Contemplative Pedagogy in the Classroom: Engaging Students’ Self-Awareness to Enhance Learning

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Contemplative Pedagogy in the Classroom: Engaging Students’ Self-Awareness to Enhance Learning
Michele L. McGrady, Western Michigan University
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Abstract

Contemplative pedagogy offers unique opportunities for students to deepen their understanding and focus through introspection, reflection, and stillness. Contemplative practices, such as meditative exercises, movement, and writing allow students to understand the nature of their minds and the learning process. Through the use of contemplative practices, students experience increased attention, connection, creativity, as well as a deeper understanding of course material. Although critics may question the appropriateness of these practices in the classroom, contemplative pedagogy has the ability to positively impact students’ learning. This presentation invites participants to explore contemplative pedagogy and discuss ways to integrate practices into learning activities.

Contemplative Pedagogy & Practices: Key Ideas

- Student-centered approach
- Offers an opportunity to find meaning in learning
- Assists in students finding themselves in the material
- Fosters a contemplative mind: open, alert, attentive, calm, curious, receptive
- Focus of the practices is on student introspection & cultivation of awareness but also facilitating connection with others.
- Regular use of contemplative practices enhances students’ learning by helping to teach them focused attention and inner listening.
- Faculty preparedness is essential!

Examples of Contemplative Practices

- Below you will find some examples of contemplative practices. This visual is not an exhaustive list of practices.
- Many of the practices listed are highly adaptable for the classroom.
- With regular use of contemplative practices, students discover their own internal reactions without having to adopt any ideology or specific belief.

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Implementation in the Classroom

- Can be applied to any discipline
- Explain the specific goals of the exercise
- Helps reduce the “out there” perspective
- Reduces student anxiety
- Purpose/outcome of exercise can be explained before or after
- Allow students time to process and “come back” to the classroom

Examples

- Example 1: Students participate in a mindfulness exercise (2 minutes of breath awareness). Following the exercise, students engage in a write, pair, share to process their experiences.
- Example 2: Students participate in a 3-minute guided meditation followed by a brief compassion practice.
- Example 3: Students engage in 2 minutes of silence, followed by some brief, silent movement (e.g. walking around the room, stretching, etc.)
- Example 4: Simple stretching when students have been sitting, followed by brief silence.
- These examples can be used in any type of educational setting or any length of class.

Why should you use these practices in the classroom?

- Increases focused attention
- Allows students to be at the center of their learning
- Various meditation practices (i.e. mindfulness, loving kindness or metta practices) have been shown to:
  - Increase concentration and attention
  - Increase mental health and psychological well-being
  - Increased connection
  - Deepened understanding of the course material
  - Increased creativity & insight
- Enhances connection between students as well as students to professor

Challenges to Contemplative Pedagogy

- Excessive optimism
- Not intended to replace other effective teaching strategies but to enhance instruction
- Faculty role-walking the walk
- Establishing context; personal practices
- Practices need to be framed to foster inclusion
- How much context to include?
- More research needed to identify how and why practices enhance learning outcomes

Select References


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