January 2017

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110108
Reflecting on Reflecting: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as a Tool to Evaluate Contemplative Pedagogies

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

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

This research article is available in International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/vol11/iss1/8
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

(Received 29 April 2016; Accepted 19 August 2016)

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, & 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; 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 MBSR, but actually opened the door to new questions about mindfulness training in health care.

Academia now finds itself in a position similar to that of the medical community before the MBSR studies. Many in higher education are returning to the ancient wisdom that contemplation and mindfulness are powerful, even essential, for many aspects of transformative learning. However, we have yet determined how to systematically, meaningfully, and sustainably design, implement, and evaluate new volante 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 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 and measure outcomes is important. For practitioners who aim to understand the processes and results of contemplative pedagogies, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a natural starting point. This framework provides a way of thinking about the nature of contemplative pedagogies as positive psychology techniques for evaluating curiosity and personal wisdom to bear on questions of student transformation. Indeed, systematic inquiry into outcomes did not occur in the medical community before the MBSR studies. Many in higher education are now returning to the ancient wisdom that contemplation and mindfulness are powerful, even essential, for many aspects of transformative learning.

In each course, she had three common goals for contemplative pedagogies: (1) to invite students to be fully present, including mindfulness exercises to ground them in the moment and to respond to course assignments (fear, excitement, anxiety anticipation); (2) to facilitate a sense of connectedness and involvement in a learning community; and (3) to develop a reflective practice orientation toward disciplinary learning, rather than focusing primarily on products and outcomes.
own confidence in their abilities. An advantage of doing this over the course of the semester was that it also demonstrated to the students how the social world itself is fluid and changing; that 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 actively with the potentially frustrating and destabilizing aspects of their disciplinary work.

A by-product of this practice was that students felt bonded to one another - multiple students remarked in their feedback forms that they felt close/comfortable with their classmates and this led to them feeling connected in the learning 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 were in the material. In addition, the final exam reflected positively to the checks-in when feedback was invited at the end of the semester.

The mindfulness practices Franzese designed for her upper-level sociological course (which included disciplinary content focused on self) were explicitly and specifically related to the sociology disciplinary process. The professor tells students to share feedback at any time, and the class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components.

Conducted in Partnership with Students

As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational - something she invites students to do, not a requirement. In fact, in her senior seminar, students were asked to share feedback at any time, and the class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. Franzese designed and implemented 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 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 question, Franzese instructed students to keep a journal of their reflections about the course content. Franzese routinely gathers student feedback at various points throughout the course to engage students in mid-semester evaluation forms. She identified the following as examples of what's working and what don’t 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-wide student survey that asked students if they enjoyed engaging in mindfulness practices and if they felt that they were learning. Students were then informed that asked specifically that, for example, in her upper-level course she asked whether students felt that contemplative practices enhanced their learning. Students responded to the question on a six-point scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). The university-wide survey was a self-report measure of engagement and 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.

Franzese asked students if they would be willing to begin again at the beginning of class - touching base not only about the status of projects but also of individual struggles. This facilitated a sense of connection with peers both within and beyond her university. Franzese often uses learning circles in her courses. This exercise, which Franzese adapted from an activity she participated in at an Anti-Discrimination League workshop and referred to as “concentric circles,” is an activity in which students are grouped into self-selected learning circles that form in which participants face one another; a question is posed, and then one circle rotates so that individuals are face to face with someone new on every rotation. Expanding beyond this initial exercise, learning circles are often a core part in Franzeese’s courses. Within her courses, learning circles require that students know the name of every student in the class. By using these practices, students can individually meet others in the course and respond to their ideas. Franzese often invites students to do these quick check-ins when the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components. The class benefited from a mindfulness practice led by the professor after the class discussed due dates for project components.
CONCLUSIONS: SOTL AS A CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

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 to 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 regard to their learning. Through the analysis of her SoTL approaches, on the other hand, focus a faculty member’s vision on an issue of particular interest. Learning circles, for example, can effectively bring attention to the diversity that is present or missing in a faculty member’s classroom. This, in turn, may 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 an integration and connection, this is a potential limitation that merits further exploration.

Like any heuristic, SoTL is imperfect, but we believe that on the whole this framework is one that works well 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 attention on the core of this work: their observations 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 bringing the needs of faculty practitioners who are seeking to enhance their use of contemplative pedagogies.

SoTL is a practical, 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 wealth of knowledge that will help us, our students, and our institutions, to move closer to the heart of higher education.

REFERENCES


Guernela, O., Sarath, E. W., Scott, C., & in questions of learning circles, for their locus of control, they care 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 bringing the needs of faculty practitioners who are seeking to enhance their use of contemplative pedagogies.


