

Contemplative Writing Across the Disciplines

Marlowe Miller, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and Karolyn Kinane, University of Virginia

Contemplative Studies

...there is a deep yearning among teachers and students today – a yearning for embodied meaning – that will be fulfilled only as education embraces the fact that what is inward and invisible is at least as important as what is outward and empirical.

—Parker Palmer

This yearning for the inward and invisible that Palmer addresses in his preface to Mary Rose O’Reilly’s profound book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, is becoming manifest as faculty across a wide array of academic disciplines are using contemplative pedagogies and practices in their classes. As part of the new discipline of contemplative studies (Komjathy, 2018; Sanders, 2013; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010), the practices that are emerging within these pedagogies are drawn from diverse spiritual traditions, including but not limited to Christian traditions like Ignatian spirituality and monastic mysticism, Buddhist traditions, some associated with such teachers as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, embodied spiritual practices like yoga, and Quaker devotions to silence and listening. The growth of a mindfulness movement within higher education can be seen in the establishment of university concentrations dedicated to Contemplative Studies (at Brown University, Naropa University, Emory University, and University of Michigan, to name just a few), in pedagogical shifts toward contemplative practices within many disciplines, and in a growing body of research on the impact of mindfulness and contemplative pedagogical practices.

There is now a great deal of evidence showing that contemplative practices in the college classroom can improve cognitive and academic performance, student concentration and the retention of information, as well as influence psychological well-being and the development of the whole person, (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). As Tobin Hart (2004) says, while “the rational-empirical approach ... has set the standard for knowledge across most disciplines.... Contemplative knowing is a missing link, one that affects student performance, character, and depth of understanding” (p. 28). Educators are increasingly interested in these practices; and often they come to them through their own contemplative experiences and practices as they seek to balance the “rational-empirical” training of their own education with the multiple modes of knowing that are encouraged through contemplative practice. Faculty who have made shifts to incorporate contemplative practices into their teaching are documenting the results in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Owen-Smith, 2018).

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Contemplative Writing

This issue of *Across the Disciplines* focuses on the use of contemplative writing as a practice (or set of practices) used in the context of writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines. As explored in the essays within this issue, contemplative writing is most commonly one aspect of carefully constructed contemplative pedagogies and integrated into classes in scaffolded and deliberate ways that might encourage nonjudgmental awareness, embodied or spiritual experience, honor for the interconnectedness of all beings, and more. Most of the scholars in this issue speak of contemplative writing as a practice, much like one might speak of prayer or meditation as a practice. And most would embrace the definition of contemplative writing offered by Barbezat and Bush (2014) which asserts that it is “a practice that emphasizes process rather than outcome” (p. 124), though many would find this definition incomplete. Indeed, the scholars included in this special issue are building a broader definition of contemplative writing as they offer additional wisdom about contemplative writing and metacognition, contemplative writing and grading, contemplative research writing, and much more.

What we already know within the growing discipline of contemplative studies is that the cultivation of an aware, nonjudgmental classroom ethos fostered by contemplative writing can shift what Parker Palmer (2007) describes as “...an academic culture that distrusts personal truth” (p. 9) He maintains that, “Though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honors only one – an ‘objective’ way of knowing that takes us into the ‘real’ world by taking us ‘out of ourselves’” (p. 9). In such a context, contemplative writing can help students experience and understand the ways in which knowledge emerges not only from experts and intellectual rigor but also from personal stories, embodied experience, intuitive insight, and spiritual inquiry. Contemplative writing is an attempt to critically and thoughtfully situate first person experience as a legitimate domain of knowledge making; as such, it challenges objectivism, resists binaries, and opens space for the integration of emotion and intellect. In a profound and yet basic way, contemplative writing can, as Mary Rose O’Reilly (1998) says, “create a spacious moment” in the classroom: it “can create a spacious moment: at the beginning of class to find a spiritual center; in the middle, to brainstorm; and at the end to reflect” (p. 6).

Of course, scholars and teachers working in WAC, WID, and composition and rhetoric have employed many of the tools that innovators like Palmer, Barbezat and Bush, and Hart (among many others) are now articulating as essential to contemplative pedagogies. For example, writing specialists have long embraced exploratory and reflective writing practices such as those Barbezat and Bush offer as “contemplative”: journal writing, freewriting, exploratory writing about reading, mindful writing, and storytelling. Such practices reflect a disciplinary acceptance of the personal as essential to the writing process.

Given this, one might ask if contemplative writing is distinct from exploratory and reflective writing. We suggest that the distinction between the disciplinary uses of “contemplative writing” and contemplative writing *as a practice* is that the latter is typically used deliberately and consistently within a contemplative pedagogy that seeks to introduce it as one practice among many that foster awareness, embodied knowledge, compassionate inquiry, and a tolerance for nondual realities. Contemplative pedagogies incorporate contemplative writing practice as a way to explore and encourage the integration of mind, heart, and body in the process of learning. While this practice might rely on modes of writing that are already used widely within our disciplines, that does not necessarily make those modes of writing contemplative. It is the integrated and focused practice of contemplative writing within the classroom that makes a qualitative difference.

The growing library of research on contemplative pedagogies within our discipline corroborates our argument that contemplative writing is part of a deliberate pedagogical approach; it is typically situated within a frame that introduces and guides students in contemplative practices with the aim of transformation (Harrison, 2012; Kirsch, 2008, 2009; Kroll, 2008, 2013; Mathieu, 2016; O’Reilly, 1998; Wenger, 2015; Yagelski, 2011). For example, of the scholars listed above, O’Reilly situates contemplative

writing within a contemplative pedagogy influenced by Catholicism, Quaker traditions, and Buddhism, specifically the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh; Mathieu, on the other hand, constructs a pedagogy influenced by the secular wisdom of “The Work” that Byron Katie has advanced; and Yagelski’s pedagogy grows out of a passion for the environment and the interconnectedness of all beings. Christy Wenger’s contemplative pedagogy is emphatically rooted in the body and the wisdom tradition of yoga. Wenger, for example, reminds us of the holistic and embodied natures of contemplative pedagogies that embrace contemplative writing as one practice among many when she says, “What distinguishes contemplative pedagogies is their attention to the body as a primary site for mindful reflection, contemplative awareness and centeredness...” (p. 13). While all writers have bodies, that does not insure that the use of the body for writing is a contemplative practice. Similarly, it is the context and the practice that makes certain writing strategies contemplative. And it is the sustained practice of contemplative writing that lends it transformative power to the “inward and invisible” as well as the “outward and empirical” (Palmer, 1998, p.x).

The Essays

This issue of *Across the Disciplines* opens with “The Place of Practice in Contemplative Pedagogy and Writing,” in which Karolyn Kinane offers educators across disciplines an adaptable framework for crafting contemplative writing experiences that can tap into the radical, transformative power of contemplative traditions. The piece urges instructors to tend to social context and personal practice in course development. Using specific examples from undergraduate General Education courses, Kinane illustrates several ways that practice—commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development—function in contemplative pedagogy.

Nadia Francine Zamin uses a specific course to trace similarly some broader contours of contemplative pedagogy and to define “contemplative writing” in the following essay. “Building a Contemplative Research Writing Course: Theoretical Considerations, Practical Components, Challenges, and Adaptability” describes contemplative activities and processes that enhance student engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Zamin further provides specific ways to convey the rigorousness and usefulness of contemplative approaches to colleagues and students. Here, Zamin offers valuable advice to educators who see mindfulness as a necessary intervention in an “increasingly de-selfed academic culture.”

The focus then turns to evaluation in “Using Mindfulness as a Heuristic for Writing Evaluation: Transforming Pedagogy and Quality of Experience.” Here, authors Jennifer Consilio and Sheila M. Kennedy present a thorough description of “mindfulness” as context for their innovation on the traditional grading contract: The Mindful Grading Agreement Process (MGAP). Flush with inspirational, theoretical, and practical tools for transforming the grading process, this article brings contemplative elements to existing student-centered pedagogies and processes. Rooted in hospitality and trust, the MGAP usefully orients students towards their writing processes and experiences (rather than points and percentages) and repeatedly asks instructors to renew their own commitment to mindful teaching, learning, and being.

Kate Chaterdon’s piece builds bridges—this time between current scholarship on metacognition and contemplative pedagogy. Chaterdon uses an Advanced Composition course to demonstrate how a partnership between internal reflection and external reflection can increase students’ sense of agency and ownership as well as help them navigate the shifting landscapes of different genres. Her article “Writing Into Awareness: How Metacognitive Awareness Can Be Encouraged Through Contemplative Teaching Practices” describes ways that reflective writing integrated within contemplative practice can bring students’ attention to themselves as authors, complementing the existing pedagogical focus on *audience*.

The issue closes with W. Kurt Stavenhagen and Tim Dougherty’s consideration of the rhetorical concept of “kairos,” which signals both deep presence and timeliness. Their article “Contemplation as Kairotic

Composure” explains how a course structured around silence, gratitude, embodied awareness, and attention to process can “help students to practice both sensing and seizing the moments to respond.” Placing the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address at the center of their discussion, Stavenhagen and Dougherty illuminate reverent ways for students to find their voices in timely relationship with other ideas, people, and processes.

The authors in this special issue offer an invitation to fellow teachers across the disciplines who are “yearning for embodied meaning” in the classroom. Each is on a unique pedagogical path and most offer their insights, ideas, and strategies in a spirit of play and invitation. Come, explore.

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Contact Information

Marlowe Miller, Ph.D.
Professor, English
Associate, Center for Women and Work
University of Massachusetts Lowell
61 Wilder St.
Lowell, MA 01778
Email: marlowe_miller@uml.edu

Karolyn Kinane, Ph.D.
Associate Director of Pedagogy & Faculty Engagement
Contemplative Sciences Center
University of Virginia
PO Box 400290
Email: kk7av@virginia.edu

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