Learning and the Illusion of Solid and Separate Things: Troublesome Knowledge and the Curriculum

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If (man) thinks of the totality as constituted of independent fragments, then that is how his mind will tend to operate, but if he can include everything coherently and harmoniously in an overall whole that is undivided, unbroken, and without a border then his mind will tend to move in a similar way, and from this will flow an orderly action within the whole.

—David Bohm

Part 1

Preamble

One of my prized magical illusions¹ is an inexpensive effect that shows an apparently solid box of playing cards that is contained within a card case. The box of cards can be removed and opened and can be shown to contain a real playing card, which the spectator sees to be one of apparently many. The box of cards is then returned to the card case and in an instant... it has vanished. The astonishment that usually accompanies this artful illusion arises because the spectator is given the close appearance of solidity where there is none.

The mystery of the vanishing box of cards is the metaphoric subject of this essay on learning and the illusion of solid and separate things, and the challenge this troublesome knowledge (Meyer and Land, 2003) poses for developing a mature curriculum that speaks to a vision of life that is non-separate; rather than, as it is currently conceptualised and experienced, a world of distinct, separate things that needs to be manipulated and exploited in order to ensure the safety of the individual in competition

¹ The author has been using illusions in his teaching practice for many years, and is particularly interested in the variety of illusions that we are confronted with: visual, psychological, spiritual and performance – illusions about illusions (Neale, 2013). He is a member of the South African Magical Society, and the British Society of Mystery Entertainers (Psycrets).
with other individuals and other life forms. While I feel that this exploration has particular relevance for Higher Education, in actuality, it has relevance for all the domains of life.

I make no apology for not strictly adhering to the accepted scholarly convention of referencing every statement with the work of another specialist in the field, because, in part, this is the problematic that this paper questions. In brief, the apperception of non-separation is an experiential, ontological insight; it is diametrically opposite to the thought bubble of intellelction, to which modern education pays so much homage, but with clearly dubious results. In this inquiry, intellectual sense-making is, at best, a tool to point to that which is beyond the conceptualising process. In this regard, then, I am echoing Steven Harrison’s *modus operandi* in his engaging book *The Happy Child* (2002), where he openly states that there is ‘only passing reference to expert theory on education’ (2002:viii). This piece is not identical in style to Harrison’s work; it does draw on the research of others where necessary, but it certainly attempts to eschew the worst kinds of academic practice of creating the illusion of authentic intellectual inquiry where there is none.

Harrison (2002: 101) also cautions against sophistry in education, and what he has to say is so pertinently instructive:

*In Socrates’ time, teachers—known as Sophists—gathered students by means of impressive promises of knowledge and elaborate philosophies—for a fee. Teachers were paid only if the students stayed, so the Sophists generally gave long-winded, self-assured discourses using reason to prove just about anything. Their legacy is the term sophistry, meaning deceptive reasoning, and their shadow still falls on education today.*

*Socrates, in yet another expression of his greatness, refused all fees for his teaching and continued to challenge the veracity and integrity of sophistry. He was eventually put to death for his outspokenness, sending a clear signal to everyone else that those in power would rather not deal with too many questions.*

*Thousands of years later, Socrates’ questions and death still resonate through our cultural milieu. Today, our educational institutions have largely forgotten the importance of the question and have supported new and complex forms of sophistry. Those in power have continued to make clear that questions are not in favor.*

It would be important to read this piece and ask if it is also just another form of sophistry, or whether it poses a truly authentic question.

**Non-separation is not new**

At the heart of this inquiry is the radical assertion (but radical only to our conventional way of experiencing self and the word) that the world is not just a system of interconnected objects and processes – a concept that has been pioneered by systems thinking for more than six decades – but that there is no separate, solid, physical world existing independently of consciousness.

This is not a new perspective; it is there in all the wisdom traditions, especially Buddhism, and in the West it was more prominently re-discovered by Bishop Berkeley, but the dominant cultural narrative, as described in great detail by Charles Eisenstein (2013) is that of separation. But we cannot continue
with this story, which we perpetuate in a myriad ways\(^2\) through one unquestioned perception – that there exist separate and solid things apart from me (and I am another solid and separate thing), – because this story is now threatening to annihilate us through its core manifestations of greed, ill will and delusion (Loy, 2003), which in turn have structured all our systems: economic, political, cultural, educational, etc. This is the common realist view of the world (Goode, 2012).

**But the problem is...**

The problem, for whatever reason that we would like to speculate upon, is that we are not wired to easily experience the illusion of solid and separate things as an illusion. At best, when one is not totally experiencing oneself as a separate, flesh-encapsulated ego, there can be feelings of connection with others and with the world in general. This itself can be very transformative, where we seem to naturally want to give rather than take. But the story of separation, as real as the vanishing box of cards, is very convincing, so we accept the illusion as real, because nothing really tells us that it is otherwise, and in fact, all our social systems go to great lengths to convince us of this reality; the greatest of them all being orthodox science, which has rubbish most belief systems and validates what is apparently real, the solid box of cards. But science is also schizophrenic; there are other sides to it that have been whispering about alternative realities, but these, largely, have been muted, except when co-opted by the New Age spiritual movements and presented in rather dubious ways to assert all kinds of magical thinking. But the real magic – the real sleight of mind – is in the uninvestigated perception itself. That’s how it always is with a good illusion; the misdirection is happening right in front of you, but because it is misdirection you will always see what the magician wants you to see.

For thousands of years it has been asserted that the magician who has been misdirecting us is consciousness, but this need not concern us if we are to derive extremely deep learning from this investigation, for any answer would simply be a story, and any story can only exist where there are apparently two. A story cannot exist without the other. This inquiry is about the fact of One, and even this is not totally accurate.

**Unpacking the Illusion**

So, while there appears to be a world separate from me, what is the basis of this assertion? The most common response would be is that I can see, hear, touch, taste and smell the world (perhaps not always using all the senses at once at any given time). And that is my so-called proof. And that is exactly what a magician relies on; an appeal to your senses to convince you of one thing while, in fact, what you are convinced of does not exist at all in the way that you apparently sensed. Like the solid box of cards.

We could digress here and look at the numerous examples of psychological and visual illusions that prove the above point, but there is no real need to, except to point out that even these well documented illusions, while suggestive of cracks in our perception of reality, are still grounded in scientific research held firm by the core story of separation. The positive outcome is that the story is now beginning to undo itself, not because it wants to, but because an illusion cannot survive very close scrutiny. In this case, the scrutiny is an intellectual deconstruction that requires verification by paying

\(^2\) I would recommend reading Eisenstein’s book for the myriad ways in which we perpetuate separation.
close attention to the qualities of experience itself; there is another, emergent, ontological awakening that provides experiential proof, but more about this later.

This intellectual deconstruction is the primary objective for writing this piece; to show that it is possible, using logic in a precise way, to perceive the operation of the senses more closely. And here, science is helpful. It can prove that what I am apparently seeing is being produced by the brain; that all experience is a sensory production. I experience the world because I sense it. But it is here that this inquiry takes a different path to that of science, because science, while acknowledging that what is being sensed of the world is being produced by the brain, it still, nevertheless, accepts the premise that there is a self-existing world *out there*, and that what we are experiencing is a reasonable approximation of it.

But here comes the difficult part: when you see that the levitating lady is not being held up by any invisible wires or hidden contraption. She is really levitating!

So, this is where science has been missing the boat. (Perhaps, it’s not the scientific method per se that has been missing the boat, but the all too human scientists who just flatly refuse to disbelieve their senses, who are, like all of us, enamoured by the story of separation that our senses enact.) We can now, on scientific evidence, accept that my experience of the world is a sensory production, and that even my experience of the world may not quite be the same as yours (e.g. colour blindness and other forms of sensory anomalies), but we are convinced that there exists a separate, free-standing world, made up of separate, free-standing objects. This is the truly great sleight of mind, the great feat of misdirection. We are so busy looking at the appearance – it is such an act of wonder – that we have never paused to look closely at the sensory process that has produced the miracle.

Let’s take any object that you are now sensing. For instance, in front of me is my cell phone, amongst many other things. I know it has a certain shape and colour because of the sense of sight. I also know it has a certain density and texture because of the sense of touch. If I pick it up and smell it, it has a certain smell; if I taste it, it has a certain taste. If it rings, I hear a sound. Collectively, the senses provide evidence of a self-existing object that resides outside of this defined physical organism that I call ‘me’.

Now here comes the trick(y) part. All that I know of an object, any object3, is my sensing of it. That is, there is no cell phone – in sensing, in perception – that exists independently of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. The sensing and the thing sensed are one seamless experience; the observer is the observed (Krishnamurti, 1992). I am aware that I am stating this fact as if it’s the easiest thing to comprehend; it isn’t. It requires deep contemplation to see the actuality of the fact that there is no thing sensed apart from the sensor; that it is one unitary movement. You are literally the world. This is so counter-intuitive that in some traditional nondual teaching systems, students were only exposed to this knowledge when they were absolutely ready to investigate it. The reader might want to engage with Greg Goode’s *The Direct Path* (2012), or Peter Dziuban’s, *Simply Notice* (2013), which were written for the modern mind.

The complaint that I often hear is that this is too philosophical. I think not. It just appears almost impossible to grasp because it not only explodes the illusion of absolute separation and differentiation, it also implodes that one thing that we dearly hold to be solid, separate and (hopefully)

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3 I am indebted to both Peter Dziuban (2006, 2013) and Greg Goode (2012), whose writings and email communications helped me hone my ability to communicate this.
permanent – the self. In Buddhist thought this is the core delusion, out of which arises greed and ill will, the primary modes of self-interest to protect myself in a seemingly hostile world. And yes, I submit that the world appears hostile, but only because we are creating it in our own image; that of never-ending separation. But no matter how we experience the world, it is still a sensory appearance and there is no self apart from the appearance.

The Fact of One and the Appearance of Two

All this begs the question: so how do I realise this seamlessness of reality? The answer, surprisingly, is not in any esoteric practices. By just paying attention to perception itself, you will notice that the stuff of perception is awareness or consciousness⁴, and that this field of perception is always undivided, always whole. You can look at what appears outwardly as the most broken, ravaged scene imaginable, littered with apparently separate objects, and the awareness of it all would still be seamless and undivided. And, given our deconstruction of sensing, you would be intimately a part of everything.

In conventional perception, we are absolutely convinced of the reality of the two, and may consider oneness as a fanciful concept, perhaps true in some mystical non-material dimension, but certainly not a fact of present experience. Yet, it is the other way around. There is only the fact of One giving rise to the appearance of two.

What has this got to do with learning?

Everything.

Firstly, we should be introducing this perspective into our education. We should make the deconstructive analysis as robust as we can, and out of this we could start introducing the experiential modes that prepare the ground for a transformative shift in perception, so that I actually experience myself as awareness, and I actually see that this awareness is the stuff of everything observed, including the observer.

Would we then behave in the ways that we do, enacting repeatedly the story of separation, with all its unnecessary manifestations that are potentially turning life into a wasteland?

The beauty of this perspective is that it is a scientifically verifiable mode of experience, not another belief system. It is the end of belief, and therefore the end of the illusion of separateness. Of course, I’ll still experience the appearance of separation, but now I know how the trick works, and so I just marvel at the wonder, the play, of it all.

There will still be unanswered questions. Life will be more of a mystery, not less. We will still explore what appears to be real, if only to touch even more deeply the unknowing that is Life.

⁴ I am using these terms interchangeably, but I am aware that in certain nondual discourses they may be used in distinct, technically nuanced ways.
Part 2
Shifting the Gaze

...we are not creative because our whole social and moral culture, as well as our educational methods, are based on development of the intellect.

J Krishnamurti (1973: 117)

If the first part of this chapter was more expository, using logic and a call to directly investigate experience in unfolding the primary thesis of non-separation, then this part, in addressing the vision of a transformative education, explores how such an education may be served by the curriculum, and in what ways. And in setting this context, it is pertinent to refer to this exploration as ‘troublesome knowledge’ – knowledge that is ‘alien’, or counter-intuitive or even intellectually absurd at face value’ (Meyer and Land, 2003: 2).

To begin with, we must honour the current academic convention that privileges theory by clearly stating that the core theoretical framework is nonduality (Bhaskar, 2012), which is mainly associated with Eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta (Loy, 1997). My own work on nondualism and educational drama and theatre (Pillay, 2007) rests heavily on David Loy’s precise scholarship into nonduality, but nowhere, in either Loy’s or my work, is there any deconstruction of the senses and perception as given here. This is an important observation, because it speaks to the possible developmental aspect of this deconstruction; that is, it has been not focused upon historically because it was either not seen (or experientially seen but not conceptually formulated), or, if it was, it was considered too difficult to communicate to the intellectually unprepared student.

So, traditional spiritual curricula concerned with nonduality, which were enacted mainly through the teacher-disciple dynamic, were in the main concerned with effecting change in the affective domain. There is no place here to give an overview of the innumerable teaching methods that were used in this endeavour, except to say that even in a recent call for a transformed education, Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge (2014) make a strong case only for social and emotional learning and systems thinking. The deep cognitive deconstructive aspect, outlined in the first part, is not addressed. This is important to note, because the project of a transformed curriculum that is required to replace the story of separation with that of non-separation can only be effective, as will be argued here, if all the domains of our being – affective, cognitive and ontological – are addressed.

Probably the most pioneering modern work that communicates the spirit of the nondual perspective for education, without any attendant outlandish esoteric notions that are found, for instance, in the writings of Rudolf Steiner (on which the Waldorf Schools are based), is Krishnamurti’s Education and

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5 I am referencing Bhaskar because his is an acclaimed academic voice and he is founder of the critical realism movement. While Bhaskar engages with nonduality in this work, there is no deconstruction of the senses as given here and in the works of Dziuban (2006, 2013) and Goode (2012). Göran Backlund’s Refuting the External World (2014) is another accessible text, as is Rupert Spira’s The Transparency of Things (2008).
the Significance of Life (1973). A brief analysis of this work is relevant at this point because it supports the scaffolded, development notions of a meta-curriculum; one that seeks to enact an education that speaks to the narrative of non-separation rather than the currently entrenched one of separation.

Krishnamurti’s work is visionary and poetic, yet grounded in an undeniable surface logic that functions effectively in its sense-making primarily because the overall picture created mirrors what we can observe for ourselves. This is a particular trait of Krishnamurti’s writings; that its mirror-like quality, at least in the moment of deep engagement, has the capacity to shift awareness from the outer to the inner; there is just not a cognitive grasp, but the intuitive realisation of the ontological actuality of awareness prior to thinking. When he writes that ‘there is no existence without relationship, and without self-knowledge, all relationship, with the one and with the many, brings conflict and sorrow’ (1973:38), he is pointing to some of the requirements needed for a transformed curriculum, as envisaged by Wilber’s (1995) integral theory and Goleman and Senge’s (2014) recent monograph. These requirements being the cultivation of social, emotional and cognitive capacities underpinned by Senge’s focus on systems thinking. But Krishnamurti, at the time that he wrote this piece many decades ago, was also aware that to fully unpack the nondual perspective, ‘to explain this fully to a child is impossible’ (1973:38).

This fact, of the difficulty of cognitively reaching the young child with the fact of nonduality calls for a developmental approach that is prominent in Wilber’s integral theory model. But Wilber’s (1995, 1997) integral theory is more than just a developmental project; it is, in fact, also important as a guide to clearing up the post-modernist confusions around our conceptual divisions and knowledge systems. For instance, his four quadrant model allows us to see that knowledge about the brain is important for a neurosurgeon, and that this knowledge is of the outer, physical world. It is not the same as interior awareness, which is cognition of a different order. This perspective helps guard against the tendency in nondual teachings to collapse different kinds of knowledge into the melting pot. This brings in the notions of the absolute and the relative. At the level of the former, there is no division, but at the level of the relative there are apparent divisions that have to be acknowledged. Current education pays much attention to the latter, because in a sense it is more accessible, and appears true. But this is an illusion that needs precise investigation, as set out in this paper.

The question that we need to ask is whether only acknowledging the relative, the world of apparent division, is sufficient for education’s purpose to help develop a creative and fulfilled human being. A close scrutiny of current education practice and its outcomes shows it to be largely functionalist, that is, serving the needs of society which, in turn, are being manipulated, arguably, by an economic paradigm (Eisenstein, 2013) that is characterised by self-interest and a model of unsustainable growth. The answer about what education should do is now self-evident; that it needs to accept the fact of non-separation and find a workable approach to embed this within the curriculum. My proposal here is that we need a curriculum that takes cognisance of the stages of human development and thereby structures access to the fact of non-separation through a developmental stance. This piece is not about the details, but rather about identifying a huge gap in our current education that needs urgent addressing because the story of separation is patently not working anymore.

It is also important to note that systems thinking is not nonduality per se. It is a useful tool to use in a developmental curriculum because it emphasises the utter inter-connectedness of things; it allows us
to see the map more clearly, and as a cognitive tool for seeing the myriad ways in which all things are connected, it aligns with social and emotional learning (Goleman and Senge, 2014).

A simple schema for an overall meta-curriculum might look like this, but obviously fleshed out by in-depth research into the best constructive alignment of human developmental stages with developing the capacity for recognising the nonduality of things.

Primary School Education – Social and Emotional Learning

High School Education – Social and Emotional Learning, Systems Thinking

Tertiary Education – Social and Emotional Learning, Systems Thinking, Nonduality

We currently have no template for how to teach nonduality in a modern educational setting, except courses that teach about nonduality, which happens most frequently in the academic disciplines of religion, and perhaps on the fringes of transpersonal psychology. While this has its uses in the curriculum, it is not the same as taking the student on an experiential journey of seeing and experiencing the fact of non-separation. This also calls for a different kind of teacher and a deep awareness that a functionalist curriculum is bound to fail in the absence of educators still wed to the dominant narrative of duality and separation.

There has been some experimentation with Wilber’s integral approach (Marrero, 2007), and Esbjörn-Hargens’ revised and expanded version of his 2005 article goes into great pedagogic detail about the finer distinctions of integral theory as a tool for a transformative education. Much can be gleaned from this about how Wilber’s all-quadrant approach can be utilised by a sophisticated curriculum. However, this is not the place to interrogate this work, but to point to work already being done, albeit sparsely and on the fringes of mainstream education. More recently, Burack (2014), wrote about the challenges of a contemplative curriculum, and the scholarship here is positive for sustaining any kind of meaningful inquiry into a curriculum that helps dismantle the story of separation.

It is interesting to note, though, that none of the recent texts referred to above ever mention the terms nonduality or non-separation, although Burack (2014:47) does write about teaching contemplative practices in courses where his aim is to develop, amongst other qualities, the ‘sense of oneness’. This is an important observation for identifying a pivotal challenge to a curriculum of non-separation, because it highlights our current ontological-epistemological gap, that is, we are still approaching ‘holistic, transformative, and integrative’ education (Burack, 2014:36) from within the story of separation – from within the realist view – while perhaps thinking that we are doing the complete opposite, that is, that we are truly engaging nondually. This is not to denigrate the attempts thus far, and indeed, conceptually, the new nondual curriculum designers can learn much from these pioneers.

What is being emphasised here, however, is that the story of separation will always creep back in if there is no ontological and conceptual clarity. Attaining ontological acuity, which aligns with Burack’s (2014) endeavour to create a contemplative curriculum is, for the present, a much more difficult task. However, conceptual clarity, as demonstrated in the first part of this paper, is attainable, albeit that on its own it is just novel information (that is, the world that I experience is just a sensory production
and that the observer is the observed), and will remain so unless grounded in non-conceptual awareness, which is the ontological stance.

**Troublesome Knowledge**

Lastly, because this exploration conforms to the critical notions of alien and troublesome knowledge in the curriculum, Higher Education would have to seriously address the conclusion reached by Meyer and Land (2003) in their research paper where ‘threshold concepts’ are ‘an important but problematic factor in the design of effective learning environments’ (2003:10) That is, threshold concepts can prove to be troublesome because they are ‘transformative’ and ‘unsettling’, very often ‘involving a sense of loss’ and here, in this critique where the common consensus reality of experiencing an objective world separate from the observer is challenged, it will prove to be even more troublesome, unless we have educators that have awakened to the ontological actuality of non-separation, rather than simply holding an intellectually-derived conclusion. While conceptual clarity would be an important starting point in the deconstructive process, eventually this could lead to a learning environment where there is a ‘lack of authenticity’ (Meyer and Land, 2003:10), unless we have educators that can transmit from their own being the truth of a transformed perception.

And this troublesome knowledge doesn’t end here with the recognition of the fact of non-separation. There are major implications for those academic disciplines that not only subscribe to individual free will, but whose very existence depends on this being absolutely true (for instance, law). But, ‘[f]ree will is an illusion….We do not have the freedom we think we have’ (Harris, 2013). The neurosciences are increasingly supporting this position, and in education we haven’t even began to contemplate what this may mean for the educational project. What work is being done, suggests that societies will have to start embracing more authentic, selfless, cooperative social acts to nurture an emergent collective intelligence that appears bound to context (Harrison, 2003; Scharmer, 2007; Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013; Pillay, 2014), where relationships in the relative world reflect the non-separation of the absolute. We have to transition, as Eisenstein writes, to *Interbeing* (2013).

In more practical terms, education, in the light of the question of free will, will have to re-assess some fundamental assumptions from the time the child enters school (and indeed before then, in the home). Some of these are:

- Reward and punishment (various forms of gatekeeping in tertiary institutions are residual, disguised forms of punishment);
- Assessment practices which place responsibility on an autonomous individual to complete;
- The act of optimal learning
- Various forms of ranking learners;
- Etc.

There are no glib, easy answers to these questions, but it is clear that they will require authentic collective responses, where the wisdom of the whole can emerge.
Conclusion

It is recorded that Samuel Johnson, when asked his opinion of the nondual view espoused by the philosopher, George Berkeley, kicked a rock to prove that there is a separate, self-existing, objective reality (Goode, 2012). This is an understandable reaction, and one which the majority of human beings will display because the sensory illusion of objectivity and separation is not only hard-wired into our perceptual system, but it also apparently takes us away from the slippery slopes of belief systems and into the realm of hard science and scientific fact where certain physical phenomena can be replicated and the senses provide the proofs thereof.

The exploration outlined here, while by no means new, challenges us to look into the nature of the experience as given by the senses, at which point the objective world as we conceive it, including the sense of self that is doing the investigating, starts to reveal itself as a mere appearance rather than as a solid, permanent reality.

However, if this illusion works, even though we might grudgingly acknowledge that it is an illusion, should we not just carry on as we are currently doing and ignore the fact that things are not what they seem? But the evidence for this approach, that is, the path of separation, shows that it does not seem to be working in the apparent world. We are reaching a tipping point; the centre cannot hold, and current Higher Education, with its emphasis on quality research and quality teaching and learning, may just as well be a training ground for warfare (as indeed it has been, and still is, in some of the world’s major tertiary institutions). After all, the best research and teaching and learning will always produce the best weapons and soldiers. In Higher Education there is idolatry around the notions of quality research and quality teaching and learning, but can we really entertain what their real purpose could be, if our conception of reality is seriously flawed?

Ironically, a substantial amount of our educational activities are about fixing the endless problems created by the story of separation; a largely uninvestigated story in the multitudinous projects of research and teaching and learning in Higher Education. We’re in an endless chase of our own tails, with the occasional voices intuitively calling for something else, dimly sensed as being truly creative and whole. But whatever is called for gets subsumed by the dominant narrative. Do we dare unpack this narrative and see that it is a lie? Or are we too invested in our beliefs, more so when they go by the names of objectivity and science?

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with an excerpt from a recently published book of dialogues between Gary Weber and Richard Doyle, a former industrial researcher and manager, and an academic, respectively, who are also active explorers of the nondual perspective:

... If you realize it’s all one and not just metaphorically, or philosophically or intellectually, if you really do begin to understand that this is all one thing, not just me and the rest of the things, then why would you go around doing what you do? You just say, “Oh. This is all one thing. Why would I mess this up?” and you behave differently. But you’ve got to somehow

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6 The description ‘hard sciences’ is linguistically revealing of what we take to be true based on the senses. Apparent self-existing objects in the world are, by and large, hard and, therefore, by inference, real. The apperception that the sensory qualities of experience are simply sensations experienced by an awareness that itself has no qualities, is most often ignored, hence our fundamental ignorance.
unwind that structure in a way that gives you that clear, true understanding that includes, but isn’t limited to, the intellectual aspect. (Weber and Doyle, 2015:42-43)
References


