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Reflecting on Reflecting: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as a Tool to Evaluate Contemplative Pedagogies

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Abstract
Although interest in contemplative pedagogies has grown considerably in higher education, faculty have relatively few resources available to help them make evidence-based choices about the use of different contemplative pedagogies in particular disciplinary or course contexts. We propose adapting a framework from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to serve as a heuristic for assessment of the design and implementation of these practices. After outlining this framework, we provide concrete examples from undergraduate courses to explore how a SoTL-informed design, implementation, and assessment process could be applied to the utilization of contemplative pedagogies. The examples suggest that there are many ways in which practices can be incorporated in support of deepening student learning and creating transformative learning opportunities for our students. We conclude with reflections on the potential and the limitations of this approach.

Keywords
contemplative pedagogy, SoTL, higher education, mindfulness, transformative education

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Reflecting on reflecting: Scholarship of teaching and learning as a tool to evaluate contemplative pedagogies

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Although interest in contemplative pedagogies has grown considerably in higher education, faculty have relatively few resources available to help them make evidence-based choices about the use of different contemplative pedagogies in particular disciplinary or course contexts. We propose adapting a framework from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to serve as a heuristic for assessment of the design and implementation of these practices. After outlining this framework, we provide concrete examples from undergraduate courses to explore how a SoTL-informed design, implementation, and assessment process could be applied to the utilization of contemplative pedagogies. The examples suggest that there are many ways in which practices can be incorporated in support of deepening student learning and creating transformative learning opportunities for our students. We conclude with reflections on the potential and the limitations of this approach.

INTRODUCTION

“Integration and wholeness in student life is too important to be left to chance. It should be one of the guiding motives of higher education” (Zajonc, in Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010, p.56).

The growing interest in contemplative pedagogies around the world demonstrates that many higher education faculty are heeding Zajonc’s call (e.g., Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bae, 2014; Miller, 2015; Oberski, Murray, Goldblatt, & DePlacido, 2014). These pedagogies build on three foundations: (1) contemplative practices that often have long, deep histories; (2) emerging research on the positive outcomes of contemplative practice for well-being and flourishing; and (3) scholarly studies of student learning in higher education (Morgan, 2015). While those foundations provide a firm grounding for contemplative pedagogies in general, they do not offer specific evidence that would help faculty (or others) make judgments about the use of contemplative pedagogies in particular disciplinary or institutional contexts – nor do they point the way toward effective practices for determining student learning and development linked to contemplative pedagogies.

Questions about how to gauge the outcomes of these pedagogies, however, have received little attention in the literature to date (Coburn et al., 2011; Gliszczinski, 2007). Indeed, faculty, staff, and students who use contemplative pedagogies might wonder whether the complexities and richness of non-cognitive learning can rigorously be captured, measured, and evaluated. In a recent review essay on “Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes,” Angela Duckworth and David Yeager concede that “perfectly unbiased, unfakeable, and error-free measures are an ideal, not a reality” (2015, p. 243). Recognizing this limitation, Duckworth and Yeager contend that the purpose of most educational inquiries is not scientific validity but rather the improvement of practice. This argument aligns with what other scholars refer to as consequential validity. According to Pat Hutchings, Jillian Kinzie, and George Kuh, “Consequential validity posits that assessment must be valid for the purposes which it is used, consistent with relevant professional standards, and – this is the key point here – that the impacts or consequences of its use should be factors in determining its validity” (2015, 41). In short, efforts to understand educational outcomes need not meet the highest standards of experimental research in order to have merit and value. Instead, a fundamental criterion for any inquiry practice related to contemplative pedagogies is how useful it is to the faculty, staff, and students who design and enact contemplative pedagogies in their own classrooms.

Even if these methodological concerns can be addressed, some might still ask about the possibility, or even the wisdom, of applying the academic tools to the study of contemplative pedagogies (Baugher, 2014). Critical inquiry often involves breaking down complex phenomena into discrete and depersonalized parts that can be measured and judged, while contemplative pedagogies focus on wholeness, synthesis, and self-knowledge (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Is there an inherent, perhaps unbridgeable, chasm between the scholarly analysis and contemplation? We do not think so. For instance, the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) movement in medicine and health offers one successful model for the systematic study of how best to design, implement, and evaluate contemplative practices in specific learning environments (see Wilson, 2014 for historical review). The MBSR movement, which can be traced to the transformational writings of Jon Kabat-Zinn (and gained momentum with the publication of his 1990 book Full Catastrophe Living), began when a small number of providers decided to return to ancient wisdom about the mind-body connection. As in academia, teacher intention alone was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the successful implementation of these practices. As the MBSR movement began to grow and prosper, medical researchers used existing disciplinary methods to study the practices and outcomes of diverse MBSR approaches (Praissman, 2008). The now extensive literature on MBSR demonstrates that contemplative practices can be appraised with discipline- and use-specific methods without compromising the purposes of mindfulness. Meta-analyses conducted of the expansive MBSR literature consistently demonstrate its many benefits for health and well-being (Chiesa & Seretti, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt &
Walach, 2004). Indeed, systematic inquiry into outcomes did not compromise the aims of MBIR, but actually opened the door to a more systematic and deeper understanding of health care.

Academia now finds itself in a position similar to that of the medical community before the MBIR studies. Many in higher education are returning to the ancient wisdom that contemplation and care are essential for diverse and transformative learning. However, we have yet determined how to systematically, meaningfully, and sustainably design, implement, and evaluate contemplative pedagogies in higher education classrooms. The purpose of this article is to provide a practical approach for designing, implementing, and even studying the results of contemplative practice guided by the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Demonstrating that SoTL can be one useful way to examine the implementation and outcomes of contemplative pedagogies, we hope to spark additional research on contemplative pedagogies – research that can help all of us to make more evidence-informed and mindful pedagogical choices that will contribute to student transformation.

CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGIES AND THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Incorporating contemplative pedagogy into one’s teaching, like any meaningful task, should begin with careful attention to purpose. The design and implementation process should be guided by a variety of goals including the nature of the disciplinary work, the faculty member’s personal preferences and strengths in contemplative practices, and the extent to which we can use and the insights we gain, we are generously allowing others to adapt and build on our own learning from contemplative pedagogies.

These principles can act as a heuristic, a simple but useful guide, for faculty seeking to incorporate new pedagogical approaches into their teaching and to conduct classroom-level practical inquiry into learning and development linked to contemplative pedagogies. Individuals or groups can use this framework as a reflective guide to plan, conduct, and act on the results of SoTL research on contemplative pedagogies and experiences of authenticity in the classroom (c.f., Dencer & Collister, 2010 and Vannini & Franzese, 2008 and Franzese, 2009 for discussion of authenticity).

To illustrate how this might be done, we will consider the ways in which Franzese (Franzese teaches at Elon University) has designed, implemented, and inquired into the outcomes of contemplative pedagogies in her own courses – using the five principles outlined above. This case does not seek to reveal Francese’s work as the only or the best approach to integrating contemplative pedagogies. Rather, our goal is to reveal how reflection affects students and faculty who are accustomed to hierarchical classrooms, but with patience and care classrooms can become sites for collective inquiry and growth (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).

5. Appropriate public: As contemplative pedagogies spread in higher education, practitioners and scholars – and students - will benefit if we treat our teaching as “contemplative learning.” Public acknowledgment of SoTL inquiries does not necessarily require publication in peer-reviewed journals; instead, many opportunities exist to share students’ learning from contemplative pedagogies. By being public about the practices we use and the insights we gain, we are generously allowing others to adapt and build on our own learning from contemplative pedagogies.

We do not offer Franzese’s work as the only or the best way to enact and evaluate contemplative pedagogies. Instead, we describe her work to illustrate the flexibility and utility of using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to design and analyze contemplative pedagogies. We also hope that others can learn from Franzese making her own teaching and inquiries “appropriately public.”

InquiryFocused on Student Learning

In each course, she had three common goals for contemplative pedagogies:

1. To invite students to be fully present, including students to gain skills for focusing their attention, and response to course assignments (fear, excitement, anxiety anticipation),

2. To facilitate a sense of connectedness and involve a sense of membership in a learning community, and

3. To develop a reflective process toward disciplinary learning, rather than focusing primarily on products and outcomes.

Her choices of specific contemplative practices aligned with her goals for students’ learning in each course. For her senior seminar course in Sociology she selected introspective self-assessments as the core of the pedagogy. With the help of introspective self-check-ins, she hoped students would gain (a) self-awareness/sense of authentic experience, (b) compassion for self and others, and (c) some freedom from negative emotions that may hinder students’ performance in the classroom. In each course – and a few students (1-2 per class in the upper level courses) had extensive knowledge related to at least one contemplative practice.

In both the introductory course and the upper-level seminar, most of the students in the class typically are not Sociology majors, so they have little or no familiarity with the theories and methods of the discipline. In the senior seminar, all students (typically B-10) are majors and have developed some disciplinary knowledge and expertise in prior courses, although they probably have not experienced contemplative pedagogies. The introspective self-assessments she designed for her senior seminar course were selected in consideration of the demands of the course, the capstone course for majors, senior seminar students are required to complete a full research project – from development of a research question to gaining approval to conduct human subjects research, collecting and analyzing data, and finally presenting their project to an audience. It is not an easy task, even for students who are accustomed to hierarchical classrooms, but with patience and care classrooms can become sites for collective inquiry and growth (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014).
the social world—she used a contemplative approach that focuses and ease with disciplinary process—a certain way of approaching phenomena. Because she wanted students to develop a familiarity about social life is the way sociologists systematically study social that what distinguishes a sociologist from someone who is curious a byproduct of the practice and students shared feedback about could have an increased level of attentiveness while learning in a mindfulness practice as soon as she entered the classroom. The and gave a brief history about mindfulness and MBSR. Students connections to Eastern religious traditions that the practices we think (see Forni, 2011 for discussion). With this in mind, Franzese level sociology course (which included disciplinary content focusing instructed to begin until the time they were told to stop. At the end of the semester students had the opportunity to submit their freewriting for review or to submit a summary document in which they reflect on their freewriting process. Franzese offered this alternative because she did not want students to limit themselves to their freewriting thinking about my reading their writing. She found that students spoke more openly about the book than they had in previous semesters, and also that students were more willing to go to those dark and vulnerable spots of misconception where learning can occur.

Linking to the SoTL framework, the practices that Franzese selected were an appropriate and reasonable fit for Franzese’s discipline and interest in authenticity, specific courses, and academic community. The mindfulness course in particular includes a “Personal Reflections” section at the end of research papers, which again legitimizes the activity of reflection and allows students to apply the practices they continue to develop. The type of contemplative practices utilized and the analysis of those practices from course to course and to fit the context of the specific course goals and objectives.

**Methodologically Sound**

Franzese’s design and implementation of the contemplative practices was methodologically sound in that the process was informed by extensive reading on these topics and in consultation with peers both within and beyond her university. Her analysis of its outcomes was also methodologically sound and appropriate because it related to her inquiry it provided relevant and appropriate evidence, and it was consequentially valid.

Franzese’s fundamental question was, do contemplative practices deepen student engagement and student learning? To probe this student looked to see how they perceived that they had appeared engaged? Did they arrive on time? Were absences few? Second, she looked to students’ report of their own engagement and learning. Finally, she looked to student comprehension of material and the outcomes of contemplative practice served as a way to make the material more real and personal for students, and Franzese found that it was effective for students to share feedback at any time, she officially collects feedback halfway through the course by providing students with a mid-semester evaluation form. The evaluation form has only one or two questions including versions of “what’s working!” and “what do you want to see changed?” At the end of the semester, to capture student perceptions of these contemplative practices, Franzese added a question to her University of Illinois students and asked them to evaluate the type of contemplative practice they had requested that precisely that, for example, in her upper-level course she asked students that felt that contemplative practices enhanced their learning. Students responded to the question on a six-point scale from Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (4). In that same course (and in others which utilized contemplative practices) about the extent to which students felt safe (an important question since Franzese often articulates to students that it is acceptable to her whether they felt safe or not). The score on that item was 5.88 (while for the Introductory course it was 5.26 and for the senior seminar course a 6, meaning that every single student reported feeling very safe in the course). The SPQ-R form also includes space for students to write comments related to each prompt, which included qualitative responses like “The start-of-class exercises helped me focus and clear my mind.” in their freewrites were a reflective process for Franzese as well, resulting in a list of topics to be explored and utilized with students in future semesters. This example of direct evidence of student learning allowed her to address how effective the contemplative pedagogical practices were engaged by students. Franzese examined the data and our connectedness, and process orientation as well as my course specific goals of insight/compassion, courage in addressing challenging themes, and critical thinking about disciplinary content.

Conduct in Partnership with Students

As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational—something she invites students to do, not a requirement. In in her Intro to Sociology course, Franzese opens most classes with an exercise in contemplation to prime students for the day’s content. This initial exercise, which Franzese adapted from an activity which Franzese often articulates to students that it is acceptable to her whether they felt safe or not). The score on that item was 5.88 (while for the Introductory course it was 5.26 and for the senior seminar course a 6, meaning that every single student reported feeling very safe in the course). The SPQ-R form also includes space for students to write comments related to each prompt, which included qualitative responses like “The start-of-class exercises helped me focus and clear my mind.” in their freewrites were a reflective process for Franzese as well, resulting in a list of topics to be explored and utilized with students in future semesters. This example of direct evidence of student learning allowed her to address how effective the contemplative pedagogical practices were engaged by students. Franzese examined the data and our connectedness, and process orientation as well as my course specific goals of insight/compassion, courage in addressing challenging themes, and critical thinking about disciplinary content.

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contemplative practice. Linking to the SoTL framework, the contemplative practices incorporated into Franzese’s work were considered as invitations and included a communication that they were voluntary practices. The Professor often also participated in these practices, modeling the reflectiveness she was encouraging in her students. They were interwoven with student work, and in fact, the SoTL framework applied to contemplative pedagogy would support the idea of inviting students to perhaps design and implement practices with the faculty member.

Appropriately Public

Having designed, implemented, and analyzed contemplative practices (Barbezat and Bush, 2014), Franzese has sought to share her experiences and insights with colleagues who might give her feedback or who might learn from her mistakes (and successes). First, Franzese gave a presentation on campus about contemplative writing. The purpose of this presentation was to share the state of the science about contemplative writing practices, invite faculty to reflect on contemplative practices they may already be incorporating and allow faculty to identify new practices and consider how they might enact and study those practices. By discussing these ideas with others she has been able to broaden her perspectives about the form and shape practices may take.

Second, as a means to share findings about contemplative writing, Franzese presented about contemplative writing at a mindful campus conference at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. She engaged in this because she has attended the conference on a few occasions and wanted both to contribute her knowledge about contemplative writing, and also the experience of leading a contemplative writing practice with a audience of peers (some 30 other faculty members). She observed that some faculty engaged in the practice exotically while others had some reluctance - similar to other faculty/attendees). She observed that some faculty engaged in contemplative writing practice with a audience of peers (some 30 faculty to identify new practices and consider how they might enact and study those practices. By discussing these ideas with others she has been able to broaden her perspectives about the form and shape practices may take.

CONCLUSIONS: SoTL AS A CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Franzese’s approach to the practice of SoTL itself can be something of a contemplative practice. Doing SoTL is one way of mindfully focusing attention of a faculty member on the learning of her students. SoTL approaches that carefully inquire into learning, like some contemplative practices, help the faculty member have a curious and open view of what is happening in the classroom. Student freewriting, for instance, allows the faculty member to witness what students are experiencing within the classroom. Freewriting can help faculty (and students) to be mindful about learning and teaching, and to discern deeper patterns and meaning than those that might be apparent on the surface.

SoTL, of course, has its limitations. This framework guides the creation of inquiries that are firmly situated in particular contexts, making it difficult to generalize or replicate findings. SoTL also is methodologically fluid, drawing on the expertise, epistemologies, and practices of a range of disciplinary ways of knowing; while this allows many and diverse faculty to engage in SoTL, it also opens this work up to critiques from social scientists who may have specialized methodologies that can be used to conduct similar research (Duckworth and Yeager, 2015). Finally, SoTL and other analytical approaches often focus on snapshots or slices of learning, rather than on whole experiences. Since contemplative pedagogies often aim for on whole experiences. Since contemplative pedagogies often aim for a degree of understanding. In these ways, SoTL effectively allows many and diverse faculty to engage in SoTL, it also opens this work up to critiques from social scientists who may have specialized methodologies that can be used to conduct similar research (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Finally, SoTL and other analytical approaches often focus on snapshots or slices of learning, rather than on whole experiences. Since contemplative pedagogies often aim for whole experiences, SoTL can encourage faculty from any discipline and focus a faculty member’s vision on their own research, analyze data, and consider how they might enact and study those practices. By discussing these ideas with others she has been able to broaden her perspectives about the form and shape practices may take.

Like any heuristic, SoTL is imperfect, but we believe that on the whole it is a framework that is well suited for the aims of faculty (and others) inquiring into contemplative pedagogies and with a commitment to the theory and practice of transformative learning and education. SoTL can encourage faculty from any discipline and focus a faculty member’s vision on their own research, analyze data, and consider how they might enact and study those practices. By discussing these ideas with others she has been able to broaden her perspectives about the form and shape practices may take.

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