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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; Gunnlaugsson, 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 & Serretti, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt &

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Walach, 2004). Indeed, systematic inquiry into outcomes did not compromise the aims of MISIR, but actually opened the door to further exploration and deepening in health care.

Academia now finds itself in a position similar to that of the medical community before the MISIR studies. Many in higher education are returning to the ancient wisdom that contemplation and mindfulness can offer essential, four-dimensional, 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 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 attentiveness is important. For practitioners who aim to understand the processes and results of contemplative pedagogies, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a valuable way to design and measure the implementation of contemplative pedagogies. Such radical openness can be uncomfortable to 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).

Appropriately public: As contemplative pedagogies spread in higher education, practitioners and scholars—and students—will benefit if we treat our teaching as “capture attentiveness” (Thum, 2005). For SoTL inquiries does not necessarily require publication in peer-reviewed journals; instead, many opportunities exist to start and learn from colleagues in our own courses. 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.

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., Denner & Collister, 2010 and Vanni & Franze, 2008 and Franze, 2009 for discussion of authenticity).

To illustrate how this might be done, we will consider the ways in which Franzese (Franze, 2008) conducted her work at Elon University (has designed, implemented, and inquired into the outcomes of contemplative pedagogies in her own classes—using the five principles outlined above. This case does not seek to present an isolated study, but to share prevailing student performance in terms of course grades or students’ ability to retain and apply disciplinary knowledge; instead, this example focuses on the primary concern of the article: how to incorporate contemplative pedagogies in-the-moment classroom experiences of students. Franzese has brought contemplative pedagogies into the full range of courses she teaches, adapting her teaching practices to meet the needs of the students in each course. For instance, in her senior seminar Franzese invited students to do introspective self-check-ins at the beginning of each class meeting and in her introductory course she did the same. & (Franze, 2008) has designed, implemented, and inquired into the outcomes of contemplative pedagogies in her own classes—using the five principles outlined above. This case does not seek to present an isolated study, but to share prevailing student performance in terms of course grades or students’ ability to retain and apply disciplinary knowledge; instead, this example focuses on the primary concern of the article: how to incorporate contemplative pedagogies in-the-moment classroom experiences of students. Franzese has brought contemplative pedagogies into the full range of courses she teaches, adapting her teaching practices to meet the needs of the students in each course. For instance, in her senior seminar Franzese invited students to do introspective self-check-ins at the beginning of each class meeting and in her introductory course she did the same.

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’s story and making her own teaching and inquiries “appropriately public.”

Inquiry Focused on Student Learning

In both courses, she had three commons goals for contemplative pedagogies: (1) To invite students to be fully present, including dropping distractions to gather their full attention and response to course assignments (fear, excitement, anxiety, anticipation). (2) To facilitate a sense of connectedness and invite a sense of membership in a learning community, and (3) To develop a reflective process orientation 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 primary vehicle for her inquiry. With the pedagogical focus 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 might hinder behavioral change and the development of self-awareness. These check-ins provided time for reflection and normalized the process of thinking about one’s experience in a given setting. The contemplative practice for her upper-level course was a more extensive knowledge related to at least one contemplative practice. In both the introductory course and the upper-level seminar, most of the 25 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 courses: 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 the project to the subject matter class (a requirement at Elon University).)- anxiety and negative anticipation have historically been high among students. With this expectation, Franzese opened the class with a 2.5 minute introspective check-in. At the beginning of class after she reviewed the agenda for the session, students put their heads down and raised their hands responsibly as Franzese listed varying levels of concern and negative anticipation. Students’ 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 primary vehicle for her inquiry. With the pedagogical focus 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 might hinder behavioral change and the development of self-awareness. These check-ins provided time for reflection and normalized the process of thinking about one’s experience in a given setting. The contemplative practice for her upper-level course was a more...
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 importance of critical thinking and how to process and critique both text and their own thoughts. Franzese stated that even when we are most concerned or overwhelmed, those times are followed by times when we feel efficacious and in control. Acknowledging this cyclical nature allowed many students to deal more effectively with their first year and second year students who were more comfortable with their knowledge in the social world - she used a contemplative approach that focuses on mindfulness and meditation. Because she wanted students to develop a familiarity with mindfully listening to a piece of music. The purpose of the 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 student looked to other students to report, in writing or orally, how they felt about their participation in the course. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement. As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogies as invitational – something she invites students to do, not a requirement.
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 on 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 work. Having engaged in 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 existing work. They 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 deepened 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 them on the local context of their work. By asking our students about their experiences, we 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 meaning the needs of faculty practitioners who are seeking to enhance their use of contemplative pedagogies.

SoTL involved a 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 larger, more diverse body of knowledge that will help us, our students, and our institutions, to move closer to the heart of higher education.

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