

Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom

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How we know is as important as what we know. However, contemporary pedagogy and curriculum generally exclude a fundamental way of knowing—the contemplative—from any viable role in education in favor of a rational and empirical approach. As a result, few mainstream teachers or curriculum planners have explicitly integrated the contemplative into the classroom. Yet, contemplative knowing has been described as fundamental to the quest for knowledge and wisdom and complementary to analytic processing. The present article offers educators a rationale for returning the contemplative to education by summarizing research on the impact of contemplation on learning and behavior. It then provides a range of specific approaches for teachers that can be easily integrated into existing curriculum from elementary to university levels. The result of such integration transforms learning and the learner while affecting the very practical concerns of mainstream education.

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What we know or should know is the common focus of education. However, how we know is just as fundamental to teaching and learning. Contemporary schools emphasize both rational and sensory knowing. The rational involves calculation, explanation, and analysis; the sensory lives off of observation and measurement. Together these form the rational-empirical approach that has set the standard for knowledge across most disciplines. However, another way of knowing—contemplation—has been recognized across time, culture, and disciplines as essential to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom yet remains absent from today's curriculum and pedagogy. Contemplative knowing is a missing link, one that affects student performance, character, and depth of understanding. In what follows I will offer a brief orientation to contemplation, evidence of its value for contemporary education, and a range of exercises that can be applied in the classroom at any level.

The Nature and Status of Contemplation

In this essay, *contemplation* will be used broadly to refer to a third way of knowing that complements the rational and the sensory. The contemplative mind is opened and activated through a wide range of approaches—from pondering to poetry to meditation—that are designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight. Although various practices may evoke different kinds of awareness, such as creative breakthrough or compassion, they share in common a distinct nonlinear consciousness that invites an inner opening of awareness. This opening within us in turn enables a corresponding opening toward the world before us. Through a fresh lens, our worldview, sense of self, and relationships may be powerfully transformed.

There is a long and rich history of cultivating the contemplative throughout the wisdom traditions. Contemplative practices have included meditation that has endured for thousands of years in Buddhism, various forms of yoga from Hindu traditions, contemplative prayer in Christianity such as that of St. Theresa of Avila or Thomas Merton, radical questioning through dialogue such as that expressed by Plato or the self-inquiry of Ramana Maharsi, metaphysical reflection of the Sufi tradition that leads to the deeper intuitive insight of the heart (*qalb*), or the deep pondering suggested in the Jewish Kabbalah. Each of these practices and many, many more offer an approach to interrupt habitual thought routines and deepen awareness.

But in the West, the dominance of a largely Aristotelian emphasis in logic, the natural sciences, and theology beginning at least by the 12th and 13th centuries and consolidated in the reformation or scientific revolution helped push the contemplative out of favor (Stock, 1994). Among other influences, the Industrial Revolution and the modern Western penchant for efficiency, speed, and productivity as well as the race to keep up with increasing information have continued to elbow the contemplative to the sidelines.

Despite (or perhaps as a reaction to) this modern bias, there is a surprisingly widespread use of contemplative practice outside of education. For example, in one recent random survey, 30% of individuals indicated that they had meditated or tried yoga (Blum & Weprin Associates, 2000). There also exists a large and growing body of evidence on the utility of contemplation in areas ranging from medicine (e.g., Benson, 1975/2000; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) to spirituality (e.g., Finley, 2000; Hanh, 1987). There is also some recent and growing appreciation of contemplative practice within higher education (Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003).

Before going further I want to mention one concern that is sometimes seen as an obstacle to bringing contemplation to public education: Is the separation of church and state threatened by bringing approaches akin to those developed in spiritual traditions into secular education? I suggest that opening the contemplative mind in schools is not a religious issue but a practical epistemic question. It is about how we know, not about what knowledge we are giving others. Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing

through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness, and so forth. These approaches cultivate an inner technology of knowing and thereby a technology of learning and pedagogy without any imposition of religious doctrine whatsoever. If we knew that particular and readily available activities would increase concentration, learning, well-being, and social and emotional growth and catalyze transformative learning, we would be cheating our students to exclude it.

Although a teacher who has his or her own contemplative practice may see value in introducing it in the classroom, at least the following two things will be required for the contemplative to be integrated into mainstream education: (a) rationale and evidence that contemplation can address the very practical concerns of contemporary education and (b) a range of simple, secular methods that can be adapted to various classrooms situations. Both of these will be explored in the following.

Performance, Character, and Depth

Can contemplation address the concerns of contemporary education? First, what are those concerns? With respect to student learning, the following three general dimensions will be considered: performance, character, and depth.

Performance. As a society, we want our students to perform better. Calls for more standardized testing reflect these goals, although progress toward this end is extremely limited and consequences such as teaching for the tests are common complaints. In addition, it appears that rather than increasing learning, such “high-stakes” testing may actually worsen both dropout rates and overall performance (Winter, 2002). Other approaches and perhaps other goals warrant consideration.

Character. There are increasing calls for intentional character development as a component of public education. The life tools of social and emotional management, civility, and compassion are increasingly part of the responsibility of schools.

Depth. A more subtle current is what I will call the concern for depth. Essentially, this refers to the problem that an overemphasis on superficial and homogenized performance measures misses the chance for deeper understanding and application. For example, even very successful students sometimes lack an ability to apply basic concepts beyond the classroom assignment. Gardner (1991) summarized several experiments ranging from physics to the humanities in which even high achievers have proven unable to demonstrate an understanding of the principles they have memorized. Although some students can recall sophisticated theories and formulae, they remain unable to apply them outside of a limited classroom context. Depth implies higher order understanding and application,

creativity, problem solving, and self-reflection. Deep encounters with knowledge and with one another have the potential to transform the learner and the process of learning.

There is a growing body of evidence that the way we know and learn, specifically the integration of the contemplative with the analytic, cuts across these three interrelated concerns of performance, character, and depth.

Contemplation, Thinking, and Learning

There are hundreds of studies on the effects of contemplative practice, particularly meditation, offering varying degrees of methodological precision. Among the main state effects (immediate changes) of meditation are physiological relaxation and slowed metabolism, a heightened self-awareness, and feelings of calm. Among the main trait effects (changes that endure over time) are improved concentration, empathy, perceptual acuity, a drop in anxiety and stress symptoms, and more effective performance in a broad range of domains from sports and academic test taking to creativity (for a summary see e.g., Murphy, Donovan, & Taylor, 1997).

What has been best documented is that contemplation of this nature affects physiology. We also know that physiology affects emotional response, cognition, and learning. For example, whereas some degree of stress can focus attention, undue emotional stress can inhibit performance, paralyzing a student's ability to write, answer test questions, or make free throws during a heated basketball game. Basic contemplative skill is extremely well documented to shift the immediate state and therefore potentially affect performance.

COHERENCE

One explanation for the mind-body changes that occur during contemplative practice is called *physiological coherence*. Correlates of physiological coherence include a regular heart rhythm, decreased sympathetic nervous system activation and increased parasympathetic activity, and increased heart-brain synchronization (the brain's alpha rhythms become more synchronized to the heartbeat) (Schoner & Kelso, 1988; Tiller, McCraty, & Atkinson, 1996). These physiological changes appear to result in a highly efficient state in which the body, brain, and nervous system function with increased synchronization and harmony. Recent studies in school settings suggest that increasing physiological coherence improves cognitive performance. In these investigations, students' performance on a cognitive task requiring focus and attention, discrimination, and a quick and accurate reaction was compared before and after they used a simple contemplative technique involving focusing on the area of their heart and feeling a positive emotion such as appreciation. Performance improved significantly as compared to a control group. Using the same technique in another study, school students

showed significant improvement in math and reading test scores over control groups (for summaries, see Arguelles, McCraty, & Rees, 2003).

Neurobiology offers another explanation for the value of contemplation. The rest principle implies that an actively used neurological connection will become stronger if it is allowed to rest briefly (Sinclair, 1981). One possibility is that contemplation may enable intentional resting and thereby engender a follow-up quickening or deepening of certain neurological processes.

Whatever the precise physiological mechanisms at work, numerous studies suggest improvement on a broad range of performance areas as the result of contemplative practice. For example, a recent series of studies in Taiwan in which 362 school students were randomly assigned to either a group practicing transcendental meditation (TM), a traditional Chinese contemplative practice, or napping showed significant increase in seven standardized measures of functioning for the TM group, increases in two scales for the traditional group, and none for those napping. The standardized measures included such areas as the ability to reason in novel situations, speed of information processing, creative thinking, and anxiety level (So & Orme-Johnson, 2001).

The distinction between the scores of those napping and those in the meditation groups reminds us that contemplative practice involves more than simply relaxation; it includes relaxation and an open or focused alertness.

ATTENTION

Performance, behavior, and depth are tied to attention. Teachers quickly recognize that a student's ability to direct and sustain his or her attention toward a task at hand has a direct impact on success. The cardinal aspect of contemplative practice is nourishing the quality of one's attention. Contemplative practice has been shown to improve a variety of perceptual and cognitive abilities related to the quality of attention (e.g., Murphy et al., 1997). In addition to the general significance of attention to learning, 4% to 6% of students are now diagnosed with attention difficulties (Attention Deficit Disorder, 2002); many are currently on medication. Could contemplative practice develop attention skills, thereby offering an adjunct or alternative to medication? Neurofeedback training—which helps develop an inner technology akin to contemplation—has shown improvement in attention measures and performance (e.g., Rasey, Lubar, McIntyre, Zofuto, & Abbot, 1996). Evidence is encouraging but incomplete.

Another way that contemplation varies attention is in the way we look upon something. Whereas the analytic tends to measure, categorize, and evaluate, the contemplative simply beholds what arises within us or in front of us. Opening contemplation can begin with simply appreciating the object, idea, or person before us. This quality of attention moves us emotionally closer to the object of our inquiry. This “less detached empiricism” is precisely what Nobel-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock described in her work with corn plants. She, like many great creative minds, claimed that this deepened relationship leads to deep, even

transformative understanding; she talked about “a feeling for the organism” and an “openness to let it come to you” (Keller, 1983, p. 198). At the very least, what we know is that emotion drives motivation. When a student comes into emotional intimacy with what they are exploring, interest and therefore motivation are enhanced.

This same kind of intimacy is also associated with increased empathy—that capacity to feel into another’s world and to see the other through the eye of our heart, we might say. Houston Smith (1993) noted that “in contrast to modernity which situates knowing in the mind and brain, sacred traditions identify...essential knowing, with the heart” (p. 18). Such empathy has been described as the base of moral development (Hoffman, 1990) and even the quality that makes us most human (Azar, 1997) and is therefore central to character development.

DETACHMENT

Contemplative practice is also commonly described as enabling a type of detachment from the contents of our consciousness, the thoughts, feelings, and reactions that flow through our minds. Several approaches instruct the practitioner to avoid reactive attachment by just being mindful of whatever thoughts or feelings emerge. This allows us to observe the contents of our consciousness rather than simply being absorbed by them. Such arms-length distance allows us to recognize and therefore potentially interrupt usual patterns of thinking and impulsivity, freeing the mind to notice unexpected insights. For example, instead of just seething with anger, the contemplative mind may allow a little more space between the anger and us. We might both have our anger and also notice it—“Look at me being angry, what’s that about?”—rather than simply being lost in the anger. To notice, accept, embrace, and thereby transform our anger may have significant impact on behavior. For example, in a recent study involving the effects of a meditation practice on 45 inner-city African American adolescents, the meditating group was found to have significantly fewer rule infractions, a decrease in absenteeism, and fewer suspensions (Barnes, Bauza, & Treiber, 2003).

Being aware of the content of our consciousness is not only an important element in emotional maturity but also a marker of deepened cognitive functioning—a developmental step beyond basic abstraction. Self-observation and reflection help to expose and deconstruct positions of role, belief, culture, and so forth to see more deeply or from multiple perspectives. This allows students the conceptual flexibility to see beyond the information given and beyond their own pre-suppositions.

GAPS

Studies of creative individuals, from Mozart to Einstein, give us clues that although analytic practices are important, often necessary, they are insufficient to explain the depths of creativity and insight. Imagination, inspiration, and unsequenced cognitive activity akin to that evoked in insight-oriented contemplation

are commonly described in fields ranging from music to science (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Hart, 2000b). Contemplative knowing balances the power and precision of the analytic.

Similarly, disciplines ranging from literary analysis to cognitive psychology identify the important function of gaps in the learning and inventive process (e.g., Spolsky, 1993). It is the cognitive gaps that allow for the possibility of conceptual flexibility and multiplicity. These studies point to the importance of a different type of intellectual process, distinct from linear, analytical, and product-oriented processes so often emphasized in contemporary education.

All sorts of methodological complications exist in doing research on contemplation, and the majority of research has been on only one general form of contemplation—meditation. Despite these limitations, even from the handful of studies mentioned earlier it is reasonable to conclude that the contemplative mind has encouraging potential to work hand in hand with the analytic, affecting performance, character, and depth. If a teacher or administrator is considering introducing contemplation in the classroom, it is prudent to understand what impact this approach might have on student learning and behavior. However, as compelling as such tangible outcomes might be, most traditional contemplative practice emphasizes present-moment awareness and the intrinsic value of the experience rather than secondary outcomes such as improved grades or behavior. The more subtle benefits rooted in stillness of mind and expanded awareness are real and essential but more difficult to quantify. In the end however, it is these subtle shifts that may have the most potential for transforming the learner and the quality of learning.

Experiments With Knowing

What we know about education is that one shoe does not fit all; students' varying learning styles, interests, and capacities require variation in teaching. The same may be true in contemplation. Different paths may work better for different people. Various contemplative approaches also focus on different goals, for example, calming versus insight contemplation, each dividing into critical and creative types (Thurman, 1994). Translated into classroom goals, various approaches may evoke creative imagination, critical reflection, or concentration and may use the gateway of silence, poetry, the body, or other means, as we will explore.

The contemplative mind cannot be willed, as it arises spontaneously, but it can be welcomed. What follows is a sampling of simple, bare-bones instructions that might be modified, combined, or used as is in the classroom. Some can be integrated with various course content, and others stand on their own. They may be thought of as experiments with knowing. In a similar spirit as Einstein's thought experiments or even Gandhi's experiments with truth, their intent is to expand awareness and push beyond our assumptions and our sedimented habits of knowing.

Although our focus is directly on student learning, contemplation also can nourish the teacher's own presence (see Miller, 1994; Solloway, 2000) and in turn influence the quality of the classroom experience. A teacher who explores his or her own contemplative mind is better able to help his or her students to do the same. The teacher-student dynamic is enhanced through this mutual exploration, and ultimately the teacher's own growth transforms the entire space in which education happens.

NOT DOING

What we know of effective learning is that the predominant factor is not merely time on task; it is the quality of attention brought to that task. If our attention is somewhere else, scattered or racing perhaps, we may have little capacity to be present. Paradoxically, we may need to not do for a few minutes to be more available for doing the task at hand.

At the beginning of a class or at a transition time I might turn the lights off and ask students to do the following:

Take a few deep, slow, clearing breaths. Let your body release and relax; let any parts of you that need to wiggle or stretch do so. Now feel the gentle pull of gravity and allow the chair you're sitting on, and the floor beneath you, to support you without any effort on your part. Just let go and allow yourself to be silent and not do for a few minutes. You may want to focus only on your breathing, allowing it to flow in and out without effort. If you find yourself thinking, distracted, working on a problem, don't fight it, don't get stuck in it. Just allow it and you to be, and redirect your awareness back to your breath, and to not doing. Perhaps you can imagine those thoughts or concerns to float up like bubbles from underwater. When they reach the surface they simply burst and disappear.

We might add a ring of a bell, perhaps three rings to begin and one to end, to add to the power of ceremony that helps students to recognize this as special time.

The moment of transition from the depth of contemplation to the action of the classroom is significant.

As you gently come back to the room you may notice the sensations of peacefulness, a clearer mind, or perhaps a feeling of centeredness. As you move through your day, even and maybe especially when things get difficult, you can take a breath and find that center again.

Following this exercise, which might last from just 2 or 3 minutes to 15 or so, we might ask them to notice any difference before and after not doing. They might share their experiences with one another; students are often surprised by the stream of their own thoughts. They may experiment with longer periods of contemplation and often report explorations on their own in various situations outside of class.

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

A slightly different focus can also nourish self-awareness and presence. “Where are you now?” we might ask our class.

Take a few moments and just relax. Take a few deep breaths. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so, and tune into where you are right in this moment. Are you thinking about the day ahead? Rehashing some past experience? Caught in an emotional hangover about a situation with a friend or family member? How much of you is in your body? In your head? Floating outside you? Do you feel out in front of you? Stuck in a painful nook? Just be aware for a few moments, just noticing where you are and how that feels.

After a few moments we might ask, “Now take two minutes and share your awareness with the person next to you (or in your notebook).”

Like many of these exercises, this could be extended into a daily activity outside of class. “Where am I now?” might become internalized as a kind of personal check-in, inviting self-awareness.

DEEP LISTENING

Passive listening involves casual attention; *active listening* involves intentional focus and skills such as paraphrasing and summarizing what another has said. For example, a waiter may practice repeating someone’s order to be certain he or she has heard correctly. A teacher might ask students to write down the important points in a teaching video or to reflect what the teacher or a fellow student just said. These are important skills of attention but not contemplation. A third kind of listening is what I will refer to as *deep listening*.

We can help students explore deep listening with the following exercise:

Take a few deep cleansing breaths, relax, and close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Take a few moments in silence to just settle in. Now listen deeply to the reading [poem, story, idea, quote, famous speech, music, or sounds; we could just as easily have them focus on a picture or piece of art or nature or sit quietly in front of another student]. Gently open to and receive the words [picture, person, etc.] without needing to do anything to it or figure it out. Just meet these words gently, allowing them to wash over you like a warm breeze. Observe the images that arise in your mind, the feelings in your body, thoughts, emotions, meanings, sounds, tastes, movement, symbols, shapes, or anything else that arises. How does your body want to move? How does this resonate within you? What do you want to do as you listen deeply? What story can you tell about this? Sit silently for several moments and just notice without judgment.

We might reread the passage. In a few moments we can invite students to describe to their neighbor something that emerged for them—a feeling, image, question, and so on. Comparing helps one notice both one’s own subjectivity and others’ unique ways of perceiving. We might then ask, “How much came from

within you and how much seems to be a common experience of the poem or picture?" As alternatives to sharing with a classmate, we could instead invite students to share out loud in class, or draw or journal in their notebooks, or perhaps move their bodies as a kind of interpretive movement, and so forth.

Rational empiricism trains us to pay attention to some things and not to others, discounting hunches or feelings, for example, in favor of certain appearances and utility—it focuses and limits our field of awareness. Contemplation involves a softer focus and lighter touch. The voice of the contemplative lives in these shadowy symbols, feelings, and images as well as in paradoxes and passions. Understanding expands as we learn to listen to the unique ways our inner life speaks to us and integrate the voices of the analytic and the contemplative.

I want to mention a special note about tuning into one another. Some children are remarkably sensitive to the feelings that others are experiencing. The ability to tune into another's inner world is very powerful form of deep empathy (Hart, 2000a). However, children (and adults) who are empathically sensitive can get overwhelmed or lost in others' emotions. Some students compensate by constructing a hard exterior or finding other means to try to shut off this sensitivity. Others remain overwhelmed and disoriented. However, when we have the power of both experiencing this intensity and also witnessing it, we can take a deep breath, center ourselves, and distinguish between our own and others' experience. We then gain greater freedom to appreciate their experience, perhaps sending them our intention of compassionate caring, but we need not hold on to their experience or confuse it with our own.

The Art of Pondering

The ancient Greek philosophers were bold in asking questions such as "Who are you?" and "What are we here for?" Young children often naturally ask these big or radical questions as a way of trying to understand the world (Hart, 2003; Matthews, 1980). But in schools, curricular demands and the emphasis on one right answer often work against depth of exploration (Hart, 2001a). The result is that "neither teachers nor students are willing to undertake risks for understanding; instead they content themselves with correct answer compromises" (Gardner, 1991, p. 150). But pondering big and radical questions, what Tillich (1951) named *ultimate concerns*, has the capacity of opening to unexpected insight. Using the intellect in this way to go beyond intellectual understanding is described in a variety of traditions (see Rothberg, 1994). In the classroom we might pose and invite questions on the following:

- Big things: "What is life about?"
- Both local and distant influences: "What would make your school, the world, your parents, the universe better?" "What do you wonder about and worry about?"
- Ethics: "How do you know what's the right thing to do?" "What would you do if you were the president, the principal, the parent?"

- Identity: “What is the most important thing about being you? What’s the most fun?”
“What will your life be like in 10 years?” “What would you like as your epitaph?”
“Who are your heroes?”
- New perspectives: “I wonder what the world looks like through an ant’s eyes, a Martian’s, a terrorist’s?” “I wonder what your parents think about when you’re not around?” “What if you had a week to live?”

In an exam or in a class discussion, simply asking for the questions that the student would ask about the topic, what they are curious about, and what they really want to know but have been afraid to ask serves as another means to loosen the lock of predetermined answers on the process of knowing.

With most topics, there is an opportunity to create the dynamic tension of ambiguity that can lead to unexpected knowing. We do this when we lead off the lesson with an honest question that has no simple preset answer. We might ask, “What are the causes of violence in our culture and in our school?” instead of truncating wisdom with “What are the five causes of violence that our text discusses?” Of course we want the student to know the text, but if our questions merely dead-end there, we have missed an opportunity of insight through exploring the gaps in our knowledge (Hart, 2001b).

Holding paradoxical or contradictory perspectives long enough may frustrate and transform normal thinking. For example, we might invite students to ponder the idea that light operates both as waves and as particles or the conflicting issues of fairness involved in a contemporary issue such as affirmative action. Could we take both the position of the disadvantaged youth and the privileged child who was denied admission to college in spite of his or her higher performance? The point is not to win an argument as in a debate; it is to see beyond the various sides to take in the whole of the issue and to synthesize a larger perspective. Traditions ranging from Chinese and Indian philosophy to Heraclitus and from Hegel’s dialectics to quantum physics and Zen Buddhism have used paradox to open knowing.

Another simple exercise invites students to generate questions instead of answers about a particular event or idea (e.g., a Civil War battle, a science demonstration, or a story). These remarks can include students’ own reactions and associations such as “What does this have to do with my life?” or statements such as “What about this really excites (or bothers) me?” In one variation of this exercise, students can anonymously write the questions on an index card to be shared out loud with the class by a designated reader. These are not immediately to be answered but just listened to. We could place a question chair in the middle of the classroom. Questions are addressed to the chair rather than to the teacher or another student. No one is allowed to answer the question directly; it is simply allowed to sit and simmer. Other questions may follow. Initially, this is awkward and students fall back to habits of looking to the teacher, forgetting to talk to the chair, or providing a quick response to the question. But with just a few reminders, space opens up. The process is less like an assembly line and more like an artist’s studio, the atmosphere gradually shifts, and I imagine that the space inside the student shifts and opens as well.

A WISDOM WALK

Guided imagery taps the symbolic or metaphorical aspects of the contemplative mind. Unexpected imagery and insight are often the result.

Take some deep breaths, settle into your seat, close your eyes, and relax. Imagine yourself in a comfortable scene in nature, feel the soft breeze, notice the smells, the temperature on your face, the color of the sky, the feel of the ground beneath you, and the feeling in your body. Take a few moments to be still and sense all that you can in this pleasant and comfortable scene. Now off in one direction notice a well-worn path leading into the distance toward some woods. Follow the path and continue to notice the texture of the ground underfoot, the sounds near and far, the light, the vegetation, the wildlife, and the smells as you move farther and farther along the path. The path narrows as it winds its way deeper into the woods. You cross over a brook, perhaps pausing to listen and feel the water, and then continue along the path. Soon the path emerges out of the woods and opens into a bright hilly meadow. Walk back into the bright light and notice a magnificent old tree on the hillside. Walk to the tree and sit under it for a few moments, appreciating its magnificence. The tree may have a message for you; listen and feel its offering to you. Note the words, images, and feelings that arise. If you would like, you can continue on around the hillside and discover that it becomes rockier, almost cliff-like on the far side. Among this rock you may notice a strong doorway. You approach and enter, surprised to find a few steps leading to a gently lit curved room filled with other doorways. If you would like, you can pick one and look inside. You don't need to go in. You can just observe from the opened doorway. Take a few moments in silence if you would like. When you're ready, consider if there is any lesson or knowledge that is offered. In a few moments it will be time to close the inner door, exit the way you came in, back out onto the hillside. Return around the hill stopping back at the tree for a moment, listening. Then follow the path back the way you came, through the woods, crossing the brook, and eventually back to the pleasant place where you started the journey. Know you can return to this place and to anywhere you visited on your own when you would like. Now it is time to come back fully. Give me a glance to let me know you have arrived back into the classroom. In a moment let's share some of our experiences [or write them in a journal]. How many were able to find a place to start with? How many found a tree? Did the tree have anything for you? Who found a doorway? What did you see? Was there anything unexpected (scary, fun, confusing, helpful, etc.)? What did you take away?

This can be a powerful experience for some, and so it is important to follow up with anyone who seems unusually agitated. For a lighter version we could skip the doorway and simply linger with the tree. Alternative travels such as a journey to a wise woman or man, climbing a mountain (perhaps representing some struggle), visiting a special or sacred site, or any number of images can invite our inner knowing.

We might also use visualization techniques as positive mental rehearsal, for example, mentally practicing successfully throwing free throw baskets, taking an exam, or performing on stage while in deep relaxation.

BODY FOCUSING

Whereas knowing is most often associated with the head, both the ancients and contemporary neuroscience supports the idea of a bodywide mind. Researcher Candance Pert (1986) discovered that endorphins and their receptor sites, once thought to exist only in the brain, are present throughout the body. The reason, she suggested, that we speak of gut feelings is because the mechanisms for feeling in the gut are already in place. Research on energy cardiology and cellular memory in heart transplant patients suggests knowing and memory are contained in an energy-information system associated with the heart (e.g., Pearsall, 1999; Russek & Schwartz, 1996). As mentioned before, Houston Smith (1993) noted that “in contrast to modernity which situates knowing in the mind and brain, sacred traditions identify...essential knowing, with the heart” (p. 18). Shifting awareness to the body may help to open to a state past the analytic.

One simple technique has already been employed successfully in schools. I’ll paraphrase the instructions from Childre and Martin (1999):

Take a few deep breaths and settle into your seat. As you relax bring your attention to the area of your chest, that place inside where you have experienced the feelings of love, care, or appreciation. Pretend you are breathing slowly through the heart—five seconds in, five seconds out. Do this a few times and then breathe naturally, maintaining focus on your heart. Now remember a feeling of appreciation you have for someone now or from the past or focus on a fun or joyful time in your life, bringing the feeling to you. Once you have felt this, you may want to radiate that appreciation to yourself and others. If distractions arise in your mind, simply bring the focus back to the area of your heart.

Eugene Gendlin’s (1988) focusing technique is another method for cultivating witnessing awareness. Very briefly, his fundamental exercise begins by asking us to create a silent and relaxed space within us. I will condense and paraphrase some of his instructions in the following:

(1) Pay attention inwardly, in your body, see what comes there when you ask, “What is the main thing for me right now?” or “How is my life going?” Let the answers come slowly from this sensing. When some concern comes, rather than entering into it, stand back and just acknowledge it. Wait again and see if other concerns or topics arise. (2) From among what came, select one thing to focus on. Sense what the whole issue feels like without going inside it. Let yourself feel it all. (3) What is the quality of this unclear felt sense? Let a word, or image, or whatever arise (e.g., tight, spacey, jumpy). Go back and forth between the felt sense and the word or image. Check how they resonate with each other. Is there a bodily signal that lets you know that it’s a fit? Let the felt sense as well as the word change until they feel just right in capturing the quality of the felt sense. (5) Now ask yourself: “What is it about this whole issue that makes this quality?” Sense that quality word or image again. “What makes this whole problem so _____?” Be with this feeling until you sense a shift, a slight give. (6) Receive whatever

comes gently and openly. Stay with it for a while; you may find other shifts; perhaps your first shift comes later.

As a tiny way of shifting consciousness, my daughter's first-grade teacher has her students take off their shoes and let their feet feel and spread over the ground. She has them stand up to do some stretching and simple breathing exercises akin to martial arts or yoga, although her teacher has no background in these techniques and developed them quite spontaneously in response to what she felt her young charges needed. She will do this before exams and any time the classroom needs a little shift in energy or mood. Although we might not consider this contemplation per se, it does shift awareness, discharge tension, and help students be more present in their bodies. This is precisely the direction of body-centered knowing. By the way, her students love these interludes.

CONCENTRATED LANGUAGE

Within poetry lives the gift of metaphor and image. These words stretch out normal perception and can open to surprising connections and unexpected depth even in young children. The play of rhythm, sounds, and meanings of the concentrated language of poetry, both writing it and listening to it, can draw out the contemplative mind.

I have sometimes asked students to write a haiku poem, a 5-7-5 count, 17-syllable, three-line work that is intended to capture a moment. The open attention to that moment and the practice of capturing it in words can be a dramatic shift in normal thought and awareness. Most haikus (a) are acute observations of nature; (b) use simple language, presenting objects rather than describing them; (c) often contain an object, time, and place; (d) embody a sense of stillness or harmony by the blend of object, time, and place; and (e) often present a new discovery or insight in the third line (*Inspirational Guide for a New Language*, 2001). For example, a fifth-grade boy wrote:

Butterfly awaits
As it calls for another
With a fountain of color. (p. 39)

Sometimes I will change the rules and ask them to describe themselves or a particular issue using this format. But any form of concentrated language or imaging has the potential for practicing intensive awareness and opening the contemplative mind. We might invite students to write a poem about current events, their own life, or the world through the eyes of a terrorist or a historical figure that we happen to be studying. For other curriculum ideas, the *Inspirational Guide for a New Language* (2001) offers a series of poetic exercises that have been refined in elementary and middle school classrooms. And Charles Burack (1999) described his use of contemplation and poetry in his university-level courses.

FREELY WRITING

Writing involves two main processes: vision—inspiration, flow of ideas, and so on—and revision—editing and crafting. These require two different and complementary cognitive operations. A process approach to writing (e.g., Elbow, 1998) may serve as a contemplative act in itself.

For example, we might invite students to

Take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, relax, and then, with eyes reopened, write everything you possibly can about a particular topic [perhaps a class assignment, a reaction to the day's reading assignment, a current event, their upcoming paper]. Let the feelings, the wisdom, the struggle, or whatever emerges flow onto your paper. Write the heart of what you want to say. Free write it, with no concern for spelling, grammar, judgment, or logical coherence. Just go with the flow. If you are not sure where to start, write, "I'm not sure where to start" and keep writing, without putting down your pen. You have 10 minutes.

Afterward, you might invite the students to share how they felt doing that task or ask them to read one sentence of their writing to another student. Perhaps they take that sentence and write for another 5 minutes, seeing where they go next in a rhythm oscillating between flowing and focusing, diverging and converging.

Keeping a journal is another way to explore the inner world and build confidence in writing. We might ask students to reflect on a controversial problem discussed in class or a powerful speech or poem.

The invitation is to find a cozy space, take some deep breaths, and free write about whatever arises from your reading or the topic at hand. Don't figure out what you're going to write but just let it flow as quickly and freely as you can.

You might invite them to assume the voice of a character in a story, a historical figure, nature, or an animal.

There are also plenty of journal writing exercises designed explicitly for self-exploration, including questions such as "What would you like your life to be?" "What are the relationships like in your life? Write down names of each and then free write about each" (e.g., see Progoff, 1992). Visual journaling is another powerful way to move into the contemplative and past the confines of words (see Cameron, 1992; Ganim & Fox, 1999). Adding a drawing or other artistic dimension can shift the perspective and potentially open the contemplative space in a great many learning situations.

In using any of these exercises or in creating new ones, the contemplative mind in the classroom can be welcomed effectively with the following:

- Ceremony: We can convey a sense that this time is special perhaps by turning off the lights and using a slower, calmer voice tone or perhaps a bell or music.
- Metaphor: Whereas the analytic lives in logic, the contemplative is invited through images, feelings, metaphor, and stories.

- Inner silence: Providing an invitation to turn inward and just notice in silence is in dramatic contrast to the outward focus of the typical school day. Silence creates gaps in our normal thought and activity routine and can coax the contemplative to surface.
- Intention: The clarity of intention that is brought to an experiment—for example, not doing, seeking clarity on an issue, simply beholding and appreciating, and sending love and compassion—can help to concentrate the energy of contemplation.
- Path: Different students may respond to different approaches; one shoe may not fit all.
- Community: Contemplative experiments in a classroom have the advantage of drawing on the energy of a group. Practitioners have both the chance to compare notes and also focus and feed off the energy of one another; often this nourishes empathy and in turn community.
- Carrying forth: If the body of contemplative practice is opening and centering the mind, the limbs are bringing this awareness to our daily encounters.

Within contemplative knowing there is sometimes a sense of centering, clarity, “a still point of a turning world,” as T. S. Eliot (1971, p. 16) named it, or perhaps an inner source of wisdom and creativity. We can remind students that with a deep breath they can draw on the nourishment and clarity of the contemplative mind as a touchstone throughout the day.

Conclusion

The aforementioned experiments provide opportunities to activate, integrate, and normalize contemplative knowing in the classroom. Bringing contemplative practice to the classroom is not exactly bringing something new to children. Children—young children especially—are natural contemplatives. They ponder big questions, they daydream, they fall in wonder with nature, they reflect on their own existence and find silence in their “special spot,” perhaps under the arms of an old tree. However, the demands for constant activity, the habit of electronic stimulation, and the production orientation of modern society make it very difficult to keep the contemplative alive, leaving children (and teachers) unbalanced in their ways of knowing and often losing touch with the inner landscape. Contemplative techniques offer both a portal to our inner world and an internal technology—a kind of mindscience—enabling us to use more of the mind rather than be driven by habitual responses or emotional impulsivity.

Long dormant in education, the natural capacity for contemplation balances and enriches the analytic. It has the potential to enhance performance, character, and depth of the student’s experience. Perhaps most important, the contemplative helps to return the transformative power of wonder, intimacy, and presence in daily learning and daily living.

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