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Michele McGrady

Western Michigan University, michele.l.mcgrady@wmich.edu

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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.

What is Contemplative Pedagogy?

Contemplative pedagogy and practices have quietly been gaining traction in higher education in the last 25 years (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Contemplative pedagogy is a perspective that allows students to use first person learning to connect not only with the material, but also perhaps more importantly, themselves. In order to facilitate this type of learning, contemplative pedagogy "...uses forms of introspection and reflection that allow students to focus internally and find more of themselves in their courses" (Barbezat & Bush, p. 9). Contemplative pedagogy uses a variety of practices that are creative, emphasize stillness, and are generative. Examples of contemplative practices that can be used in the classroom include: introspection, deep listening, movement, and other centering practices such as loving-kindness and mindfulness meditations (Grace, 2011; Barbezat & Bush). Some of the benefits of using contemplative practices in the classroom include the following: increased student attention, increased connection to others, and a deepening of the meaning behind the course material. Application of contemplative practices have been used to question power dynamics in the social work profession (Wong, 2013), as well as increase students' social justice consciousness across disciplines (Berila, 2016).

Contemplative Pedagogy & Practices: Key Ideas

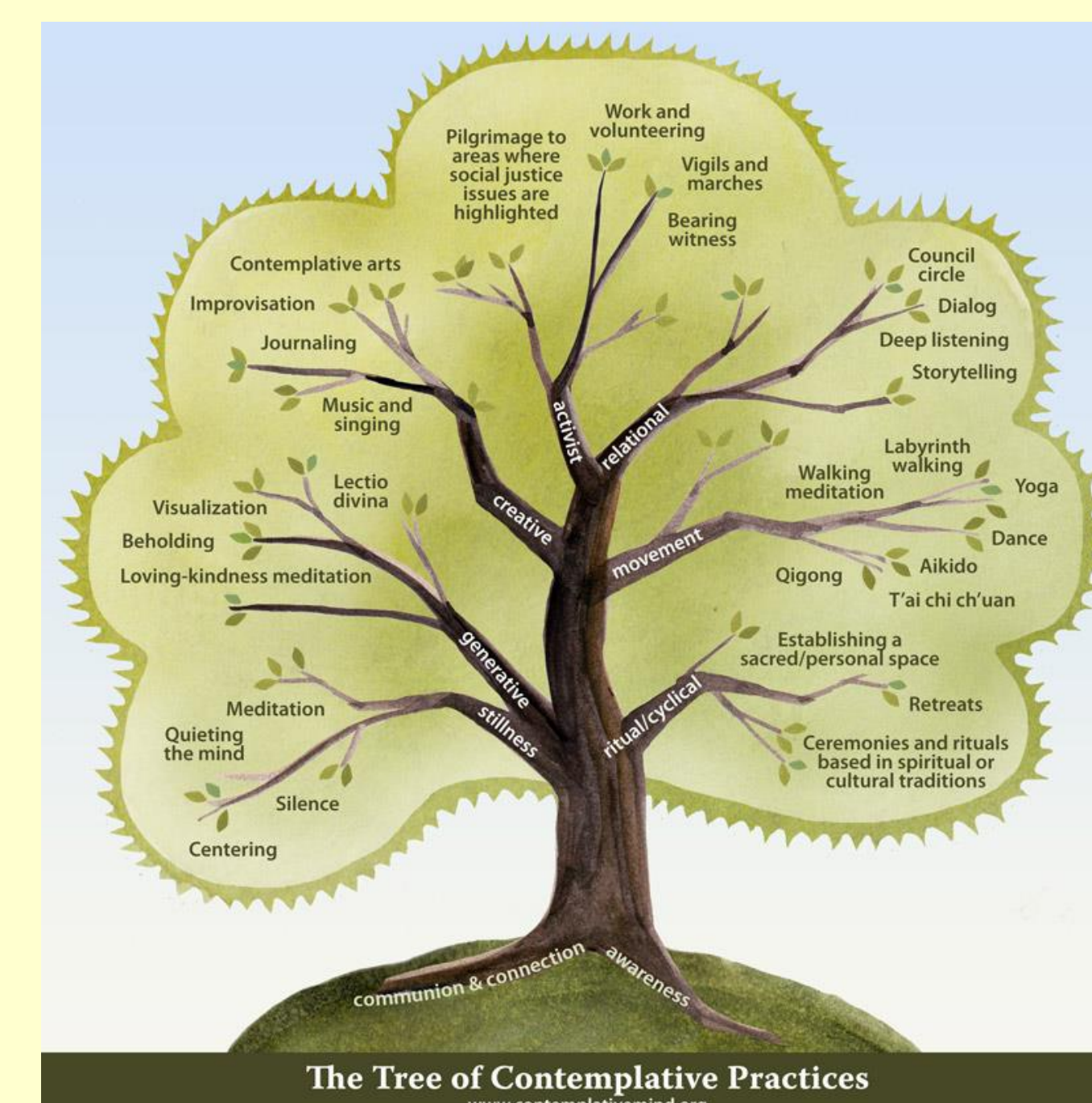
- Student-centered approach
- Offers an opportunity to find meaning in learning
- Assists in students finding themselves in the material
- Fosters a contemplative mind: open, alert, attentive, calm, curious, receptive
- Focus of the practices is on student introspection & cultivation of awareness *but 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 meeting free write 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

Take Home Message & What is next?

Take home message 1: The best of what contemplative pedagogy offers is an opportunity for students' to learn about the nature and habits of their minds and how these relationships impact their connections to self, others, and the community.

Take home message 2: These practices are highly adaptable and increase students' abilities to connect with the course material, themselves and each other.

Take home message 3: Faculty need to be prepared to facilitate practices. This is easier when faculty have engaged in some type of regular contemplative practice(s).

Take home message 4: There are numerous resources that can assist faculty who would like to learn more and/or deepen their understanding. See reference list below for suggestions.

What is next? Data collection (mixed methods approach) is beginning fall semester in one undergraduate course. After this pilot study is complete, additional data collection will occur.

Select References

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Contact information

Michele L. McGrady
Integrative Holistic Health & Wellness Program
School of Interdisciplinary Health Programs

- 2412 College of Health and Human Services
- Oakland campus

Michele.L.McGrady@wmich.edu