

Creating Peace: Contemplative Practices as an Agency for Peace

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Abstract

Encounters with beauty can serve as an engaging and powerful agency for peace. Over the past few decades, the interest in the contemplative practices of world wisdom traditions has been expanding. Higher education has also incorporated these “inner sciences”, as they are often called. Contemplative practices foster a more compassionate understanding of the behavior and values of others, especially those who are unlike us. They are transformational practices and open ways to improve intercultural understanding. Transcending the limits of a traditional classroom, they offer a new dimension to contemporary learners. As students from different cultural backgrounds cross paths while studying in other countries, intercultural learning becomes an additional focus of their study abroad. An increasing interest from international as well as Canadian students in contemplative practices offers an opportunity to expand existing courses, to connect curriculum with real life, to go beyond the curriculum to offer all students a common shared experience. Getting students physically and emotionally involved in the learning process gives them better spatial and temporal awareness as well as awareness of each other. Sensory engagement offers students the therapeutic effects of cultural experience as well as better understanding of the subject. Research confirms that contemplative forms of inquiry can offset the constant distractions of our modern cultural environment. Thus, creative teaching and learning methods that integrate the ancient practice of contemplation innovatively meet the particular needs of today's students and teachers by assuaging their fear of the future by focusing on the present.

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Introduction

Over the past five decades the interest in the contemplative practices of world wisdom traditions has been steadily expanding (blossoming) all through the Western culture. According to the 2003 survey on transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education conducted by the Fetzer Institute, 90% of respondents from a wide range of post secondary institutions, stated that contemplative and spiritual dimensions of learning are “important” or “very important”. Contemplative practices foster a more compassionate understanding of the behavior and values of others, especially those who are unlike us. They are transformational practices and open ways to improve intercultural understanding. The rapid development of communication technology in recent years, the extreme hike in the so called “click-mentality” and the high dependence on social media and the internet among young people has resulted in the lack of actual human communication and their inability to successfully use their body-mind and fully engage all their senses. Under these circumstances, the importance of additional ways of learning for younger people is obvious and we, as educators, need to open up the walls of a traditional classroom to innovative methods and strategies.

Contemplative practices in higher education

Over the past two decades, interest in the contemplative practices of world wisdom traditions has been steadily blossoming in the West. Though partially rooted in world religions, such practices as mindfulness, meditation, and awareness are being used as secular, pan-spiritual forms of activity. They are rather connected to the fact that we are all humans rather than to the fact that we all belong to different cultural, religious and language backgrounds. Contemplation can be seen as a spiritual experience, however, it is not constrained by it and can have an entirely secular tone. So rather than separate us, contemplative practices bring people of different backgrounds to understanding their similarities and offer connecting bridges to our collective mind. There is vast amount of evidence that contemplative practices help to alleviate stress and increase productivity, self-respect, confidence and overall wellbeing. That’s why executives in many fields and disciplines recognize the potential of contemplative practice for their employees, and thu for the success of their businesses. Duerr points out that contemplative practices have an even greater potential. “At a time when there is widespread inability to respond effectively to situations that seem overwhelmingly large and complex, a cadre of leaders is conducting an inquiry – often inspired by the insights gained from their own meditative practice – into how more sustainable forms of change might evolve out of environments where contemplative awareness is nurtured.”(Duerr, 2004) According to the 2003 survey on transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education conducted by the Fetzer Institute, 90% of respondents from a wide range of post secondary institutions, stated that the contemplative and spiritual dimensions of learning are “important” or “very important”. (www.fetzer.org) This is an important number, overwhelmingly stating the need for contemplative opportunities for students, not only as extracurricular activities but also right at the core of the course. Contemplative practices help students to develop better attention and to alleviate fear. They also offer additional ways to deal with anxiety, to increase motivation and to help to build self-confidence. Attention need not necessarily focus on just one thing. Even though we are told that multitasking is virtually impossible since the human brain can only focus on one thing at the time,

humans are multifunctional organisms that breath, walk, think, smell, taste, hear and see, often at the same time. Mindful attention constitutes panoramic awareness of space and time within and without.

Teaching in Eastern traditions is often compared to “pointing to the moon”. All the teacher can do is to point the way but it is up to the student himself/herself to learn. The teacher is simply the one who guides the students to the sources of knowledge. Relations between teacher and student are likened to the one between a chick still in the egg and the mother hen pecking the egg to help the chick break out. The hen can peck all over the egg with no result and so can the chick. Only when and if their efforts coincide from both sides of the shell at one place, can the chick get out of the shell and begin a new life.

Mindfulness as a teaching and learning competency

Contemplative practices could be included as methods of teaching in practically any discipline since they foster focus, presence and multiple awareness. Contemplative methods of learning are fully applicable to other areas of learning. Learning through observation and inquiry-based discovery is fundamental. Learners are responsible for their knowledge and are regarded as co-creators of knowledge, where the teacher is a guide but also a co-inquirer. Contemplative practices offer a well-tested foundation for the development of contemplative pedagogical methods fully applicable to any area of learning and teaching, including curriculum studies. These teaching methods cultivate deepened awareness, focus, concentration and insight. Contemplation helps to discover other ways of knowing, experiencing and being. It complements traditional methods of liberal arts education. As Tobin Hart states, “Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness.... These approaches cultivate an inner technology of knowing....”(Hart, 2009) Contemplative pedagogy aims to cultivate deepened awareness, to stop the habitual noise of the mind and to open the inner sources of self. They nurture mindfulness as a way to relate to the reality. Contemplative reading, reflective aesthetics, cultivation of compassion, panoramic awareness, spontaneity, refined perception, multi-sensorial learning awaken the natural capacity of using one’s mind by re-establishing connection with the inner landscape. Contemplative forms of inquiry go beyond particular learning context and are especially useful today to balance dispersed attention needed to deal with the modern digital culture. Contemplative arts-based teaching methods innovatively meet the essential needs of learners of today.

Mindfulness can be considered another important competency for both teachers and learners. According to Ted Aoki, teachers exist in the “zone of between” (Aoki, 2005, p. 161). They are constantly building bridges between the two curriculum worlds that created on paper outside the actual classroom and the one that unfolds in the presence of the students in real life. They are bridging this gap and at the same time they maintain awareness of the constant gap between the two. Moreover, they expand this space by entering the state of “not knowing” and expanding learning beyond knowing and into experiencing and simply being. They transform the classroom into a community of learners.

Contemplation as “another way of knowing” has been recognized across time, cultures and disciplines as essential to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Students from the widest spectrum of disciplines across the university have a great interest in contemplative practices. The inclusion of mindfulness expands existing courses beyond-curricular activities that offer the common experience aimed to connect curriculum with real life.

Contemplative practices in the classroom: students’ response

My experience in including contemplation directly in the classroom activities consist of courses on Japanese language and culture I teach at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Canada. While I include some language into my culture courses and some culture into my language courses, they are distinctly different classes, though complementary. Interestingly, one student noted that I was “a completely different person” in these two different subjects. After analyzing students’ responses to including elements of contemplation into the learning process, I realized that students particularly appreciated the opportunity to participate, to have hands-on learning opportunities, to be able to foster “the ability to observe details carefully”, to learn by experience, and to “gradually learn how to engage all senses”.

“I felt like I was actually taking something out of the course for me, not just my degree.”

“I feel like I’ve incorporated new aspects/ideals into my life that’ll remain with me forever.”

“The idea of truly seeing each moment and not wasting time thinking of what is to come was very useful for my life... It showed me that there is more to things that one can see on the surface... It is an amazing experience, and one that should be taken advantage of.”

Conclusions

While contemplative practices are directed inward, they also inspire curiosity and expand inter-cultural understanding. They help to develop a more compassionate view of the behavior and values of others, especially of those who are unlike us. They facilitate acceptance of and compassion towards the other. In turn awareness of the other and of the world also cultivates insight and inward exploration. When we are mindful we view situation from different perspectives, see information presented as fresh, new; we attend to the context and finally create new categories through which this information can be understood.

Research confirms that these contemplative forms of inquiry can offset the constant distractions of our multi-tasking, multi-media cultural environment. Thus, creative teaching methods that integrate the ancient practice of contemplation innovatively meet the particular needs of today's students and teachers.

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