

Center for Teaching and Learning

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Mindfulness in higher education

By Linda Watts



Last spring, I participated in an Online Learning Institute conducted at UW Bothell. Since I had long been skeptical about the ways in which my own teaching might travel into an online environment, I opted to confront those reservations directly. That is, I decided to develop an online design not only for the course I'd always wanted to teach, but also for the one I presumed relied most extensively on face-to-face instruction.

The course, *"The Beholding 'I': Social Observation as Contemplative Practice in the Helping Professions,"* addresses the nuanced work conducted by such figures as teachers, healthcare professionals, and social workers. This course (influenced by previous efforts such as Robert Coles' Harvard course, "A Literature of Social Reflection"), calls upon us to consider the compelling power of humanistic inquiry in addressing issues surrounding central practices throughout the helping professions: observation, description, narrative, commentary, advocacy, and intervention.

I wanted to engage class members in exploring and contributing to the literary and journalistic documentary tradition of social observation. In so doing, I recognized that we would be posing questions regarding the complex relationships generated through acts of social observation:

To what degree are we responsible for what we see? What do we notice and why? What does that say about us, or others? How do we think about the stories of others, and about our own stories? Is it most important that we emphasize our commonalities with others, identify our differences from others, or is there a third option? Is there an ethics of reading? In what ways are we accountable for what we write? Are we duty bound to act upon the social phenomena we observe, read about, and write about? What does it mean to help? What does it mean to serve? How are we to understand the dynamic of empathic connection? What is the quality of compassion, and what are its optimal results? How do we strive for reciprocity in human relationships? At its best, what might creative

coexistence look, feel, and sound like? What role does literature play in human rights and human thriving? How does language contribute to creating a more peaceful and just world? In what sense are all of these issues critical to arriving at a professional identity informed by reflective practice?

Beyond those questions, I wanted students enrolled in the class to consider how to sustain both themselves and their practices in the helping professions. That intent caused me to delve into the literature regarding mindfulness in education. In addition to assigning students to read examples of the literature of social observation (for example, excerpts from James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), I found myself developing assignments to promote needed skills for helping professionals:

- Dispositions associated with mindful practice (nonjudging; nonstriving; nonattachment; acceptance; patience; trust; openness; curiosity; letting go; gentleness; nonreactivity; loving-kindness)
- Acuity of vision as relevant to mindful practice (beholding; noticing thoughts; noticing feelings; noticing gaps; seeing dispassionately)
- Relational abilities associated with the helping professions (witnessing and welcoming; being present; deep listening; attunement; connection; empathy; compassion)
- Familiarity with techniques associated with mindful practice (mindful breathing; mindful movement; body scan, sitting meditation, walking meditation, walking with words)
- Awareness of methods for self-care in the helping professions (introspection, self-awareness; values clarification; gratitude; distress tolerance).

I went from thinking about the course assignments as a series of essays to a suite of activities that might more vividly cultivate and demonstrate these emerging awarenesses in students. That meant that while students would still write some essays, they would also engage in contemplative photography assignments and learn (or develop) practices such as meditation and guided visualization.

As the course configuration took this turn, I realized that online learning affords students some welcome forms of flexibility, especially around time. After all, it is difficult to meditate on demand. Instead of submitting to a lesson plan at the appointed hour, class members might pursue their contemplative practice at times and locations optimal for them. Online learning also creates some avenues for safe and personalized exploration that the traditional classroom might not. That is, students may customize their selections of contemplative activities to suit their own professional interests, constituencies, and needs.

In short, this experience with online course design brought with it two discoveries that surprised me: (1) that in some instances, and in some respects, online learning might prove preferable to (not merely as good as) face-to-face instruction; and (2) that mindfulness education might achieve certain nuances and felicities only through online environments.

Now, if you're still reading, in the spirit of a nonjudgmental curiosity and attention directed to learning, let's hear from those of you who have productively applied mindfulness principles to your teaching, whether face-to-face or online.

FAQ

Q: What is mindfulness?

According to the UK's Mindfulness in Schools Project, "Mindfulness involves learning to direct our attention to our experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance. Rather than worrying about what has happened or might happen, it trains us to respond skillfully to what is happening right now, be that good or bad."

You can see a graphic depiction of the ways kindness, compassion, and curiosity take shape in academic settings by examining the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's "Tree of Contemplative Practices".

If those explanations seems too lofty or ethereal for you, you might prefer Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer's no-nonsense, crusty, and somewhat comical approach in the following YouTube clip, "Mindfulness over Matter":

Ellen Langer: Mindfulness over matter



Q: How does mindful practice shape education?

A: According to Deborah Schoeberlein David and Suki Sheth, authors of *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2009), there are numerous benefits of mindfulness in education, both for teachers and students:

Benefits of Mindfulness

For Teachers

- Improves focus and awareness.
- Increases responsiveness to students' needs.
- Promotes emotional balance.
- Supports stress management and stress reduction.
- Supports healthy relationships at work and home.
- Enhances classroom climate.
- Supports overall well-being.

For Students

- Supports “readiness to learn.”
- Promotes academic performance.
- Strengthens attention and concentration.
- Reduces anxiety before testing.
- Promotes self-reflection and self-calming.
- Improves classroom participation by supporting impulse control.
- Provides tools to reduce stress.
- Enhances social and emotional learning.
- Fosters pro-social behaviors and healthy relationships.
- Supports holistic well-being. (p. 9).

Q: Where can I find out more about mindful education?

A: These quick links offer some starting points:

Association for Mindfulness in Education

<http://www.mindfuleducation.org/>

Center for Mindful Education

<http://www.mindfuled.com/#!>

Mindfulness in Education Network

<http://www.mindfuled.org/>

Project Mindfulness

<http://projectmindfulness.net/what-is-mindfulness-in-education/>

Q: Where might I read more about mindfulness in education?

A: Here are a few recently published resources to begin (or continue) your explorations:

Barzebat, Daniel P., and Bush, Mirabai. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013.

Rechtschaffen, Daniel. *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*. New York: Norton, 2014.

Sanders, Linda A. *Contemplative Studies in Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

Q: Are there upcoming events related to contemplative practice in higher education?

A: As it happens, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education will be holding their annual conference on the UW's Seattle campus, October 10-12, 2014. For more information, consult the conference website at <http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/conferences>.

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K. Yasuhara · a year ago

Thanks for the eye-opening post and list of resources. With one foot in Buddhist practice and another in higher education (specifically in engineering), I'm inspired to explore the overlaps and opportunities more. Similarly inclined readers might be interested in work by M. M. Santiago, who has a chapter on Buddhism and socially just engineering education in the book *Engineering Education for Social Justice* (J. Lucena, ed.).

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