

How to Connect with Your Students

AN INTEGRAL APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Mark James Fischler

This article explores why focusing on the subject matter alone in the student/teacher relationship is a restrictive and non-comprehensive approach to higher education. Such a narrowly focused relationship seems to impede the overall health and development of both the teacher and student. The process of avoiding so much of our lives “to teach” leaves many dissatisfied and thirsting for something deeper and more whole. To move beyond the limited pedagogical approach, I will outline a comprehensive approach to higher education by utilizing the AQAL model as developed by Ken Wilber. This article will focus on one aspect of the AQAL model, the quadrants, and will consider their potential benefits in helping teachers connect better with ourselves, students, and the world.

Introduction: Making Your Subject Whole

Last year, a colleague called and told me that a student was killed in a motorcycle accident. I felt deeply sad as I contemplated the student’s short life and those he had left behind. It was then that I awoke to the fact that the subject I teach is not entirely separate from my interior experience.

Our interiors affect how we teach and how we learn. Death is not a topic directly related to the subject matter I teach, and yet many of my students were affected by this student’s death. Should I go there with them or not? Should I dare to talk about issues that affect us, affect our learning, our being and our doing, even if they are not the assigned subject matter? Why would I dare? What is the benefit? How would I approach such an endeavor?

The Integral model provides a way of considering these questions through its foundational element: quadrants. The quadrants represent four intrinsic perspectives that arise in every moment. They represent the interior and exterior of the individual and the collective.

The Upper-Left quadrant represents the interior perspective of the individual, or the “I.” This perspective is subjectively felt by the individual (e.g., feelings, thoughts, images). The Upper-Right quadrant represents the exterior of the individual, or the “It” perspective. This represents what we can objectively see about another (behavior, gestures, physical form). The Lower-Left quadrant represents the interior collective perspective, or “We.” This perspective shines a light on our intersubjective values. The Lower-Right quadrant represents the exterior perspective of a group and focuses on the systems that we use to interact with one another. (See figure 1.)

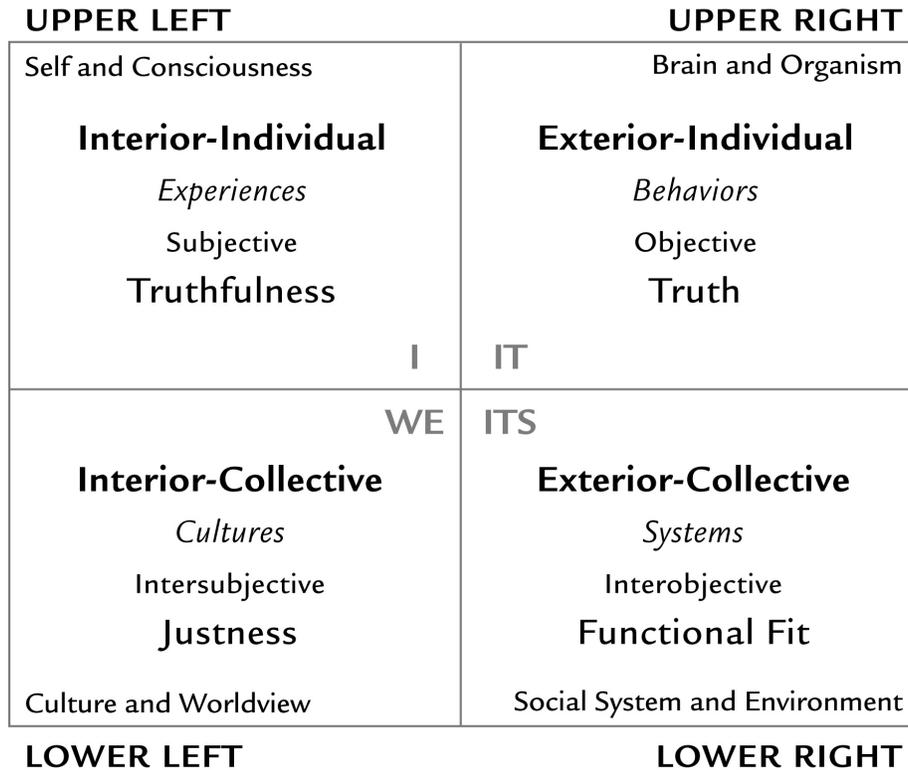
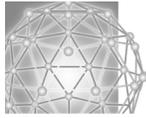
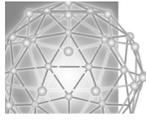


Figure 1. The Quadrants

Each quadrant tells a partial piece of the story of life and cannot be reduced to the other. When we do not reduce and honor these perspectives we then understand, provide, and teach a more comprehensive picture of existence. Thus, it is important that we recognize these quadrants in ourselves and in the lives of our students. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate the relevance of the AQAL model to the teaching profession.

The first way I shall explore the quadrants is from the perspective of the subject matter that we teach. It does not matter what your subject is, it is still situated within at least one of the four quadrants. Many teachers like to think that their subject matter (and their approach to it) is the most relevant and important means of learning available. The problem, of course, is that it is not true. For example, a professor of psychology might focus on Freud and other approaches that emphasize the interior perspectives of the individual and how they develop. This is an Upper-Left quadrant focus. Does this professor think that the interior perspective develops in a vacuum? Do they think that the neurological and physical health (Upper-Right quadrant) of the person do not play a factor? Do they consider that political and environmental systems (Lower Right) and cultures (Lower Left) are also influential in this individual’s psychological development? This does not mean the instructor must teach these other perspectives. Rather, they can simply contextualize the subject and recognize its contributions and limitations. To admit the limitations of our disciplines allows us to connect in a more authentic way with our students, who already know on a deeper level that we do not have all the answers.

**Upper-Left Quadrant**

To create the space for a more comprehensive education of the student, the teacher must begin by checking in with their own interior perspective (UL). Within the interior lie our subjective interpretations and experiences of reality. Our inner world also reflects our feelings, thoughts, and overall mental well-being. If we are feeling ill at ease and unhappy inside, this will most certainly spill over into our teaching and compromise our effectiveness. Thus, it is worthwhile to get in touch with our mental processes, not only for ourselves but also for everyone we meet.

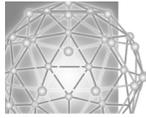
At the same time, our students have their own subjective experiences. Students have their own inner realities developed over time. They are also dealing with feelings of happiness and pain that we cannot always objectively see when they walk into the classroom. Such inner realities can have a dramatic effect on their learning ability. In the previous semester alone I became aware of various students suffering internal strife over such things as losing their best friend, losing their brother, finding out their parent has cancer, being charged with a crime, being under investigation for a crime, and being the advocate of a victim of a crime, to name a few. This is in addition to the regular internal struggles accompanied with being in your late teens or early twenties. Each situation is obviously painful in its own unique way. To be under investigation for a serious crime or having to go home on weekends to take care of an ill parent can leave little time for the mind to think about the subjects we teach. It is therefore worthwhile to encourage our students to explore their inner realities so that they can develop the tools to handle the vicissitudes of existence. We might encourage them to visit a psychologist or begin the practice of contemplation and meditation—tools used throughout history to explore our subjective experience.

Upper-Right Quadrant

The Upper-Right quadrant represents the exterior perspective of the individual. When applied to the teacher, this perspective brings to light what you actually do every day. Are you writing, researching, teaching, advising, serving on committees, or doing a little bit of each? The connection between the Upper-Left and Upper-Right quadrants is apparent. (See figure 2.) If, for example, you are engaged in some of the above-mentioned activities, and they are bringing you little subjective satisfaction, it may be time to question what you are doing. Connecting what we do (Upper Right) with what gives us meaning (Upper Left) will bring us deeper satisfaction and should have a positive effect on the people we meet. (And note that connecting interiors and exteriors is nothing new: we ask people to back up their words with their actions all the time. The words stated would have no meaning otherwise.)

The Upper-Right quadrant also represents our physical health. What are you doing for your physical well-being? Our physical health can have an impact on the amount of activities we are able to participate in as a teacher. Therefore, for optimal efficiency, it is best to take care of yourself.

Of course we can apply this Upper-Right quadrant to our students as well and see their behavior and physical health. To better understand my students, I must ask what kind of behaviors and actions brought them into contact with me? What choices led them to my classroom, at this institution? By understanding these previous behaviors, we are in superior position to serve their needs. In addition, as instructors, we have the opportunity to shape their behavior and actions based on our rules and what we demand from them. We can observe how often they come to class, whether they participate, and whether they hand in their assignments on time, to name a few.

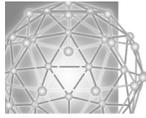


<p>UPPER LEFT</p> <p>Thoughts</p> <p>Feelings</p> <p>Personal values</p> <p>Intellectual activity</p>	<p>UPPER RIGHT</p> <p>Write articles and tests</p> <p>Attend meetings</p> <p>Attend class</p> <p>Participate in school activities</p>
<p>LOWER LEFT</p> <p>Intersubjective understanding with students</p> <p>Collective values of groups teachers are a part of:</p> <p>Political values</p> <p>Cultural values</p> <p>Intellectual values</p> <p>Ethics</p>	<p>LOWER RIGHT</p> <p>Actual interaction with students in the classroom</p> <p>Social systems teachers are part of:</p> <p>Tenure system</p> <p>Legal system</p> <p>University system</p> <p>Committee system</p>

Figure 2. The Quadrants of the Teacher

By observing their behavior, we can help the student reflect on the kinds of behaviors that lead to successful outputs in life and the kinds that do not. We can also deduce some of what they do when they are not in the classroom. A simple check of the athletic rosters and student organizations informs us about how they spend their time outside of class. Some of those behaviors outside the classroom (like drinking heavily) can be destructive in more ways than one.

This leads us to another aspect of the Upper-Right quadrant, which deals with the student's physical health. As instructors, we are in the unique position to notice their health by just looking and listening to them. Not a class goes by that a student does not have a cold or cough. Sometimes you see broken hands or black eyes from physical altercations. Each provides invaluable information into the worlds of our students. This information gives the teacher a more comprehensive look into their overall academic experience, which is something that benefits us both.



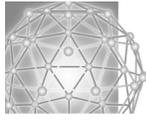
<p>UPPER LEFT</p> <p>Thoughts</p> <p>Emotions</p> <p>Personal values</p> <p>Intellectual activity</p>	<p>UPPER RIGHT</p> <p>Physical health</p> <p>Classroom behavior and attendance</p> <p>objective student output</p>
<p>LOWER LEFT</p> <p>Intersubjective understanding with the teacher</p> <p>Collective values of groups students are a part of:</p> <p>Political values</p> <p>Peer values</p> <p>Intellectual values</p> <p>Cultural values</p>	<p>LOWER RIGHT</p> <p>Receiving subject matter from the teacher</p> <p>Social representation of collective values:</p> <p>Greek system</p> <p>Disciplinary system</p> <p>Grading system</p> <p>Student loan system</p> <p>Student government system</p>

Figure 3. The Quadrants of the Student

Lower-Left Quadrant

In the classroom, the Lower-Left quadrant represents the actual intersubjective understanding that happens between the student and teacher when we interact. That magical connection that happens between two people is the meaning behind the act of teaching itself.

The Lower-Left quadrant also focuses on the interior perspective of the cultures we are members of. It highlights the collective worldview and shared values of the people we interact with. Who do we choose to spend time with and why? As teachers we are members of many groups and committees. What are the values of those sub-groups? Are we creating a culture of us versus them, whether it is in politics or inter/intra departmental rivalry? How are we interacting with other people? Are there subgroups that undermine cohesion and connection amongst various members of your campus? In essence, what are your ethics? Furthermore, what kind of principles does the university itself represent? What kinds of values and interactions are appreciated in this



community, and do I choose to participate? For instance, on my campus we have a center for educators to help educate each other, so we value sharing ideas and new visions to further our connection with the student body.

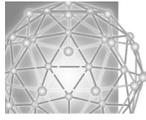
As teachers, we are also partly responsible for the culture we create in the classroom. Thus, one must consider the ethics being conveyed in the teacher-student experience. In other words, is justice honored and taught in your classroom? Developing communication that is based on mutual respect and understanding can create a culture of awareness and connection in the classroom. Recognizing that students do in fact have interior feelings creates insight and trust between the teacher and student. It is my opinion that students intuitively know who is open to where they are at and who is not. It is therefore imperative that we recognize this is happening. We do not need to become clairvoyant and intuit what they think, but we do need to understand that there is more on their mind than just the course when they walk in the classroom. When we are open, a bond can develop, and students often disclose the pains and joys they are carrying. Moreover, like a good friend, we can listen and direct them to the best place for the services they need most.

Students also have their own cultures and collective worldviews based on their background and age. (See figure 3.) As teachers, it makes sense to try and understand the various cultures that our students are members of. In addition, understanding the influence peers have on one another gives us a better appreciation of the pressures of being seventeen to twenty-two. Our effectiveness is also limited if we do not understand the values and worldviews of the students who enter our classrooms. For example, if I teach a class about baseball outside of Fenway Park in Boston and I choose to use the history of the New York Yankees as an illustration, I may not be very successful in connecting with my students. I actually might be endangering my life, too (at least in New England). How each student sees the world provides us the necessary information to work with that particular point of view. This insight will help break down the barriers and distances between us.

Lower-Right Quadrant

The Lower-Right quadrant represents the interobjective act of hearing and receiving information, which is the essential teaching experience. Of course, the strategies and styles I use in order to convey that information will depend on my own interior values, as well as larger cultural contexts (i.e., the Left-Hand quadrants).

Through the Lower-Right quadrant, we see the exterior of cultures and the social structures that we interact with. This is the interobjective view of reality. The Lower-Right quadrant also represents the systems we participate in. Simple examples include the capitalist system, the educational system, and the legal system. More specifically as teachers, we are often on various campus committees that reflect the systems our university has adopted. We have systems to choose new hires, systems to decide curriculum within the department and campus wide, and systems to decide who gets to attend school. Again, these systems are comprised of human beings who have subjective viewpoints of their own. It is therefore worth reflecting on which systems we interact with and questioning whether they provide cultural meaning (Lower Left) and personal satisfaction (Upper Left), in the process. In addition, are the systems we utilize effective? Our campus is currently reflecting on why we have 53 different committees on a campus with fewer than five thousand undergraduate students. (In fact, I think we have created a committee to look into it.) Do not forget that your syllabi are reflective of the system of



governance in the classroom. Does your class system connect with the cultural values you aim to project and develop as well?

How do these systems affect the student's ability to learn? For example, if the federal government reduces the loans it gives to low-income students it has a dramatic effect on who chooses to attend school. Moreover, such systemic decisions may directly affect students' ability to live on campus. A number of students in the past two years have shared with me their desire to live on campus, but they are unable to afford it because the money is not even there to borrow. Furthermore, just being aware of the various systems our students are involved in gives us a more comprehensive look at their whole experience. Whether they belong to campus clubs or organizations, athletic teams, or have to answer to the campus judicial system, knowing their interactions with our systems makes us better able to meet their needs.

Conclusion

This tour of the quadrants provides an initial overview of a comprehensive student/teacher relationship and a peek at the emergence of an Integral educator. An Integral educator sees the partiality of the subject they teach, and thereby connects it with other perspectives to create a fuller picture of their discipline. The Integral educator recognizes that there is an interior and exterior approach to the subject they teach and are clear about which perspective their subject stems from. Integral educators pay attention to their own subjective, interior realities. The Integral educator also recognizes that there is more to the student than meets the eye. The student has his or her own interior world, culture, and systemic involvement that is not immediately available when you see them in class. The days of only knowing the students' social security number and grade after delivering our daily lecture are over. Without a fuller framework we foster a fragmented culture. *What kind of framework do you currently use to understand these issues?*

To separate the feeling part of my self from what I teach creates a division that is painful and illusory. This phantom separation ultimately undermines my relationship with my students, leaving us all a little more distant and confused in the process. By using the quadrants, I can bridge these kinds of distancing tendencies within education. While the quadrants are only one piece of the AQAL map, these four perspectives help us recognize the interiors and exteriors of the human experience within both the individual and collective contexts of teaching and learning. In further essays, I will explore other elements of the AQAL map and apply them to the relationship between student and teacher within Integral Education. For now, the four quadrants give us plenty of insight and material to work with in ourselves, our teaching, and our students.

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