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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*

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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
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

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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 & Seretti, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt &

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action can be quite diverse, taking as assets the disciplinary training so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate particularly helpful tool. SoTL is most simply defined as “a kind of pedagogies, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a in contemplative practices, and the extent to which the ability to work, the faculty member’s personal preferences and strengths contribute to student transformation.

CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGIES AND THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Incorporating contemplative pedagogy 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 pedagogy, and the extent to which the ability to capture and care extends to a kind of ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning—conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth—and do so with awareness of their own classroom but to ‘going beyond this’ (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). SoTL in action can be quite diverse, taking as assets the disciplinary training and research methodologies of the faculty members who are conducting the inquiry. Across this diversity, however, Felten (2013) has identified five common principles that guide SoTL practice. We have adapted these as a framework for the design, implementation, and evaluation of contemplative pedagogies:

1. Inquiry focused on student learning: What, how, and why students learn varies widely across disciplines and courses. When inquiring into learning in a contemplative classroom, faculty may begin by demonstrating in students’ habits of mind and heart than they are in considering students’ grasp of course content. Regardless of the particular focus, learning should be at the center of contemplative pedagogy.

2. Grounded in context: SoTL inquiry should be rooted in a specific context; we are not asking abstract questions about student learning, we are seeking insights into the learning of these students, in this course, and on this campus. At the same time, SoTL inquiry should build on the scholarly context of our work. Researchers and practitioners have provided a strong foundation for both contemplative pedagogies (e.g., Barbezat & Bush, 2014) and student learning in higher education (e.g., Ambrose, Bridges, DiBenedetto, et al., 2014). If the research findings and any scholarly study should build on what is known.

3. Methodologically sound: Like contemplative pedagogies, SoTL is methodologically diverse, allowing faculty from a range of different disciplines to frame and personal wisdom to bear on questions of student learning (Huber & Morraze, 2002). Some disciplinary tools may not be readily adapted to contemplative inquiry and personal awareness about the nature of our teaching, as positive psychology techniques for evaluating curiosity or mindfulness, but intentional application of many different research methods, including deeply reflective and learner-centered approaches, are found when connected to the heart of a particular inquiry (McKinney, 2013).

4. Conducted in partnership with students: SoTL should be done with students, not to them. In practice this involves inviting students to join us in seeking to understand how individuals and the class community experience and learn from 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).

5. Appropriately public: As contemplative pedagogies spread in higher education, practitioners and scholars— students and practitioners—will benefit if we treat our teaching as a form of public discussion. For practitioners who aim to understand the processes and results of contemplative pedagogies, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a way to frame and systematically investigate the teaching process. As such, SoTL inquiries do not necessarily require publication in peer-reviewed journals; instead, many opportunities exist to share the learning from different teaching styles and from different research methods, including deeply reflective and learner-centered approaches, are found when connected to the heart of a particular inquiry (McKinney, 2013).

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 approach to teaching and invite and engage “appropriately public,”

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In each course, she had three common goals for contemplative pedagogies:

1. To invite students to be fully present, includingFPW orientations to gain insight and compassion, (b) focus on response to courses or assignments (fear, excitement, anxiety, anticipation),

2. To facilitate a sense of connectedness and invite a sense of membership in a learning community,

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 pedagogical practice. With the pedagogical practice 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 may hinder their ability to complete demanding disciplinary projects. Finally, in her Introduction to Sociology course she used the contemplative practice of freewriting to help students (a) gain insight and compassion, (b) explore themes that they might otherwise shy away from, and (c) think critically and deeply about disciplinary content.

TABLE 1. Course Type and Contemplative Pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Type</th>
<th>Contemplative Pedagogy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Seminar in Sociology</td>
<td>Introductory self-assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-level Course in Sociology</td>
<td>Mindfulness practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Course in Sociology</td>
<td>Contemplative freewriting</td>
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</table>

SoTL framework.

Linking to the SoTL framework, each of the pedagogies generated some evidence of student learning that gave both Franzese and the course’s previous SoTL mentor and current faculty member for the senior seminar. Indeed, the Franzese’s SoTL-inspired inquiries into student learning led her to choose the contemplative practices in the first place.

Grounded in Context

As Franzese planned for the ways contemplative pedagogies would be incorporated into this non-majors introductory educational institution, students, her discipline, the purposes of each course, and the range of contemplative pedagogies that might help her students toward her goals.

At Elon University, a private and selective liberal arts institution in Elon that enrolls roughly 5,500 undergraduates, Elon students tend to come from the eastern half of the United States, and many grow up in middle class or upper class families. Prior to her courses, few have actively engaged in contemplative practices on their own, although many have at least a passing familiarity with mindfulness, yoga, and meditation, and a few students (1-2 per class in the upper level courses) have 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 practices in prior courses.

The introspective self-assessments she designed for her senior seminar course were selected in consideration of the demands of the course. By the capstone course for majors, senior sociology 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 preparing the research paper or oral presentation. Because of the extensive demands of the course— and the short window of time allowed during the semester (a 2-5 minute introspective self-check-in at the beginning of each class after she reviewed the agenda for the session, students put their heads down and raised their hands responsively as Franzese listed varying levels of concern and negative anticipation. When she explained that self-assessments were not to be shared with anyone besides the professor, her students’ anxiety dropped significantly. 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 much less common form of teaching and learning in her class. For students to (a) gain skills for focusing their attention, (b) be in a state of openness about different ways of seeing the world, (c) focus on response to courses or assignments (fear, excitement, anxiety, anticipation), and others, and (c) some freedom from negative emotions that may hinder their ability to complete demanding disciplinary projects. Finally, in her Introduction to Sociology course she used the contemplative practice of freewriting to help students (a) gain insight and compassion, (b) explore themes that they might otherwise shy away from, and (c) think critically and deeply about disciplinary content.

Reflecting on Reflecting

Franzese invited students to do introspective self-check-ins at the beginning of each class meeting, and in her introductory course she asked students to record their feelings about the previous reflective practice, and in her upper-level course she engaged the students in a brief mindfulness practice, on occasion inviting students with interest or expertise to lead the practice (See Table 1). Each of these three courses of practices are offered here to demonstrate the multitude of ways in which contemplative practices can be designed, implemented and studied according to the SoTL framework.


own confidence in their abilities. An advantage of doing this over the course of the semester was that it also demonstrated to those students most in need of confidence-building activities 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 effectively with their potential for course failure, the first step toward a greater and more productive awareness of their study skills. A by-product of this practice was that students felt bonded to one another - multiple students remarked in their reflective forms they felt a bond toward each other as classmates and a sense of community. At the end of the semester, students expressed positive comments that included, for instance: “It was very helpful...” and “I learned from the others.” These responses are consistent with the findings of several studies that found mindfulness to be beneficial for students’ learning and well-being (Goldberg & Haidarliu, 2017).

The mindfulness practices Franzese designed for her upper-level sociology course (which included contemplative content focused on the self), often also invited students to reflect and discuss the “why” behind the practice. She observed that students with higher self-esteem and self-confidence often spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the “why” behind the practice. Franzese found that mindfulness practices often required students to reflect on their own experience and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their own thinking and behavior. This shift in perspective often allowed students to develop a greater sense of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Franzese also found that mindfulness practices often allowed students to develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding of others.

In this way, Franzese comes to this classroom with a partnership framework; she is doing these practices with her students, not to request consent prior to conducting any mindfulness practices. However, after approximately 3-5 classes, students would request a mindfulness practice as soon as she entered the classroom. The purpose of the practices was to teach students skills to increase awareness so that they would have an increased level of attentiveness while learning in the class. Again, an enhanced sense of connectedness was a byproduct of the practice and students shared feedback about this benefit immediately afterward. Most striking was the way in which students would begin statements about the practice, “I’m so glad we did this.” Franzese then implemented a “Personal Reflections” section at the end of research seminar. In this way, Franzese addressed how effective the contemplative pedagogical practices she engaged in and the implications this had for students, as they entered her upper-level seminar. She also implemented a “Personal Reflections” section at the end of research seminar.

Franzese’s fundamental question was, do contemplative processes from course to course and to fit the context of the specific course goals and objectives.

**Methodologically Sound**

Franzese’s design and implementation 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.

As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogy as an institutional approach to student learning. She understands that this approach requires an institutional commitment to support and resources. In the case of the contemplative practices, Franzese engaged in a critical analysis of the existing literature and identified key themes that were relevant to her teaching goals and objectives. She then designed and implemented a set of practices that allowed her to apply her own disciplinary expertise to the study of contemplative practices.

**Conducted in Partnership with Students**

As illustrated above, Franzese approaches contemplative pedagogy as an institutional approach to student learning. She understands that this approach requires an institutional commitment to support and resources. In the case of the contemplative practices, Franzese engaged in a critical analysis of the existing literature and identified key themes that were relevant to her teaching goals and objectives. She then designed and implemented a set of practices that allowed her to apply her own disciplinary expertise to the study of contemplative practices.

For instance, in her senior seminar, Franzese opened most classes with a mindfulness practice to center students and help them focus on the learning content. She asked students to sit quietly and observe their breathing for three minutes, being aware of any sensations they felt in their bodies, and whether their thoughts were focused on the practice or scattered. After the mindfulness practice, students were asked to share feedback at any time, she often conducted feedback sessions throughout the course by providing students with a mid-semester evaluation form. The form has only a few questions including versions of “what’s working” and “what do you want to see changed?” At the end of the semester, to capture student perceptions of these contemplative practices, Franzese asked a question to her University students. “Would you like to continue with this...”

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Consequently, the goal of Franzese’s requirements for this practice was to request consent prior to conducting any mindfulness practices. As noted above, students began requesting contemplative practices and also took a meta-approach to their own learning providing unsolicited information about their level of attentiveness or focus on a given day, or how they implemented a
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 free-writing, for instance, allows the faculty member to witness what students are experiencing with their classes. SoTL, 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 without the need for guidance or graded evaluation. Other 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 without the need for guidance or graded evaluation.

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.

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) engaging in 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 their own locus of control – their own thoughts 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 making the needs of faculty practitioners who are seeking to enhance their use of contemplative pedagogies.

SoTL stands as 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 body of knowledge that will help us, our students, and our institutions, to move closer to the heart of higher education.

REFERENCES


