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The Value and Role of Contemplative Practices for Effective Teaching and Transformative Learning in Adult and Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper presents and discusses value and role of contemplative practices for effective teaching and transformative learning in adult and higher education.

We live in a fast-paced world. Multi-tasking brings stress and illness symptoms. Adult learners juggle jobs, family obligations, community services, and their own learning activities. As adult educators, how do we help our learners become ready for each class meeting? How do we make them feel relaxed and focused, attentive and confident, leaving all other things in their minds behind temporarily? How can we facilitate them to enter into a space where they feel comfortable to start learning? At an even higher level, how can we lead them to be more open to understanding themselves vis-à-vis ideas they have not thought about before? How can we foster and promote transformative learning helping them function critically and effectively in this globalized world?

Since the publication of Jack Mezirow's research in the early 1990s, transformative learning has enjoyed significant focus, whether as conscious-raising, critical reflection, development, or individuation (Dirkx, 1998). This topic is currently receiving even more attention. Much research on strategies and approaches for fostering and promoting transformative learning has been published (Craton, 2006, Taylor, 2006). Literature on the use of contemplative practices for transformative learning has also increased dramatically (Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003, Nelson, 2006, Robinson, 2004, Sarath, 2003, 2006, Zajone, 2006). More teachers begin to integrate meditation techniques with their curricula. In the Five College area of Western Massachusetts alone, 35 courses offered across all academic disciplines in which professor use such practices in their classrooms (Mellen 2005). Moreover, many professional organizations and institutions have committed to its development and some now provide fellowships to those who apply a contemplative component to their teaching. For instance, the Center of Contemplative Mind in Society in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies in New York City, since 1997, has awarded 108 fellowships to professors at 80 colleges and universities in the United States (Mellen (2005). Some researchers also note the development of networks for supporting applications across the country (Duerr et al. 2003, Robinson, 2004).

Why do faculty use contemplative practices in their teaching? What are effective exercises experienced by those who have used such practices? What opportunities do they offer us? Which contemplative practices may fit our own teaching? Let us now experience a short relaxation/focus activity (a form of contemplative practice, omit here), then, I will articulate the rationale of the application supported by literature and my research on its use in my own teaching. During our live discussion, we will explore and discuss how to find one that may fit your teaching.

Commonly, contemplative practices refer to exercises that consciously directing your attention to alter and heighten the state of consciousness and connecting to extraordinary clarity, insight, and inner calm. There are many types of contemplative practices embodied in both

eastern and western traditions, such as meditation from Buddhism, Daoism, yoga from Hinduism, contemplative prayer in Christianity, the self-inquiry of Ramana Maharsi, metaphysical reflection of the Sufi tradition or the deep pondering in the Jewish Kabbalah (see Hart, 2004, Sarath 2003,). Self-awareness, mindfulness, ecstasy, grace, high place, peak experience, transcendence, spirituality, and enlightenment are some of the terms to describe these states. If appropriately applied they will function for different purposes at different levels. For educational application, the most basic is called “mental hygiene” the therapeutic relaxing focusing effect (Gravois, 2005), which is a way to quiet the mind and promote concentration, empathy, perceptual, acuity, and reduce anxiety and stress (Hart, 2004). Thus, they can be used before starting class helping learners being ready and learn better by leading them physically, psychologically, and mentally relax, focus, and attentive. At a higher level, they function “knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, and witnessing the contents of our consciousness” (Hart, 2004, pp. 29-30). Therefore, they can be integrated into the content of courses for more effective learning such as “creative writing” (Nelson, 2006), transformative learning that leads to a more authentic identity (Robinson, 2004), and more experiential, transformative, and reflective pedagogy (Zajonc, 2006). Yet beyond that, they help nurture our soul and foster “contemplative inquiry” (Gravois, 2005) and ultimately balance our busy life. Various practices applied in classrooms and testimonies of benefits at different levels from students (see Hart, 2004, Mellen, 2005, Robinson, 2004, Zajonc, 2006), including my own, have yielded promising prospects for cross-disciplinary applications for adult and higher education. All above-mentioned strongly support that contemplative practices, the ever-lasting wisdom and devices on broadening the scope of human development, have great value and significant role to play in adult and higher education teaching, particularly, teaching for transformation.

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