CONNECTING WITH OUR STUDENTS: HOW TO PROMOTE A MORE CONSCIOUS TEACHING / LEARNING PROCESS


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Abstract

In this paper we present a teaching innovation project through which we intend to systematize the individual experiences that, as spiritually engaged professors in different degrees of the University of Almería, we have been carrying out for several years in our respective subjects. At a general level, these experiences share a commitment with the use of contemplative practices in education. At a more specific level, these practices have the common denominator of the use of mindfulness, both on a personal growth level and as a pedagogical resource. With this project we intend to validate the transforming potential of certain didactic activities that can contribute to a more enriching learning in our students.

Keywords: Conscious teaching/learning, integral approach, meditation, mindfulness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Our work is oriented, ultimately, towards the development of practice and discourse about the field of what can be called a “spiritual” dimension in education, something that challenges traditional academic orthodoxies, insofar as they discard spiritual perspectives as foreign to learning and academic life [1].

For us, spirituality manifests as a desire for integration, a deep meaning and a purpose beyond the transmission of specific knowledge forms of subject or discipline. We hope that in raising the need for a shared public language of spirituality within academic contexts, we will stimulate conversations that more clearly identify the concerns, problems, and opportunities to develop a more coherent discourse that can address the current spiritual needs and concerns of teachers, instructors, students and administrators within and through academic environments.

This project is inspired by the approaches of various theoretical currents in the field of higher education:

a) The so-called "Critical Thinking Approach" models, reviewed globally, for example, by Fahim and Shakouri [2] or by Behar-Horenstein and Niu [3].

b) The proposals of the so-called "Integral Approach", shown, for example, in the book edited by Esbjorn, Reams y Gunnlaugson [4], and very recently by Gallifa [5]. This approach defends the need to connect the cognitive, affective, moral and spiritual dimensions in the teaching-learning processes, based on a teaching methodology that promotes the (self) awareness of the participants.

c) The "Consciousness-Based Education" model of Maharishi University, a university in which the study of subjects is linked to the systematic cultivation of students' "internal potential". The awareness of these expands gradually with each class session, and each of them is relevant because the content is connected to the internal nature of the participants.

It is our contention that contemplative practices support transformative learning processes but, unfortunately, these practices can be difficult to identify in a higher education environment. As advocates of contemplative approaches to education, we see this void as a concern. When topics like these are ignored, especially when even students, staff, and faculty claim for their inclusion, the holistic, transformative, and deep learning needs of students are unfulfilled. In our view, attention needs to be brought to the connections between contemplative practices and the pursuit of transformative education. In a superb qualitative study by Beer at al. [6], seventeen higher education professionals were asked how they integrate contemplative practices into their work and personal lives. In analyzing the data, three themes emerged: awareness, integration, and interconnectedness.
We consider these three themes powerful enough to become pivotal issues to reframe our teaching activity.

The ultimate aim of engaging ourselves in a contemplative practice in classrooms is to foster students’ self-awareness, a type of critical reflection recognized as a crucial component of transformative learning [7]. Higher education institutions cultivate excitement for innovation, complexity of thought, awareness, and creativity [8]. However, little cultural shift has occurred to foster and/or to increase the relationship between awareness and self-reflection in students, professionals, or overarching systems in higher education [9]. Reflection as a teaching tool “helps develop students’ capacities to enhance their learning” ([10], p. 245).

Literature related to contemplative practice in higher education is very limited and primarily focuses on the wide range of available practices and their outcomes at individual, programmatic, and institutional levels. But research and implementation techniques specific to professionals in higher education has not yet been discussed in depth. Beer et al.’s [6] study demonstrated how the development and regular use of mindful contemplative practices are helpful, and perhaps imperative, for professionals to meet the demands of roles in higher education with success. Their findings hold promise for anyone involved in postsecondary education who wishes to connect personal contemplative practice to transformative learning principles and reap the rewards. And we find a source of inspiration in this type of studies to guide our project.

Contemplative approaches in higher education can be applied by using the framework of Integral Theory. Esbjorn-Hargens [11] described the benefits of an integral approach in higher education by reproducing the voices of some students from the degree in Psychology at JFK University. One of those students - Jordan Luftig- wrote these words in his class diary:

“Indeed, I have witnessed in myself and in classmates a profound unfolding of human potential, precisely because the Integral Psychology program has taken to heart Integral Theory’s call to yoga or practice. Both inside and outside of the classroom, students are encouraged to engage in self inquiry, embodied reading, reflective dialogue, shadow work, multiple perspective taking, daily meditation, and so on. The result of such Integral Awareness Practice is not perfection but rather increasingly healthy and whole human beings, individuals capable of effecting positive change in the world.”

From the teacher’s side we obtain more inspiration when we take into account statements like this one: “Teaching in this manner brought heart into the classroom. Even without explicit instruction concerning love and forgiveness, they felt that one nurtures and models these as a teacher in such classes. Life is experienced as more precious. Faculty report a much deeper connection to their students in these classes than otherwise.” [12].

As these authors say in their survey of spiritual practices within higher education classrooms, both teachers and students are more comfortable with silence and “relish a learning environment largely free from the tyranny of grading”. Teachers and students, although hesitant at first, report how significant the experiment with meditation and transformative learning has been, and seek more ways for including it into their teaching and learning” (id., emphasis added).

2 METHODOLOGY

Our innovative teaching project has these three main goals:

a) To rehearse forms of didactic interaction based on a greater awareness of the elements involved in teaching / learning situations.

b) To empower students to be more aware of what they think, feel and do when they are in the classroom and how these elements influence the quality of their learning.

c) Identify the sources of our beliefs, feelings and actions, both in teachers and students, to be aware of their influence in teaching / learning situations, in order to assume in a more responsible way the direction of our personal and professional growth.

The project will be carried out in the following 7 subjects, distributed in 6 undergraduate and master’s degree study plans:

- Research in the English classroom: theory and practice
- Motivation in the classroom. Resources and materials for teaching a foreign language
- Educational research in primary education
The programs or teaching guides of these seven subjects will include a description of this innovation proposal in the contents, methodology and evaluation sections. Since it is probable that many students do not read the teaching guides, the aspects of the proposed innovation will be explained in special detail in classroom, at the beginning of each subject.

Our project is clearly connected with former experiences in higher education developed by integral educators who organize their teaching activity around certain core principles, like the following ones indicated by Esbjorn-Hargens [11]:

- Presence: When you are listening to others speak, be present and fully attentive; when others speak, do not use it as a chance to collapse into your own world. Remain open to the mystery of the person talking. Feel your body, open your heart, and clear your mind.

- Reflective Dialogue: When you want to speak, reflect on how your contribution will deepen the conversation. Do not just talk to make a point or to have your cool idea heard. Be willing to not raise your hand and be willing to raise it. Notice how long you talk.

- Shadow Work: Be aware of your tendency towards projection, splitting things into “all good” and “all bad,” and other defenses such as rationalization and intellectualizing.

- Inquiry: Continually inquire into your own experience and be reflective of how you are contracted and/or open.

- Witnessing: Be aware of the part of your awareness that is absolutely free from contraction and is always witnessing everything that arises in each moment.

- Daily Meditation: Engage in some form of spiritual practice on a regular basis (e.g., breath counting, prayer, body scans, vipassana, yoga, visualization).

Inspired by such a profoundly human and enriching conception of teacher-student interaction, it is our intention to carry out a series of activities aimed at achieving the aforementioned goals. Thus, during the class sessions -in the seven subjects involved-, these activities will be, among others:

- At the beginning of class: “Three initial minutes of introspective silence”.
  This activity will consist of a guided micro-meditation in which we will ask our students to visualize certain aspects of their personal vision about themselves or about the world that may be affected by the theme of the class. This activity reminds us of a beautiful episode by Brady [13], who wrote this: “Several years later, when the upper school community was experiencing an unusual amount of stress, I began reading The Miracle of Mindfulness by Vietnamese Zen master Nhat Hanh (1975) [14](no está puesta la referencia). I saw how useful his teaching might be to my very busy students and began to share short readings with my classes following our opening silence” (p.375, emphasis added).

- During the development of the class: “Check parenthesis”.
  Throughout each class session, teachers and students will stop the development of the session to review and realize how the specific content addressed and the activities we are doing are connecting "in real time" with our cognitive dimensions, affective and ethical-moral, briefly sharing our awareness of it.

- At the end of each class session: "Three final minutes of introspective silence".
  This activity will consist of a guided micro-meditation in which we will ask our students to observe how the work done in the recently finished class has been able to affect certain aspects of their personal vision about themselves or about the world.

- Task outside of classroom: “Shared class journal”
  Both teachers and students must synthesize our impressions in a "Shared class journal", hosted in the virtual classroom space of each subject, where all of us can freely express the way we think we have been aware of the connections between the contents that have been taught /
learned and our mental maps (beliefs, feelings and purposes of action), whether it be the personal or professional aspect of those maps.

This plan is a proposal that will be open to the incorporation of other activities that may arise. The very nature of this innovation suggests maintaining an attitude of openness and constant reflection in the light of what emerges in the classes.

3 RESULTS
As this paper presents the main lines of a project not yet implemented, we cannot obviously talk about “results” of it. However, we can specify how we are going to evaluate the results of our project. We will use the following instruments:

a) On the one hand, the preparation and administration of an anonymous questionnaire addressed to all students, asking them for their assessment of the experience. This questionnaire will be based on the one used by Choy, Goh, and Sedhu [14].

b) On the other hand, the analysis of the contents of the "Shared class diary". This analysis will be done by all teachers in teamwork, using techniques from grounded theory methodology.

These two data sources (questionnaire and class diary) will be compared with what the students produce in order to evaluate their learning (exams, papers or presentations, depending on each subject), thus being able to calibrate the impact that the proposed innovation has could have in the quantity and quality of what has been learned, as well as the satisfaction of the teacher with the methodology used.

4 CONCLUSIONS
We deeply agree with Tolliver and Tisdell [15] when they said that engaging learning in multiple dimensions, including the rational, affective, somatic, spiritual, and sociocultural, “will increase the chances that new knowledge is actually constructed and embodied, thus having the power to be transformative” (p. 39). We think that this is most likely to happen for students and colleagues in the presence of educators who experience multidimensional learning through their own contemplative practices, who value the outcome of this personal learning and are able to share their wisdom with others. Brady (2007) clearly stated that we must not ask teachers who lack contemplative experience in their own lives to attempt to engage their student in contemplative learning. Thus we conclude with the same invitation he made to those educators with some contemplative experience: please find ways to share this gift with your students. And for those educators who are not familiar with any contemplative practice, we deeply recommend to explore it as an option for their own well-being and growth, as well as for the growth and well-being of their students.

REFERENCES


