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# Integrative Holistic Education: A Flexible Model to Meet the Needs of Students in Our Post-Modal Society

## Keywords

holistic education, integrative education, cognitions of choice, universal design, brain-based learning, habits of mind

## Disciplines

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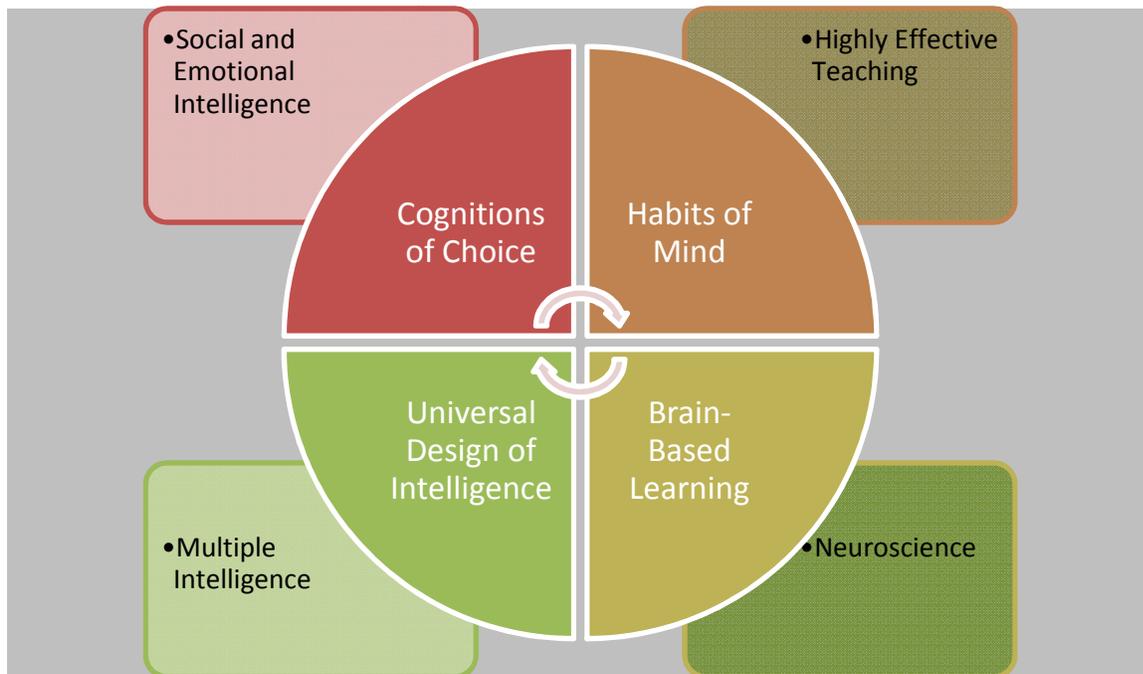
## **Integrative Holistic Education: A Flexible Model to Meet the Need of Students in Our Post-Modal Society**

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### **Abstract:**

Learning involves a relational process and for learning to be most effectively retained information must have personal meaning. Educators intentionally target learning efforts to include the acquisition of rote (factual and procedural) information along with relational learning which is specific to people, situations, or events and can be associated in memory. In our post-modal society, many educators are concerned as to whether or not students are most effectively developing higher cortical or critical thinking skills. Combining rote and relational learning offers a holistic approach with the intention of developing critical thinking skills. Eight recognized educational models are combined to create a flexible integrative-holistic educational model. Choice and the related cognitive skills are introduced from a three levels paradigm to support the personal relevance aspect in learning. This holistic model recognizes the multiplicity of brain function in respect to creating an adaptive learning environment. Choice is aligned with freedom which is highly valued in Westernized Cultures. Targeting and neutralizing negative cognitions and meta-messages that can interfere with learning can improve educational outcomes. Moving the learner through a process that brings them to engage in choice in learning in a mindful manner may remove personal obstacles that interfere with empowerment in learning whether in a face to face, online, or hybrid learning environment. A dynamic integrative-holistic model that adapts in respect to advances in neuroscience and is anchored in educational methods that support inclusive and individualized learning may assist in the development of life long habits, percepts, skills and cognitions that support creative and critical thinking in students.



## Integrative Holistic Education Model

### Introduction:

Holism by its very nature focuses on the individual in their approach to learning, and their personal point of view. The concepts of holism consider the gestalt of the mind, body and spirit paradigm and the interaction for each individual in the context of the learning environment. Although there may be a variety of educational programs or models that could be combined to create a holistic model; the combination of the models outlined here blend especially well because they offer:

- Inclusion
- The development of higher cortical thinking skills
- Attention to executive functioning
- Appreciation for the significance of relational learning

Learning occurs in academic settings in a blended manner in which the lines between face to face, hybrid, and online education are less distinct; making this blended approach the new tradition for learning. Students may expect more immediate methods to access information in which deeper connections are made by simply clicking on a link. Many educators are left to question as to whether or not students are actually developing the underlying track thought patterns that lead to the development of higher critical thinking skills that support executive functioning. In other words if those connections are instantly made for them do they process the

connection in a relational way that provides meaning? There is also the question as to whether or not these students are sufficiently challenged enough to develop creative thinking skills.

### **Integrative-Holistic Approach to Education:**

Returning to the concept of holistic education; the premise here is to offer an approach that significantly analyzes the aforementioned questions and sufficiently answers them by offering a solution that provides an integrative approach. Each of the individual educational models will be discussed to outline how they contribute to the total picture. In an effort to provide a sound foundation that is designed to meet the needs of all students, at every level of academic performance, the place to start is by reviewing **Universal Design of Instruction (UDI)**. This approach initially constructed by a group of architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental design researchers at North Carolina State University found its way to the field of education. The *principles* are not only aspirational but also speak to application: *Equitable use, Flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance of error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach for use*. When applied to design the principles ensure respect for the needs of all learners. The *guidelines* are performance indicators that can be applied to many products and environments to improve student accessibility and outcomes: *Class climate, interaction, physical environment and products, delivery methods, information resources and technology, feedback, assessment, and accommodation*. When followed and practiced, the general guidelines ensure the methods applied will successfully address the needs for each individual student.

With the ground work laid or foundational elements in place; a back-up plan is offered to ensure the methods used are consciously meeting the educational goals in an efficient manner. To address this piece one could look to the methods offered through **Highly Effective Teaching (HET)**. This approach is in essence a holistic model that takes into consideration the interactive way in which students learn via the nine body-brain compatible elements within the paradigm: *Absence of threat/nurturing reflective thinking, meaningful content, and enriched environment, movement to enhance learning, choices, adequate time, collaboration, immediate feedback, and mastery (application)*.

With such a complete model one might suggest we simply stop here. Although that may be a very acceptable solution this model in itself doesn't fully address the fundamental or trace elements of how to develop skills to the same degree of depth that the following models offer.

Perhaps the foundation for all the models that follow stems from the contributions of **neuro-science**. This dynamic field is continually discovering and advancing which allows us the experience a new understanding and appreciation of how we learn. Educators who keep abreast of advances in neuro-science have the benefit of being able to address each student with flexibility.

Models are designed to help us understand the contributions of neuroscience and apply research findings in a practical way. The work of Howard Gardner on **Multiple Intelligences** in his own words has not been fully embraced. Despite his personal recognition of this, it doesn't diminish the contribution his work offered in considering that intelligence is more expansive than discrete measures of verbal and mathematical abilities. The recognition of at least eight forms of intelligence (verbal, mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic) provides a broader perspective in which to view the individual. According to Santrock, (2014), "Critics of this model argue that research on these approaches is not well established," (p. 314) . Despite criticism, this layer of the holistic education model brings a deeper level of understanding in which to appreciate individual ability and approach each student from a strength-based method.

The next model that builds off neuro-science is the work of Daniel Goleman on **Social and Emotional Intelligence**. His work adds a richness to help us understand that we can never remove culture and environmental factors from the picture in relating to each student. Beyond the discrete ways in which we measure intelligence we may acquire a complex set of social skills that allow us to function and thrive. Ideally, as educators we introduce our students to these skills and support the development of skills that make up social and emotional intelligence to allow for leadership in education, career development and other future endeavors.

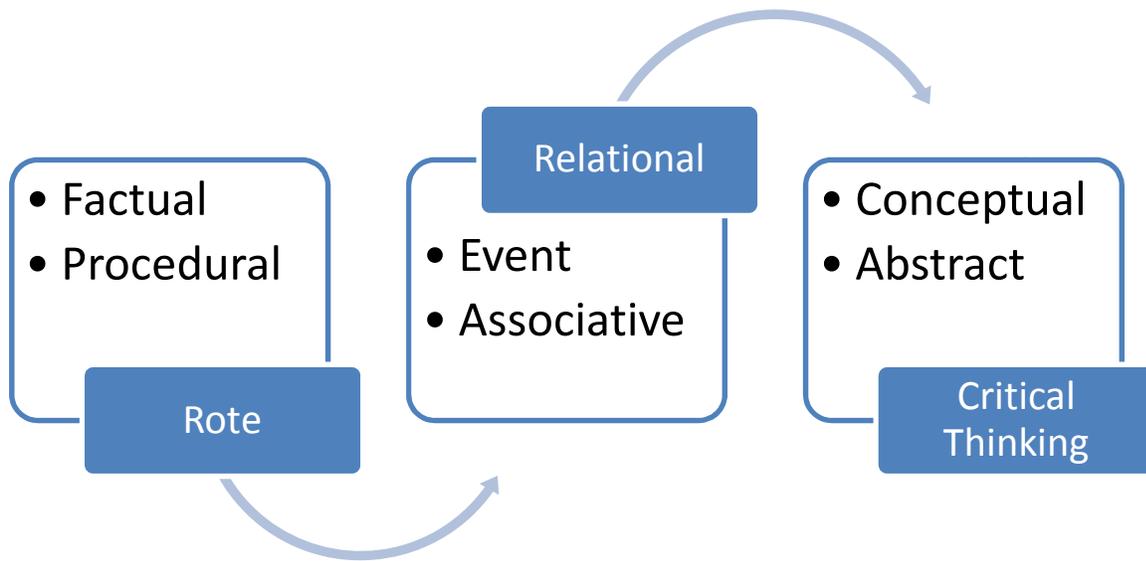
The thread that runs through each of these models is neuro-science. The next approach appears to be directly connected by highlighting the relationship between emotion, cognition, and learning. **Brain-Based Learning** reminds us of the importance of targeting learning efforts to directly impact the limbic system, so that information will be retained. Emotions cannot be removed from the learning environment, or the context in which learning occurs. If our goal is to assist students in transferring learning into long-term memory; we must recognize two regions of the brain, the hippocampus and the amygdala. Both are located in the limbic area and both play an important role in the processing of emotions and the transferring of information into long-term storage.

All of the models mentioned are respectful of the degree to which the frontal lobe maintains and manages executive functioning which is responsible for attention and concentration, motivation, thinking, planning, decision-making, problem-solving, personality, emotions, behavior, social behavior, self-awareness, judgment, expressive language, body movement, and intelligence.

Again, you might pause and say we have the total picture but perhaps that might be premature. The next proposed model is **Habits of Mind**. With concern that we not lose the art of critical and creative thinking, Costa and Kallick researched to determine which traits or predispositions were necessary to develop critical and creative thinking skills when confronted with problems to solve. From this body of work, curriculum has been created to support the acquisition of these

skills in students. The habits are considered a composite of many skills, attitudes, and proclivities.

Although there is a place for rote learning, as teachers we generally want to help student's move learning from rote to long-term memory to increase retention (Steffen, 2013). We accomplish this by emphasizing relational meaning within the context of learning as we focus on developing critical thinking. One way we might accomplish this is by introducing choice. *Choice* is always present whether acknowledged, or denied; however, bringing it to a conscious level allows increased freedom in learning.



## Transferring Information in New Acquisition Learning



## Combined Thinking to Build Brain Development

**Cognitions of Choice** © (Steffen, 2012) is a complimentary model to Habits of Mind. It offers a network of neural programming that engages self-dialog between automatic thinking, critical thinking, mindfulness, and integrated life-choices. It evokes an active process of resilience and a healthy respect for self and one's ability to learn. Cognitions are not just the thoughts we hold, but incorporate the actions we take based upon these patterns of thinking. Cognitions connect to our values and personality traits that create our neural hotwiring or programming that construct our social perceptions and learning choices. Our cognitions guide our habits of being and life philosophy. Choices can require a simple yes/no response or be complex and multifaceted. For some individuals and for anyone in certain situations even the simplest choice can be difficult. Choice is connected to a larger domain-making of behavioral skills related to decision-making. Because choices are influenced by learning and a set of responses we store in our memory bank; we can learn new responses and develop skills to create new choices. Many choices occur in response to automatic thinking. If the individual's automatic thoughts are negative and unhealthy, it will limit their available options to choose and create a more satisfying response. As the individual gains more freedom in their ability to make choices and knows more about personal limits and boundaries; choice can be a more readily accessible skill. When the individual become more familiar with the manner in which they engage in choice, make-decisions, process information, and create options they have a wider range of responses available

to them. In time, the individual can be assisted in experiencing a higher level of comfort and move away from a mechanical automatic response to choices that involve critical thinking at a conscious level. Not all choices require deep critical processing; but when faced with decisions that require this; the individual will feel more confident if they trust their ability to make choices accurately with confidence and efficiently.

Choice is aligned with freedom which is highly valued in Western Culture. When an individual has freedom to choose they are less likely to experience anxiety or depressive symptoms. Trusting one's skill and ability to choose may result in a higher level of confidence. Accessing critical thinking generates a wider range of choices which is the stated intent or purpose in acquiring skills to generate confidence in the development of new choice thinking skills. Cognitions of choice are used to neutralize negative self-defeating cognitions that interfere with self-harmony and creating holistic balance. These cognitions not only offer patterns of thinking that may be deeply programmed or engrained at the level of core identity, but also offer intuitive guideposts for making healthier choices. If they are not already present within the parameters of thought, with practice they can be taught at varying levels of cognitions and become a part of the integrated life filter or functional force as a means of offering psychological immunity.

A three tiers level approach is offered which involves a step process toward deeper critical thinking that are social memories, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying beliefs that can be learned or are the result of feedback and perceptions. Thoughts and feelings (cognitions) influence underlying beliefs and behavioral choices. It is these cognitions that drive the belief structures that influence beliefs and behaviors; therefore, the interest in exploring the individual's cognitions of choice. These choices are made from a composite of life experiences the individual has integrated into their definition of self or identity. Some choices are healthy others may be unhealthy and can influence the perception of self, empowerment, and view of position in the world.

Level one choices focus on specific cognitive-behavioral skill. This option is to move from fear-driven response patterns toward assertive engagement which result in congruency between thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying belief structures. The goal at this level is to create congruency and a more open channel in which choice making can be experienced. At Level two the individual is moving away from automatic negative response patterns they engage with a healthier perspective or positive psychological thought process. The goal of level two is to build resiliency in the individual to allow them to experience movement in creating choice at a conscious level. At level three the individual consciously focuses on aspirational goals that transcend previous perceptions that caused fear, anxiety, or limitations. The goal is to move toward a collective consciousness with respect for self and all living things.

Each of the lower levels one and two is a fundamental building block toward level three. Not all learning choices require level three thinking; however, accessing critical thinking at a wider

range of response allows for a broader locus of control for the individual. Knowing when to act and make a choice (timing) can be the difference between having a desired outcome and a door closing on an opportunity. The more an individual is armed with the information about their choice making ability, and they practice and rehearse the skills of choice making, the more confident they will become and the better they will be at making choice. Knowing when to pull back can prevent someone from becoming over-whelmed. We are often bombarded by choices; and have a clear sense of one's ability may eliminate unwanted stress or anxiety. Having a model to apply in situations that evoke choice making may assist the individual in assessing the situation, consider the required level of choice, and determine whether or not a decision of choice needs to be made.



## Critical Thinking in the Development of Choice

### Conclusion:

This finalizes the proposed integrative holistic education model. Each of the pieces within the model contributes to the total picture in a significant way. As the model is dynamic, as is the field of neuro-science which is at the foundation of the model; it may change and grow in time as new advances in neuroscience are discovered that may require amendment to the model. The concept of holism and the integration of mind-body-spirit is stable. What is offered is a dynamic model that is respectful and recognizes inclusion, both at an aspirational and practical level along with the importance of focusing on individualized learning. The model also recognizes the multiplicity of brain-function in respect to creating an adaptive learning environment. The model provides the tools to develop life-long habits that support critical and creative thinking

skills. Finally, the model offers a neural network of skills involved in the development of choice in learning. A three level approach to the development of choice is provided in recognition of the differences in functioning with learners.

The ultimate objective is to offer a learning environment that is flexible and speaks to all learners in an inviting way. The idea of assisting the learner and taking them past any personal obstacles to a place of empowerment is the goal. Whether we teach or learn face to face, online or in a hybrid method is no longer the question; we are existing in academic environments in which post-modal have become the norm.

This integrative and holistic approach to learning borrows from psychology, education, and neuroscience. Bringing relational learning to the forefront within the learning environment is key. This cannot be over-looked because we must reach the limbic area of students' brains for learning to be meaningful and retained. There is no one solution as to how we propose to accomplish this all important task. The learning must be reciprocal and involves active interaction between teacher and student. This whole person approach to learning encourages supportive development and is a preliminary effort to voice the need for integrative holistic education. Choice in education and life equates to freedom to explore, develop, and create. The desired outcome is vision and empowerment in the learner.

Learners who view their ability to learn as life-long and continuously tend to be more resilient. If we want to launch students that are given the tools to be flexible in life, we need to model flexibility in our teaching methods and learning environments. This can best be achieved by crafting educational models that promote the tenets found by gleaning an integrative holistic educational model that most closely fits the needs of today's students who exist and learn in a post-modal society.

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