

I. Context

Mindfulness has become a cultural buzzword in the last decade. It has appeared in popular media and is increasingly prevalent in the research literature, and it has been correlated with a number of positive psychological and physiological effects (see **Relevant Literature**). Yet, what exactly is mindfulness? Mindfulness has been defined by researcher and author Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994, p. 4). Mindfulness is cultivated through practices such as meditation, though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Meditation is one of many contemplative practices that aim to cultivate awareness. Yet, contemplative practice doesn’t need to be formal or traditional. Educator Rick Repetti defines contemplative practice as “metacognitive exercises in which attention is focused on any element of conscious experience” (2010, p. 87). Building on the idea of contemplative practice, Repetti defines contemplative pedagogy as a “philosophy of education that espouses the academic use of contemplative practices” (2010, p. 87). Here, Repetti places contemplative pedagogy next to a handful of other reflective philosophies of education. In his view:

... it may be useful to see it as an inclusive outgrowth of earlier philosophies valuing process over content, depth over coverage, philosophies such as social-emotional learning, writing across the curriculum, and critical thinking. These pedagogies share a fundamental valuing of what is already in the student... (2010, p. 87).

With this statement, we can see contemplative pedagogy as an approach that utilizes meditative reflection as a technique that can complement any of our standard classroom practices: reading, writing, reasoning, observing. No matter what pedagogies you utilize, contemplative practices are a way to bring the learner into the learning process.

Elsewhere, Arthur Zajonc asserts that the “...theory of education that underlies contemplative pedagogy is one that presumes that the capacities of sustained attention, emotional balance, insight, and compassion are able to be developed through practice” (2013, pp. 88 – 89). Taking this further, any argument for including contemplative pedagogy in your classroom needs to make the case that these capacities are worthwhile both in themselves and in relation to how students learn. Luckily, there is a growing body of research to suggest meditation and other mindfulness practices can enhance any of these qualities, and, further, there is evidence that these practices can produce improvements in academic performance.

II. Relevant Literature

In recent years, a growing body of research has suggested that meditation may provide unique physiological and psychological benefits. Beginning with curiosity as to how meditation is different from rest/relaxation (Dillbeck & Orme-Johnson, 1987) and how the brains of lifelong meditators may differ from non-meditators (Gelderloos, Hermans, Ahlscröm, & Jacoby, 1990), current research is increasingly reporting positive effects from even small doses of meditation. Zeidan and colleagues (2010) found that even short-term practice can result in positive changes in our working memory. Over time, meditation practice can result in a reduced effort to maintain attention (Zanesco et al., 2013). Meditation can have positive effects on our working memories, mediated by decreased mind wandering (Mrazek et al., 2013). These attentional benefits may even help to explain how meditation helps alleviate dysphoric moods: by interrupting rumination, meditation functions as a healthy distraction (Broderick, 2005). Yet, the potential benefits of meditation extend beyond attention. **See Table 1 for a Summary of Relevant Findings.**

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Research

What evidence is there that meditation can benefit teaching and learning?	
Attention	In addition to the findings listed above, meditation can improve performance on attentional tasks (Moore & Malinowski, 2009), suggesting it boosts focus even in the face of distractions.
Emotional Regulation	Meditators in a mindfulness-based stress reduction program showed quicker return to baseline levels of mental activity after undergoing emotional stress (Desbordes et al., 2015).
Insight/Creativity	Open monitoring (OM) meditation resulted in a higher number of original ideas and categories on a test of creative thinking (Colzato, Szapora, & Hommel, 2012).
Compassion	Loving-kindness meditation (intentionally cultivating positive emotions towards self and others) can result in a higher incidence of prosocial behaviors as well as high levels of what scientists call <i>cognitive empathy</i> , reacting strongly to negative emotions in others (Winning & Boag, 2015).
Multi-Tasking	In one study, meditators engaged in a multitasking environment exhibited longer time on task, fewer task switches, and less negative emotion as compared to a control group that took part in relaxation training (Levy, Wobbrock, Kaszniak, & Ostergren, 2012).

In addition to research focusing on the potential benefits of meditation, there exists a growing body of scholarship addressing the potentials of contemplative pedagogy in the classroom. Universities are also beginning to develop programming and even degree programs that focus on contemplative studies, practices, and pedagogy (see **Online Resources**). This “... quiet revolution in higher education” (Zajonc, 2013) is riding a larger cultural wave of mindfulness. Given the amount of research and popular literature that has flooded the market in recent years, it can be difficult to sift through and find approaches that relate directly to our everyday teaching and learning contexts. Though empirical classroom research is limited, there is a growing body of scholarship written by educators who have experimented with contemplative approaches in their classrooms. These essays offer us multiple examples of what’s possible, and they also confirm the basic idea that treating contemplative pedagogy as a philosophy allows us to apply it to subjects as diverse as physics and art history (see **p. 4 for examples**).

III. Getting Started

In discussions about mindfulness, it is not uncommon to set the stage with a litany of reasons that modern humans’ attention is diffuse and that we’re increasingly unable to focus for any meaningful amount of time. In one study, researchers found that the average amount of time people spend looking at world-famous art in a world-famous museum was underwhelming: 15 seconds (Smith & Smith, 2001). Elsewhere, researchers have found that our attention spans may now be shorter than those of goldfish (McSpadden, 2015), thanks in no small part to our use of smartphones. What does this have to do with contemplative pedagogy? The statistics listed above are not problematic in themselves, but they present potential shortcomings when translated into the classroom. If most people can only give Picasso and Matisse 15 seconds of their time in a museum, how do we get students to engage with these works in the classroom? If people can’t go more than 10 seconds without thinking of their phones, how do we get them to engage in deep, meaningful discussions, without constant distractions?

At their core, techniques and practices within contemplative pedagogy aim to create space. Viewed in this way, some evidence-based classroom techniques you may be familiar with already fit under this umbrella. One of the simplest techniques to integrate into our classrooms is wait-time. Research has found that while most teachers wait 1 - 2 seconds after asking a question, simply extending this time to 3 – 5 seconds can increase both the quantity and the quality of questions (Rowe, 1986). There’s no reason that this time can’t be extended to 5 – 7 seconds, depending on the cognitive demands of the question/request. Elsewhere, Stahl (1994) states that wait-time can occur in many places: after an instructor question, after a student question, after a student answer. Additionally, this ‘pause’ can occur after you’ve made a major point in your lecture. Though these 5 seconds can seem like an awkward silence, we can rest assured that this small step is backed by research.

Extending this line of thought, meditative activities can be seen as a way for creating space for students to prepare for class, take a mental break, or pause and process a significant activity, reading, or discussion. Meditative exercises can be quite simple. They can last as little as a minute, or we can give them more time (in the context of a class, maybe 5 minutes). As Repetti points out in his definition of contemplative practice, attention can be focused on anything within our conscious awareness. This includes our breath, our physical sensations, even our thoughts. Thus, using meditation in the classroom can be a way to get people settled at the beginning of class, or as a way to sit still when things get heated. Many basic meditations start with the breath, something that has a natural rhythm that we can follow. **See Table 2 below for some ideas to consider when integrating meditative exercises into the classroom.** In the next section, we'll look at ways to transform everyday classroom activities into contemplative ones.

Table 2. Considerations for Implementing Mindfulness Exercises

What things should I consider when using meditation/mindfulness in my classroom?	
Try it yourself first	Though you may be eager to introduce these ideas to students and see how they work in your classroom, it can be helpful to engage in the technique you want to try a few times yourself. This way, you can get a sense of what it's like, and you have first-hand experience to draw from when students inevitably have different reactions to it. Just as you might try a lecture or active learning strategy outside of a class, we can prepare for the 'live' trial.
Call it what you will	Whether you call it mindfulness, meditation, or focus/attention training is less important than being clear about directions. People have called it by the name of 'Mindful Minutes,' 'Focus Practice,' and even 'Attention Strength Training.' This way, you're comfortable with what you're offering to them.
Be clear on the directions	Many protocols begin with Focused Attention (FA) meditation: choosing an object of focus like a phrase or the breath. Some people count breaths, others don't. You can simply repeat a phrase, like <i>in</i> (with the in breath) and <i>out</i> (with the out breath). The important thing is that it's a simple direction that won't take too much thought to maintain.
It's normal to get off track	With any practice, anyone will come to see how easily the mind goes in different directions. The point of training our focus is to bring it back when it wanders. This act of bringing our attention back is what strengthens it.
Allow students to opt out	Though we want to be clear that meditation need not be religious or spiritual, we may still want to consider allowing students to opt out, as long as they respect the experience of others by remaining silent during the allotted time for meditation. They may enjoy the silence anyways!
Debrief	As with any classroom activity, taking time to reflect and debrief allows students to share their experiences. Moreover, as you've hopefully tried the meditation yourself first, you'll be able to help students make sense of their experiences.

IV. Transforming Classroom Activities into Contemplative Practices

While we can create space by having students take time to meditate, we can also create space for our students to do many of the things that we'd like them to do anyways: read, write, listen, or even just look. Simply by expanding the time we afford for observing, we create opportunities for our students to engage in contemplative classroom activities:

- **Look** – If you've ever taken an art history class, you may remember lectures full of slides with artists, dates, titles. Yet, how much time were you able to spend just looking at, observing art? If a questions takes time to process, how much time does it take to observe and process and image? Taking time to observe is an idea that needn't be limited to visual art. Images can function in any class, including the sciences. Though students may come across diagrams in a book, they may be scanned as information to study for a test. Looking intentionally can change that:
 - Take an image or graphic. Set a time: 15 seconds, 30 seconds, maybe 2 minutes. Just as with a meditation, tell students that the goal is not to think about anything particular. We want to pay attention to both what we see as well as our responses to it.
- **Listen** – Listening can apply to a recording, reading a text out loud, or the practice of listening to other students in class. Again, what's important is that it's approached intentionally (listening rather than 'waiting to talk'):

- With others, we can engage in dialogue where one person talks, uninterrupted, while the other listens, and then switch. This practice can be used to facilitate active listening, where the listener paraphrases what they heard back to their partner.
- **Read** – Though we may assign reading to our students, it may never occur to us that the word ‘reading’ may mean different things to us than it does to them. For us, reading may consist of studying the text closely, writing notes in the margins, pausing at particular salient points and letting them sink in. For us, reading may be an experience (Read, ponder, repeat). For students, ‘read pages 55 – 65’ may mean simply getting through them. By approaching reading contemplatively, we may be able to give students a small dose of reading as an experience:
 - Isolate a key passage. Is there a particularly poignant point? A complicated argument that turns on a series of ‘moves’? Project that on the board. Better yet, have students read the passage aloud. Give it some time. Pause. Read it again. After a few minutes have passed, you can debrief the experience: **What was it like? Were there things you noticed on repeated readings that didn’t make sense or emerge on your initial reading?**
- **Write** – Freewriting has been championed by educators before, especially Peter Elbow (2000), as a way of bypassing premature editing and self-criticism in the writing process. Yet, it can also be seen as a contemplative practice. While meditation involves simply observing our thoughts and feelings with the intent of not evaluating them, freewriting can be seen as transcribing those thoughts/observations. This can be done in response to something in class (or a reading/activity outside of class). It brings the learner into the learning process by putting the focus on his/her thoughts and reactions to whatever is being observed or discussed:
 - Students can engage in free writing as a warm-up or response activity. As a warm-up, have students just start writing (the only rule being to keep the pen moving). As a response, we can tell students to write whatever comes to mind after a discussion or activity. This writing can be kept private or shared, but either way it helps get whatever is on their minds out onto the paper!

V. Developing Contemplative Practices for Your Classroom

In developing contemplative practices for your classroom, it helps to consider your goals. Contemplative pedagogy asks us to let go of pedagogies of content coverage and experiment with a learning process that privileges depth over content. In a class for majors, especially one that might serve as a prerequisite for other courses taught by other instructors, it may be wise to stick with smaller doses of contemplation, such as utilizing wait-time, pausing, etc. In a class where efficient ‘pedagogies of information acquisition’ (Repetti, 2010) are necessary to set students up for future coursework, contemplative practices might serve as methods for increasing depth of knowledge for essential material:

- A physics professor asks students to observe a diagram for an extended period of time. Then, he removes the image from the overhead and asks students to draw it out from memory. He then alternates between viewing the image and reproducing it. This careful study is not uncommon in a field like visual art, but he finds that it asks students to consider the relationships between parts of a system. Moreover, this approach completely fits in with what research tells us about practicing recall: students get as much, if not more, out of trying to recall new material as they do in studying it over and over again (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014). Cultivating this habit of observation and reflection may take 10 – 15 minutes of a class period, but it socializes them in an effective study habit (Francl, 2016).

However, in an elective class, we may consider experimenting with contemplative practice as a foundational approach for appreciating art, literature, music, etc. We can focus on observation skills and worry less about accumulating a body of knowledge such as facts, dates, etc.

- For example, one art history professor focuses on fewer slides, approaching art appreciation for non-majors as a class about the process of looking and analyzing a work of art. The skills they take from repeatedly viewing a limited number of works, discussing their observations, and reflecting on this experience can be transferred to any works of art (Repetti, 2010). Thus, the focus becomes just as much on how we observe as what we observe, a learning outcome they can apply to any future classes.

In developing a contemplative activity for your classroom, here are questions to consider:

- **What is one image or graphic that you think students could observe more closely?**
- **What is one quote or passage you want students to consider more thoroughly?**
- **When/where would your students benefit from time to decompress and refocus?**

VI. Conclusion

In considering applying these ideas to your classroom, you may find yourself wrestling with an age-old conflict: how am I going to cover all of my content if I engage in this? The same question has been asked about active learning strategies, service learning, and other pedagogies that have found their way into the classroom. There is research to support any of these ideas, and they offer different ways of helping students engage in meaningful learning experiences that can last beyond the semester students spend in your class. Future considerations aside, there are plenty of potential benefits that can happen even with a few minutes spent here or there, as a growing body of research suggests. What if we give ourselves and our students just a little more time to consider whatever we're discussing today?

Ultimately, contemplative pedagogy involves adopting the attitude that there is something to be found in approaching teaching and learning with a contemplative attitude, a process orientation. Nelson (2006) states this directly: "I strive to teach not technique, but attitude" (p. 1). This shift in perspective doesn't need to replace our current approaches, but it can complement them: "I am advocating for a contemplative as well as a critical intellectual education, one that seeks a comprehensive and deep understanding of self and world" (Zajonc, 2013, p. 91). The commitment to a more contemplative attitude is applicable to most any activity in or out of the classroom, as popular titles like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *Zen and the Art of Archery* would imply (in fact, the latter title makes no explicit mention of meditation as we know it). Though contemplative pedagogy opens the door to many applications, it can help to start simple: "All I try to do is help my students understand that there is something valuable, something important, to be found in silence" (Nelson, 2006, p. 1).

Increasingly, it appears that faculty too could benefit from a reminder of the values of silence. In their book, *The Slow Professor*, a pair of academics write a manifesto against what they call 'the corporate university' (Berg & Seeber, 2016). They address the issue of speed as it relates to faculty work satisfaction and health. In addition to considerations of student learning, contemplative approaches ask us to consider our own personal philosophies of work and learning. Viewed in this light, taking a few moments to sit and breathe is not just a matter of student performance:

We need, then, to protect a time and a place for timeless time, and to remind ourselves continually that this is not self-indulgent but rather crucial to intellectual work. If we don't find timeless time, there is evidence that not only our work but also our brains will suffer (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 28).

Though this paper has focused on how we might integrate contemplative approaches into our classrooms, it might be just as well to consider how contemplative approaches could benefit us personally and professionally.

Online Resources:

The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. (n.d.). Retrieved August 14, 2017, from <http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe>

Brown University. (n.d.). Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning: Contemplative Pedagogy. Retrieved August 14, 2017, from <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/effective-classroom-practices/contemplative-pedagogy>

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Citations and Related Literature:

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