Contemplative pedagogy
and the quest for meaning and transformation in higher education

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Outline

- What is contemplative pedagogy and why has it become prominent now?
- How is it connected to and informed by other pedagogies?
- How can contemplative pedagogy assist us in our quest for meaning and transformation in higher education?
Medieval times higher education was carried out in Christian Cathedral schools or monastic settings, universities developed in response to the continuation of the interest in learning promoted by monasteries where contemplation was thought to be considered critical to learning.

However the Renaissance with the dawning of humanism, the Enlightenment and scientific revolution has led to an ever increasing emphasis on logic and science at the expense of the contemplative pursuit of knowledge. The line between the contemplative life, historically considered to be associated with religious life and the logical, rational pursuit of knowledge in academic life has grown more distinct over time.

Contemplative pedagogy has arisen in response to this bias within our education system, a recognition that our education orientates us outwardly at the expense of knowledge of our inner lives.
Defining what we mean by contemplative pedagogy is very difficult. So I am going to rely heavily on those more experienced than me!

What I primarily want to get across is that contemplative pedagogy is not just about explicitly using contemplative practices in education – it may well include this, but it is pointing to something more than that – a reorientation about what we value within the educational pursuit.

In fact it is difficult to think about what contemplative pedagogy is without touching on the idea of meaning – what do we give meaning to? What do your students give meaning to? How do we understand that process?

So here are a few quotes that try to capture contemplative pedagogy:
What is contemplative pedagogy?

“[contemplative pedagogy] presumes that the capacities of sustained voluntary attention, emotional balance, insight, and compassion are able to be developed through practice… Full comprehension means that we understand the world from inside as well as the outside”

(Zajonc 2014: 93)
What is contemplative pedagogy?

“Contemplative pedagogy shifts the focus of teaching and learning to incorporate ‘first person’ approaches which connect students to their lived, embodied experience of their own learning…[enabling] them to form richer, deeper, relationships with their peers, their communities and the world around them.”

(Barratt 2014)
Inter-subjective and relational element is also important in contemplative pedagogy – it is not just about me ‘in here’ and the world ‘out there’ but also developing a sense of ‘us’ a connectivity – that we radically co-exist.
It can take numerous forms – it does not have to ‘look’ a particular way. If we define contemplative pedagogy just by what we do in the classroom it think we over look the importance of its contribution.
Mah y Busch really brings this out when he considers why contemplative pedagogy is so hard to define:

‘…Contemplative Pedagogies are not merely the acts themselves. There is a qualitative dimension
(Mah y Busch 2014: 122)

He describes how despite learning about contemplative practices, when attending events or reading about contemplative pedagogy it becomes clear there is more to it than the practices in and of themselves – there is something more at play.

[quote]
If contemplative pedagogies point towards the ‘wordless’, something beyond the conceptual realm in which education usually dwells, how do we describe it?

How do we define that which points beyond the limits of what we usually refer to as knowledge?

If it defies definition, then being sure about what students will learn from contemplative practice is also impossible – this will be unique to each student but then how confident can we ever be about what students are learning from what we teach? But by introducing contemplative approaches into learning we are giving them tools with which to navigate their subjectivity.
I now want to put contemplative pedagogy within a pedagogical context.

I wanted to pick up on five main areas of pedagogy which I think are carving out the space for contemplative pedagogy. I am not trying to establish lines of causation here just to draw connections which are of interest so that we can understand what contemplative pedagogy is more fully as well as recognise its potential.

**Mindfulness**

Increased acceptance of mindfulness practice has been crucial in introducing the concept of meditation and contemplation into society helping to do some of the groundwork to increase the acceptability of contemplative pedagogy.

Has established the significance of attention and the absence of training on our own minds – that our minds are ironically absent from our education. Our mind thought and thinking are taken for granted.

Evidence of impact on performance and wellbeing are positive but considered in isolation might miss some of the deeper learning that emerge from contemplative practice.

**Contemplative studies**

Interest has also helped fuel research into contemplation and the development of interdisciplinary contemplative studies courses both taught and research.

The development of teaching in this area and the innovation it has led to more contemplative practice being integrated into HE and this has done a lot to inform the use of contemplative pedagogy across the curriculum.

**Critical and radical pedagogies** have at their heart a desire for social transformation, they have provided a space in which students are encouraged to question deeply who
they are in the world, to look at patterns of oppression, power and privilege and challenge them. They seek to give a voice to the experiences of those not normally heard in society.

Kaufman (2014), writing about the relationship between critical and contemplative pedagogies notes that one of the problems with critical theory and the focus on oppression is that the currently oppressed go on to become the next oppressors. That power shifts but actually little progress is made.

Our social conditioning is powerful, how can we de-programme ourselves to prevent this? How do we develop the self-knowledge and insight necessary to ‘choose to act otherwise’?

This is where the contemplative can inform critical perspectives - where the wordless wholeness revealed within contemplation can balance the conceptual distinctions which fragment the world at our everyday level of perception.

Also crucial from my perspective is the understanding offered by critical and radical pedagogy which helps us avoid naïve promotion of contemplative practice in such as way as to suggest that contemplative practice itself, and this is particularly relevant to mindfulness, is not itself subject to issues of power and privilege. To the extent that contemplative practices are portrayed as a ‘cure all’ may threaten to obscure the real ethical issues that we should be concerned with.

The concept of transformative pedagogy also relates to all of these identified here and as its in the title of my talk I’ll spend a little longer exploring this.
Tends to focus on how we generate change within students - how do we get them to see the world differently and hopefully act differently on the basis of this new knowledge.

Emphasises need for critical self-reflection to change ‘habits of mind’ and ‘meaning schemes’

So here we can see that transformative learning theory draws on the notion of meaning - suggesting that as what we attribute meaning to changes, we can then transform.
So if meaning making is important in the process of transformation we need to know where meaning is created – where does it come from?

[quote]
Mezirow who developed transformative learning theory also recognised this.

The choices we make, how we act in the world, the hobbies we take up are to a degree determined by where we find meaning and purpose in your lives

(Meaning can be defined as ‘the end, purpose or significance of something’)

If we are only educated to attend to the world outside of us it is in the outside world that we pursue meaning. What society values we therefore value. It makes it difficult then to express values which contradict those already dominant or at least accepted in society.

This is not just relevant to transformative learning but critical pedagogy too – critical pedagogy is useful and highly values the process of reflection in order to question our place in the world and to become critical of dominant modes of being.

What contemplative pedagogy can bring to this is the valuing of interiority – a reorientation towards our inner experience – a rebalancing of what it is that informs our actions in the world.
Contemplative pedagogy can prevent, in Ergas’s words, social habits becoming the habits of our own mind.

We can become more deeply critical and more open to transformation as through contemplative practice we develop a clearer sense of reality – we come to see that it is our minds which are attributing meaning and that we have agency over that.

Otherwise we habitually take on the meaning attributed by society and our capacity to then be critical and to be open to deep transformation are limited – we become fixed because we consider our internal lives to be dictated by what is external to us, we do not see the agency that we have, the authority that we give away.

That is not to say that our lives are not conditioned by the circumstances around us, the contemplative pedagogy project is one of rebalancing not domination.

So by introducing a contemplative element in to teaching, by valuing interiority, its role in meaning making, and the fresh perspective this might offer on our habits of mind, we increase the possibility of transformative learning.
To try and illustrate the connections between contemplative practice and transformation I have included a few quotes from students who have taken my ‘Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner’ course which integrates contemplative pedagogy. I hope that these capture how the course has impacted their feelings, actions and understanding.

Transforming students...

“The deep listening technique had given me breathing space to centre myself and to breathe, helping me to slow down my thoughts and to contain the emotion of panic I was feeling and to accept it was there and to allow the feelings and thoughts to pass.”

Quote from unpublished data collected from ‘Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner’ students
Transforming students...

“I was able to write a very clear treatment plan, perhaps because I had gained a far deeper understanding of Emily’s needs through an enhanced presence within the sessions...I was able to feel calmer, and better able to focus...”

Quote from unpublished data collected from ‘Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner’ students
Transforming students...

“Afterwards, I had various questions in my head … what compassion means for me, what does it look like, am I able to describe or define it, am I able to learn it, is it indeed another buzz word in the health care industry or a target that we as nurses must comply with and who anyway is more deserving of compassion…”

Quote from unpublished data collected from ‘Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner’ students

Moving beyond the taken for granted…
So I have briefly discussed the idea of transformation in relation to transformative learning theory, particularly the perspective of wanting to transform individual students but I’d like to broaden that out a little.

University education was once, and optimistically still is, perceived as a public good. That the generation of knowledge can contribute to our wellbeing and prosperity.

Therefore, when I think about the transformation that contemplative pedagogy can contribute to I also want to think about the social and relational transformation – it is not just about transforming individuals.
However I think one of misunderstanding about contemplative practice is that is somehow placates people, sends them to sleep, helping them get in with their lives with less stress but not wanting to engage in the crucial challenges of today.

One of the biggest sources of resistance I experience in relation to the integration of contemplative practice in education or when teaching mindfulness is the idea that it is naval gazing and the idea of acceptance of openness and just ‘being’ is actually in some way saying that everything is OK at it is, that there is nothing to do and therefore these practices will just encourage people to be compliant and ignore the need for social transformation.

Another concern I have, and that is increasingly being written about, is that contemplative practices, particularly mindfulness, are being used in ways that focus on the value of practices for promoting wellbeing and reducing stress for individuals and that simply equipping people to cope better with stress places the responsibility back on the individual rather than developing critical debate about what is causing that stress.

But this is NOT my experience
I think is a fundamental ethical issue within contemplative pedagogy - that we should not be expecting others around us to transform without being willing to engage in some way in our own contemplative journey in which we too risk being open to change.

Need to explore what it means for ‘teachers’, how this this alter our role in the classroom and the meaning we attribute to it?

When talking about contemplative pedagogy I do not mean that there are not other very important and worthwhile ways of teaching and learning. Going back to my earlier slide about how higher education has systematically moved away from the contemplative – this is about redressing that balance not about throwing out all we have learnt and discovered since then.

We also need to be alert to issue of risk and care when we are using contemplative practices in the classroom. We need to consider the suitability of the setting and he student group and adapt as appropriate.

As we as educators become more sensitive to our own values through contemplative practice and how we want them to manifest in our work then we create a circle of transformation in which our openness to change facilitates our students capacity for transformation. In my experience contemplative practice and mindfulness in particular has really been important for me getting braver, being prepared to have a voice and engage with the change I want to see in the world.

So I will end where I started contemplative pedagogy is difficult to define because it points beyond words and beyond concepts and yet this is some way captured in words
Sometimes
if you move carefully
through the forest,
breathing
like the ones
in the old stories,
who could cross
a shimmering bed of leaves
without a sound,
you come to a place
whose only task
is to trouble you
with tiny
but frightening requests,
conceived out of nowhere
but in this place
beginning to lead everywhere.
Requests to stop what
you are doing right now,
and
to stop what you
are becoming
while you do it,
questions
that can make
or unmake
a life,
questions
that have patiently
waited for you,
questions
that have no right
to go away.
References


Blöte, P. 2017. The Pedagogy of Compassion at the Heart of Higher Education. London: Springer


Reading and resources list

Websites
Contemplative Pedagogy Network
www.contemplativepedagogynetwork.com
Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education
http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe

Books

Videos
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