

Mindfulness in the Classroom

The Pedagogical Role of Mindfulness

Mindfulness and contemplation fosters additional ways of knowing that complement the rational methods of traditional 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....” This cultivation is the aim of contemplative pedagogy, teaching that includes methods “designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight.” Such methods include guided meditation, journals, silence, music, art, poetry, dialogue, and questions.



In the classroom, these forms of inquiry are not employed as religious practices but as pedagogical techniques for learning through refined attention or mindfulness. Research confirms that these practices can offset the constant distractions of our multitasking, multimedia culture. Thus, intentional teaching methods that integrate the ancient practice of mindfulness innovatively meet the particular needs of today’s students.

Meditation in Higher Education

In the article “Toward the Integration of Meditation into Higher Education: A Review of the Research”, Shapiro, Brown and Astin (2008) state that meditation is noted as contributing to enhanced cognitive and academic performance (including attention and concentration), management of academic stress, and the development of the “whole person.” All of these are factors involved in higher education and thus connections to higher education can be hypothesized; however, little research has looked specifically at the benefits of integrating meditation into higher education settings.

Multitasking and divided attention tend to result in rote learning rather than deep understanding of material. Meditation can increase creativity, which is important in higher education. In order to respond adequately to students’ experiences and questions, it is recommended that the instructor engage in regular meditation practice.

References

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Mindful Activities in the Classroom

The following are examples of ways of incorporating mindfulness and contemplative practice into the classroom, as described by faculty in a variety of disciplines.

In-Class Contemplation

“What we know of learning is that the predominant factor is not merely time on task; it is the quality of attention brought to that task. If our attention is somewhere else, we may have little capacity to be present. Paradoxically, we may need to not do for a few minutes to be more available for doing the task at hand. At the beginning of class I might turn the lights off and instruct students: ‘Take a few deep, slow, clearing breaths. Let your body release and relax; let any parts of you that need to wiggle or stretch do so. Now feel the gentle pull of gravity, and allow the chair beneath you to support you without any effort on your part. Just let go and allow yourself to be silent and not do anything for a few minutes. You may want to focus on your breathing, allowing it to flow in and out without effort.’” *Tobin Hart, Professor of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom. Journal of Transformative Education, Vol. 2 No. 1, January 2004.*

Guided Meditation on a Raisin

Students are instructed to silently contemplate a raisin for 10 full minutes: to take a close look at, touch, smell and, finally, taste, chew, and swallow a single raisin. “You can imagine that spending 10 minutes with a single raisin helps students increase their powers of attention, but what I find most rewarding has to do with their heightened self-awareness. As we discuss their experiences, they realize with astonishment what rewards they reap when they pay greater attention to their moment-by-moment experience of life. Slowing down to eat a raisin turns out to be really complex and exciting. Not only do they discover many facets of their relationships with raisins as memories arise, but they rediscover the taste of this wrinkly, ordinary fruit. They take notice of their own wonder, instead of allowing it to slip away, and they learn one way to cultivate wonder: to pay attention to what’s happening right now.” *Sid Brown, Professor of Asian Studies, Sewanee: The University of the South, Cultivating Wonder. Sewanee Magazine, Spring 2008.*

Beholding

“With other art historians, I have begun to practice and teach ‘beholding,’ experiencing works of art ‘face-to-face,’ as Susan Wegner put it. ‘You stand in front of [artworks], hold them in your hands, look them in the eye, awed by the scale of them, or drawn in by the intimacy of their tininess.’ Beholding is a counter both to the usual two-second walk-by experience that characterizes much museum looking and to the analytical dissection of art. ...beholding often leads to another kind of encounter. My own love of Islamic manuscripts and calligraphy has grown from this kind of sustained beholding.” *Deborah Haynes, Professor of Art, University of Colorado at Boulder, Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person. ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, 16, 2, 2005.*

Lectio Divina

“We had a biblical text, a short one, and we read it out loud in class. Then people could meditate on it, taking the forms of journal writing, thinking or considering, or drawing. Then we read the same text again. The next stage is Oratio Prayer, which is offering a personal reply after having meditated on the text. It’s finding something [from the text] that connects to oneself, a word or an image, and then making some sort of reply, be it a vocal or silent or written prayer. Then we read the same text one more time, slowly and out loud, and followed this by silent sitting. This is the final stage of listening. Not thinking, cogitating, speaking, but being silent, open, accepting of whatever might come.” *Susan Wegner, Professor of Art History, Bowdoin College, Case Studies, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.*

Journaling

Writing at the beginning of a class can provide each student with something to say in discussion and writing in the middle of a class can provide a time for reflection and calming in the midst of a challenging or intense discussion.

“In most of my classes we begin with a short period of journal writing, which is a time of silence and a contemplative few minutes in the beginning of class. I find that the students and I get centered by doing this. Then every few weeks I ask them to write a one or two page piece, called a ‘small writing,’ and then share that one small statement of where they are with the group. ...There are three basic questions [for the journal]. The first question is, ‘What matters here?’ I tell them that if they ask that question of themselves in every class, they will get better grades. This question is about taking ownership for oneself in the world, and it leads to that. And that’s why this classroom is a community, because we are taking ownership for our role in the classroom. And I think it all goes back to caring. The format of this is to encourage people to care—care about the work and care about each other.

The second big question is ‘Where are you now?’ This question has implications about maps, the map of our lives, where are you on the map. It’s psychological and emotional. Where are you with your feelings, where are you spiritually? The third big question is ‘What do you know now?’ This question is the question behind all traditional research papers. You’ve done the research or read the text, now tell me what you know, what you can say about it. I want the student to think about knowing on different levels, not just the intellectual level. So I’m trying to get them to write from their experience, to value their own experience.” *Michael Heller, Professor of English, Roanoke College, Case Studies, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.*

Reading

Assigning fewer texts and reading the texts in more intentionally and contemplatively can foster students entering into texts in deep and transformative ways rather than *using* the texts for their information alone. Reading aloud and in different configurations can highlight different aspects of a text. Alternating readers by line, sentence, or paragraph provides varied voices and different emphases. Specific strategies such as echoing frequently used or *significant* words influences students’ attention.

Listening in Difficult Conversations

“At the end of the course, students are required to find someone whose religious commitments (or lack thereof) are different from their own or someone about whose religion they don’t know. Outside class, with phones turned off and no interruptions anticipated, the student and the interviewee carefully answer a series of questions such as ‘What’s your fondest and oldest memory related to your own religion or your secular ethics/values? Why is this such a fond memory?’ and ‘What’s your most painful memory related to your own religion or your secular ethics/values? What makes this memory so painful?’ Each person answers all the questions and has at least three minutes for each one. ...If the speaker uses only one minute of the three, the listener still waits patiently, making eye contact, waiting for any more words the speaker might want to share. Both students spend time as listener and speaker as they go through the questions. This kind of conversation can be awkward and exhausting.

Students often report that they realize through the experience how little they actually listen. Often in conversation they are instead remembering something or planning what they will say next. (So conversations are generally more about them than about the person with whom they’re conversing.) This new kind of listening is different and differently rewarding. The depth of intimacy they achieve with another person, how close they feel, frequently surprises students. And, in some cases, how much a person can love another and still utterly disagree with her worldview and ethics.... Refraining from judgment, if only for a few minutes, opened the door to peaceful, honest, and directly spoken disagreements.” *Sid Brown, Professor of Asian Studies, Sewanee: The University of the South, [Cultivating Wonder](#). Sewanee Magazine, Spring 2008.*

Mindfulness at Vanderbilt

The following books in the Center for Teaching Library may be of interest to those interested in more holistic models of teaching and learning.

- *A Buddhist in the Classroom* by: Sid Brown
- *Encountering Faith in the Classroom: Turning Difficult Discussions into Constructive Engagement* by: Miriam Rosalyn Diamond
- *Encouraging Authenticity & Spirituality in Higher Education* by: Arthur W. Chickering, Jon C. Dalton, and Liesa Stamm
- The Vanderbilt Center for Integrative Health offers regular Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses. Visit www.vanderbilthealth.com/osher to find out more and to register.

Mindfulness Resources Online

The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education site provides event announcements, syllabi, information about trainings in contemplative pedagogy, and resources including research and teaching tools.

The Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education at Naropa University aims to provide both local services and to contribute to the larger field of Contemplative Pedagogy. www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe

The Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University includes faculty from a variety of disciplines who share a common interest in the contemplative experience. www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies

The Forum for Contemplative Studies is a resource site containing information on mindfulness meditation, contemplative psychotherapy, a directory of psychotherapists, courses, articles and literature. www.contemplativeforum.co.uk

The Garrison Institute explores the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world. They have a special initiative on contemplation and education. facebook.com/garrisonCTLinitiative

The Mindfulness in Education Network was created to facilitate communication among all educators, parents, students and any others interested in promoting contemplative practice (mindfulness) in educational settings. www.mindfuled.org

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has a catalogue of sample syllabi of courses integrating contemplation for various disciplines may be helpful in constructing your own course. www.contemplativemind.org/resources/higher-education/syllabi

The Inside Passages blog offers insights on contemplative kayaking, thoughts, essays, and talks from Kurt Hoelting. www.insidepassages.com

The University of California San Diego’s Center for Mindfulness website provides links to several guided audio and video files to guide mindfulness practice. health.ucsd.edu/specialties/mindfulness/Pages/default.aspx