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

Alexis T. Franzese  
*Elon University, afranzese@elon.edu*

Peter Felten  
*Elon University, NC, USA, pfelten@elon.edu*

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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

Alexis T. Franzese¹ and Peter Felten²

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Elon University, Elon, NC 27244, USA
²Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University, Elon, NC 27244, USA

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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; Gunnaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 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; Gliszcinski, 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 &
and evaluation of contemplative pedagogies: conducting the inquiry. Across this diversity, however, Felten (2013) advancing practice beyond it” (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). SoTL in so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth—and do with purpose. The design and implementation process should be like any meaningful task, should begin with careful attention to plan, conduct, and act on the results of SoTL research on transformative learning. However, we have yet determined how to compromise the aims of MBSR, but actually opened the door to Walach, 2004). Indeed, systematic inquiry into outcomes did not provide a strong foundation for both contemplative pedagogies, (e.g., Barbertz & Bush, 2014) and student learning in higher education (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, Wiliam & the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (demonstrating that SoTL is 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 pedagogies 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 the ability to capture attention is important. For practitioners who aim to understand the processes and results of contemplative pedagogies, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a worthy endeavor. The core of SoTL is the systematic study of one’s teaching and learning. Practitioners who seek evidence-informed and mindful pedagogical choices should build on what is known. Individuals or groups can use this framework as a reflective guide into learning and development linked to contemplative pedagogies.

1. Inquiry focused on student learning: What, how, and why students learn varies widely across disciplines and courses. When inquiring into learning in a contemplative classroom, we may bring, by demonstrating in interesting in students’ habits of mind and heart than they are in considering students’ grasp of course content. Regardless of the particular focus, learning should be at the center of our inquiry into contemplative pedagogies.

2. Grounded in context: SoTL inquiry should be rooted in a specific context; we are not asking abstract questions about the nature of learning, but rather, we are seeking insight into the learning of these students, in this course, and on this campus. At the same time, SoTL inquiry should build on the scholarly context of our work. Researchers and practitioners have provided a strong foundation for both contemplative pedagogies (e.g., Barbertz & Bush, 2014) and student learning in higher education (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, Wiliam & the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (demonstrating that SoTL is 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.

**Inquiry Focused on Student Learning**

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

1. To invite students to be fully present, including asking students to cultivate awareness of attention and response to social cues, and engage in authentic, non-competitive free-form conversations.
2. To invite students to be fully present, including asking students to cultivate awareness of attention and response to social cues, and engage in authentic, non-competitive free-form conversations.
3. To develop a reflective process orientation toward contemplative pedagogies. We also hope that others can learn from Franzese making her own teaching and inquiries “appropriately public.”

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.”

**Conducted in partnership with students:** SoTL should be to plan, conduct, and act on the results of SoTL research on transformative learning. However, we have yet determined how to compromise the aims of MBSR, but actually opened the door to Walach, 2004). Indeed, systematic inquiry into outcomes did not provide a strong foundation for both contemplative pedagogies, (e.g., Barbertz & Bush, 2014) and student learning in higher education (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, Wiliam & the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (demonstrating that SoTL is 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.

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own confidence in their abilities. An advantage of doing this over the course of the semester was that it also demonstrated to the students the potential of connecting with others, even when we are most concerned or overwhelmed, these times are followed by times when we feel efficacious and in control. Acknowledging this cyclical nature allowed many students to deal effectively with the anxieties that are common in college. A by-product of this was that students felt bonded to one another - multiple students remarked in their feedback forms that Franzese's approach meant a great deal to them and made a difference in their sense of belonging to the community. At the final research presentations students presented a group photo of the class, illustrating just how supportive students were over the course of the semester and how invested they remained in the course and their class. In addition, some students referred positively to the check-in when feedback was invited at the end of the semester.

The mindfulness practices Franzese designed for her upper-level sociology course (which included disciplinary content focused on the self), again were selected in response to contextual factors. Since the course was taught in the spring semester at lunchtime and was comprised primarily of juniors and seniors, Franzese had concerns about the ability of students to stay focused and engaged during the course. Students often are distracted and as educators we must protect the time and space for our students to think (see Forni, 2011 for discussion). With this in mind, Franzese shared information about mindfulness practices with the students and asked them if they might be willing to begin each class with a mindfulness practice. She explained that while mindfulness has contentious connections to spirituality, Franzese's practices were designed so that they would be doing nothing that violated any religious tradition and gave a brief history about mindfulness and MBRS. Students were given enough context about mindfulness to request permission to conduct any mindfulness practices. However, after approximately 3-5 classes, students would request a mindfulness practice as soon as she entered the classroom. The purpose of these mindfulness practices was to provide students with unencumbered or unobstructed time to begin every class with a mindfulness practice. Because it was a mindfulness practice, Franzese included a “Personal Reflections” section at the end of research papers, which again legitimized the activity of reflection and allows the instructor to learn about how students are thinking not to do another class period or spelling but to write continuously from the time they were instructed to begin until the time they were told to stop. At the end of the semester the 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 in their freewriting thinking about their reading and 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 communities. For instance, across courses in Franzese’s Sociology program, there is a recurring assignment that asks students to "think about the book you are reading". This provides a framework; she is doing these practices with her students, not to provide an alternative because she did not want students to limit themselves in their freewriting thinking about their reading and 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.

Franzese's designs 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 the outcomes was also methodologically sound and appropriate for the research question, and its methodology was valid.

Franzese’s fundamental question was, do contemplative practices deepen student engagement and student learning? To address this question, students were instructed to write about a social topic that asked precisely that; for example, in her senior seminar, she asked students that asked 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, which students believed that it was known that students anticipated that the question on a six-point scale, which students believed that it was known that students anticipated that the question on a six-point scale, which students believed that it was known that students anticipated that the question on a six-point scale, which students believed that it was known that students anticipated that...

But Franzese’s fundamental question was, do contemplative practices deepen student engagement and student learning? To address this question, students were instructed to write about a social topic that students were interested in, and to think about the book they were reading. This allowed her to apply her own disciplinary expertise to the study of contemplative practices.

Conducted in Partnership with Students

As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. In line with student feedback, Franzese’s practices were designed with potential demands (class size of 40 students) but also was explicitly and specifically related to the students who would be attending the course and their needs. Franzese’s practices were designed to foster a sense of connectedness and process orientation as well as our course specific goals of insight, compassion, courage in addressing challenging themes, and critical thinking about disciplinary content.

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Linking to the SoTL framework, Franzese selected practices that allowed her to apply her own disciplinary expertise to the study of contemplative practices.
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 with their inquiries into learning – they are able to 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 & 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 in-depth understanding, this is a potential limitation that merits further exploration.

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 engage faculty from any discipline and focuses on their questions about their students, use methods tied to their own expertise to explore those questions, and involve students and others in the process of making sense of the results. In these ways, SoTL effectively achieves the fundamental goal of any educational inquiry by meeting the needs of faculty practitioners who are seeking to enhance their use of contemplative pedagogies.

SoTL is a related, single study that will scientifically prove the power and validity of contemplative pedagogies in higher education. However, if those of us who teach with contemplative pedagogies embrace the potential of SoTL together, we will build a more robust knowledge that will help us, our students, and our institutions, to move closer to the heart of higher education.

REFERENCES


