused on professors. He found it difficult to define spirituality because of the many and often conflicting definitions in the literature so he opted to *describe* it and what it should mean for educators:

Since the term covers a lot of territory and means different things to different people, there’s little point in trying to develop a precise definition. Instead, let me simply lay out the general territory and range of things that the word suggests to me.

To begin with, spirituality points to our interiors, by which I mean our subjective life (as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that you can point to and measure directly). In other words, the spiritual domain has to do with human consciousness—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness. Second, spirituality involves our qualitative or affective experiences at least as much as it does our reasoning or logic. More specifically, spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality can also have to do with aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical. Within this very broad umbrella, virtually everyone qualifies as a spiritual being, and it’s my hope that everyone—regardless of their belief systems—can find some personal value and educational relevance in the concept. (p. 1)

Please note that this description does not mention “religion”; however, it does not preclude the existence of God, nor does it affirm or deny any personal belief or non-belief system a person may hold concerning a personal relationship with God. In addition, one can see shades of both Griffin’s (1988) dualistic approach to defining spirituality and Ashmos and Duchon’s (2000) three basic tenets (i.e., nourishing our inner lives, doing meaningful work, and building a sense of community at work) echoed in Astin’s (2004) description of spirituality tailored for academicians.

4. The Relationship between Spirituality and Science

Most modern educational systems worldwide were founded on two guiding principles: the first was the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment and the second was the economic circumstances of the Industrial Revolution (Robinson, 2010). The Enlightenment’s intellectual model of the mind was logical, objective, empirical, and scientific. It was based on deductive reasoning and firmly entrenched in Cartesian scientific skepticism. Abu-Febiri (2011) argued that “this privileging of rational and objective knowledge, skills and attitude set and the denial or rejection of emotions, morals, and spirit has been the fundamental operating principle of formal education in modern industrial and modern postindustrial political economies” (p. 47). Scientists in the academic world have not hidden their *mistrust* of the unempirical and have created a dichotomy of knowledge that has been labeled the Humanities and the Sciences, of which the latter has risen to epistemological dominance in the academic world and the former has often sunk to being an afterthought in curricular planning and budgeting. I believe the spiritual has been pigeon-holed in the Humanities, making it mostly eschewed in the academic and scientific community as counterintuitive to proper academic conduct and sound scientific research.

Thanks to new researcher voices in the SIA movement, the hermetic barrier between spirituality and science is beginning to crumble. Palmer (1999) stated that

the spiritual is always present in public education whether we acknowledge it or not. Spiritual questions, rightly understood, are embedded in every discipline, from health to history, physics to psychology, entomology to English. Spirituality—the human quest for connectedness—is not something that needs to be ‘brought into’ or ‘added onto’ the curriculum. It is at the heart of every subject we teach, where it waits to be brought forth. (p. 2)

In a wide range of disciplines, educators and academicians openly espouse the relevance of spirituality in the curricula. For example, Heidari and Heidari (2020) address spirituality in medical education stating “spirituality should be covered in medical curricula to convey a thorough knowledge of human being” (p. 1). With data from a nationwide survey of Canadian social work educators, Kvarfordt, Sheridan and Taylor (2018) discovered that “the sample as a whole held generally favourable views concerning the role of religion/spirituality in social work practice, even though a sizeable majority (80.9 per cent) reported receiving little or no instruction in this area during their graduate training” (p. 1483). Finally, Albert Einstein, arguably one of the greatest and most influential empirical scientific minds of the 20th century, understood that spirituality and science are not inimical. On the contrary, he said that “the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true Art and Science” (Einstein, 2000 as cited in Astin, 2004, p. 39).

Ecklund and Long (2011) conducted a research project in which they interviewed 275 natural and social scientists at 21 top U.S. research universities. Their research findings offer interesting insights into how scientists view the relationship between religion, spirituality, and science. First, their findings showed “a largely a-religious spirituality among scientists” (p. 258). Nonetheless, 72 of the 275 scientists interviewed talked of (as labeled by the authors) having an “identity-consistent spirituality” (p. 258). This term means that these scientists “do not want spirituality to be intellectually compartmentalized from the rest of their lives, but are seeking a core sense of truth through spirituality in particular one that is generated by and consistent with the work that they do as scientists . . .” (p. 260). Even more interesting, over 20% of the self-labeled atheist scientists developed “a sense of themselves as ‘spiritual atheists’” (p. 260). The results showed that “scientists hold religion and spirituality as being qualitatively different kinds of constructs” (p. 261). Finally, the “scientists who see spirituality as important often view spirituality as, at its core, about ‘meaning-making without faith,’ which nicely conforms to their perspective on science” (Ecklund & Long, 2011, p. 262).

In conclusion, we need to overcome the centuries-old zeitgeist in Academe that pits the scientific against the spiritual and start to reconcile and integrate these complimentary epistemological paradigms to achieve more integral research, teaching, and learning.

5. Why Spirituality in Academia Is Needed

This section will explain three important reasons why spirituality in academia is needed.

First, a well-rounded education is about much more than memorizing facts and information; it is also about learning the values necessary to become an integral person as well as a responsible member of society. Deane-Drummond (2007) argued that

Universities need to be places that instill in those who study there the love of learning that goes far deeper than simple success at examinations. For this kind of wisdom that is instilled offers skills that are not just ‘transferable’, but help to foster citizen values, those who are able to take active and full responsibility not just in their family life, but in the public sphere as well. (p. 182)

I believe teachers with a more spiritual outlook are better equipped to plan and impart lessons that foment values formation because they would have spent time developing their own sense of self and sense of ethics.

Second, to teach the citizen values mentioned above, a more spiritual professoriate mindset is needed in Academe. Marquez (2010) reminded us that “higher education still tailor their teaching strategies and curricula to the tone set by the larger part of the corporate world, oftentimes without questioning whether this tone still makes sense in today’s reality” (p. 12). Fortuitously, a slow transformation in the business world seems to be taking place. More emphasis is being put on business ethics and corporate responsibility than in the past. Higher education institutions need to respond to this gestalt shift in the corporate world by encouraging contemplative practices among their faculty and modifying their curricula to include dynamics that foment spiritual growth. To wit, Marquez (2010) posed the question:

What are the most proper ways to teach the most proper things to future leaders in order to prevent the two destructive s-words in corporate performance, selfishness and short-term focus, and replace them with one strong S, spiritual awareness (which should not be confused with religious thinking)? (p. 12)

Third, three pedagogical trends today have become more mainstream in education: student-centered methodologies, transformative learning, and on-line teaching. Concerning these trends, SIA research findings and expert opinion bolster the argument for fostering more contemplative (i.e., spiritual) practices by teachers in today’s rapidly evolving classrooms.

Student-centered methodologies. Contemplative and mindfulness practices fit in well with student-centered ap-

proaches to teaching. Lindholm, Astin and Astin (2005) found in their research on professoriate spirituality that

Faculty who self-identify as spiritual are more likely to endorse as ‘important’ several goals for undergraduate education that can be considered to reflect a predisposition for engaging in student-centered approaches to teaching, such as enhancing students’ self-understanding, developing students’ moral character, and helping students develop personal values. (pp. 188-189)

Constructivist pedagogies like student-centered approaches, flipped classroom, and other active methodologies that engage all facets of the student’s self are ripe for the incorporation of spiritually-minded professoriate practices.

Transformative learning. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) recognized the important connection between spirituality and engagement in transformative learning. For these authors, transformative learning

Creates a more expansive understanding of the world regarding how one sees and experiences both others and one’s self and is grounded in one’s entire being. Such learning increases one’s sense of an ability to make a difference in the world and leads to a greater sense of purpose and meaning. (p. 37)

They concluded that “learning is more likely to be transformative if it permeates one’s whole self, which has a spiritual component, rather than being confined to the rational realm of critically reflecting on assumptions” (p. 38).

On-line teaching. Finally, on-line teaching is a growing medium in education that, due to the challenges of not being face-to-face with students, desperately needs ways to make the *classroom* experience more meaningful and engaging for all stakeholders. Having taught a handful of on-line courses and attended various on-line teaching workshops, I know firsthand how disconnected and isolated one can feel taking an online class. Building a sense of community among students in online classes is difficult for educators, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic that has students suffering from increased separation from their classmates and teachers because of school closures and forced online learning. The importance of building a sense of community, the third pillar of Ashmos and Duchon’s (2000) definition of workplace spirituality, cannot be overstated. As evidence, Byrd (2016) interviewed a cohort of 12 online PhD students and they “confirmed the power of sense of community in the online student experience” (p. 125) and perhaps more importantly, a sense of community “helped the participants overcome anxiety and adverse situations, and they attributed their success to this phenomenon” (pp. 125-26).

In conclusion, teaching values, having a more spiritual mindset, and incorporating contemplative practices in current educational trends (i.e., student-centered methodologies, transformative learning, and online learning) can positively affect students and teachers alike, which is more important than ever because of the radical shift to on-line learning and social isolation brought on by the Covid-19 crisis.

6. Three Educator Perspectives toward the Classroom

While reading an article about teaching with spirit in the secular classroom by Bradford J. Hall (2009), I found a germane section about teacher perspectives towards their classrooms. He draws parallels about teacher attitudes towards teaching from three concepts by Eyre (1990) relating to material goods: *rentership*, *ownership*, and *stewardship*. Hall’s insightful analogy describes these terms according to how we as teachers view our role in the classroom.

In his analogy, Hall (2009) first explains that a teacher with a *rentership* perspective “sees teaching as something that must be done now in order to do better things, your own things, later. The classroom is just a place to stay in between opportunities to do your own work, your real work, your research” (pp. 40-41). He then explains the *ownership* perspective saying

There are many kinds of owners, but the basic driving forces behind this mind-set are pride and control—control in the sense that this is *your* class and *you’re* the expert. This perspective finds the teacher viewing the course during the semester as a personal possession, with the teacher strictly controlling what is learned and what counts as learning. (p. 41)

He also pointed out “One thing that comes with the ownership attitude is fear. Fear in the classroom, as in social interaction in general, can create a defensive attitude that resists learning” (p. 42). Finally, he explains that *stewardship* in the classroom involves

. . . a trust for which a person is accountable. The spirit is best able to work in an environment of trust. Students should leave the course with memories that can be drawn on during difficult times to face life’s challenges. . . . To have a stewardship attitude requires a genuine involvement with and concern for that which is entrusted to your care. There is none of the lack of concern associated with the renter mind-set; nor is there the same kind of pride associated with ownership because there is a recognition that the stu-

dents and the classroom are not really ‘yours’. They are entrusted to us. (p. 42)

As educators I think it is fair to say that most of us have felt all three perspectives in the classroom at one time or another. Obviously, the stewardship perspective appears to be the ideal and we all ought to strive to attain it in our teaching. Again, I am compelled to argue that the spiritually-minded teacher would be more apt to adopt the stewardship perspective than a teacher who is not because building trust, caring for students, and creating meaningful memories are all integral components of spiritually-minded, contemplative practices.

7. What Spirituality Looks Like in Practice

In this final section, I will draw on my personal experiences of consciously incorporating contemplative practices into my lessons and classroom environment and how it has positively affected my students and me.

Shahjahan (2010) explained that the word “‘spirituality’ emerged in 17th century European culture and originated from the Latin word *spiritualitas*—meaning the breath of life” (p. 475). *Breathing life* into everything I do, inside and out of the classroom, is my goal, my ultimate mission in life. *Breathing life* into my students for me means *animating* them to be to be in the moment, to be authentic, to accept challenges, and to overcome their fears. Not only do I want to pass knowledge on to them, I want to *breathe life* and meaning into their lives.

In order to accomplish this, as a teacher and human being, I first need to be authentic and true to myself. Nothing is easier to spot than a ‘fake’. We are taught to leave our problems at home, put on our ‘game face’, and get the job done. To a certain degree this is correct, but how can we not bring who we are—our hopes, our dreams, our fears, our ambitions, our feelings—into the classroom as well? Sure, I put on my ‘game face’ all the time, but I never leave who I am—my authentic self with all my virtues and defects—at the door when I enter the classroom. This takes courage because bringing your whole self into the classroom makes you more human, making you more vulnerable.

Active rapport building is another way I consciously incorporate my spirituality into my classrooms. I take the time to share personal stories about my life. I answer the tough questions that might arise when doing this. I listen to my students when they want to share. I make the classroom a safe environment for everyone to opine. I really go out of my way to be available for my students and show genuine interest in not only their education, but also their lives.

Another way I weave spirituality into the daily classroom routine is by adding easy contemplative activities that are aligned to the course content. I taught advanced English to Peruvian undergraduate students majoring in translation and interpretation. One of the core competencies of the course was the students’ ability to speak English with fluidity. To address this competency with spirituality in mind, I created a brief speaking activity designed to have a different student present a topic every day of class during our warm up time before the planned lessons begin. The activity is called Great Leaders and Inspirational People; the students’ job is to investigate a person—someone as famous as Gandhi to someone as obscure as a neighbor who washes and feeds homeless dogs—and tell the class in a 2–3-minute presentation about the person’s life, their struggles and accomplishments, how they have changed the world, and why this person inspires the student.

This contemplative activity has been a great success on many levels. It makes the students get in front of an audience and speak in public in their second language; I give the students grammar and pronunciation feedback after their speech so all the students benefit. The content of the presentations makes us all dwell on what is really important in life and greatly increases our mindfulness, our gratitude, and our sense of well-being. Thinking about other people’s struggles, service, stewardship, and leadership is an exercise in empathy, compassion, and gratitude.

This contemplative Great Leader dynamic could easily be adapted to fit any subject taught, whether the class is face-to-face or on-line. If it is a business administration class, students could present great business leaders who have changed the world for the better. If it is a calculus class, students could present great mathematicians whose work changed the world for the better. With a little creativity, simple contemplative practices can be seamlessly blended into the curriculum of any course or any delivery platform.

8. Conclusions

The two goals of this position paper were to give a general overview of the construct of spirituality in academia and to inspire teachers to embrace spirituality in their academic lives so they and their students can enrich and deepen their human relationships and learning experiences in and out of the classroom. Hoping I have achieved these goals, I would like to call all educators to action. Becoming a more spiritual teacher—remember Astin’s (2004) description of spirituality as it applies for educators—is a goal all education professionals should aspire to. One correct path does not exist; it is an individual journey for each of us and it begins by taking the first step, which is opening our hearts and minds to the idea that spirituality does have a rightful, necessary place in education.

Practicing spirituality in the classroom is not *rocket science*. However, it can involve risk and it does require courage—especially the courage to act authentically and to struggle against two centuries of mainstream cultural and epis-

temological norms in academia that have silenced the spiritual side of teaching. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) reminded us that “Spirituality can involve not only positive and constructive understandings, but also struggle and confrontation of the more shadowy aspects of human existence” (p. 45). We need to be brave in the face of the many challenges to embracing spirituality in academia.

In spite of the caveats, I believe spirituality in academia’s benefits far outweigh its risks. There is not a set formula or recipe for us to follow; every teacher must follow his or her own heart and instincts. If we truly have the heart, we can make positive changes in ourselves and in our students by becoming more mindful, spiritual educators, which does not mean we have to lose our objective academic mindset in the process. Maybe it is as simple as bringing our whole selves into the classroom, being authentic, being in the moment, being mindful of what we say and how we act, weaving in simple contemplative dynamics that align with our course curricula (whether it is physics or philosophy), and striving to develop our inner lives, to do meaningful work, and to build a sense of community with those people—students and colleagues—with whom we share our life’s work.

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