Rekindling the Fire of
Transformative Education

A Participatory Case Study

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A growing consensus is emerging among transformative educators about the need for an integral education that incorporates all human dimensions—body, vital, heart, mind, and spirit—into the learning and inquiry processes. This article presents a case study of a graduate-level course as an example of an integral and participatory approach to transformative learning with potential implications for the future direction of integral education. The course’s aim was to inquire individually and collectively into collaboratively formulated spiritual questions, using methods that encouraged integral ways of knowing. After describing the course and summarizing its multidimensional learning outcomes, the authors conclude that it is in the intentional integration of all human attributes in the inquiry process where lie immense possibilities of expanding the fruits and span of transformative education in the academia.

Keywords: transformative education; integral ways of knowing; cooperative inquiry; participatory approach; case study; embodied spirituality

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As described by Will McWhinney (2005) in his Editor’s Perspective for this journal, the evolution of transformative education is like watching bubbles appear on a boiling teapot—as the temperature of the water increases, small bubbles form on the teapot as eruptions of a seemingly magical phenomenon occurring inside that transforms the boiling water into steam. In the same way that boiling water is cooled by its surrounding environment, McWhinney suggests that many programs of transformative education have been reabsorbed by a more “cooling” conventional educational environment, possibly weakening the transformative potency with which they were initially designed.

This article aims to rekindle the fire of transformative education. We hope to contribute to a style of education that does not become the boiling bubbles of a teapot but rather the sweet, nourishing liquid nectar found inside the pot. The presentation of educational styles that emphasize learning from the inside-out, such as that described in this article, are imperative to encourage other such approaches to transformative learning so that models of participatory education do not remain in the periphery of academic institutions but one day find their proper place as the norm.

In this article, we present a case study of a graduate-level course called “Embodied Spiritual Inquiry,” which was offered in Spring 2005 in the East-West Psychology Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, as an example of an integral and participatory approach to transformative learning with potential implications for the future of integral education. First, we provide a description of the course, including its core objectives, the basic structure, the inquiry focus, the inquiry tools, the structure of a typical class, and the theoretical context within which the course was developed. Second, we present a summary of the main learning outcomes that emerged for participants throughout the course. Finally, we address the contextual nature of the validity of these inquiry outcomes, summarize the main fruits of the course, and briefly discuss the potential implications of this participatory approach for the future of transformative education.

Embodied Spiritual Inquiry: Course Description

BACKGROUND AND COURSE OBJECTIVES

“Embodied Spiritual Inquiry” was facilitated by the CIIS core faculty member Jorge N. Ferrer, assisted by doctoral student David Nicol. The class participants were twelve graduate-level students, four men and eight women of both the doctoral and master level enrolled in a variety of CIIS programs. In the course syllabus, Ferrer (2005) described the class as “a practical exploration of embodied spiritual inquiry in the context of participatory and co-operative research” (p. 1). The course was built on the working hypothesis that certain spiritual views, dilemmas, or systems may be
the fruit of disembodied states of knowing and that a more embodied spiritual inquiry, therefore, may shed new light on the perennial problems of spiritual discourse (see Ferrer, 2006). The course’s primary objective was to inquire individually and collectively into collaboratively formulated spiritual questions, using methods that encouraged integral ways of knowing, that is, ways that involve all human dimensions contributing equally in the inquiry process, including the body, the vital world, the heart, the mind, and consciousness (see Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005). A secondary objective was to present the foundations of participatory and cooperative operative research methods in the context of transpersonal and spiritual studies.

METHODOLOGY

The course employed a pedagogical methodology inspired by elements of John Heron and Peter Reason’s cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). This approach involves (a) the inclusion of all participants as cooperative researchers who are fully involved in all research decisions about the participatory methods, (b) moving through a number of consecutive cycles of experience and reflection, and (c) extending the epistemological framework beyond the merely conceptual (the propositional, in Heron’s terms) to include experiential, presentational, and practical ways of knowing. Heron (1996) distinguishes between full and partial types of cooperative inquiry, with the former involving everyone in the group as both coresearcher and cosubject (e.g., having equal decision-making power at all stages of the research), and the latter involving everyone in the group as coresearchers but with the facilitator being only partially involved as cosubject. Though in both forms the initiator or facilitator typically has a greater role in “methodological know-how and facilitative guidance” (Heron, 1996, p. 23), cooperative inquiry works toward breaking down this difference.

As described below, inquiry in this case study is seen to gradually move from a more traditional qualitative participatory method (in which the main researcher has a complete or greater role in research decisions) to a fuller cooperative inquiry, especially as the inquiry entered its second cycle. Although the inquiry was externally initiated (i.e., by Ferrer’s autonomous design of the course) and originally conducted through inquiry tools introduced by the facilitator, not only did the facilitator become more involved as cosubject as the inquiry unfolded, but also the participants decided to take greater responsibility for the learning methods and research decisions in the second half of the course. This sequence seems pertinent when the facilitator is introducing radical forms of holistic transformative learning—such as the Interactive Embodied Meditations described below—which require a considerable degree of directive facilitation until participants become familiar with them. Another important difference between the inquiry method in this case study and the cooperative inquiry of Heron and Reason is that the course’s structure only allowed for two cycles of experiential immersion five to eight cycles recommended by Heron (1996).
BASIC COURSE STRUCTURE

The group met every Wednesday night for 3 hours during the 12-week semester. The course comprised four main parts:

1. A brief introduction to the notions of embodied spirituality and embodied spiritual inquiry and to the principal theoretical models that informed and shaped the course structure through both lecture and assigned readings (one session);
2. A 2-day introductory weekend retreat at a local yoga center to learn the Interactive Embodied Meditation practices, which are designed to access the epistemic power of the body, vital, heart, mind, and consciousness centers;
3. Two cycles of inquiry, with each cycle comprising four sessions. The first cycle involved inquiry into a collectively formulated question and the second inquiry into individually formulated questions of choice emerging from the first cycle. Each one of the four sessions of the cycles encouraged the primary involvement of a particular human dimension in the inquiry process (i.e., body, vital, heart, mind/consciousness); and
4. An integration session at the end of each cycle to allow participants to reflect on their overall thread of experience as a first step to elaborating and integrating the knowledge gained from the experiential explorations of the previous sessions. The last integrative session of the course included a ritual to close the 12-week inquiry process.

INQUIRY FOCUS

At the conclusion of the introductory 2-day retreat, the class collaboratively decided to adopt the question “What is the nature of relational spirituality?” as the inquiry focus for at least the first cycle of collective research. Although this question was deliberately not defined in precise terms, the exploration was broadly centered on the experience of the self, the other, and the mysterious space “in-between” that can emerge during conscious relational encounters.

During the integration session at the end of the first cycle, the class members collaboratively decided to use the second cycle to explore individually tailored questions that had emerged organically from the first inquiry cycle. These individually tailored questions were, nevertheless, related to the broad theme of the nature of relational spirituality.

INQUIRY TOOLS

The basic inquiry tools used in the class were

1. Interactive Embodied Meditations (IEM);
2. Integrative work and creative expression through drawings, paintings, movement, journaling, poetry, and other creative expressions; and
3. Verbal elaboration and critical discussion of the experiences in dyads, small groups, group check-ins, and circles of sharing.

The IEM practices stem from the body of work of the two Spanish psychologists Marina Romero and Ramon Albareda (see Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004; Romero & Albareda, 2001). These practices are very simple in form but carefully devised to allow for a space of openness and “deep listening” to the potential insights and wisdom uniquely embedded in the various human dimensions. In most cases, the practices involve respectful and contemplative physical contact between two people. Typically, one person plays a receptive role (i.e., receiving the physical contact) and the other an active role (i.e., initiating the physical contact). Where the contact is made depends on which center is to be explored: for the mind and consciousness the area of contact is the head and forehead; for the heart, it is the center of the chest and the back; for the vital world, the contact is with the lower abdomen or hara; and for the body, the focus is on the feet and legs. An example of an IEM practice focusing on the vital center could involve the person in the receptive role lying down, with the person in the active role initiating and then maintaining an open meditative physical contact by placing his or her hands (or forehead) over the hara of the partner.

Although the practices involve relational contact between people, both partners, regardless of their roles, are encouraged to stay focused on their own experience. This inward focus is supported by the optional, though highly encouraged, use of different types of bandanas as blindfolds. During the practice, gentle music is played—typically music that evokes or resonates with the particular center that is the focus of the practice, for example, simple, slower drum beats for the body; more refined, emotive music for the heart; and so on. After describing and demonstrating the practice, the facilitator verbally guides the practice, gently reminding participants of when and where to make physical contact and encouraging an attitude of openness and unconditional acceptance to whatever experiential content may arise throughout the practice.

The facilitator also reminded participants, at the deepest part of the meditation, of the focus of the inquiry. For example, during the first inquiry cycle, he would ask, “What is the nature of relational spirituality?” while participants were deeply immersed in the “listening” to a particular human dimension. Participants were encouraged to allow and pay attention to any images, feelings, thoughts, sounds, or other sensations that may emerge while they “listened” to a particular center in response to the inquiry question, as well as to let go of the need to immediately make intellectual sense of the response. In this way, participants were encouraged to learn how to access the voice and wisdom of their bodies, instincts, hearts, and souls to uncover what these human attributes had to say, if anything, about the question was explored.

For Albareda and Romero, each of the physical areas focused on in IEM practices are entryways into the depths of the different human worlds (see Ferrer, 2003). They maintain that physical contact between people and, in particular, between their vital, heart, mind, body, and consciousness centers is extremely
important in holistic education insofar as direct and interactive contact between people facilitates a deeper awakening of the parts of themselves that may have been previously numbed, deadened, or simply ignored in traditional educational settings (Ferrer et al., 2005).

THE STRUCTURE OF A TYPICAL CLASS

With the exception of the integration sessions at the end of each cycle, each class began with (1) an Opening Walk that entailed the exploration of the physical space of the class, the stretching of the body to make it more present and porous, and/or a guided exploration of the present energetic state of the different centers. After this brief period of exploration, the class was led into (2) an Introductory Game, usually facilitated by the teaching assistant, to begin to bring more awareness to the specific center that was being explored in that particular session. After the game, participants were led back into a contemplative walk in which they were asked to identify either a word or a nonverbal expression that best captured what they were feeling at that moment. These expressions were optionally disclosed during (3) a Circle of Sharing.

After the Circle of Sharing, the facilitator proceeded to (4) the Demonstration of the IEM practice. Here the facilitator not only explained the practice but also brought awareness to a number of considerations that helped deepen the inquiry process and make it a safe, respectful, and voluntary experience for all participants. These considerations included

- the explanation of a number of options to carry out the practice, including the possibility of practicing on one’s own, without interacting with other participants;
- the awareness that, at any moment, any of the participants could stop the practice without any explanation;
- the optional use of bandanas to encourage an inward focus for each participant; and
- an invitation to allow the practice to unfold with no pregiven goal, but rather with an openness to whatever experiential content could emerge.

This was also a time to address questions from the participants and adjust the practice, as needed, in response to their current needs and wishes. In the second inquiry cycle, this component became much more alive as class members began to find their voices and collaboratively determine necessary adjustments to the IEM that would help enhance their overall experience. An example of this was the decision one week about whether to develop the practice at hand in dyads or in a way that engaged interactive contact between all members of the group. The class as a whole felt strongly that the practice involving contact between all group members was the best option.

The participants then proceeded to (5) the Practice of the IEM. This was usually the longest part of the class. As noted above, the IEMs were verbally guided by the facilitator, who first made gentle suggestions to help direct the inquiry into the
nature of each center. For example, in relation to the body, the facilitator asked, “Is the body a manifestation of spirit, a transmutation of spirit, or the temple to the soul?” Or, certain suggestions referred to how the different centers were connected, for example, “The vital center . . . the doorway into the creative energy that can nourish, sustain, and open the heart.” As mentioned above, the guidance was then used to provide a verbal reminder of the inquiry question at hand—in the case of the first cycle, “What is the nature of relational spirituality?” Participants were also encouraged to stay as open as possible to images, felt-senses, or whatever other experiential contents happened to arise.

Following the practice, the class entered a period of (6) Integrative Work that allowed for a nonverbal “processing” of the experience. This time was critical for allowing the experience to find an imaginal, symbolic channel of individual expression before we attempted to translate the experience into concepts or more general statements. This usually took place through drawings, journaling, poetry, and/or body movement. This time was also combined with a break so that the participants could have some space to move, relax, and transit into the more verbal part of the class.

Once the class resumed, the participants would join with the classmates with whom they had developed the practice. This (7) Small Group Sharing between two or three people afforded a more intimate structure in which to begin to verbally articulate the experience. The participants were encouraged to share mainly from their images or drawings so as to avoid a premature conceptual analysis or closure of their experience that might abort or hinder the emergence of the full richness of the experience itself. In fact, it was often suggested that the conceptual understanding of the experience might in fact come days, weeks, or even months later, once the experimental phase of exploring our different worlds really “sank in.”

The participants then came together into (8) the larger Group Circle of Sharing. Each person was asked to choose one important part of their experience or insight gained, regardless of whether it seemed to them to be the most significant. Again, this was a time for honoring the preciousness of the experience without the pressure of conceptually understanding or discerning all its different threads. It was also a time to contemplate the drawings of the other class members and allow their experiences to integrate with and complement their own.

Finally, each class included some type of (9) Closure, be it through a closing circle with a final group contact (e.g., simply holding hands or bringing one hand to one’s chest and the other hand to center of the back of the neighboring person), or through simple eye contact with all the group members to honor the shared process. It was as if each week we reminded ourselves that we were witnesses to a beautiful, unfolding, and cocreated practice that in itself seemed to breathe life.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

As noted above, Ferrer describes the class as “a practical exploration of embodied spiritual inquiry in the context of participatory and co-operative research.” The cooperative elements of the research were designed following certain features of
Heron and Reason’s cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). In this model, Heron and Reason develop an extended epistemology that divides the art of knowing into a sequence of experiential, presentational, prepositional, and practical dimensions. **Experiential knowing** is that knowing gained through direct experience of the world and of others. It can lead to transformational inquiry outcomes, that is, changes in the participants’ inner being and behaviors. **Presentational knowledge** emerges from the experiential knowledge by expressing, in a nonverbal and/or nonconceptual way (e.g., aesthetic, action-oriented, etc.), the significance of the experience and encounter. **Propositional knowledge** then proceeds to formulate the experience and the presentation into ideas, thoughts, and verbal expressions, leading to the conceptualization of the experience in terms of an informative product or statement. Finally, **practical knowing** is the application of the knowledge gained into a specific trade, action, or skill (Heron, 1996). The methodological novelty brought about by cooperative inquiry lies in that these four dimensions of learning are actively, explicitly, and intentionally part of the inquiry and the process of elaboration of knowledge.

In the course, experiential knowing was primarily accessed through the practice of the IEMs, as well as through participation in games, meditative walks, and other ritual activities. Presentational knowing was accessed through the practices of drawing, creative movement, or creative writing (mostly poetry) after the IEMs and then through the sharing of these creative expressions. Propositional knowing was incorporated through the formulation of initial thoughts, insights, and ideas around the experience and was especially brought out during the integration sessions and in the final written assignment, when participants reflected on some of the themes that had emerged individually and collectively in the inquiry process. Finally, practical knowing took place in terms of each participant’s development of a set of practical tools conducive to a more embodied, cocreated, and integral approach to both their lives and the educational process.

In terms of participatory research, it was hypothesized that the intentional incorporation of all human dimensions in the inquiry process could immensely expand the fruits and span of academic investigation. In their article “Integral Transformative Education: A Participatory Proposal,” Ferrer et al. (2005) argue that it is likely that this type of participatory learning and expanded epistemology may be influential in shaping the future of integral education. In contrast to the currently prevalent cogni-centric model of integral education that incorporates alternative practices such as meditation or movement into a pedagogical framework in which the mind is still the chief agent of inquiry, a participatory approach seeks the activation of the epistemic power of all human dimensions to collaborate on a basis in the construction of more holistic forms of knowledge. The conventional mind-centered approach leads to inquiry outcomes that stem from an intellectual understanding or study, for example, through logical analysis, rational argumentation, or discussion of readings and academic works. As described by Ferrer et al. (2005), even when learning activities include experiential moments or practices, the nonmental dimensions rarely, if ever, comprise the actual substance
of the educational process. This type of integral education, which Ferrer calls the “bricolage” approach, strives to include other human attributes but still keeps the mind in charge of the learning process.

For Ferrer et al. (2005), a more genuine approach to integral education emerges through the intentional integration of all human dimensions in the inquiry process—a process in which all centers cocreatively participate in the inquiry process. In this approach, the body and the heart are neither driven nor directed by the mind but rather become autonomous and yet interrelated elements of a greater whole, with each dimension carrying the unique qualities and insights necessary for a more holistic exploration of the inquiry questions. In other words, if equally considered, the formation of knowledge in the context of an expanded epistemology (which includes experimental, presentational, prepositional, and practical ways of knowing) may be greatly enhanced when it stems not only from one source (i.e., the mind) but also from all the epistemic sources of the human participation in life and reality.

According to Ferrer et al. (2005), a participatory approach allows the mind to relinquish its control. The powers of the mind are instead invited to unfold alongside the capabilities of all the other human dimensions, contributing to the emergence of a more holistic, integral, and multidimensional perspective of the human experience and/or the inquiry question. This account expands the colloquial phrase “two minds think better than one” to “many dimensions know better than one.” In other words, the mind becomes a collaborator, a “cognitive translator,” and a communicator for what the other human dimensions may have to “say,” but by no means is it the holder of the only or privileged way of knowing.

Embodied Spiritual Inquiry: Course Outcomes

To illustrate the findings of this inquiry process, we include multiple forms of results as described in Heron’s extended epistemology, which discerns four areas of inquiry outcomes that “extend beyond” the overly narrow empiricism of mainstream research. This provides a more inclusive frame of reference, particularly appropriate for an inquiry of this nature. For example, a number of participants voiced their difficulties in expressing and synthesizing their experiences and embodied insights around questions of relational spirituality in verbal terms. As one participant described it, the themes within this experiential, multidimensional inquiry are “not easily reduced to language,” but rather “language contains and supports the nonverbal creative expression of these non-verbal, physical and emotive elements.” In this spirit, we include creative expressions of experience such as poetry and drawings “contained and supported” by language.

As the theme of inquiry developed from the more general focus of the first cycle to the more personalized articulations of this topic in the second cycle, the participants’ feedback about their experiences became diversified, not always relating
directly to one precise research question but rather following a number of interwoven threads of inquiry within the fabric of the overall topic. However, looking at the outcomes in all their different manifestations, we see a body of knowledge that points to the general inquiry focus in one way or another. Staying true to the character of this inquiry, we intend to remain with an attitude of openness and curiosity as we present the fruits that were collected, without attempting to draw final conclusions or offer ultimate answers. The outcomes presented here are based on and include written, verbal, and creative expressions and reflections given by the participants during and after the inquiry process. Other types of creative presentations of inner processes that emerged in the process, such as dance or movement, are omitted in this presentation because of the inherent difficulty of conveying them adequately through illustrations or the written word. Capturing through the medium of this article the profound multidimensional and embodied wisdom that emerged from the class around the topic of relational spirituality is extremely challenging. Additionally, in the context of this article, it is necessary to condense the vastness of the material on the explored themes to a few underlying and recurring streams. The authors acknowledge that these streams are not all-inclusive and that there were numerous personal insights that cannot be mentioned because of space limitations.

Generally, it can be said that the inquiry process provided a novel and profoundly meaningful experience for the participants, as they consistently reported in their feedback throughout and after the process. The multiple levels of bodily engagement and knowing in explorations of self, other, and the space-in-between were powerful and, in some cases, life changing for the participants. In the following pages, we outline a few significant themes that emerged for the inquirers related to the explorations of the nature of relational spirituality or the “space-in-between.” First, we offer propositional and presentational outcomes addressing the nature of relational spirituality, describing insights and experiences connected to being within a field of shared, embodied exploration. Then, we depict transformational and practical outcomes reported by the participants in relation to their experiences during the overall inquiry process. This particular grouping of inquiry outcomes in our presentation is partially based on Heron’s (1996) observation that, whereas propositional and presentational outcomes are “separable from the person” (i.e., they come into being when symbolized through an external medium), transformational and practical outcomes are “inseparable from the researcher” (i.e., they are qualities of being and skills existing within the person) (p. 107).

**PROPOSITIONAL AND PRESENTATIONAL OUTCOMES**

Early in the course of the inquiry, participants started referring to a shared field that they experienced as they practiced the dyadic IEMs to explore the nature of relational spirituality. There seemed to be a widespread agreement among participants that, as they engaged in the embodied meditations, there was often a nonordinary experience of increased union or softening and even dissolving of boundaries between them and their partners. Through the cycles of experience and reflection,
it became clear that the nature of this space-in-between (and with it the nature of relational spirituality) is one of great mystery and paradox. The qualities of experience appeared to differ and fluctuate among participants, and even for a single individual, from notions of oneness of self and other to a clear and explicit awareness of separation and difference. In what follows, we differentiate three distinct experiential areas of what was often referred to as the “space-in-between”: oneness, communion, and nonduality.

**Oneness—merging on multiple levels.** A number of participants repeatedly talked about a “blending of energy” and “feelings of oneness” they experienced with their respective partners, as well as with the entire group on physical and energetic levels during the embodied meditations. In a number of cases, participants reported experiences, where oneness exceeded the realms of physical and energetic bodies and seemed to include consciousness itself. Participants spoke of being in a state, where ordinary distinctions and limitations of individual physical, energetic, and emotional identity, as well as individual identity of consciousness were no longer experienced. For example, one participant described how “a vast ocean of conscious potentiality opened up” for (and within) him as he and his partner “entered” their own and each other’s (subtle) bodies in the practices. The emotional quality of being in this space-in-between was generally described as “deeply intimate,” “peaceful,” “joyful and nurturing,” bringing forth the expansion of body and mind, and an access to a changed awareness, but at times also evoking emotions like fear and sadness as participants re-connected with old wounds and disappointments and touched on an existential experience of separation and isolation.

The following presentational outcomes creatively illustrate the experience of the space-in-between as one of boundless union. The poem speaks of a fusion of energies and identities and the drawing illustrates a seamless overlapping of beings who merge into a unified etheric field.

The fish and the lover and I are one.
There is no in-between, no vacuum, no nothingness;
only a blurring of energies in the meeting points.
No boundary divides Bear from sunshine, hope from bicycle, me from you.
There is only me-me touching me-you.
And me-us touching me-all

*(Poem by Sarah Kerr)*

**Communion—shared but separate.** Some participants stressed that, in contrast to the recurring descriptions in the group of experiences of oneness, they did not encounter the space-in-between as one of merging and unity. There were numerous reports of people entering a “common space,” yet experiencing themselves as clearly distinct and separate, as not blended with others. One woman pointed toward that quality of the relational spiritual realm, writing that to her the space, as well as her self-awareness, was distinct rather than blended. She described the
space she experienced as “intersubjective and healing,” where “an organic influencing and receiving occurs beyond the mere fulfilling of roles and needs.” She clearly referred to a space that for her was shared, yet individual. The following poems by other inquirers point toward similar experiences and insights on a presentational level:

I am me
and you are you
and yet we are us
and the us is as real
as the me and the you

(Poem by Sarah Kerr)

Relationships
are not just for champions anymore.
Morphing, transforming
montages,
pieces of you
Nudging shoulders with pieces of me,
creating a masterpiece.
A moving, flowing, dancing work of art.

(Poem by Kim Bella)
In her report on the practice focusing on the heart center, one participant described an interesting experience of emotions in this shared-but-distinct space. She reported that the central feature of her experience, while in deep connection with her partner, was the discovery of some sadness “which I did not recognize as mine.” As she rested her forehead on her partner’s heart, it seems that she may have made contact with her partner’s sadness (the partner later confirmed in the feedback session that he had in fact been feeling sad during the practice). In further reflection, this led her to believe that in physical contact, without the interference of the cognitive mind, “we were experiencing the emotions of our own hearts, perhaps each other’s heart or even our collective heart.”

Another participant related her experience through the image below. Her drawing represents a heart that by being open to the immanent presence of life is touched by all. The multiple hands represent the hands and touch of community, yet the distinct outline of the woman’s own body and the bodies around her indicate the unique existence of each person as a human being. She (and the others) belongs to a community and are implicitly touched and held by a community, but each one also carries a separate and unique set of human potentials to unfold on their own.

*Nonduality—merged and distinct.* Still other reports described an experience with a paradoxical quality that is both merged and distinct, deeply intimate as well as limitless, free and spacious. They described an embodied awareness of the
parallel truths of both these seemingly opposite ends of a spectrum of experience, where consciousness would gravitate from one toward the other. One participant beautifully described her realizations about this paradox during an embodied meditation:

There is fundamentally no differentiation between anything or anybody, we are all one. There is no clear line of distinction between me and that which is not me. And there is. There is something of me that is different than anyone else, and yet me and not-me are paradoxically both indivisible and divisible. It is this tension that lies in the heart of this inquiry.

In some cases, there was integration toward this type of nondual comprehension over the course of the inquiry process, as participants moved toward an experiential and conceptual wholeness, in which both ends of the spectrum could be possible, accessible, and acceptable, without excluding or contradicting each other. The following poem touches this sense of integration:

Here I am!
Bones and all,
receiving and received.
I jump for joy,
I exult in the flames
of passion
of power
of aliveness.
I spread my hands
to embrace the world.
Love tickles my feet.
Illumination bathes my mind.
Excitement emanates from my core.
I am drunk with the fruits
of the nectars of the flesh.
I have no body,
For my body is unbounded.
I have no knowing,
For my mind is open and empty.
I revel in the not knowing.
But I know.
Myself.

(Poem by Kim Bella)

This state of nonduality, in which participants came into contact with seemingly paradoxical states simultaneously, was experienced on different levels. In addition to the interpersonal level just described, there was an intrapersonal level
of such an experience. For example, reflecting on the practice focusing on the feet and legs, several participants talked about becoming aware of the solidity and density of their bodies, while experiencing a concurrent opening within their energetic centers and a general sense of permeability. Again, and as depicted in the drawing below, experience and descriptions point toward the recurring phenomenon of integration of opposites: being solid, rooted, and grounded and being open, spacious, and permeable at the same time, gently moving from one to the other.

TRANSFORMATIONAL AND PRACTICAL OUTCOMES

As participants examined the nature of relational spirituality, many personal issues and areas of exploration emerged. In their reports, inquirers explained how
they not only found deeper or different awareness in regard to personal themes but also experienced changes on practical and transformational levels. Though we present reports involving intrapersonal changes, it is important to stress that, as Heron (1996) points out, transformations of personal being are best “conveyed, at their own level, through personal meeting, through being with the inquirers, in their presence” (p. 105). In any event, in the following pages, we present a selection of themes that participants reported in regard to such changes.

Integration of embodied knowing. One of the most immediate outcomes on practical and transformational levels was the integrative impact of the IEMs themselves. Many participants reported how positively they had perceived the engagement of the body as a channel of inquiry—in its entirety as well as through the specific energetic centers. The conscious focus on the various centers in contemplating a subject and acquiring knowledge was new to most participants and profound to all. A number of participants expressed gratitude and joy about their (re-)discovery of a more holistic and wholesome way of inquiry than their familiar cognicentric approach. One participant stated that during the inquiry practices she had touched on a “truly profound, far from linear place of knowing” within her body-mind that she hoped to continue to incorporate and “allow to come through” in her academic work. A number of group members concurred with her description.

Modulation of personal boundaries. For most participants, the theme of personal and interpersonal boundaries was a recurrent question. As they explored a space with fluid and changing boundaries during the IEMs, inquirers were introduced to an alternate experiential reality in regard to separateness from others as well as from parts of themselves. The conventional boundaries of the normal state of consciousness regarding distinction and separation were continuously challenged experientially in the practices. And boundaries that are usually only overcome either conceptually in adhering to abstract spiritual ideas of oneness or nonduality, or experientially during sexual union, were repeatedly crossed during the IEMs. Hence, many participants struggled with questions about the validity, necessity, and role of their familiar experiential paradigms, often reflecting on how and to what extent and purpose they are creating and maintaining boundaries in the meditations as well as in their everyday relationships. Several participants described how they gained a new awareness and a changed frame of reference for their own boundaries in contact with others and how they felt they had now greater practical knowing about how to modulate their boundaries more freely and intentionally in their everyday lives.

Besides the experience of increased creative power and liveliness during the IEMs, participants also reported changes in their comprehension and ability to regulate their own boundaries in anticipation of how they may influence their relating to others. One woman spoke, for instance, of a “dance of openness and contraction” during the meditations that stand in clear contrast to her habitual
experience of more rigid boundaries and contraction, which for her “create the illusion of differentiation and separateness” and prevent “life to fully manifest and unfold through the body.” Another participant inquired about whether boundaries separate and divide or rather strengthen and hold and found that both were true simultaneously, without any of the two poles being experienced as contradicting or in tension with the other. This insight could also be found in the feedback of other group members. Many reflections pointed out that boundaries are usually related to issues of safety and fear, and though they can serve an important function, they often hinder increased levels of aliveness, connection, and intimacy when maintained rigidly with a low level of awareness and fluidity in everyday relationships. Most participants reported to having found a new openness and flexibility in their awareness and assertion of boundaries. One person described her development in regard to the dynamic experience of “me and not-me” as manifesting on different levels. She expressed that, being a sensitive and intuitive person who tunes into other people’s states easily, she had found a new “baseline of knowing” what her own energy pattern feels like. From this place of knowing, she finds herself more able to discern which emotions and energies are hers and which belong to others.

Longing for communion versus fear of engulfment. Connected to the discussion of boundaries, many participants reflected on their struggle between two seemingly opposing forces: one toward more union and the other toward more individuality. Through the inquiry process, the polarity between wanting to experience a deep connection and even union with others, on one hand, and wanting to protect a sense of individual identity, on the other, was highlighted as a common dilemma. Participants repeatedly reflected on feelings of grief and sorrow as they touched on their (apparent) ultimate separation and isolation from others, as well as their fears of “merging” or “losing themselves” as they explored deep physical, energetic, and emotional connection with others. Several participants reported that their relationship to this polarity (and the tension created within it) changed during the inquiry process. One woman spoke of her realization that the grief and loneliness she experienced is “inextricably linked to the evolution of individual consciousness” and therefore “has to be acknowledged as real.” At the same time, she concluded, this grief serves as a motivation and fundamental point of connection between people. Other inquirers pointed toward having experienced a greater fluidity around this question with which they could be in contact. They spoke of moving into deeper areas of their own consciousness, as well as into deeper connection with their practice partners, without contracting as much out of fear of isolation or fear of engulfment.

Pearls of wisdom in the centers of inquiry. Throughout the inquiry process, the body was utilized and experienced as a container, generator, and receiver of knowledge. Through the embodied contact in the IEMs, participants recognized and connected to their own energetic centers and were able to tap into insights beyond
the scope of what they had known to be accessible on purely cognitive pathways. Each chosen channel of inquiry, though never functioning independently, brought unique experiences and understandings to the participants on various levels. In this section, we present practical and transformational outcomes that relate to a deeper discovery of the nature of these centers and their role in regard to relational spirituality.

The body or “root center,” as one participant termed it in her reflections, was often referred to and experienced as a place of grounding and connection to a deeper place within oneself as well as to the earth. Another description of the body/root center was to be the connector to the “intrinsic rhythm of life,” the “pulse underlying all movements” within and between people. A number of participants reported an enhanced awareness and greater capacity of how to utilize their body as a source of grounding with the outside world, as well as within themselves.

Whereas the body/root center could be seen as the basic holding and connecting structure, the vital center was experienced as a generator of energy that fuels and enlives all the other human attributes. It was described as a “strong” and “hot” source of “serpentine” energy feeding all other centers and being the “source of deep connection.” Some found that the vital center “opened the boundaries to let knowledge emerge from and through the body.” The drawing below depicts the primal and vital energies, now unleashed, rising into, and informing and nourishing the rest of the body/heart/mind complex.
The inquirers found the vital energy to be “somewhat untamed” as its “fire” is about expansion and connection, oftentimes distorted as or limited to a sexual or erotic quality. Engaging with and through the vital center, a number of participants reported finding a new awareness of and relationship to this energy within them, as they experienced it more as a pure life-force feeding them and their relationship, as well as less confined to themes of attractiveness, eroticism, and sexuality. The following poem expresses the “wild energy” some participants recognized as residing in the vital center:

The Vital.
Exploding kaleidoscope
bursting into being
from a juicy, succulent source.
Fierce imaginings,
sensuous wonders,
released into the wild.
No container, no control.
Stirring brilliance
cascading carelessly,
seeking expression.
Careful the whispers.
You could kill someone
with this power.
Unleashed, untamed
celebration.
Who wants a party?
I do! I do!
But only so much,
only so far.
Society taught me well.
I am a Good Girl.
For now.

(Poem by Kim Bella)

The heart center was recognized as the connector, resonator, and empathic receiver in relational spirituality. It was the channel through which most people connected with “sacred parts” of themselves, their partners, and at times even the collective in and beyond the group. Not surprisingly, participants spoke of the heart center as the “source of love,” care, and healing—the place from which they could contact and embrace themselves and others most clearly and fully. Many described connecting through and with the heart as a “moving and healing” experience. The healing experience of the deep joining through the heart is touched on in this poem:
The head rests in the heart.
Breath enters breath.
Heart beats mingle.
Two hearts come together.
And this is wholeness.
Or two fragments of one boundlessness.
Alone cannot form a whole.
The heart opens like a pool spreading from a spring.
The heart enters, is immersed, flutters, to escape.
Some hearts don’t know the heart can swim in love.

(Poem by Niccolo Francesco Santilli)

The heart was also seen as the integrative center capable of containing multiple paradoxes such as light and dark, happiness and sadness, and animal and divine. The following drawing illustrates this capacity of the heart to encompass all.

Whereas the shadow of the vital energy was understood as a limitless, powerful yet potentially destructive quality, the shadow of the heart was an experience of vulnerability and sadness. The vulnerability was often connected to the possibility of being hurt in the openness of the intimate encounter in the space-in-between, while the sadness was experienced in connection to different themes. Many inquirers described recognizing the heart as the center that holds but also the one that contains grief and sadness. Therefore, when the heart was held, some participants touched a feeling of sadness without being clear about the origins of the emotion, though some thought of it as a grief over not having this level of union, connection, and community in their everyday lives.

Although sometimes perceived as an inhibiting force in spiritual development, the mind was recognized in new ways during the IEMs of the inquiry process.
Participants talked about a new appreciation and gratefulness they felt toward their mind, which, for many spiritual paths, is often seen as an obstacle to or even enemy of spiritual realization. Several participants reported that when the mind was intentionally invited to engage in the inquiry (i.e., during the IEM focusing on the mind) the quality of “mind-activity” changed. A number of participants experienced the mind as organically connected to the other centers, supported by and rooted in the body, vitalized by the instincts, and softened by the heart. Being relieved from its usual role of doing all the work, the mind was able to relax, and its intrinsic brilliance and beauty could come forward. Several class members reported experiencing the mind as now a relaxed, cooperative participant in an integral inquiry process, as opposed to the dominant and often stressed nature of the mind in ordinary consciousness. One woman wrote: “the mind allowed consciousness free time to dive into the realms of the unknown, the unformulated potential of all that can be. My Being was no longer held prisoner by the mind and could scan the unlimited horizons while opening up to the Mystery.” Another participant reported that as she experienced an “absence of mind” [in the usual sense of thought and emotional sequences], “something else was present, something mystical and elemental. I felt like a vessel of presence and activity with no clear emotions and not even a distinct body.” These accounts, which describe experiences not uncommon in contemplative practices, are nonetheless noteworthy because the experiences occurred during meditations in which the mind was
deliberately engaged to explore topics of inquiry. The following poem (written after the IEM that focused on the mind) beautifully depicts the light and spacious consciousness that emerged for many participants in relation to this center.

Blue as the sky
Bright as a star
Light as a cloud
Mysterious as a full moon
So sweetly I fly through the night.

(Poem by Laurette Dupuis)

Conclusion

In this course, applying a participatory and cooperative approach to the question, “What is the nature of relational spirituality,” revealed extraordinarily rich layers of meaning that, in our view, could never have been accessed through mind-centered or even bricolage approaches. By means of an integrative inquiry that tapped into the complexity and epistemic power of a larger number of human dimensions and ways of knowing, participants reported to have gained a deeper and more integral understanding of the topic at hand.

In looking at the process as well as the outcomes of this inquiry, we notice and can summarize a number of significant effects for the participating coresearchers. First, the participants of this inquiry had, in varying degrees, direct experiences of spiritual states phenomenologically akin to those described by many contemplative traditions. This in itself is a rather remarkable occurrence, because many traditions emphasize that in most cases the achievement of such states requires years of meditation or other contemplative practice. Therefore, we can speculate that the practice of the IEMs facilitates the access to such states through some kind of synergetic resonance between the multidimensional energies of two or more individuals.

The participants explored three different qualities (union, communion, and non-duality) of this nonordinary space-in-between, which served as their container for reflection of spiritual and psychological themes. Exploring personal and interpersonal issues within this state, they found new insights, creative expression, practical wisdom, and transformational changes, which, in many cases, exceeded their previous understandings and capabilities. Through engagement in and reflection on the IEMs, the inquirers learned to recognize, access, and utilize multiple levels of knowing and processing beyond the familiar mind-centered paradigm in education.

We realize that the conclusions drawn by the participants and reflected in this article are contextual and specific to this inquiry. To explore the possible greater and more general validity of these outcomes, a replication of this process in additional inquiry projects would be required—with both similar and different inquiry tools. The experiences, as well as connected insights and changes of the
participants, were sound and meaningful within the context of this process and could find further validation in subsequent inquiries.\(^3\)

Recognizing that the results of this study are contextual, we want to summarize a few essential considerations that appeared to be true within the scope of this inquiry process and the nonordinary states that were experienced in these explorations:

- Many of the themes touched within the inquiry on relational spirituality have a paradoxical quality. There is a coexistence, a parallel felt experience of dual polarities: me and not-me, trust and fear, solid body awareness and no-boundary awareness, union and separation, intimacy and isolation, containment and spaciousness, joy and sadness, and so forth.

- Access to and movement between these experiential poles increased in fluidity through the practices. The commonly perceived tension between polar realities was often eased and harmonized through the experience of some particular quality of the space-in-between.

- Experientially, the culturally pervasive perception of being isolated individual identities, and the cognitive construct of separation between people, were challenged and dismantled. Depending on the lens of experience, there is potential for awareness ranging from a state of union and fusion to a clear perception of difference, boundaries, and separation. Both were experientially acknowledged as real.

- Nonduality, communion, and oneness can emerge in embodied contact as we create a space of safety and trust that allows a genuine openness to the space-in-between.

- Conscious and unconscious fears function as regulating, limiting, and protective factors in experiencing relational spirituality.

- States of openness and permeability, as well as of rigid boundaries and separation, are possibilities and are a matter of choice, intention, and practice.

- Physical contact is a major factor in relational as well as in individual contemplation in this form of work. Through touch, the internal experience is widened and deepened in multiple layers of consciousness. At the same time, touch creates a dynamic and fluid common field of energetic, emotional, physical, and mental exchange between practitioners.

- The general level of anxiety typical of everyday encounters among people in the modern West decreases over time in this kind of group process. Likewise, the need for control, protection, and strong boundaries in interpersonal relationships lessens.

- The quality of knowing that emerged—when people shared they seemed to speak from a relaxed, grounded voice that had the authority of their own experience—is perhaps a manifestation of the attainment of embodied knowing. This was experienced as very different from the feeling tone typical of academic discussions.

- Finally, as the class evolved, participants took more responsibility for cocreating the IEM practices. This was felt as an important “maturation process” of the group that rarely takes place in traditional academic settings.

The participation of all human dimensions in the inquiry process in the context of a cooperative research model allowed for a new and unique approach to academic learning. For Ferrer, the course was meant to potentially shed a new light
for students on some perennial questions of spiritual discourse by extending the method of inquiry to include the epistemic potential of all human dimensions. It encouraged a style of research that was more integral, inclusive, and holistic—one that engaged all the major dimensions of the human being (i.e., somatic, vital, emotional, psychological, and spiritual). By doing so, not only could a course like this contribute to the implementation and legitimization of more transformative educational models but also to the cultivation of more holistic ways of knowing that, in turn, might lead to a more complete and, therefore, undistorted picture of human experience and reality. We suggest that it is in the intentional integration of all human attributes in the inquiry process where lie immense possibilities of expanding the fruits and span of transformative education in the academia.

Notes

1. For a description of the Institute and its various programs, see www.ciis.edu.
2. For a report of a related cooperative inquiry in the “realm of the between,” see Heron and Lahood (forthcoming). For conceptualizations of the “realm of the between,” see Ferrer’s (2002) account of spiritual phenomena as “multilocal participatory events” that can arise in different loci, such as an individual, a relationship, or a community, and Heron’s (1998, 2006) reflections on relational spirituality and the enaction of situational spirit as the reality of the between. The expression “realm of the Between” was first used by Martin Buber (1970).
3. A full discussion of validity in cooperative inquiry can be found in Heron (1996) and Heron and Reason (forthcoming).

References


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