

**CONTEMPLATIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND
LEARNING AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND:
REFLECTIONS FROM A FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY ON
CONTEMPLATIVE EDUCATION**

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on behalf of
The Faculty Learning Community on Contemplative Education
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Since November 2009, a small interdisciplinary group of faculty and staff at Memorial University has been exploring a body of theory and practice known as contemplative education.

The group meets monthly as a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) organized around an interest in contemplative and meditative practice. Contemplation has long been recognized by the world's religious and spiritual traditions as a means to hone and focus attention, but even though the capacity to attend is just as vital in a secular educational context, little has been done in higher education to cultivate students' internal conditions for genuine attention in a systematic and direct way (Zajonc 2008). This is an oversight that the contemplative education movement seeks to remedy, by exploring the relationship between mindful awareness and a more engaged teaching and learning environment.

The FLC on Contemplative Education at Memorial University is a small collegial study group and "community of practice," a model of professional exchange and dialogue that has become increasingly popular at campuses across North America (Cox 2004; Cox 2003; Richlin & Essington 2004). At Memorial, it has proven a fruitful means to engage with the idea of contemplation in education. The group offers its members opportunities to reflect and to cultivate collegial conversations about integrative learning. Members have been able to identify and develop shared values about teaching and learning based on the belief that a 21st Century university education should prepare students to become citizens and leaders in a caring, just, and humane world.

While the university is adept at fostering critical thinking, contemplative education focuses not just on developing the intellect, but also on cultivating the heart to promote clarity, empathy, presence, compassion and a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. Through contemplative techniques that cover a wide spectrum, from

simple breathing exercises and seated meditation, to free writing, and even walking, the most basic intent of contemplative education is to cultivate *attention*, which is at the heart of any learning experience. Contemplative approaches are gradually finding a home in higher education, from music programs to leadership studies, math classes to engineering labs. Contemplative education offers intriguing possibilities for a more engaged learning experience, and while progress at Memorial University is modest, the Faculty Learning Community on Contemplative Education represents an important step in bringing educators together to keep the conversation going and the pedagogical possibilities brewing.

The FLC formed as the result of an informal conversation between three educators at Memorial University, after a series of faculty development workshops. They discovered a shared interest in integrative learning, spread the word to a few colleagues, and have been meeting regularly for two years since then. Membership at meetings hovers between six and eight at a time, with thirteen currently on a mailing list. Members come for a variety of reasons. Some feel scattered and overloaded in their workdays and find coming to the FLC a change of pace, and a chance to gather themselves. Others come to participate in dialogue on the ways that contemplative and meditative practices can inform our teaching and professional lives, both inside and outside the classroom.

As a collective project, members decided to contribute to *Antistasis* a few thoughts on how and why contemplative approaches can enhance learning environments and student success.

One of the questions informing our gatherings is: “What are we aiming to help our students to know, to value and to do?” While we have the utmost respect for critical modes of inquiry and analysis, we also appreciate reflective and contemplative modes of thinking, which are just as vital for human well-being. Thus, in our meetings we have engaged in a diverse range of practices.

We generally begin by checking in with members to see where we are mentally, professionally, and spiritually and to find out what has gone well in our lives since the last meeting. Then over the next hour and a half we embark on a variety of practices, activities, and conversations that have ranged widely over the past two years. We have discussed scholarly articles on contemplative administration, spirituality in the secular classroom, and contemplative classroom practices. We have submitted a brief to the Office of the Vice President (Academic) during the campus-wide open consultations in 2011 on the university’s emerging comprehensive teaching and learning framework.

In getting to grips with the practice of contemplative learning we have done free-writing exercises, read poetry, traced labyrinths and engaged in focused conversations; we have practiced *lectio divina*, guided meditations, breathing meditations and contemplative walking; we have reported back on contemplative studies webinars, recounted mindful experiences outside, and discussed the Charter for Compassion (<http://charterforcompassion.org/site/>). We have also invited guests from the community (e.g., a representative from the Mercy Centre for Ecology and

Justice, a mindfulness meditation facilitator, and a yoga instructor), and lent guidance to a student contemplative practice group. We encourage broader dialogue in the university community by reporting on happenings at the university (speakers, meditation sessions), and one of our members has given a university-wide talk on contemplative education through the Instructional Development Office. Our identity is continually evolving.

We believe that contemplative approaches to education represent a significant development to keep in mind not only at Memorial, but in the wider academy, for a variety of reasons. One FLC member states:

...one of our primary responsibilities within a student-centred environment is to fully engage our students within a holistic educational approach towards personal transformation and self-efficacy. Institutions of higher education strive to train students to be self-aware and to be critical, mindful, and reflective thinkers. Infusing the academic experience with opportunities for meditation and spiritual/contemplative practices helps students to heighten their ability to attend, to strengthen their sense of purpose and motivation, and to clarify their personal goals while focusing more directly on their academic endeavor.

Beyond this, as another FLC member put it:

...what contemplative learning brings is a different experience for learners, one that moves away from competition and aggressive individualism. It offers a focus on people, rather than content. It allows learners to be holistic people who have many roles (wife, mother, etc) in addition to being learners. Contemplative learning emphasizes the safety of the learner. It's an acceptance of non-judgmental learning as something that is worthwhile.

The point of contemplative education is to bring together the aspects of contemplation that are meant to interrupt habitual patterns of thought and to deepen awareness with the aspects of education that attempt to encourage better performance, to develop character with intention, to foster deep reflection and to strive for a higher order of understanding (Brady 2007; Hart 2004; Palmer & Zajonc 2010). That higher order of understanding encompasses more than thorough knowledge of any single discipline; it includes understanding ourselves as whole people in relationship with others as whole people, in undertakings that are meant to be meaningful. In the words of one of our members:

Everyone – students and professors alike – benefit when we have time to take stock and to reassert the key relationships we have with one another. We can do our best to avoid frantic and content-driven academic exercises but I suspect we may never be entirely free of them. That underscores the need to make a conscious effort to create space enough in this university's

busy schedule to afford ongoing reflection on how and why what we choose to do here matters.

What do we contemplate for the future? We are starting to study together an essential book in transformative education, *The Heart of Higher Education* by Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. We would like to establish some research projects on contemplative teaching and learning. We would like to engage in more practice ourselves through a faculty retreat. Most of all, we would like to continue to foster collegial conversations at Memorial University and beyond about what it means to lead mindful lives both inside and outside the academy.

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