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Now I Can See the Moon: Contemplative Pedagogy Informed by Western Influences in Teaching and Learning in Twenty-first Century America

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ABSTRACT

Contemplative pedagogy has been used to inform a variety of educational goals in higher education, and there has been significant work done on exploring ways in which the contemplative traditions inform teaching and learning. New work continues to emerge in this field, and extant fields have taken on new life, but there remains a lack of research exploring ways that Western pedagogical strategies might inform contemplative education. This article addresses that gap through a discussion of some elements of Western teaching and learning that may be used to inform curricula and are being put into practice.

KEYWORDS

contemplative education, contemplative pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning, Freire

One day very long ago a family left their home early in the morning. They were a traditional family: a mother, a father, and two children. They spent all day out: doing errands, enjoying nature, visiting friends. When they returned home, they found that their home was completely burned to the ground.

The father was distraught: “How could this have happened?” he wailed. “Our things! Our clothes! Our house!” “Oh, oh, oh,” cried the children with tears running from their faces. “Our toys! Our books! Our precious belongings!” They ran to and fro, inconsolable.

But the mother stood a little way back, looking up at the sky. “Ah!” said the mother. “The house has burned down!” She took a breath and smiled with great joy.

“Now I can see the moon!”

This story is a traditional Buddhist narrative from the Zen Buddhist tradition, and indicates how a shift in perspective can inform the meaning of our experience with great impact. The use of contemplative pedagogies in teaching and learning can have a similar effect, inviting the student to slow down, reflect, and, in the space that arises, reevaluate and reconceptualize their experience (Barbezat and Bush 2014). The application of frameworks from our own Western traditions to curriculum and course design in contemplative education can increase and enhance this shift.

Contemplative pedagogy (a “quiet revolution,” in the words of Arthur Zajonc [2013],) has been used to inform a variety of educational goals in higher education, including increasing focus, attention, and positive states of mind in classrooms, for the past several decades (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Ergas 2018; Morgan 2014; Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011; Zajonc 2013). Notable results can be seen in a multitude of programs and courses offering a contemplative component as part of course methodology, and the rather astounding increasing prevalence of the word “mindfulness” in connection with modern education. Also notable is the emergence of institutions of higher learning purposely dedicated to contemplative pedagogies, organizations dedicated to developing the culture of contemplation in American society, and journals, websites, and other publications that embrace the conversation and offer a place for it to flourish (Barbezat and Bush 2014).

There is no question that contemplative pedagogies have taken root in Western culture. Importantly, in addition to the functions listed above, contemplative pedagogies rely on methods that integrate subjective experience (first-person approaches) and the consideration, analysis, and application of meaning-making and ethics in education (Zajonc 2019). Contemplative pedagogies connect students to the lived, embodied experience of their own learning; students become more aware of their internal world and connect their learning to their values and sense of meaning, which enables them to form richer deeper, relationships with their peers, their communities, and the world around them, and to act as agents of positive change. Up until this point, there has been significant work done on exploring ways in which the contemplative traditions inform teaching and learning in American higher education (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Braxton et al. 2018; Owen-Smith 2018). New work continues to emerge in this field, and extant fields have taken on new life, but there remains a lack of research exploring ways that Western pedagogical strategies might inform contemplative education. This article addresses that gap through a discussion of some elements of Western teaching and learning that may be used to inform curricula and are being put into practice. Such a conversation may contribute to the developing fields of contemplative education, contemplative pedagogy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning in the broader academy.

The Purpose of Education: Education as an Act of Freedom

The framing of the purpose of contemplative education is a logical starting point for this conversation. Orienting the integration of a reflective dimension to teaching and learning beyond the superficial rationale of productivity, job placement, or even academic success is critical to grounding the contemplative approach to education in a broad purpose beyond individual gain, and ensuring that we do not monetize its integration according to the norms of our current capitalist culture (Forbes 2016).

The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, famously writes of education as either an instrument of freedom or an instrument of oppression (1970), and articulated an aspiration and a yearning towards the contemplative as part of a holistic education (1994). He wrote often and prolifically of the need for reflection and action as a means to social change.

One of the quintessential characteristics of the work of Freire in relationship to education is his belief that education, at its best, is a practice of freedom and has the potential to either liberate students from systems of oppression or further shackle them in systems of inequity by reinforcing oppressive norms. Intentionally framing contemporary contemplative education with a similar awareness can ground the purpose of our work in the classroom in a context of the greater good, directly or indirectly. At its simplest, this may be done through a moment of silence at the start of most classes, in which all present are invited to simply arrive in the room and be present for the work of the day, together. Most of the time this moment can be spent in complete silence, although sometimes a motivation for the benefit of all, or an aspiration that our work together will be of benefit might be spoken aloud. Besides bringing quiet clarity and focus to the group, this simple practice will also connect learners to one another, and to the time to be spent together. It will orient the learning that is about to transpire to a purpose that transcends individual gain, and in this way situate the educational process in a context

that recalls, very gently, a sense of social responsibility. Depending on the subject matter of the class, this intention may naturally evolve into a consideration of the course content in the dynamics of the actual world in which we live and the systems that we live by.

The Authenticity of the Educator: Spirituality in the Academy

The second most compelling work from Western educators that might inform contemplative curricula and programming relates to the role of the educator. The place of spirituality in the academy has become a topic of increasing interest over the past decades even outside the domain of contemplative studies. Higher education in the United States famously began in the form of educational institutions focused on training young men for the ministry, and where a young man could get an education in theology and philosophy as a preparation for his life (Marsden 2000). At no time in the early days of American higher education is there a record of a consideration that an education would be complete if it was *separated* from a study of the internal life of the mind or spirit. In the tradition of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, religion, philosophy, and how such ideas functioned in the world in actual practice were very much a part of the discourse of early American higher education (Marsden 2000), and therefore, very much integrated in the discourse and experience of early faculty. However, as time passed, in response to a host of mitigating factors, professors began identifying themselves as “scientists” and “scholars” who were primarily dedicated to the pursuit of “objective truth” in order to produce research that would result in social progress. Thus began the era of area specialties and research-based scholarship, and the evolution of the culture of American academe that we see today, wholly separated from the religious and spiritual dynamics of the human mind (Gross 2007). In contrast to this evolution, research shows that in the twenty-first century, most higher education faculty embrace religion and spirituality as significant ways of knowing (Lindholm 2014), and many share the concern that the academy’s narrowing focus on empiricism, scientific thought, and professional training is excluding too much (Chickering 2003).

There is a body of scholarship emerging that addresses the role of internal experience in the mind and life of contemporary faculty. An initial challenge arises from the fact that most research on faculty in academia has thus far focused on external conditions and the objective domain, thereby establishing those as the norm of faculty experience. However, American institutions of higher education, as, at their best, centers of knowledge and learning, have an important responsibility to respond to this split, and address the question of balance between the internal and external facets of life and experience (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011). The harmonious balance of the internal and external experience of an individual (as may be manifested in the exploration of oneself as a “spiritual” person) has been shown to affect how the individual actually engages with others. It has also been shown to foster an increased awareness of the interdependent nature of the world and our existence, and a subsequent aspiration towards empathy, virtue, and social justice within a person (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011). The original rationale for a liberal arts education (essential for free citizens of Greece and Rome) holds much in common with this explication (Parker 1890).

In the literature on spirituality in the academy, the salient points that emerge establish clearly that, regardless of our philosophical positions, faculty have internal lives and seek spirituality as a meaning-making endeavor. They do this for themselves and their students (Lindholm 2014; Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011). There is a hunger and a need for the expression of subjective ways of knowing to be considered valid in the academy (Simmer-Brown 2019).

In relationship to these points, an individual’s spirituality (as distinct from religion) is a crucial lens through which meaning and knowledge are constructed (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011), and so should certainly be considered part of a complete education. As Astin and colleagues assert, faculty members who identify as “spiritual” are consistently more likely than those who do not to demonstrate behavior that meets the public expectations for higher education. There is growing evidence demonstrating that “good” (and effective) teaching is dependent on much more than teaching technique alone (Palmer 1998). The sense of connection with others that facilitates a teacher’s ability to move students, and thereby influence them, is considered a quality apparent in teachers who engage in self-reflection; itself part of a spiritual practice.

Secondly, since the traditional American academy does not at present consider subjective ways of knowing to be an important part of the educational process, a student’s individual subjective experience of education (as well as the subjective experience of teachers) is left completely unacknowledged, undiscussed, and separate from discourse on

research and education (Cozart 2010). This results in a textbook example of teaching a “null” curriculum, in which students learn that the subjective world and their own subjective selves are not important, indeed, in many instances, not even real (Palmer 1998). This is a mistake, and it distances students and faculty alike from important research, teaching, and learning strategies (Ng and Carney 2017). Instructors and faculty can counteract this inclination by, if not embracing, at least exploring the parts of themselves that value and embrace subjective experience.

The Relationship with the Student: Education as an Act of Love and Curriculum Design

The final element of Freire’s work that directly informs this research is his commitment to dialogue, relationality, and communication. Freire developed a unique pedagogical method for working with students to promote their “critical consciousness” (*conscientização* in Portuguese) based on dialogic pedagogy.

Although the specifics of Freire’s pedagogical technique will not be addressed here, the theoretical basis of dialogic pedagogy is central to this article, and is a key tool that may be used to inform contemplative education. Dialogic pedagogy is based in the assumption that knowledge is not transferred from the one who knows (the teacher) to the one who must learn (the student), but instead that knowledge arises in the space between them (Freire 1970). Contemplative pedagogy, at its best, approaches knowledge in the same manner, and is less concerned with transferring knowledge or truths than creating conditions for students to seek (and find) their own truths.

A final conspicuous element in the telling of the life and work of Freire is the continuous reference to the affect of the man himself, and his teaching, as being suffused with love. It is notable that in both the anecdotal and more formal accounts of his life and temperament, one of the most common descriptives used in narratives about him is the word “love” (Kiryllo and Boyd 2017; Darder 2017). According to those closest to him, this sense of love functioned as an impulse for Freire’s teaching; he famously held that “education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage” (Freire 1990, 24). This, too, is an important element for contemplative education and contemplative educators, and one that is not just emerging as part of contemporary discourse on teaching. Simply put, research demonstrates that the most effective determinant of a student’s learning is their relationship with the teacher. Contemplative educators are not exempt from this. A trusting relationship based on a genuine sense of respect, caring, and kindness (even in a general sense for large groups) can be a touchstone for both educator and student to return to as education progresses.

Finally, course and curriculum design in contemplative education are specific areas in which Western models can help inform practice. Intentional course and curriculum creation offers a reflective process by which faculty may support contemplative education. Fink’s (2013) framework is one which lends itself well to such practice. This framework is based on a “Taxonomy of Significant Learning,” and includes six components: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. This schema facilitates the synthesis of reflective elements with course planning and creation. In particular, Fink’s “integration,” “caring,” and “learning how to learn” offer opportunities to expand our work in contemplative education to include a reflective element in curriculum and course design itself.

The primary challenges to the integration of Western frameworks of teaching and learning with contemplative education are the same as the challenges to contemplative education itself. The master narrative of our times—of modernity and its close companion, capitalism—presumes an autonomous, independent, rational self at the center of teaching and learning. Western ways of knowing value measurable, observable knowledge derived from scientific inquiry and are heavily influenced by positivistic world views, which largely reject the metaphysical or spiritual realm as a source of knowledge. These challenges to contemplative education are being met in a variety of ways, including a growing body of quantitative research that formally measures the physical inputs and outputs of contemplative programs and techniques with scientific instruments; increasing bodies of research using familiar psychological metrics for measurement; and an increasing presence of programs, courses, and projects emphasizing the contemplative domain in the mainstream. But there is much work to be done. Contemplative education can benefit from extant pedagogical frameworks and tools from our own traditions especially in relationship to an orientation in purpose and motivation, the interior life of the instructor, the relationship with the student, and course design.

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