

Mindfulness in the Shattering Times

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Abstract

Mindfulness can be considered both a teaching and a learning competency, especially valuable in our shattering times. One can reclaim the future by actually focusing on the present. In fact, staying in the present is no easy task. Contemplative arts-based teaching methods innovatively meet the essential needs of today's learners. They liberate our innate ability to deal with stress, attention deficit and anxiety by actually focusing on the present. Therefore, contemplative practices could be included as methods of teaching in practically any discipline. They foster focus, presence and so-called "multiple awareness" with an aim to stop the habitual noise of the mind and to open the inner sources of self. They do not aim to avoid reality or run away from it. On the contrary they nurture mindfulness as a way to relate to the reality. Contemplative forms of inquiry go beyond a particular learning context and are especially useful today to balance dispersed attention created to deal with modern digital culture. They cultivate deepened awareness, focus, concentration and insight. Contemplative methods presume that the learners are responsible for their knowledge and are regarded as co-creators of the learning environment and knowledge. At the same time, the teacher is a guide but also a co-inquirer. Contemplation helps by discovering other ways of knowing, experiencing and being and it very well complements traditional methods of liberal arts education. I will share my experience teaching various university courses, which actively implement contemplative arts-based methods.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Contemplative Pedagogy, Meditation, Chanoyu, Japanese Aesthetics

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Introduction

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. In this paper, I will share my experience teaching various university courses, which actively implement contemplative arts-based methods.

Staying in the Present

Today, we are thinking about the future and looking at the ways of “reclaiming it”. All of us are thinking about the future every day. Often we are fearful of what this future might bring or not bring or we are simply curious about what will happen. Clearly, we have no ways of knowing the future and we don’t exactly know how we can prepare or deal with what it holds for us anyway. Ironically, one way of reclaiming the future could actually be staying in the present, focusing on the “now” and fully experiencing and living the present moment. Humans do not like to be in the present. We like to think of the past or worry about the future but not actually fully experience the present moment whether extraordinary or an ordinary one. Contemplation, mindfulness, and meditation – all three practices that do just this – keep us in the present moment, continuously return our mind back to the present when it wanders off like a curious puppy.

Mindfulness is a skill, an ability, therefore it can actually be developed, and one can train self and others to be more mindful, to practice mindfulness. There are many different ways to do it. It doesn’t mean that one has to face the wall or be in a cave, far away from the noise of the world. In fact, the noisy world is the time and place when one needs mindfulness most. And our world is getting noisier and noisier by the hour if not by the minute. The speed with which all these changes occur is such that many of us are wondering how we can protect the human being-ness itself. How can we stay humans and not become human extensions of the gadgets, without which most of us cannot exist even for a short time? Our phones, computers and other devices are wonderful, they are very useful, they make our lives so much more convenient. And yet poetry written by artificial intelligence and a poem written by Matsuo Basho are very different. One way to describe this difference is “not knowing”. The computer knows exactly ‘how’ it created an art work while the human artist actually doesn’t. This “not knowing” or “knowing differently” is a skill that we train and develop through contemplation. Art is arguably the only space where AI will not be able to fully establish itself. Art is really the only way to counter AI avalanche in order to stay human.

Students’ need to Meditate

My colleagues and I have noticed that in recent years students have become so much more vulnerable, unable to deal with obstacles. Ever growing mental health issues,

mounting stress, anxiety – all make the university experience a miserable one for students.

In the “Proceedings of the 2015 Atlantic Universities’ Teaching Showcase”, Margaret Anne Smith of the Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New Brunswick, Saint John quotes staggering data on students’ mental health findings, where 37.5 % of students in Canada “felt so depressed, it was difficult to function”, 56.5% “felt overwhelming anxiety” and 9.5 % seriously considered suicide. (Smith, 2015) Based on my own experience in the classroom for almost twenty years I can conclude that these numbers are soaring and will only grow in the future.

If the electricity goes off we cannot teach our classes anymore. We are unable to hold a class without PowerPoint Presentation, without a computer. Students want to have their phones, I Pads, computers in front of them during the class. Such tasks as “analyze” or “compare” or “attribute” seem to become a major difficulty on a test.

Mindfulness can be considered both teaching and learning competency. Contemplative arts-based teaching and learning methods innovatively meet the needs of today’s learner. They liberate our inner abilities to deal with stress, attention deficit and anxiety by actually focusing on the present. They transcend disciplines and can be applied to any subject. They foster focus, presence and so-called “multiple awareness” and aim to stop the habitual noise of the mind and to open the inner sources of the self. They do not aim to avoid reality or run away from it, on the contrary, they nurture mindfulness as a way to relate to reality. Contemplative forms of inquiry go beyond a particular learning context and are especially useful today to balance dispersed attention needed to deal with the modern digital culture. They cultivate deepened awareness, focus, concentration and insight. Contemplative methods presume that the learners are responsible for their own knowledge and are regarded as co-creators of the learning environment and knowledge. At the same time, the teacher is a guide but also a co-inquirer. Contemplation helps to discover other ways of knowing, experiencing and being and it very well 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 a connection with the inner landscape. Contemplative forms of inquiry go beyond a 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.

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: the one 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

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. Teaching Japanese Aesthetics through the art of Chanoyu, commonly known as Japanese Tea Ceremony”, has been particularly rewarding in terms of implementation of contemplative pedagogy. 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.”

Conclusion

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 behaviour 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 the 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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