

## Mindfulness Learning and Contemplative Inquiry in Online Environments

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Learning environments are changing fast. Today high school diplomas and college degrees can be earned in brick and mortar environments, online environments, and environments that blend both in person and online experiences (Nazari and Webber, 2012; Sturgis, 2012). Historically, there have been two traditional structures for learning that involve top down (lecture delivery) or bottom up (experiential and collaborative) approaches (Langer, 1997). Today, scholars have also described these kinds of approaches as “mainstream, conventional, or traditional forms of education, which tend to focus on the acquisition of knowledge” (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, and Gunnlaugson, 2010, p. 2). Currently, there is a movement to go beyond the traditional methods of delivery partly due to the proliferation of online educational opportunities that have manifested from the secondary level of education through all levels of higher education (Awbrey, Dana, Miller, Robinson, Ryan, and Scott, 2006; Palmer and Zajonc, 2010). These opportunities involve developing a virtual classroom environment where there is no physical human contact that take advantage of technological advancements that have changed the landscape of education around the world (Bache, 2008). While we are still in the dawn of these exciting changes, we cannot expect that our traditional pedagogical strategies remain intact; we must adapt, adjust, and revolutionize our approach to teaching and learning in these new kinds of environments, some scholars refer to these changes as a move toward “integral education” (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, and Gunnlaugson, 2010, p. 1). These new opportunities in educational

philosophy and practice have paved an exciting transdisciplinary discussion that is just one part of a larger phenomenon.

Besides the shift toward online learning environments, there is a growing movement in the United States and abroad that seeks to respond to and counter the technological revolution that has permeated our communication patterns, learning capabilities, and interpersonal relationships. The Slow Movement is a critical mass of people who recognize that our culture has become infatuated with the quick, the fast, and the immediate and in this cult of speed mindset judgments are made that can cause miscommunication, misjudgment, and an overwhelming sense of fatigue related to information overload (Honore, 2004). These experiences impact our connection with others causing a loss of peacefulness and rest that is needed to nurture our inner being and our relationships (Honore, 2004). Carl Honore (2004) refers to our environment as being saturated with the quick, fast, and immediate as “the age of rage” (p. 1). In this environment we try to keep up but there is no end in sight.

Similar to the Slow Movement in popular culture, there is another critical mass of educators, scholars, researchers, and philosophers who are propelling research into an integrative approach to learning and teaching. Some of these scholars are pursuing mindfulness studies and others are pursuing contemplative studies, both of which have been applied to pedagogy in all kinds of learning environments. Mindfulness and contemplation are not new phenomena, in fact they are part of what Tobin Hart (2007) refers to as practices from wisdom traditions and pedagogy of interiority. These practices from ancient wisdom traditions are being renewed, revisited, and re-appropriated in both popular and academic cultures. *The Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society* is a central location of resources for educators in all environments and fields who are interested in exploring the value of contemplative practices to create active

learning and research environments. Contemplative practices and mindfulness conditions are sometimes considered oppositional to technological advances that currently pervade our culture of quick, fast, and immediate, however, we argue that they provide alternatives to our fast-paced, outcome driven focus in both secondary and higher educational domains.

This essay does not dispute the advantages of new technologies and the development of learning outcomes in the educational environment. This essay focuses on how mindfulness learning and contemplative practices in the classroom can enrich the mind, body, and spirit of a student (Siegel, 2007). In the culture of quick, fast, and immediate this tripartite is often forgotten, so the purpose of this discussion is to invite consideration of these integrative practices into the classroom at all levels. This essay first identifies the challenges inherent in our learning environments today as a result of the proliferation of new technologies. Second, this essay explores the couplet developed by Ellen Langer (1997), *mindful learning* and Arthur Zajonc's notion of *contemplative inquiry*. Third, this essay considers how mindfulness learning and contemplative inquiry can be employed specifically to online teaching environments. Finally, we end with a discussion of the value that mindfulness learning and contemplative pedagogies bring to education at any level. To understand the need for this shift toward mindfulness in education, we first explore the challenges to educational environments today.

### **Challenges in Education Today**

There are many challenges in educational environments today. According to Altbach, Berdahl, and Gumport, (1999/2005), "universities are singular institutions" (p. 15); they often resist change and don't adapt well because they are steeped in tradition and history. Infantino and Wilke (2009) claim both primary and secondary educational domains also face tough choices and challenges in their own unique environments. Wolfgang (2001) offers a variety of

educational tools theoretical models designed to help these teachers negotiate a safe and happy learning environment. Whether considering specific funding issues, campus safety issues, costs related to the tools students of all levels need to be successful, or the social, political, ethical, legal, and economic challenges facing faculty, students, administration, and support staff, one of the biggest challenges facing American education resides in the relationship between the individual student and the environment. Some researchers argue that technological advancements have changed society to the detriment of the *capacity* for one to learn in a healthy environment (Altbach, Berdahl, and Gumport, 1999/2005; Honoré, 2004).

We suggest that our fast-paced culture and vastly mediated environment is over saturated with information which has reduced our consumption practices into gathering short snippets of information often at a superficial level. There seems to be fewer places in the life of a student where one can sit, digest, reflect, and wonder about the ideas with which he or she is reading and learning about. Students in all grade levels move from one block of material to another at a fast pace because mass media have trained students to consume quickly and in short segments. In this fast paced environment, learning has become fragmented and students just want to know the answers so they can move to the next thing; they do not give enough time and intellectual space to the ideas that undergird the main ideas with which they are engaged.

A healthy lifestyle includes one's formal educational experience and it should cultivate the mind and provide openings to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world; this requires a habit or practice of mindfulness engagement. As students engage in their *massified* and media driven lifestyle, they may become disconnected from themselves (because they may not look inward for any length of time) or from others (because they may not see what or who is before them). It is up to those of us who engage students in formal educational environments to help

them find a way to permit what they learn to cultivate their minds and help them *see* new things. Educators can help students create a practice or habit of learning that promotes health and wellness of their being. This is true for all educational environments, both brick and mortar and online. We argue that educators can engage students with mindfulness learning and contemplative pedagogies online that not only help students learn field of knowledge content but also promote overall student and faculty wellness.

### **Mindful Learning and Contemplative Inquiry**

Often we hear of mindful learning and contemplative pedagogy together. Both of these approaches are part of the broader category of integral education. Integral education is an integrative approach to education and an emerging field of study that is transdisciplinary (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, and Gunnlaugson, 2010). Characteristics of integral education involve a number of foci that include the following: exploring multiple perspectives, first, second, and third-person methodologies of learning and teaching, bringing together domains of self, culture, and nature, integrating critical thinking and experiential feeling, a collaboration of developmental and constructive psychology, regularly practiced personal approaches to transformation, multiple ways of knowing, recognition of various types of learners and teachers, shadow work (self-reflection), and honoring other approaches to education (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, and Gunnlaugson, 2010, p. 5-6). These characteristics fall short of providing an absolute or concrete definition of integral education but they do provide consistent features of what integral education involves. As we mentioned earlier, mindful learning and contemplative pedagogy are often discussed together, however, they are two very different kinds of pedagogy. Traditionally, mindfulness has been associated with the emptying of the mind as modeled by proponents of the Buddhist tradition; contemplative practices are more aligned with focusing

one's attention to a particular notion or aspect. However, in integral education, these strict delineations are becoming modified and adapted to a variety of perspectives.

*Mindfulness* is a phenomenological focus of attention that enhances the way we communicate, therefore it has significant meaning to human communication and to how we learn. Ellen Langer (1990) defines the nature of mindfulness as being open to creation and creativity, new ideas, and having an awareness of more than one perspective. In her theory of mindful learning she suggests that mindfulness as a pedagogy eases, subdues, and even averts the temptation to engage automatic behaviors. Langer (1990; 1997) suggests mindfulness enables the releasing of preconceived ideas and expectations which is key in learning because preconceptions and concrete expectations limit resources, attitudes, and possibilities.

Mindful pedagogies are not governed by linear time (Langer, 1997). For example, many pedagogies are constructed in linearity; time governs the experience which involves a firm beginning and end, or there may be a deadline, or there may be consequences for missing a deadline. If linearity governs the learning experience, possibilities of engagement are automatically limited and actions become more functional than open to learning moments. So, in mindfulness, one's phenomenological attention is inward and ungoverned by the external environment. With assessment driving many aspects of our teaching, our orientation to time is a challenging issue to balance though Langer provides pedagogical practices that tend to nonlinear experiences.

Langer (1990) offers a prescription for mindfulness learning that involves our intuitions and a shifting of our own perceptions that we have about teaching. Langer tells educators to begin with the assumption that the very "basics" need to be questioned which is part of the reason her mindfulness learning model dispels the myth that rote memorization is necessary in

the learning process (p. 15). When we begin outside of the “basics,” we can see beyond the moment in an unencumbered manner. Langer (1997) refers to this kind of seeing as “*sideways*” (p. 23). Listening sideways is a rhetorical opening to possibilities that points learners to fresh perspectives and liberates worldviews. Sometimes, it takes a sideways approach for student to grapple with difficult and challenging topics. The characteristics of sideways learning includes being open to novelty in learning, paying attention to subtle distinctions, being sensitive to differing contexts, having both implicit and explicit awareness of multiplicity of perspectives, and an orientation to the present moment. Sideways learning is an alternative to traditional top down or bottom up pedagogical strategies; it aims for those in the learning environment to be receptive to changes in an ongoing situation. Langer (1997) argues that traditional theories advocating that we learn best when we can break a task down into discrete parts do not make possible the kind of learning that occurs in sideways learning—she describes these discrete parts as being *presliced* or prepackaged and this predetermination undermines the learning outcome.

Mindfulness describes the approach taken to an action. In mindfulness, we approach our subject or our doing as we are fully present—the experience tends to the present moment in a deep and fulfilling way. Attention is beyond a surface level and is unencumbered by any one or thing else. Some examples of sideways learning include using a syllabus as a general guide rather than a strict template that is governed by time. The course should be driven by the content/ideas rather than a chronological frame; the syllabus can be used generally and be open to adaptation, changing assignments, spending more time on certain content if needed, or generally making adjustments based upon the nature of the students in the course, which you cannot know prior to the beginning of the course. One might also permit the meeting schedule to be partially co-created between teacher and students. Another example might be to present

material (perhaps through lecturettes) in a *conditional* sense/tone leaving students to keep an open mind and open discussion. For example, when discussing a conditional topic such as religion, politics, economics, keep open an open mind even if the content is not mainstream. Additionally, it is all right to admit to the students that you do not know everything, this illuminates your ethos as an ethical agent as well as a learner along with the students. Each of these structures are open and easily adaptable to the in person classroom—in the physical environment and in the online environment.

Another collaborative way to engage students conditionally is to permit students to create/co-create a rubric for an assignment. This permits students and engages them in inner intention of the assignment, providing more depth and insight into their experience of performing the assignment. Incorporate different pedagogies that might feel nontraditional. For example, have students draw stories of content individually or in groups. By using drawing as a pedagogical tool, students learn to see the content they are covering differently and might learn something new about the ideas. Additionally, when visual representation is used, new ways of seeing the world are also illuminated for the audience. For use in the online environment one might use specific software that the institution makes available for student use or students might need to physically draw something and scan their work to upload into the online environment. Of course, these kinds of approaches require different kinds of logistical engagement by the instructor to ensure students have the tools they need to participate.

Langer (1997) reminds us that another kind of general sideways approach involves a recognition that right answers can also be wrong answers: *The shortest distance between two objects is a straight line* is right in the context of plane geometry but in the context of my house to the store – it could be wrong (detours and shortcuts are not always straight). We should help



the students see that an inadequate answer can be adequate in another context. We should permit students to define their own experiences, generate their own hypotheses, and discover new ways of categorizing the world – we should be not so quick to evaluate their responses but rather we ought to listen to their questions and see where that goes. These strategies are also open and easily forged in the in-person classroom—seeing what they might look like in the online environment becomes equally important.

Mindful learning requires that we become liberated from the sage on stage mindset and create a learning environment that is conditional and contingent—and we must become comfortable in that environment. We must enter the environment with a hermeneutic humility and be ready to learn as well as teach. This approach breaks the canon of higher education—it asks us to be open and be a co-learner with our students by serving as an intellectual guide that questions and permits students to find their own answers their own way. For many, this is frightening; but what it really does is liberate us in the classroom—we adapt, facilitate, and listen to our students. We recognize we do not know everything and what we do know, we should always question because the world changes every single day/moment.

*Contemplative inquiry* enters the conversation from a different vantage point that involves silence and meditation. Arthur Zajonc (2009) maintains that the goal of contemplative practice is to join insight, compassion, wisdom, and love in a meaningful way to one’s life, and to meet these goals we must “learn to be ever more awake” (p. 13). The contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) should also be also an active life (*vita active*)—we need to “engage in an inner work commensurate with our outer work” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 14). The *method* of contemplative inquiry involves “incorporating the contemplative life into the active life” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 15). The path of contemplative inquiry involves a meditative practice that can potentially transform

one's personal life that brings healing, new insight, and opens one's heart into one's path in life. This transformation can move from a student's personal life into her or his public life—for the educator, this also transforms the learning environment in the classroom. Whether one meditates in class, brings moments of silence as a pedagogy, or engages some form of mindfulness meditation to an activity in the classroom, contemplative experiences open students to new ways of learning and experiencing ideas. Contemplative practices in the classroom become a habit of the mind and this habit builds humility and reverence to inner harmony, emotional balance, and tending to our attention (Zajonc, 2009). When we experience our silent/contemplative selves we move toward and begin to see higher principles and what is possible in our lives.

Philosophically and theoretically mindfulness learning and contemplative inquiry engages students differently than traditional modes of educational delivery. These approaches ask educators to enter the learning environment from another perspective and sometimes changing our approach in the classroom is scary—or at least it creates uncertainty in the physical classroom. The online environment poses other problems *and opportunities* for these integral approaches. The next section explores some possible ways in which mindfulness learning and contemplative pedagogy can be engaged in the online environment.

### **Application: Mindfulness Learning and Contemplative Inquiry in the Online Classroom**

This section provides an example of mindfulness learning and contemplative inquiry practices that can be applied to the online educational environment. While these are just one way of engaging this new wave of online learning, we acknowledge there are infinite possibilities in how one might take these approaches and adapt assignments to embrace the online environment. We begin with mindfulness learning in the online environment. These examples come from our own experiences and while they are not supported by qualitative studies, they offer anecdotal

evidence of the educational value that mindfulness learning and contemplative inquiry can have to online engagement.

Adapting Langer's notion of sideways learning in an online educational environment one might create a group assignment and break students into virtual groups using the online tools available in the platform delivery system embedded in your course. This way the groups can work together and only they can see their work, which will be discussioning and perhaps uploading of documents or other creative media. There will be a time later when you, as the course administrator, can open the group work for the other groups to see. However, you only create the idea for the assignment. Before the groups enter their group discussioning, create an interactive forum where you invite the students to create the rubric themselves. They must identify the goal of the assignment and specific learning outcomes. Then, develop and agree upon the criteria with which they will be graded.

When students play a role in thinking about their assignments from a teacher's perspective, they can see the assignment differently. They will end up with a textured understanding of what they ought to be doing, they will have given thought to the idea in general, and this kind of knowledge will enable them to approach the assignment with a sideways opening or different mindset of what they should be focusing upon. Students also have a different level of buy-in. This means that students will have already placed a value on the assignment because they took a part in developing the assignment. The ownership that they experience enables them to be more actively and authentically engaged in the group work and we also know from assigning traditional group work in the classroom, there are often interpersonal difficulties due to varying levels of engagement and care that students bring to preformed assignments. We found that there has been less social loafing in online and in-person group work

where students play a role in creating their own assignments. While mindfulness learning approaches learning via a sideways entry way, contemplative inquiry offers an alternative pedagogical model.

Adapting Zajonc's contemplative inquiry to the online environment can be exciting. One way of engaging this approach is to have students maintain a meditation journal. In general, have students meditate for ten minutes each time prior to turning on their computer to enter the online classroom site. After the meditation period, require students to first maintain an online meditation journal. So, they would open their classroom and write in their journal about their meditation experience before they do anything else in the online classroom. As the course administrator, you have access to check the student's time in the classroom; you can opt to check their time online or not.

In traditional in-person classrooms, this would manifest as having a meditation period prior to starting class. Since students are coming from all over campus, meditating before class begins or within the first 5 or 10 minutes of each class meeting, students are able to settle into the space and be better prepared to participate actively in class and be open to the ideas that will be explored in that particular class. Meditating before class opens is one way to focus attention, remove clutter, and let students breath without requiring anything else from them. Not all students like this because they have never been exposed to this practice. However, after establishing this as a practice in your classroom, students become accustomed to it and actually prefer to meditate before starting by the end of the semester. It is the same in the online environment. Students are coming to their online course from all different activities. This gives them time to focus and be open to what it is they will need to learn and experience.

By having students maintain a meditation journal, they have to think about the meditation experience. If you include a discussion forum on each meditation experience, students can share what they want about the experience but it is not like sharing their journal with the class. This provides students with two different kinds of communicative engagement, one is private and one is public; this provides students multiple opportunities to think about and share their experience. In the end, they are ready to engage ideas focused and attentive to intellectual discovery. This is similar to discussing the meditation experience in the classroom. When students are asked to talk about their experience they have to process the experience differently, which contributes to a deeper level of intellectual engagement.

These are just two examples of how one can adapt an assignment using mindfulness learning or contemplative inquiry in the online environment. What is key is that you give up some control as the instructor and you enable students to take a more active part in their own learning. Most importantly, getting to know how you can use the technology to benefit your means is necessary and this involves developing a good relationship with your technology support people charged with helping you succeed in the online environment.

### **Significance**

The world is changing around us. The global environment, whether we talk about the climate changes, economy shifts, media industry, marketplace, medicine, or education, we are seeing and experiencing new ways of living in the world and living or communicating with others. While we do not advocate moving away from traditions, we are suggesting that as educators, we need to recognize that the world is changing and if we want to be active and respond in our disciplines, we need to be active and responsive in this changing world. By

recognizing the challenges in all levels of education today, we need to do more than just recognize the challenges; we must meet them.

We do not know what the long-term impact of online education will be to the tradition of education in the United States and beyond but we do recognize that online learning environments are emerging everywhere and they make sense in an age of the global village becoming virtually localized. The world has become smaller with the accessibility of information at our finger tips. All levels of education must embrace these changes and adapt to the changing environment. One way of ensuring that the integrity of education remains high, we need to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and embrace new technologies; we need to understand the limits and the possibilities. From this time forward, integral education models should be embraced, applied, and studied; mindfulness learning and contemplative inquiry have a place in online education models, we just need to be open to seeing their applications and value to the learning environment.

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