Contemplative practices and pedagogy in the classroom

An open educational resource sharing insights and practices from our community

CENTRE FOR TEACHING & LEARNING

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
TIOHTIÁ:KE (MONTREAL)

Contents

TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

MINDFULNESS AND PRESENCE

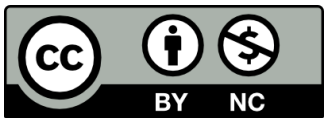
PRACTICES AND PRACTICAL RESOURCES

How to use this resource

Welcome to our open educational resource (OER) on contemplative practices and pedagogy in the classroom. This page provides a quick guide on how to use and navigate this resource. We invite you also to read the foreword from the editors to learn how this resource was co-developed and our intentions for those reading or adapting from it.

What is OER?

Open Educational Resources are teaching and learning materials in any medium that permit no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others. Contemplative pedagogies engages with the community-oriented work of building, sharing, and adapting to best practices. This open guide in Pressbooks encourages the growth of contemplative practices, which is why we encourage follow educators to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for **noncommercial purposes** only, and only so long as **attribution is given.**



This resource holds a CC-BY-NC license

Learn more about **Open Educational Resources** with our publisher Concordia University Library and **see other OER** in the Concordia catalogue.

Want to contribute?

This is intended to be a living resource – growing and changing as we grow and change. We welcome new contributions from our community of educators. To express interest in contributing, please get in touch with the Centre for Teaching and Learning at **teaching@concordia.ca.**

Navigation

To move through the Pressbook, you can use the 'Next' and 'Previous' buttons located at the bottom corners of every page. To jump to a specific part or chapter, you can open the Table of Contents at any time by pressing the 'Contents' button in the top-left corner of this book.

Throughout the book, we are making use of different types of text boxes to help draw your attention to important pieces of information. We explain the types and purposes below:

Signposting

Some text-heavy pages will feature a contents list at the top to help you jump to lower chapters in the page:

On this page...

Additionally, because of the close interlinking that we intended for this resource, at the bottom of most pages you'll find a "Related content" box to take you on a non-linear learning path throughout the resource:

Related content

Call-outs

Sometimes, authors wil take a quick detour from the main content or draw out important information in a call-out box like this:

> Text here.

Acknowledgements

This resource is the result of a collaborative effort between the faculty interest group on **contemplative pedagogies (CP FIG)** and the **Centre for Teaching and Learning** at Concordia University. To read about all the contributors, please go to our **About the contributors page.**

Special thanks to our research assistant and student-partner Erika O'Hara, our editors Amy Cooper and Stephen Yeager, the Library OER team Chhayhee Sok, Zo Kopyna, Rahil Kakkad and Rachel Harris, for support with CTL's authoring in Pressbooks, as well as Marie-Christine Simard and Margo Echenberg among others who helped bring this resource to fruition.

Québec This project was funded by Quebec's Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, through the Canada-Québec Agreement on Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction.

Land acknowledgement

Concordia University is located on **unceded Indigenous lands**. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today, it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community. You can discover more about Concordia's land acknowledgement, including its history, **at this webpage**.

Professor Rosemary Reilly, a founding member of the CP FIG, in her 2023 presentation at Winterfest (our annual Teaching and Learning festival), reflects on why contemplative pedagogies can be a way of decolonizing education:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=20***

Video © Concordia University

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

About the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL)

The CTL advances innovative and impactful approaches to teaching and learning for the Concordia community. Our work is guided by principles of collaboration, learner-centred education, evidence-based practices, culturally diverse ways of knowing and doing, and Indigenous Decolonization. To learn more about the CTL and our offerings, **visit our website here.**

Cover artwork

Cover artwork © **Joseph Siddiqi** (2025). *August 24th*. Coloured pencils on paper. 14 x 11 in. | 36 x 28 cm.

Accessibility statement

This resource has been designed using the following accessibility features:

- All images which are not decorative have authored alternative text. Decorative images have empty quotes.
- Videos have closed captioning and a downloadable transcript PDF file.
- Properly structured pages and use of headings.
- This book is available in PDF and for eReaders in EPUB format.
- Use of interactive (H5P) content types that have WCAG 2.1 AA support.

Foreword from the editors

As members of the Contemplative Practice Faculty Interest Group (CP FIG), staff and faculty at Concordia University gathered monthly to create a space for stillness and reflection, interrupting the bounded layers of teaching and learning within a large urban higher education institution. This resource reflects the generative possibilities that emerged through our communal and yearlong cycle of inhaling and exhaling together; moments of playful resistance where empathy, belonging, and curiosity surfaced.

This publication arose from a scan of existing open-access resources on contemplative practices and pedagogies (CP&P). It is not meant as a recipe book or an exhaustive introduction to CP&P, but instead a reflection of the knowledge and experiences of our faculty interest group. Rather than reading it linearly like a traditional book, we invite you to engage with this online resource as a network of reflections, practices, and tools. Like a tree root system, it is somewhat entangled, always in communication with itself, and has the potential for new content and practices to grow.

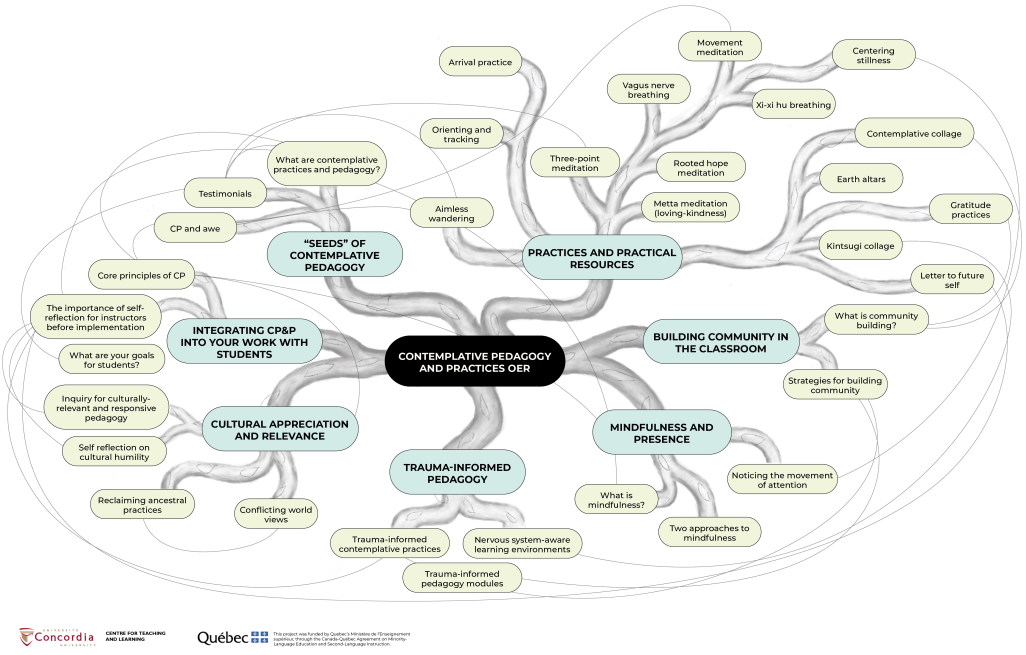


Diagram of the OER © Concordia University

The phrase "Contemplative practices and pedagogy" can mean two distinct but related things. The first meaning names an approach to pedagogy that prioritizes the development of student skills in contemplation. Regardless of discipline, subject matter, or approach, every teacher can develop approaches to teaching that benefit the whole person–mind,

body, and spirit. In this resource you will find high-level design principles and practical tips for bringing CP&P to your learning objectives and classroom activities, towards goals like **community building**, **practicing cultural humility**, and **engaging with awe**.

Second, "CP&P" can name an entry point into being contemplative about your teaching, reshaping how you relate to and approach your course goals, materials, and lesson design. CP&P in this sense was what inspired us to include intentional pauses throughout the resource, as reminders for how CP&P is as much about instructors as it is about students. Notably, this research features pedagogical considerations that emerged during our monthly gatherings, including **honouring the cultural and historical roots** of various practices; recognizing the interconnections between the nervous system and the importance of **trauma-informed approaches**; prioritizing **classroom community**; and **integrating mindfulness and presence**.

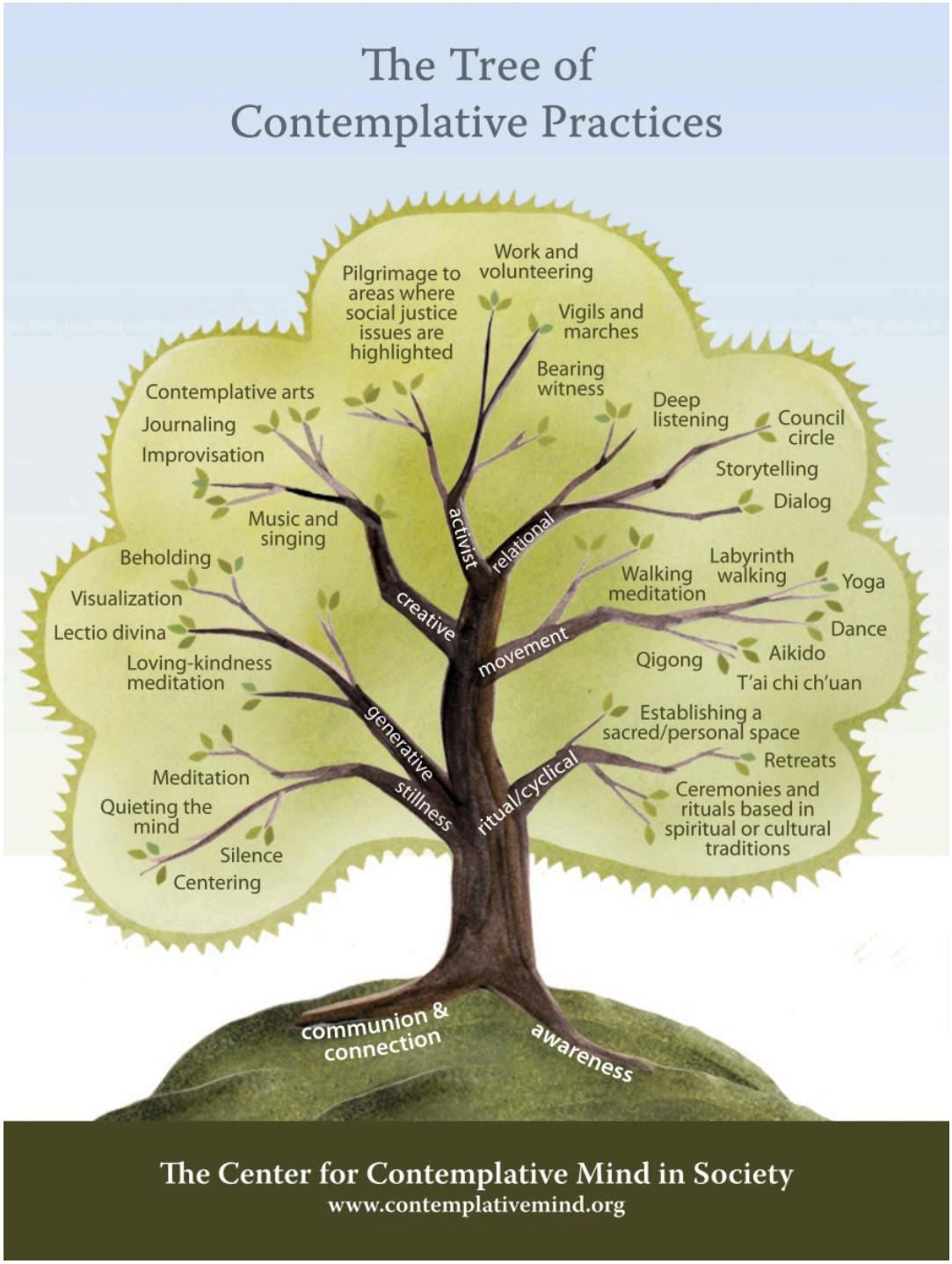
We are very pleased to share this resource with you, and we feel honoured to have been participants and learners in the many sessions hosted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning over the last year. We have much to praise and feel grateful for from all of our collaborators, but we still wish to single out Cristina Galofre Gomez, Josephine Guan, and Erika O'Hara for bringing everything together with their vision, generosity, and joy. We are so pleased to have helped bring this resource for teachers into the world, and we hope to learn about how CP&P shapes your teaching in the years to come.

– Amy Cooper and Stephen Yeager

SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES AND PEDAGOGY

Contemplative practices can be visually represented as a "tree" (Duerr, 2004). **Read more from Maia Duerr about the process of developing this tree.** You can also hear from our own **Rosemary Reilly talking about the tree in this video.**

In this resource we use the "branches" and the "roots" of this tree to frame our presentations of the materials. In this first section, we discuss the *what* and *why* that gives us the purpose for contemplative pedagogy: **what these terms mean**, connect **contemplative practices and pedagogy to your goals for students**, discuss **contemplative pedagogy and awe**, and share **testimonials from our own instructors and their students.**



The Tree of Contemplative Practices © Maia Duerr, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

What are contemplative practices and pedagogy?

Donetta Hines and Erika O'Hara

Contemplative practices and pedagogy (CP&P) encompass a variety of course design approaches, teaching practices, and learning activities that provide the time and space for individuals to identify, access, and satisfy their own needs and intentions for learning, in line with **your learning goals for students.**

On this page...

Contemplative practices

Contemplative practices come from all over the world, rooted in the rich histories of a variety of cultures and peoples. Barbezat and Bush in their 2014 book *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* provide the following definition for contemplation:

> The word contemplation derives from *contemplari*, to "gaze attentively," but the word was originally linked to the act of cutting out or creating a space, as in "to mark out a space for observation." The word *temple* comes from this definition: a place reserved or cut out for observance. In many ways, the practices we are discussing provide this space for students to allow them to observe and gain insight.

Contemplative practices have varied origins and purposes tied to them, including:

- **spiritual/religious** – e.g., The *Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm* (Chien, 2020),
- **secular** (e.g., secular instrumental music (MisirHiralall, 2016),

- or **a blend** – e.g., *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) but its roots come from Zen, Theravada, Tibetan, and Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist meditation (Romano & Chang, 2022)

These practices are diverse, varied, and perhaps even contradictory, but some of the shared qualities that exist across contemplative practices are that they:

- are additional ways of knowing the world which complement the traditional (rational, sensory) ways of knowing, teaching, and learning (Hart, 2004).
- make space for discomfort by cultivating curiosity, rather than mastery.
- can foster *transformative* – rather than transactional – and integrative learning that nourishes the well-being of the whole person. This includes not only the cognitive domain of learning, but extends to the emotional, the physical, the spiritual, and more.
- reorient us to ourselves, what we are actively doing, those we are in relation with and the effect of our actions, and the community we are fostering together.
- aid in cultivating a sense of meaning by using a first-person perspective with either the direct experiences of the self, or complex ideas or situations as the object of focus (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012).
- are more than meditation. Contemplative practices include forms of movement and dance, ritual, focused thought, time in nature, reflective writing, deep listening, dialogue, storytelling, and arts, from traditions around the world.

The *Tree of Contemplative Practices*

In the video below, Rosemary Reilly, a founding faculty member of the faculty interest group on contemplative pedagogy gives a brief overview of the "Tree of Contemplative Practices". This tree, developed by Maia Duerr and Carrie Bergman for Contemplative Mind in Society in 2004 provides an overview of practices that were used by folks in sectors such as healthcare, education, business, government, and social justice. The practices are group by common themes, which serve as the larger "branches" of the tree.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=136***

Click to download a transcript of the video (pdf)

Contemplative pedagogy

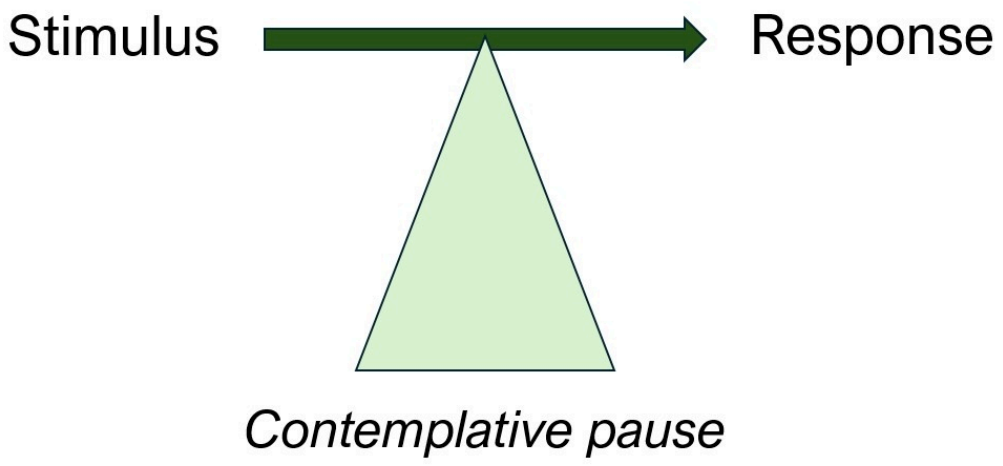
Contemplative pedagogy can be defined as approaches to teaching and learning that intentionally integrate contemplative practices, or the philosophies behind them. The general aim is to encourage deep learning and character development by cultivating students' focused attention, reflection, and introspection. Contemplative pedagogy can range from integrating practice in the classroom all the way to designing a course or curriculum that centres contemplation.

From a scan on the literature, contemplative pedagogy can be summarized as:

Ways of teaching and learning that exist in the spaces between.

"The spaces between" is intentionally worded ambiguously – it can be applied to the physical spaces between the body and its surrounding environment, stimulus and response; the metaphysical spaces between mind, body, and spirit; self and other; self and environment; self and object or subject of study; the educator and student, student and student...

This is building on the "contemplative pause" in which Karolyn Kinane (University of Virginia, contemplative guide & educator) talks about in her **introductory video on contemplative pedagogy (2022).**



Contemplative pause, adapted from Kinane, 2022

An aside on the term "pedagogy" versus "andragogy"

During a co-writing meeting held by the OER co-writing group, there had been some discussion over what we intended "pedagogy" to mean in the context of this resource. Given that we are aiming to reach educators in the university setting, there was question of whether we are actually engaging in contemplative andragogy.

Three points of note regarding this:

1. "Contemplative pedagogy" is the contemporary keyword/subject term for this topic which, if searched in literature databases, will yield relevant texts, regardless of the age of the learners in question.
2. Andragogy and pedagogy have a tenuous, highly contextual relationship ranging from being in opposition, to one growing from the other, to being unattached fields of study (Loeng, 2018).
3. Even within andragogy, there are variant understandings of the concept including a spectrum of individualized motivation and progress, to a social and relational lifelong learning process (Loeng, 2018).

With that in mind, the pedagogy vs. andragogy question is not one to be answered in the scope of this resource. Rather, our aim is to highlight the "why"s and "how"s of bringing contemplation into one's teaching practice.

From a scan of the literature on contemplative pedagogy, the following key themes and characteristics were found:

A variety and versatility of approaches, attitudes, and practices

Not only does the variety of contemplative practices allow educators to pursue the best fit for themselves and their courses, it also creates the opportunity for students and teachers to learn about diverse cultures and situate themselves in relation to these histories and peoples (Fort, 2016). Haberlin (2026) has developed a framework for implementing meditation in the classroom that is flexible enough to work for any discipline. What matters, in the case of bringing contemplative pedagogy into the classroom, is knowing oneself as an educator and knowing the students.

Because contemplative practices can be rooted in spiritual or cultural practices, **they must be chosen and integrated with care.** This is a key addition that arose from our co-writing sessions with the contributors of this resource that developed into many chapters that you will find here. Ridge Shukrun provides a starting point for instructors who are consid-

ering or have already implemented contemplative pedagogy in their work with students in **his chapter on the importance of self reflection.** Furthermore, you will find an entire section in this resource focusing on how the implementation of a contemplative pedagogy can be done in a **culturally appreciative and culturally-relevant manner**, beginning with a **self-reflection exercise from Naj Sumar on cultural humility**.

Educator as practitioner

Educators do not need to be masters of a given practice in order to share it, but it is important to commit to something that they connect with and works for them and their classroom (Laliberte, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d). If the educator is not a practitioner, it becomes harder for students to develop their own practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). In many practices, the educator needs to have the intrapersonal competence and readiness to guide a practice with students. For more on what this means see Ridge Shukrun's chapter on the **importance of self-reflection for instructors** and Joseph Siddiqi's **testimonial as an instructor integrating a contemplative pedagogy into his classroom.**

When educators are themselves practitioners and have spent time rehearsing practices, it can increase confidence to teach using a contemplative approach (Laliberte, 2025b; 2025d). For those who are new to contemplative pedagogy, connecting with groups like Centres for Teaching and Learning can help acquaint them with like-minded peers and build community among faculty members within an institution (Laliberte, 2024b; 2025c).

Fostering intra- and inter-connectedness

Contemplative pedagogy can foster connectedness within different parts of the self, with a variety of knowledge disciplines, and with the world as shared by all (Brucker & Chapple, 2017; Papenfuss et al., 2019; Alimah, 2020). Practices can cultivate a sense of judgement based on multiple perspectives which helps both educators and students to think with an open mind that is aware of the interconnectedness of the world (MisirHiralall, 2021).

Students are often encouraged to connect with their own values and meaning making, with course material and to broader issues like social justice (Wilson, 2021). Unlike the banking model of education, where students are seen as "empty vessels" into which information is deposited, contemplative pedagogy bring students and educators together to co-create knowledge in a participatory manner (Wilson, 2021).

See more about this in our section on **building community in the classroom** and specifically how **arts practices can deepen a sense of belonging**.

Lifelong growth and learning

Rather than focusing on external materialisms and knowledge acquisition, contemplative pedagogy cultivates students' insight and wisdom through ongoing awareness (Romano & Chang, 2022).

The transformative learning of contemplative pedagogy stems from the shift away from knowledge and skill acquisition towards a "journey of enacted wisdom" (Gunnlaugson et al., 2023, p. 88).

By adopting a mindset of lifelong growth beyond the power and status acquired with graduation, students who experience education embedded with contemplative pedagogy see their time at university as just the beginning, where they will continue to help the world throughout life. Competition is discouraged in Buddhist universities, who prefer to transform this energy into cooperation (Storch, 2013). Britton et al. (2013) also found that contemplative practices in science education and research helped to foster prosocial behaviour, decrease competition, and improve scientific integrity.

Beyond simple momentary "stress reduction"

In addition to helping students cope with adjusting to university, life stressors, and global crises (Wilson, 2021; MirsirHiralall, 2021; Reeve et al., 2021), contemplative practices can also help educators cope with the stresses involved in teaching, thereby preventing burnout (Muneer & Batool, 2021). They can also help to prevent stress in the future by developing resilience and tolerance to failure (Henriksen et al., 2022), as well as provide physical benefits such as silence or slow breathing (**box breathing**, **centering stillness**).

While a common motivator to educators incorporating these practices into their work with students is often stress (Alimah, 2020; Wilson, 2021), it is important to not limit their use to only being a stress-reduction tool. Contemplative pedagogy contains much more nuance and complexity that, when brought into the classroom in a **culturally appreciative manner,** can allow students to use course material as the object of contemplative focus (Delfita et al., 2020). We will discuss this more in the following chapter on **your goals for students.**

Building on top of this discussion of stress reduction, our contributors note that some practices may even *increase* stress for students, especially when asking students to connect with their emotions or engaging with unfamiliar practices in the classroom setting. It is important, therefore, to **approach contemplative pedagogy in a trauma-informed manner.** Our contributors have developed a **section focusing on trauma-informed practices and pedagogy**, and going deeper into the reasoning of how **activated nervous systems contribute to the classroom environment.**

Slowing down to resist the "rush"

Contemplative pedagogy helps to break the habits of mind of "perfectionism, urgency, instrumentalism, and purely transactional relationships" (Kinane, n.d.c.). In contrast to the "fast knowledge" culture we currently live in, contemplative pedagogy aims to slow the classroom pace to allow the time for the knowledge to sink in deeply, which allows them to better understand the full complexities of knowledge and the world (Orr, 1996; Hall & Keator, 2019; Simmer-Brown, 2019).

See Joseph's section on **mindfulness and presence** to hear his approach to slowing down and noticing. Also, see the **aimless wandering**, **three-point meditation**, **orienting**, **gratitude**, and **arrival practices** shared in this resource.

Decolonial action in education

Engaging in CP&P in good faith, **with appreciation**, challenges and resists the commodification of mindful and contemplative practices as mere "tools" (Kinane, n.d.b.). Additionally, honouring wisdom – **ancestral** and contemporary – as equal to intellect is to teach and learn in ways outside the western and colonial habitus (Reilly, 2023). Resisting the rush and recentering values is crucial to ensuring **the sustainability of our natural world.**

Contemplative pedagogy supports the inner work required to unlearn colonial habits of mind. For example, racial biases can be uncovered, examined, and transformed (Romano & Chang, 2022). Contemplative practices can offer hope and imaginative resistance for more just futures, as in **Dr. Robinson-Morris' rooted hope practice** shared in this resource.

Related content

- In the following chapter, we will dive deeper into **how contemplative pedagogy can align with your goals for students**
- Donetta Hines summarizes **five core dimensions of contemplative pedagogy**
- A crucial step before implementing CP&P is reflection on what approach you are taking, how to frame this with students, and the implications of incorporating practices. Read Ridge Shukrun's **piece on the importance of self-reflection here.**
- Similarily, care must be taken to ensure cultural appropriation. Naj Sumar provides **some critical questions for self-reflection here.**
- Watch Joseph Siddiqi's **video introducing mindfulness**, one entry point to contemplative

practices and pedagogy

References

Click to expand reference list

Alerby, E. (2020). ***Silence within and beyond pedagogical settings***. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51060-2

Alimah, A. (2020). **Contemplative and transformative learning for character development in islamic higher education**. *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies,* 24(1), 1–23.https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v24i1.384

Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2014). ***Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning***. Jossey-Bass.https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-06440-000

Barbezat, D., & Pingree, A. (2012). **Contemplative pedagogy: The special role of teaching and learning centers**. *To Improve the Academy, 31*(1), 177–191.https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2334-4822.2012.tb00681.x

Britton, W. B., Brown, A-C., Kaplan, C. T., Goldman, R. E., DeLuca, M., Rojiani, R., Reis, H., Xi, M., Chou, J. C., McKenna, F., Hitchcock, P., Rocha, T. A., Himmelfarb, J., Margolis, D. M., Niles, H. F., Eckert, A. M., & Frank, T. (2013). **Contemplative science: An insider prospectus.** *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (134), 13-29. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20051

Brucker, J., & Chapple, C. K. (2017). **Contemplative pedagogy: A descriptive account of two approaches to student engagement at Loyola Marymount University**. *International Journal of Dharma Studies,* 5(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40613-017-0046-z

Chien, G. I.-L. (2020). **Integrating contemplative and ignatian pedagogies in a buddhist studies classroom**. *Religions, 2020*(11), 567. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110567

Delfita, R., Trisoni, R., Andrizal, A., Putra, A. I., & Adripen, A. (2020). **Contemplation-based learning: An effective learning model for serving science and self-knowledge integration**. *Al-Ta Lim Journal, 27*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.15548/jt.v27i1.586

Fort, A. O. (2016). **Creating contemplative studies in the southwest: Theory and practice**. *International Journal of Dharma Studies, 4*(1), 13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40613-016-0039-3

Gunnlaugson, O., Cueto De Souza, R., Zhao, S., Yee, A., Scott, C., & Bai, H. (2023).**Revisiting the nature of transformative learning experiences in contemplative higher education**. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 21(1), 84–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446211067285

Haberlin, S. 2026. **Facilitating meditation practice in the higher education classroom: A conceptual framework.** *College Teaching, 74*(1), p. 52-61.

Hall, M. P., & Keator, M. (2019). **Stitching together east and west: A tale of two professors**. *Dev Sanskriti Interdisciplinary International Journal,* 14, 08–21. https://doi.org/10.36018/dsiij.v14i.132

Hart, T. (2004). **Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom.** *Journal of Transformative Education, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/154134460325931

Henriksen, D., Heywood, W., & Gruber, N. (2022). **Meditate to create: Mindfulness and creativity in an arts and design learning context**. *Creativity Studies, 15*(1), 147–168.https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2022.13206

Karolyn Kinane (Director). (2022, April 20). ***18 min intro to contemplative pedagogy w/ Karolyn Kinane*** [YouTube Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3j8–VUO34

Kinane, K. (n.d.-a). ***Is contemplation just meditation?*** [Wordpress]. Contemplative Lab Curriculum.

Kinane, K. (n.d.-b). ***What are we doing?*** [Wordpress]. Contemplative Lab Curriculum.

Laliberte, A. (2025a, February 5). **Contemplative pedagogy and practices spotlight: Joseph Siddiqi**. *Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).*

Laliberte, A. (2025b, February 26). **Contemplative pedagogy and practices spotlight: Anne Archambault**. *Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).*

Laliberte, A. (2025c, April 3). **Contemplative pedagogy and practices spotlight: Megan Fitzgibbons**. *Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).*

Laliberte, A. (2025d, April 4). **Contemplative pedagogy and practices spotlight: Theodore Klein**. *Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).*

Loeng, S. (2018). **Various ways of understanding the concept of andragogy**. *Cogent Education, 5*(1), 1496643. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1496643

MisirHiralall, S. D. (2016). **Re-envisioning contemplative pedagogy through self-study.** *Teacher Learning and Professional Development, 1*(2), 84–96.

MisirHiralall, S. D. (2021). **Developing a body scan meditation for contemplative pedagogy through self-study.** *Teacher Learning and Professional Development, 6*(1), 48–63.

Muneer, R., & Batool, R. B. (2021). **A qualitative study on mindfulness and teacher's well being**. *International Journal of Education and Humanities, 1*(2), 79–89.https://doi.org/10.58557/ijeh.v1i2.19

Orr, D. W. (1996). **Slow knowledge**. *Conservation Biology, 10*(3), 699–702. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1996.10030699.x

Papenfuss, J., Merritt, E., Manuel-Navarrete, D., Cloutier, S., & Eckard, B. (2019). **Interacting pedagogies: A review and framework for sustainability education**. *Journal of Sustainability Education, 20*(April 2019).

Reeve, J., Jindal, R., Bartle, C., & Stokes, N. (2021). **Using creative and contemplative pedagogy to promote learning efficacy and wellbeing within first-year, undergraduate students**. *Gateway Papers, 2*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.34

Reilly, R. C. (2023). ***Workshop: Exploring the tree of contemplative practices: What can I actually do in my classroom?*** [Yuja].

Romano, L. E., & Chang, D. F. (2022). **Right mindfulness in teacher education: Integrating Buddhist teachings with secular mindfulness to promote racial equity**. *Education Sciences, 12*(11), 778. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110778

Simmer-Brown, J. (2019). **Contemplative teaching and learning: Opportunities for Asian studies**. *ASIANetwork Exchange A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts, 26*(1). https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.291

Storch, T. (2013). **Buddhist universities in the United States of America**. *International Journal of Dharma Studies, 1*(4), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1186/2196-8802-1-4

Wilson, C. (2021). **A contemplative pedagogy: The practice of presence when the present is overwhelming.** *Journal of Transformative Learning, 8*(1), 52–62.

Contemplative pedagogy and awe

Rev. Jen Bourque

> "The [most beautiful] thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science—Einstein (1949, p. 5)"; cited in Keltner (2023, How Awe Transforms our Relationship to the World section).

Contemplative practices can be a response to awe. Indeed, many historical contemplative or spiritual practices are formalized from natural responses to awe. Keltner writes: "our awe-related vocalizations become sacred sounds, chanting and music...yoga offers a series of bodily postures that often manifest our physical expression of awe..." (2023, Intelligent Design section).

What is awe?

Awe is the "feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world" (Keltner, 2023 p. 25-26).

Cross-cultural studies show that there are eight main sorts of experiences that lead to awe:

1. moral beauty: stories of exceptional virtue, courage and ability
2. collective effervescence: feeling part of a "we", for example in a crowd or event, or through collective movement
3. nature
4. music
5. visual design (e.g. art, film, architecture)
6. spiritual and religious stories and experiences
7. experiences of birth or death
8. moments of insight, particularly related to systems and relationships (Keltner, 2023)

Photo by Nathan Anderson from Unsplash

Awe causes our default sense of self to be at least temporarily displaced with a "small self," leading to greater sense of humility and connection to others and the world around us. Perhaps you've experienced this sense looking at the night sky or a beautiful vista; studies show it is a common response (Keltner 2023, Piff et al, 2015). Awe can provoke wonder and curiousity as the mind "opens to intellectual questions and searching that awe inspires". Indeed, many stories of scientific discovery start with curiosity and searching that follow an experience of awe (Keltner, 2023).

How it relates to contemplative pedagogies and practices

Some of the **CP** described in this volume expose participants to these eight sources of awe and can themselves bring about awe and wonder in contemplation. For example, **making earth altars (LeeRay Costa)** or **aimless wandering (Gabriela Petrov)** take place in nature; **kintsugi collage (Amy Cooper)** exposes participants to visual imagery. **Gentle movement meditation (Anne Archambault)** or some of the breathing practices such as **Vagus nerve** or **Xi-xi Hu breathing (Rosemary Reilly)** may invite the sort of moving together that can lead to a sense of being part of something larger than themselves. No practice or experience is

guaranteed to create experiences of awe, but it is relatively common among adults studied (Bai et al, 2017) and can be found by opening oneself to the experience (Keltner, 2023). Educators using CP may want to be aware that practices could lead to awe and therefore understand the experiences and possible benefits of awe as well as those more directly associated with individual CP practices.

Noticing one's own experiences of awe—particularly those that might relate to one's subject matter or teaching—and encouraging students to do the same could be an avenue into contemplative teaching and learning. Understanding the relationships between awe, contemplative practices and learning may also provide additional insights into the ways CP functions and supports learning.

Further resources

The **Greater Good Science Centre** "offers free research-based and informed strategies and practices for the social, emotional, and ethical development of students, for the well-being of the adults who work with them, and for cultivating positive school cultures" has a page of information and resources curated on **Awe for Students** and **Awe for Adults.**

References

Click to expand reference list

Bai, Y., Maruskin, L. A., Chen, S., Gordon, A. M., Stellar, J. E., McNeil, G. D., Peng, K., &

Keltner, D. (2017). **Awe, the diminished self, and collective engagement: Universals**

and cultural variations in the small self. *Journal of Personality and Social*

Psychology, 113(2), 185–209. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000087

Einstein, A. (2011). *The world as I see it*. Open Road Media.

Keltner, D. (2023). ***Awe: The new science of everyday wonder and how it can transform your***

life. Penguin Press.

Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (2003). **Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion**.

Cognition and Emotion, 17(2), 297–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297

Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). **Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior**. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108*(6), 883–899. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018

Instructor and student testimonials

Hear from some instructors in our faculty interest group (FIG) and their students on their first-hand experience incorporating contemplative practices and/or pedagogy in the classroom.

Anne Archambault

Anne has been teaching in the Department of Applied Human Sciences since 2000. In this video, she shares how she was able to integrate her backgrounds in therapeutic recreation and yoga into her teaching through joy, play and pausing. What she noticed was the heightened sense of connection in her classroom.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=176***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

"It's a means to invite the students and instructor to create a space of safety, create a space of trustworthiness, and create a space where the group really comes together to be even more ready for learning." – Anne Archambault

Joseph Siddiqi

In this video, Joseph talks about how he entered into the practices of Buddhist meditation and mindfulness and how they've influenced his teaching approach in his Studio Arts courses. In the second half, he talks about the benefits he sees with students, and emphasizes the intentionality and instructor-preparedness in order to incorporate contemplative practices into their teaching.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=176***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

"Mindfulness isn't going to solve your problems, mindfulness is just going to make your problems clearer, it's going to accentuate things... And maybe that's not what students need in the moment. Maybe they need to just come and take a break from all their pressures and have a bit of an escape...that's healthy too. Do their art project, their school project, focus their mind and get away from whatever's really painful." – Joseph Siddiqi

Gabriela Petrov in conversation with Elle Belvedere

Elle Belvedere, a former student of Gabriela Petrov, instructor in the Department of Theatre, recalls the awareness, silence, somatic and movement practices that Gabriela introduces in her classes. She emphasizes that the practices heightened her personal awareness and her connection with other classmates. Gabriela speaks to the "Six Viewpoints" (Overlie, 2016) concept that she based a practice off of.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=176***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

"[The practice] gives me time to ground myself and just honestly self-regulate myself in the current moment. Also, being with everybody in the room, it reminds me that people are navigating their own day just like I am. And also something I've learned from the check-ins that we do, it was a way for me to learn how to articulate my goals for myself in front of other people and share any boundaries… it's about preparing my mind and body for collaboration and work or to create something." – Elle Belvedere

Anne Archambault in conversation with Laura Gammack

Anne Archambault interviews a former student in recreational therapy, Laura. In her classes with Laura, Anne utilized contemplative practices through intentional pauses, breathing and movement exercises and individual journalling. Laura shares her experience as student in this class and recalls a specific time when Anne brought in roses from her garden as a contemplative activity.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=176***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

"The contemplative practices helped to bring some depth into the class in a way that I think kind of did bring the group together into something different than sitting and listening to you speak and listening to the other students ask questions. So it changed the rhythm of the class." – Laura Gammack

Related content

- Anne Archambault's recorded practices: **Movement meditation** and **Three-point meditation**
- Joseph Siddiqi's recorded practice: **Centering stillness**, and his talks on **Introduction to mindfulness**, **Two approaches to mindfulness**, and **Noticing the movement of attention**
- Gabriela Petrov's recorded practice: **Aimless wandering**
- Instructors mentioned themes related to being **trauma-informed** and **building community in the classroom**

References

Overlie, M. (2016). ***Standing in space: The six viewpoints theory & practice softcover***. Fallon Press.

Intentional pause: Settling in

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Drink some water
- Take a deep breath (or a few!)
- Shift your attention from the screen to a point on the wall or floor, or an object, or simply close your eyes for a few minutes.

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude the first section on the seeds of contemplative pedagogy, here are some practices focused on orienting yourself to a new space or new material.

- Arriving / breathing / focusing practice
- Orienting

INTEGRATING CP&P INTO YOUR WORK WITH STUDENTS

In this section, we'll discuss **how contemplative practices can be applied to your teaching approach** with Donetta Hines summarizing the five high-level design principles that can be found in contemplative pedagogy. Educational developers Josephine Guan and Cristina Galofre Gomez connect some benefits of CP&P with **possible learning goals for students.** Finally, Ridge Shukrun offers some **key considerations for instructors before implementing CP&P** in their classrooms.

Core principles of contemplative pedagogy

Donetta Hines

In her research proposal, Lela Mosemghvdlishvili (2022) posits five **"Design Principles of Contemplative Pedagogy"** to guide educators who are interested in integrating a contemplative practice or pedagogy in their work with students. These five design principles work synergistically to foster, nurture, and grow a contemplative learning environment and community. This chapter will discuss these five principles, whose names are derived but not exactly the same as the original, and connect them to the work of our faculty interest group contemplative pedagogy.

Mindfully attending

Although Mosemghvdlishvili presents these five principles unhierarchically, in a circle, I begin with "mindfully attending" because "[a]ttention (mindfulness to the present moment) is the basic literacy needed to be nurtured continuously and an entrance competence to attend to introspective experiences" (2022). To paraphrase Mosemghvdlishvili, attention is also a basic literacy for learning, requiring knowing where our attention is and (re)orienting to the place, people, task, and purpose at hand, and engaging in what makes learning meaningful for oneself, which is one of the other 5 design principles, "First-person inquiry" (see below).

In related contemplative research, mindfulness scholar Oren Ergas (whom Mosemghvdlishvili also references) adds a third necessary component, "attitude," to this combination of attention with intention/purpose (Ergas, 2019). This attention trio means that we not only know where our attention is and intentionally (re)direct it, but that we also bring attention to the attitude, emotion, feeling, or valence our words convey and evoke. For example, do I "want to write" or "need to write," or "force myself to write"? Do I tell myself "I'm never going to do well in this course" or do I wonder "hmm, what could help me learn this concept better?" In other words, attitudes of curiosity, openness, (self) compassion, resilience, kindness, and gentleness, as opposed to negativity-bias, absolutes (e.g. never, always) criticism and force, "forcing" oneself), are necessary for learning.

These shifts in attitude, or tenor, of the words and attitudes we use with ourselves and each other echo Carol Dweck's research (2006) on growth mindset and purpose in successful learning, and remind me of **David Treleaven's trauma-informed embodied practice** with the fist: trying to pry one fist open with the fingers of the other hand only makes the muscles tense and the fist resist. But laying a gentle hand on top of the fist and even caressing it softens the muscles and the fist as it begins to release in response. Thus, the intention and the attitude we bring to mindfully attending make a difference, as do Mosemghvdlishvili's additional four principles.

Allowing silence

In our busy worlds and lives, allowing and making time for silence gives an opportunity for reflection. Such reflection can begin outside of our bodies, with sounds, sights in our environment, visualizations of people and places. With continued/repeated opportunity for silence, these external anchors eventually move inward, to our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, integrating them. The reflections can be metacognitive or sensory – body scan/movement, (re)orienting in the space, auditory, visual, tactile, or gustatory. The silence allows us to mindfully attend to one thing, refocusing when necessary.

Silence invites connecting with self and from self to external then back to self, with curiosity, openness, each person deciding their own attentional anchors and attractions, making meaning on their own. Silence also changes our habitual exposure to noise, be it aural, verbal, visual, corporal, mental, or cognitive. As the verb "allow" evokes, most of us could benefit from intentionally dedicated silent time so that we "allow" ourselves these opportunities for reflection. Thus, we can design our classrooms to offer or "allow" a daily 1-3 minutes of silence, which segues us to Mosemghvdlishi's next principle.

Reorienting time

Reorienting time involves slowing down and dedicating time for silence and mindfully attending in the classroom, which also makes space for a diversity of learners, learning styles, paces, and needs. In addition to inviting silence and reflection, reorienting time synergistically cultivates a process and sense of exploration and curiosity instead of the high stakes and urgency evoked by the habituated, perceived need for instant mastery, as well as the negative affect that arises when the instant mastery doesn't arrive quickly, or at all. Never-

theless, Mosemghvdlishi's verb "allow" also applies to us, the instructors, who need to allow time and space for "reorienting time" in our classrooms and lesson plans; contemplative scholar and practitioner, Daniel Siegel uses the term "time-in" to posit the minute or more we can give ourselves in a day to mindfully dedicate to silence and reflection (2013, 112). Not only, Siegel writes, does it help disconnect us from the noise and "endless stream of information" and reconnect us with ourselves, our (self) empathy, insight, presence, and focus, but it also benefits our immune systems (2013, 112-4) spaces specifically. For teaching and learning contexts, Siegel encourages educational institutions to "tak[e] a step back from routines and busy schedules and create[e] a new approach to education overall" (2013, 115) whereby "[t]eachers could expand their focus beyond the traditional three R's of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic to teach reflection, relationships, and resilience" (2013, 114).

Siegel posits that such a small yet consistent allotment of reflective time benefits teaching, learning, and life, including enhanced self knowledge/awareness, better school relationships, and happier educational spaces (2013, 114-5), which is also supported in teaching and learning scholarship on creating self-regulated learners (e.g. Nilson 2013, p. 10).

First-person inquiry

First-person inquiry, then, emerges *with* as much as *from* mindfully attending, allowing silence, and reorienting time. By allowing space and time for reflection, students practice engaging their own curiosity, to what is meaningful for them, and they step into self-regulated learning. Such first-person inquiry is transformational rather than transactional, expeditious, or instant-mastery focused.

Perspective shifting

With each of these principles, and as an ensemble, one can see how habitual and received perspectives shift. Normalizing time and space to mindfully attend and reflect shifts learning to emerge through first-person inquiry, grow through interaction with the others in the learning community, and leads to experiential meaningfulness and transformational education.

Themes from our faculty interest group

When asked a similar question in a group meeting in November 2023, the members of our faculty interest group on contemplative pedagogies responded:

Screenshot of a word cloud generated from the faculty interest group survey.

From further discussions, the considerations that arose from the knowledge and expertise that will be covered in the resource will fall under the themes of:

- Integrating CP&P in your work with students
- Culturally appreciative and culturally relevant lens
- Trauma-informed lens
- Classroom community-building
- Mindfulness and presence
- Practices and practical resources

Related content

- You can learn how one instructor, Joseph Siddiqi, interprets “mindfully attending” in his talk and demonstration on **noticing the movement of attention**
- Many practices in this resource around “allowing silence” and “reorienting time”, such as:

- **Arrival/breathing/focusing practices**
- **Vagus nerve breathing**, **box breathing**, **Xi-xi Hu breathing** practices
- **Aimless wandering**
- **Centering stillness**

- "First-person inquiry" with:
  - Ridge's piece on the **importance of self-reflection for instructors in implementing CP&P in the classroom**
  - **Cultural appreciation and relevance** section
- The meaningful and transformational education mentioned in the "perspective shifting" can be related to **awe in contemplative pedagogy**, and is addressed in practices in our resource such as:
  - **Gratitude practices**
  - **In memoriam and a letter from the future**
  - **Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining**

References

Click to expand the reference list

Brahm Centre (Director). (2021, September 6). ***Trauma sensitive mindfulness | Dr David Treleaven*** [YouTube Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgL20FNPLVM

Dweck, C. S. (2006). ***Mindset: The new psychology of success***. Random House.

Ergas, O. (2019). **Mindfulness in, as and of education: Three roles of mindfulness in education**. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 53*(2), 340–358.https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12349

Mosemghvdlishvili, L. (2022). ***Design principles of contemplative pedagogy***.

Nilson, L. B. (2013). ***Creating self-regulated learners: Strategies to strengthen students' self-awareness and learning skills***. Routledge.https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003443803

Siegel, D. J. (2013). *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*. Jeremy P.Tarcher / Penguin.

What are your learning goals for students?

Josephine Guan and Cristina Galofre Gomez

On this page...

As educators, we often want our students to focus better and engage with materials and each other more deeply – but how do we foster that? In our role as educational developers in the university's teaching centre, this is the question that powers our work with faculty, sharing approaches such as active and experiential learning and inclusive pedagogies for instructors to consider or bolster in their own classrooms. Contemplative pedagogy offers another approach to this question by placing the rich experiences of student at the centre. Here, we'll focus on the overlaps we see between goals of contemplative practices and pedagogy and common learning goals you may have for students in your courses.

To illustrate the kinds of objectives contemplative approaches can support in a more embodied and connected pathway of learning, we'll draw on current research on contemplative practices highlighted by Barbezat & Bush's book *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* (2014). We've reordered the principles to progress towards deeper learning. This progression starts from personal meaning, to focused attention, to problem-solving, to connection with peers and ultimately to deeper understanding.

Personal meaning

We begin with **first-person inquiry** before all else because when students find the course material to be relevant and relatable, they are more motivated to learn (Sousa, 2011). To achieve this, educators can start by fostering students' self-awareness and develop their personal meaning, or, as Barbezat & Bush (2014) describe, "the intentional cultivation of personal inquiry" (p. 16).

By encouraging this first-person inquiry, students are invited to engage their curiosity and identify what is important for them in their learning. Contemplative practices and pedagogy can validate students' experiences, their own sense of meaning, and personal values, creating opportunities for students to connect their inner world with the outer world, deepening their understanding of themselves and the material covered.

The often-introspective nature of contemplative practices and pedagogy is perfectly equipped for students to self-reflect. "Meditation and introspection provide effective means for students to become aware of their emotions and reactions while at the same time helping them clarify what is personally most important" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p.17). For example, journalling practices such as Theodore's **In memoriam and letter from the future** help students distill what is important to them. Barbezat & Bush posit even a simple breathing exercise can stimulate significant personal insights. When students are invited to turn inwards and reflect on what they are doing, this can lead to thinking about they want to do. Instructors can then connect this back to course content once deeper personal values are identified, thus positioning students more co-creators of their learning rather than passive receivers of knowledge.

Focused attention

Once we have clarified what matters, we can then focus on what matters. We often want our students to pay attention – to the lecture, to the activity, to their learning. In order to learn, they need to focus on what's important and be able to filter out the distractions. This can be especially challenging in our current times, with technologies and outside events fighting for students' attention. What if our students' attention needs to be cultivated, rather than assumed as the default or forced? Lang (2020) explores this question deeper in his book Distracted: Why your students can't focus and what you can do about it.

As noted in Donetta's chapter on **core principles of contemplative pedagogy**, attention is a fundamental skill for learning. Hart (2004), in Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom, argues that a "student's ability to direct and sustain his or her attention toward a task at hand has a direct impact on success." (p. 32).

Contemplative practices and pedagogy can foster learning environments that value and nurture mindful, willing attention, inviting students to notice, (re)orient their focus to the place, people, task, or purpose at hand, and stay engaged with what makes learning meaningful to them. Contemplative practices can support effective learning by enhancing the "quality of attention brought to that [learning] task" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014 p. 35). For example, guided mindfulness practices can cultivate concentrated and focused attention because the instructor provides an object of focus and scaffolded steps on how and what to focus on. This scaffolding, typically provided through step-by-step instructions or a script, provide a way for students to train their focus especially when done in a repetitive way.

For more on how contemplative practices and pedagogy can develop an increased capacity for focus and attention, we recommend watching Joseph Siddiqi's videos: **What is mindfulness?** and **Two approaches to mindfulness.**

In addition, there are practices in this resource that can help strengthen focus, attention and concentration, especially when done repeatedly:

- Arriving/breathing/focusing practice
- Movement meditation
- Breathing exercises: Box breathing, Xi-xi Hu breathing technique, Vagus nerve breathing.

Problem-solving

Focused attention is a crucial component in preparing students to solve complex problems you may present to your students in class (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 12). At the same time, problem-solving also requires open-mindedness or the ability to listen to and accept new ideas, therefore being able to direct where your attention goes. Psychologists Murray and Byrne (2005) describe this as "the capacity to hold alternative possibilities along with the ability to switch their attention between them".

This connects with the learning theory of cognitive development from Piaget (1968), in which students in post-secondary education generally move from seeing one worldview as "truth" into ultimately harnessing multiple worldviews simultaneously. In other words, they ideally shift away from a "black and white" view of the world towards adopting various frameworks and worldviews to analyze a problem from multiple angles. We ultimately want our students to leave our courses with a myriad of ways to look at things and know when to draw on the appropriate framework in order to be ready and resilient for an ever-changing world.

Photo by ThisisEngineering from Unsplash

In order to foster this, Barbezat and Bush (2014) say that the student needs to discern when to hold onto an idea, and when to let it go. This is closely linked with the contemplative practice of mindful awareness – noticing where your attention goes and being more in control of where its directed. Sable's (2024) mixed methods research showed that contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation, journal writing, deep listening, reflective inquiry, and dialogue used over a term enabled students to reflect on their thinking processes, become more aware of their mental habits, and engage with multiple perspectives and points of view, strengthening student's dispositions for critical and reflective thinking.

Additionally, contemplative practices often have cultural or historical backgrounds from all over the globe – when brought into the classroom appropriately and respectfully with **cultural humility**, they can expose students to various epistemologies or ways of thinking than what is typically presented in the course material.

For more about mindful awareness, see Joseph Siddiqi's talk and practice: **Noticing the movement of attention.**

Connection and compassion

In many of our disciplines, learning cannot happen alone– it must take place through meaning-making with others in the form of dialogue and collaboration. This is constructivist learning theory, where knowledge is co-constructed and cannot be formed in isolation. If we want our students to leave our courses more ready to listen and work with one another, we must create opportunities for them develop that capacity in a low-stakes environment like the classroom. Refer to **this chapter on community building** to read more about why building classroom community is important to support student learning.

In the **introduction** chapter, Donetta talks about how a common trait of contemplative practices is that they can reorient us to "those we are in relation with and the effect of our actions, and the community we are fostering together". For example, the practices from Sable's study (2004) were found to enable students to feel more connected and empathetic toward students with whom they disagreed than those with whom they easily agreed at a superficial level.

Furthermore, contemplative practices such as **loving-kindness meditation** can increase feelings of social connection and positive response toward strangers (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008). These practices not only deepen social connection and relationships with others but also with ourselves by stimulating self-compassion (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Photo by Kindel Media from Pexels

Contemplative practices do not need to be done individually. In fact, when repeated over and over in a group setting, silence or stillness practices like breathing or noticing can become rituals for a class. In this resource, you can explore how **collage arts** and **gratitude practices** can deepen a sense of student-student connection and belonging. Additionally, Naj Sumar provides **sample reflection exercises** for students reflect on how their identity shapes their engagement in the course, but also encourages them to consider how they would connect with their peers in respectful and inclusive dialogue.

Deeper understanding

The above principles of personal meaning, focused attention, problem-solving, and connection with peers can all contribute to students' deeper understanding of the content. In addition to this, the common traits of "allowing silence" and "reorienting time" principles core to contemplative pedagogy provide the necessary space for the learning to develop. The slowing down of contemplative pedagogy is often a resistance to the fast-paced world we live in, so creating space for this in the classroom is an invitation for students to revisit material to make the necessary connections and reflections. This reflection is also very common in the experiential learning process developed by Kolb (1984), in which students learn through doing, followed by reflection on that experience.

An example of deeper understanding Barbezat & Bush (2014) share is a practice known as ***lectio divina***, which provides an opportunity for students to "sink into" the material, a rare opportunity amongst the amount of reading they are often assigned. With this practice, new interpretations can arise from each repeated reading, making it more meaningful and understandable.

Another example presented in the book is the branch of beholding practices (pg. 47). In this particular example, students were presented with a painting and given some time to interpret it through intuition while suspending what they rely on with descriptions of colour, medium, history, culture. With extra time spent focusing on the same artifact, students were able to come up with multiple perspectives and stories in a more nuanced way instead of being given the story at the outset.

In this resource, contributors share many stillness and ritual/cycle practices that can create this space for reflection:

- Aimless wandering
- Centering stillness

Conclusion

Contemplative practices and pedagogy can enhance students' dispositions for focused attention and problem solving, deeper understanding of the course material, increase self-awareness, and strengthen a sense of connection and community (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Sable 2014) to activate deep learning within our students. While contemplative practices allow students to reflect on both their inner experiences and the course material, and their connections to the outer world they are not intended to replace other effective means of learning. Instead, they offer valuable complements or additions for teaching and learning (p.19).

Although this chapter focused on goals for students' learning, we want to echo our **editors in their foreword** that CP&P is as much about instructors as it is about students. In addition to benefiting students, contemplative practices can also nourish the instructor's presence and support their ability to explore their own mind (Hart, 2004). As Barbezat and Bush (2014) note, the "teacher's presence is the heart of teaching" (p. 91). Furthermore, contemplative practices support relational learning by cultivating both intra- and interpersonal skills. Through the shared exploration of contemplative practices in the classroom, the teacher-student dynamic can be strengthened enhancing the quality of the classroom experience (Hart, 2004).

This brings us to conclude with what Barbezat & Bush also end with – a word of caution. Contemplative practices and pedagogy are not a simple solution for all challenges faces by you and your students in the classroom. They can act as a complement to other effective teaching and learning strategies in your repertoire. Building on the insights from other contributions in this resource by **Joseph**, **Ridge**, **Naj**, and **Clarissa**, educators should have personal experience and competence with these practices before implementing them in their work with students. Additionally, they should be applied with a keen understanding of your own students and context – see the following chapter by Ridge on the **importance of self-reflection before implementation** – and aligned with your pedagogical goals such as your course learning outcomes.

References

Click to expand the reference list

Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. Jossey-Bass. **https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-06440-000**

Byrne, R. M, & Murray, M. (2005). Attention and working memory in insight problem-solving. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, 27.

Hart, T. (2004). Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2(1), 28–46. **https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603259311**

Hutcherson, C. A., Seppala, E. M., & Gross, J. J. (2008). Loving-kindness meditation increases social connectedness. *Emotion, 8*(5), 720–724.

Lang, J. M. (2020) *Distracted: Why students can't focus and what you can do about it*. Basic Books.

Piaget, J.(1968). *Six psychological studies*. Anita Tenzer (Trans.). Vintage Books.

Sable, D. (2014). Reason in the service of the heart: The impacts of contemplative practices on critical thinking. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry, 1*(1), Article 12. **https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol1/iss1/12**

Sousa, D.A. (2011). *How the brain learns* (4th ed.). Corwin Press.

The importance of self-reflection in the implementation of a contemplative practice

Ridge Shukrun

On this page...

So, you're interested in implementing some form of contemplative practice into a course you will teach. Before continuing, stop and ask yourself this question: why I am interested in implementing a contemplative practice?

There are many reasons why you might be interested in this, and this section is intended to give you a chance to take a reflective (and perhaps even contemplative) approach to this process, identify your goals in using some of these practices, and consider the possible risks.

First, you might ask yourself: **what do I understand "contemplative" to mean?** You will no doubt come across several definitions (including in this OER), but what is your own *personal* experience of contemplation? Do you have a personal contemplative practice? Have you participated in any contemplative activities? **What benefits have you received from them,** and how feasible would it be—given your level of experience—for you to share those benefits with your students through your course?

Second, you might ask: **what is my goal in doing this?** Contemplative practices (CPs) have many benefits, but one must be careful in understanding one's goal for trying to share these benefits. Is this truly for the benefit of the students? Or am I implementing this for my own benefit? Tips for how to implement CP in a way that benefits the students will be discussed in the Who benefits? section below.

A final question to consider here: **how can I implement a CP appropriately and in a way that truly benefits the students?** Is it designed in a way that can be integrated meaningfully into the course? That is to say, does it make sense in the context of the course?

While you are ultimately responsible for how you choose to implement CP into your classroom, we believe that these questions are necessary if one is to approach implementing them respectfully, appropriately and meaningfully.

What approach should we take in implementation?

There are several potential issues with implementing a contemplative practice separately from its cultural context and original goals. In this section, we will deal with the issue of removing a contemplative practice from its cultural context, thereby narrowing its scope for the individuals in question.

In the study *A Powerful Silence* by Maia Duerr (2004), data on the role of meditation and other contemplative practices in American life and work was collected through in-depth interviews with "84 professionals who incorporate contemplative practices in their work," (Duerr, 2004) including but not limited to educators. The study found three main approaches to the implementation of a contemplative practice:

1. The **clinical use approach**, which is "goal-oriented and functional" and focuses on "stress reduction, relaxation and concentration"
2. The **doorway to change approach**, which holds a "balance between goals and intentions"—often by beginning with the clinical use approach by leaving the door open to the possibility of "exploring the psychological and spiritual facets of their lives"
3. The **transformative use approach**, which is "intention-oriented" and focuses on the "transformation of individuals, groups, and society

An example of the clinical approach in the context of a secular university is Concordia's Mindful Campus Initiative which draws on research by Davis and Hayes through the Centre for Mindfulness. (Davis & Hayes, 2012) This approach takes a more utilitarian view of a contemplative practice such as mindfulness meditation by presenting it as a tool "in the service of improved physical and mental well-being." (Duerr, 2004) By contrast, certain traditional Buddhist understandings of meditation seem to clearly fall into the transformative use approach; in such views, the practice is an integral part of the Eightfold Noble Path (Keown, 2013) and is directly intended to orient the practitioner towards a total transformation "for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of lib-

eration."(Kabat-Zinn, in forward to Gilbert & Tirch, 2009)[1]. In this approach, individuals are generally encouraged "to explore questions of meaning and spirit in their life," and the practice is often presented alongside "ethical guidelines" such as the Buddhist precepts. (Duerr, 2004)

Is one approach better than the other, particularly when considering the context of the classroom? At the very least, we can make the case that the different approaches vary in terms of their scope; for example, the clinical approach seems to narrow the scope of the practice in how it treats the individual. It focuses on how the individual feels (stress reduction, reduced rumination, decreased negative affect), on their ability to regulate their emotions, and their brain's productivity (cognitive flexibility, improved working memory) (Davis & Hayes, 2012). The clinical approach does not necessitate considering questions of meaning, purpose, and value,[2] which in the traditional context, are inseparable from the practice itself. On the other hand, the doorway to change approach and the transformative use approach both open the door to these questions; as a result, they are more likely to treat the human being as a whole (holistically) rather than partially.

Again, we are not making the case that such benefits which the clinical approach focuses on are irrelevant to the students or that this kind of approach should not be considered. It is our view that at the very least, the appropriateness of this approach to the implementation of **CP** should be questioned and evaluated based on the needs and context of the course. On the other hand, it is also worth questioning how the transformative use approach does or does not fit in a secular institution, and how it might be implemented respectfully and appropriately without 1. knowingly or unknowingly imposing a particular worldview or 2. culturally appropriating/watering down the practice. We will discuss further in the next section on **cultural appreciative and relevant pedagogies.**

Perhaps a middle way such as the doorway to change approach offers the best balance between the two. In either case, it is clear that the method must be appropriate for "specific settings and audiences" (Duerr, 2004). There is no one-size-fits-all practice, and an educator must know their audience so that they may tailor their approach to it.

Finally, we might ask whether the educator themselves needs to be a practitioner. Just as the implementation varies depending on the practice, the level of expertise necessary varies depending on the practice. For example, some practices (such as many in the OER) are designed to be accessible for beginners and suitable for educators of different fields; others, such as **Joseph Siddiqi's noticing movement of attention** is more specific to the field of the arts and might need some tweaking to fit into the context of another field. Ultimately,

1. Please note that while many Buddhist traditions do hold liberation (or enlightenment) as the goal of the practice, this does not necessarily characterize all traditions. We acknowledge the diversity of belief, worldview and practice among Buddhist practitioners and traditions.
2. That is to say, questions about what is good, how one should act according to what is good, and how one should orient themselves towards what is good.

we recommend that the educator try the practice for themselves before implementing it in the classroom, because as both a practitioner and an expert in their field, they would then be well-positioned to judge how to appropriately implement a particular contemplative activity or practice in a way that fits into the context of the course they are teaching.

Framing the contemplative practice

Before proceeding, we feel it is important to preface this and the next section by posing the following question: **are the traditional ethics and worldview in which a practice originated inherent to that practice?**

It is not our goal to argue that this is the case for all practices all the time; instead, we aim to raise the question so that you as the educator may explore the relationship between the practice and its traditional context, with the goal of better understanding the practice and the ways in which it may be possible to appropriately and meaningfully implement it in the classroom.

We will begin this section by continuing to use the example of certain forms of Buddhist-style meditation due to its popular and even mainstream adoption under the umbrella of "mindfulness", "mindful practice" or "mindful exercises". Its implementation is often justified through the promotion of measurable benefits such as (but not limited to): stress reduction, reduced rumination, decreased negative affect (e.g. depression, anxiety), less emotional reactivity/more effective emotion regulation, increased focus, more cognitive flexibility, improved working memory (Davis & Hayes, 2012).

These benefits are certainly worthwhile and relevant to not only students, but indeed, all people. However, it is certainly the case that many of the Buddhist traditions have a very different goal and understanding of the practice. For example, in some traditions, meditation is understood as a method for achieving enlightenment, which is the liberation from "the endless cycle of rebirth" through the cultivation of the Eightfold Path (Takahashi Brown, 2002). Again, it is important to note here that this understanding of Buddhism does necessarily characterize all Buddhist traditions.

Another example of a contemplative practice which has been re-framed for a secular context is the Christian practice of *lectio divina,* or "holy reading". The traditional goal of the practitioner is to "rest in the presence of the Holy Spirit" by following its four steps (lectio, meditation, oratio and contemplatio). (Wright, 2023) Importantly, this practice does not involve just any text, but specifically the Christian scriptures. Jake Wright, a Philosophy professor, implemented a modified version of this practice in his classroom with these goals: "increased attention to cognitive and non-cognitive reactions to the text, willingness to

engage with the material in novel ways, and the opportunity to engage in independent disciplinary practice" (Wright, 2023). In his implementation, Wright's students engage with philosophical texts rather than the Christian scriptures.

Inherent in certain traditional understandings of these practices are worldviews which hold to certain beliefs about the nature of reality (metaphysical) and human purpose (teleological). In a secular context, however, these practices risk being stripped of their cultural contexts, their traditional worldviews and goals. Or, perhaps even worse, they are presented as secular practices while still covertly (or unknowingly) retaining some of these. There are at least two possible issues with this kind of implementation: 1. the risk of imposing a worldview and 2. cultural appropriation/the watering down of the practice to fit the needs of the practitioner. The educator should be aware of and try to avoid both of these. The best way to do this is to actively address these in the classroom. The educator might want to discuss the cultural and historical background of the practice, including its goal or benefits according to its original tradition. The educator might also then discuss how they perceive the practice, their own experience with it, and how their implementation differs from (or is similar to) the traditional practice. Finally, the educator might discuss (if necessary) how this practice fits into a secular environment, and what its goal or benefits might be in this context. Please refer to the ***Cultural appreciation or appropriation* chapter by Naj Sumar** for a lengthier exercise regarding cultural appropriation.

The "value" of contemplation: or, what is *educating for the good?*

In this section, we will briefly take up the question that was alluded to earlier: specifically, the question of ethical values in contemplative practice. To begin, it is our view that education in general should be oriented towards a kind of learning which produces critical, ethical members of society: that is, people who 1. can exercise a **critical discernment** towards themselves and the world around them and 2. act according to the good of both themselves, others, society and the non-human world. In a classroom which is oriented towards such goals, the student develops these to the degree which they are able to seriously and authentically engage with the course. Similarly, in certain traditional understandings of the practice, Buddhist meditation is inseparable from ethical guidelines (such as the 5 precepts) [3] which accompany them precisely to the degree to which the practice is taken seriously.

3. Traditionally, these are to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and intoxicants. In certain traditions/stages of practice, there are 8 precepts.

As demonstrated by the different approaches to contemplative practice in Duerr's study, not all who implement a contemplative practice or activity in the classroom necessarily need to design it to support such moral development. In particular, the clinical approach does not seem to require this (but certainly can include it, such as in the form of gratitude, empathy, etc.); on the other hand, as we begin to consider the doorway to change and transformative use approaches, such a consideration becomes more and more relevant. Depending on the depth of the implementation and the goals of the practice, it would be helpful for the educator to be aware of and consider some or all of the following implications:

- What are the ethical values of the worldview in which the practice was developed?
- What, if any, ethical values do the practice aim to cultivate?
- How is the above related to the course material? Are there links, congruences and maybe even perceived incompatibilities between them?
- How should they address the above in the classroom?
- How should they ensure that the students' ethical development is supported and respected?

Again, the context of the course will ultimately determine the relevance of an implementation which discusses or includes ethical elements related to the practice. As mentioned above, we are not arguing that the original ethical values or worldview of a practice are always inherent to it; our aim is to raise the question of the relationship between the practice and its original context, so that you as the educator may be better positioned in deciding how or how not to implement a particular practice.

For more discussion on CP and values in the classroom, please also refer to the ***Building community in the classroom*** section.

Who benefits?

In this section, I would like to take up the question of who is benefiting from the implementation of a CP. This question is essential when considering whether one should implement, and it is also linked to the first question posed in this section: why are you interested in implementing a CP? The title of the section is perhaps provocatively chosen to highlight the principle that the implementation of CP (and education in general) should be of service to the students. If the educator is only interested in implementing a CP for selfish or egotistical reasons (sometimes even under the auspices of benefiting the students), then they should perhaps re-consider. If, however, the educator is interested in CP with the goal of benefiting the students and enriching their learning, then here are some recommendations regarding how to implement:

- It is important that students can opt into these practices; in the practices presented in the OER, authors give examples of how to introduce and frame the practices for students, giving them needed context to understand them. They also give alternatives or adaptations for students who may not be able to or comfortable with the practices as described.
- Before implementing CP in the classroom, instructors will want to think through how to present them to students, how to ensure their teaching is trauma-informed, and how to offer adapted versions when needed.
- A good implementation of CP ideally entails that the instructor be sufficiently experienced with the practice to answer questions and offer guidance. They might also want to familiarize themselves with different perspectives on the practice, or offer students additional resources for consultation, should questions arise.
- When implementing CP in the classroom, the goals for doing so should not be abstract. The projected goals and benefits to the students and the classroom should be clear and concrete. Consider the course you are teaching, the approach which is most appropriate for the context, and the level at which the implementation makes the most sense. Please refer to the *Benefits of CP&P* chapter for a lengthier discussion on the benefits of CP.
- Finally, even with all the planning in the world, we can never perfectly predict what fruits our efforts will bear. As such, resolve to stay open and learn from your experience.
- When things do go well, share your results with other educators so that they and their students may also benefit from your experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we encourage you to consider these questions and points we have made with the hopes that they help you do what is best for your students (and as a consequence, yourself). As was mentioned above, take this opportunity to engage in self-reflection; your and your students will no doubt benefit from it. With all this being said, we wish you success on this journey, as well as the success of your students.

Related content

- Doing Naj Sumar's **self-reflection activity on cultural humility** will provide you with a script

to use in your teaching practice or reflect upon further

- Clarissa de Leon has an alternative activity using **thoughtbooks to reflect upon culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy**
- You might also be interested in Theodore Klein's journaling and visualization practice: In memoriam and a letter from the future

References

Click to expand the reference list

Davis, D. M., & Hayes, J. A. (2012). What are the benefits of mindfulness? *American Psychological Association, 43*(7), 198–208.

Duerr, M. (2004). ***A powerful silence: The role of meditation and other contemplative practices in American life and work***. Yumpu.

Gilbert, P., & Tirch, D. (2009). **Emotional memory, mindfulness and compassion**. In F. Didonna (Ed.), *Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness* (pp. 99–110). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-09593-6_7

Keown, D. (2013). ***Buddhism: A very short introduction*** (Second Edition). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199663835.001.0001

Takahashi Brown, W. (2002). ***Introduction to Buddhism***.

Wright, J. (2023). Using lectio divina as an In-class contemplative tool. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry, 6*(1), 71–94.

Intentional pause: Setting intention

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Shift your position (between sitting and standing, facing a different direction, moving to another room) for a moment
- Set an intention for the rest of the day, or tomorrow, that doesn't end in, or is motivated by, productivity

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude this section on integrating CP&P into your work, here are some practices focused on building connections between yourself, others, and the course material.

- In memoriam and a letter from the future
- Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining

CULTURAL APPRECIATION AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

As Ridge Shukrun's piece on the importance of **self reflection prior to implementing CP&P into your work with students** introduced, there are varying approaches to how a contemplative practice is implemented. As Duerr (2004) noted it is important to consider the appropriate context and audience for the method in question, which we have covered in our chapter on aligning the practice with your learning objectives. Additionally, a question that surfaces often in discussions on contemplative practices and pedagogies is the issue of **cultural appropriation** or "watering down" a practice by taking it to a different context, or knowingly/unknowingly imposing a worldview onto students.

We believe this is where crucial self reflection work takes place – there are no straightforward answers as to how to implement CP&P in a culturally-appreciative or relevant manner. Thus this section, primarily built up by specialists and knowledge keepers in this area, serves as an opportunity to contemplate within ourselves. As noted through various CP FIG and Summit gatherings, sometimes the answer after all of this is that a practice is not appropriate in certain contextst.

We begin this section with an invitation to do a self-reflection on **cultural humility practice**, guided by questions developed by Naj Sumar, where the answers you provide will become a downloadable script that you can take with you. This is followed by an **inquiry cycle activity** written by Clarissa de Leon who uses "thoughtbooks" as a tool for engaging with culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy. Next, Emil Briones shares insights into **reclaiming ancestral practices** which were co-created during their session as the Contemplative Pedagogies Summit. This section concludes with a summary of a talk by Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber on the **conflicting world views** of Western colonial materiality and Indigenous land-based relationality.

References

Duerr, M. (2004). ***A powerful silence: The role of meditation and other contemplative practices in American life and work***. Yumpu.

Self reflection on cultural humility

Naj Sumar

This resource provides a **list of reflective questions** designed to guide educators in responsibly incorporating contemplative practices into their teaching.

Why reflection?

Cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) suggests that we cannot acquire expertise on other peoples' lives and accordingly their cultures. In this way, engaging with culture is seen as relational, continuous, and subjective. By challenging us to step outside of our comfort zone of objectivity and mastery, cultural humility is a path to openness and curiosity. For educators, this means being humble enough to accept that deeper preparation and thought is needed when bringing cultures that are not our own into the classroom.

How to work with questions

There are many proposed questions listed below for you to reflect on and embrace cultural humility. While it may feel overwhelming, these questions are simply a starting point. Think of questions as bridges – pathways to understanding, not interrogation tools. The intention is to gather your responses to begin scripting and structuring your use of contemplative practices in the classroom.

This tool will guide you in answering some self-reflective questions about your relationship to contemplative practices and how you intend to use them in the classroom. By the end of this activity, you will have the option of downloading this script to keep on hand and look to when considering including contemplative practices or a contemplative pedagogy in your classroom.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=213#h5p-5

Related content

- Ridge's self-reflection piece on the **importance of self-reflection for instructors before implementing CP&P**, including considerations of whether to take a secular or spiritual approach with your students
- Clarissa's **thoughtbook exercise** for instructors on culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy
- **Emil**, **Lee and Dave's** provocation questions for readers, including: what does it mean to reclaim or reconnect practices from our ancestry? What are questions to think about CP&P as settlers on this land? Where do we call "home"?

References

Tervalon, M. & Murrary-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, *9*(2), 117-125.

Inquiry cycle for culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy

Clarissa de Leon

On this page..

Introduction

Overview

Drawing on the work of Dr. Geneva Gay and Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, this learning resource explores key concepts within Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, demonstrating how they can be used in tandem to challenge dominant white narratives in higher education. Taking an inquiry approach, this learning resource will guide you through an examination of normative teaching practices within your disciplines (or institutions) and prompt you to consider how these practices may perpetuate racial hierarchies. Through a cyclical process of independent and group reflection, learning about key concepts, and practical application, you will build an understanding of how culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies can be used to disrupt and challenge power dynamics in educational spaces. Central questions participants will consider are: how can we affirm students' cultural identities in our approaches to curriculum, classroom environment, and learning

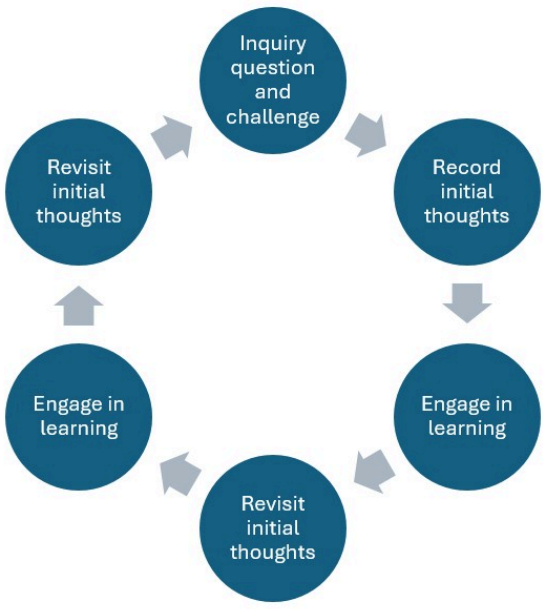
activities? How can we create accountable spaces that avoid microaggressions and tokenization? How can we encourage students to develop a socio-cultural critical consciousness?

Learning objectives

- Analyze how dominant white narratives contribute to normative teaching practices across disciplines
- Unpack points of connection and difference between Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
- Identify culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies that can be used to challenge racial power hierarchies in higher education

Inquiry cycle

This learning resource is structured around a cyclical inquiry approach developed by **The Critical Inquiry Consortium**.



The starting point for the inquiry cycle is an inquiry question and/or inquiry challenge.

Inquiry questions are ones that we grapple with over time. They resist binary thinking and singular answers and instead invite us to consider multiple perspectives on a topic. However, this does not mean that all responses to inquiry questions are equally valid or correct. An important component to inquiry questions is that responses to them can be evaluated and adapted as learners grow in their understanding of a topic and develop reasoning for their response to the inquiry question. Inquiry challenges are concrete tasks that respond to inquiry questions. They are designed to be completed within a set amount of time (e.g. a lesson, series of lessons, or in a course).

After being introduced to the inquiry question and/or inquiry challenge, learners record their initial thoughts in a *thoughtbook*.

Thoughtbooks

Thoughtbooks are spaces where thoughts are allowed to be messy. They are private, unstructured journals where learners can record their thinking and responses to an inquiry question and/or challenge. You are invited to use your thoughtbook whenever you like, but at key points of the inquiry cycle you will be directed to revisit it for reflective activities.

You are welcome (and encouraged) to use your thoughtbook to document your thinking in any way that feels most authentic to you including:

- Freewriting
- Bullet points
- Complete/incomplete thoughts
- Questions
- Drawings
- In any language

In this resource, steps involving the thoughtbook will be denoted by this icon:

Cycle one

Inquiry question and challenge

- **Inquiry question:** How may Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogies help us thoughtfully and intentionally support racialized students?
- **Inquiry challenge:** Identify a strategy you can adapt and a strategy that you can adopt to be more culturally responsive and relevant in your practice

Record initial thoughts

Using your thoughtbook, record your initial thoughts about the inquiry question and challenge using the below table.

What are my staple teaching practices?	What do I want to start doing?

Engage in learning

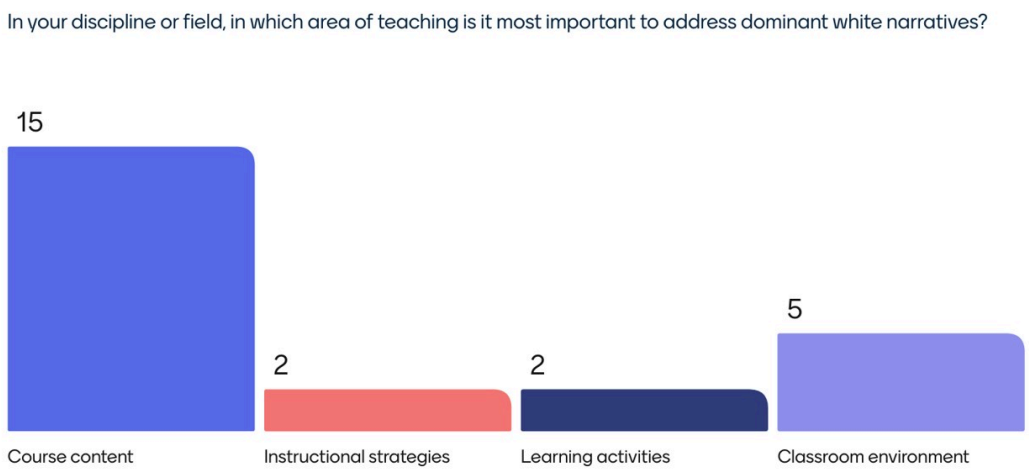
In the “Engage in learning” portions of the inquiry cycle, you will be introduced to key concepts connected to the inquiry question and challenge. In this section you will explore ideas related to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and curricular violence. You will also be provided with resources to explore, and reflection prompts to consider independently and/or with others (e.g. colleagues).

Consider: In which areas of your discipline or program is it most important to address dominant white narratives through your teaching?

- Course content
- Instructional strategies
- Learning activities
- Classroom environment

Here is what attendees at the Contemplative Summit had to say:

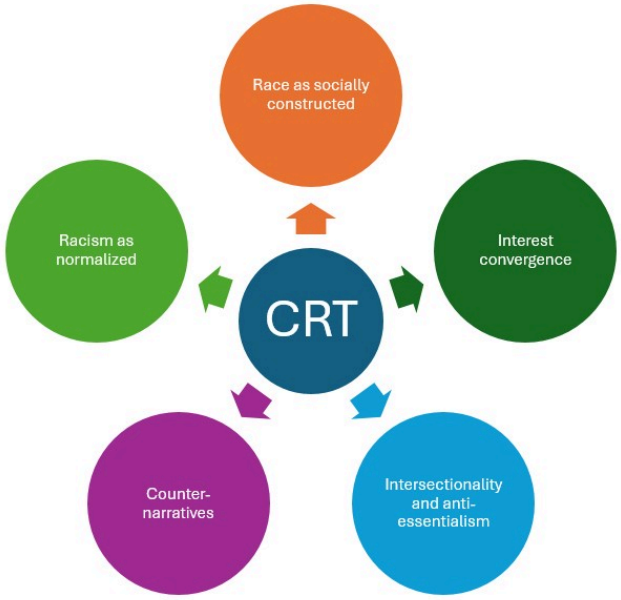
Responses from participants during the Contemplative Summit workshop



How do these responses align with your answer? Do the results surprise you? Why may others have the same or a different response to you?

All the above options can be considered a valid selection depending on your specific context. This is because dominant white narratives can be present in all aspects of teaching across all disciplines due to systemic racism. Critical Race Theory (CRT) can help us better understand the systemic nature of racism.

The origin of CRT is in critical legal studies. CRT is a theoretical framework that argues that race is socially and legally constructed to advance the interests of white people at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. As such, race and racialization are embedded in structures within and across institutions such as the legal system, education, health services, and housing. While there is some variation amongst CRT scholars on how they discuss or theorize about systemic racism, there are a set of generally agreed upon tenets of CRT:



(see **Additional resources** section to learn more about CRT)

Of the abovementioned CRT tenets, racism as normalized is of particular importance to consider when endeavoring to address dominant white narratives in teaching. The normalization of racism helps explain the ways whiteness can be centered in both what and how we teach. A concept that can help illustrate this point is curriculum violence (Jones, 2020). According to Jones, "curriculum violence occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally" (para. 7).

The adverse effects curriculum violence can have on students can be felt from various aspects of lessons and teaching. CRT explains that curriculum violence often goes unnoticed because practices that center and privilege whiteness are conveyed as normative or "just the ways things are."

Consider: What status quo educational practices in your discipline perpetuate curriculum violence? You are encouraged to discuss this question with a colleague in your field or discipline. Remember, curriculum violence can manifest in different ways including:

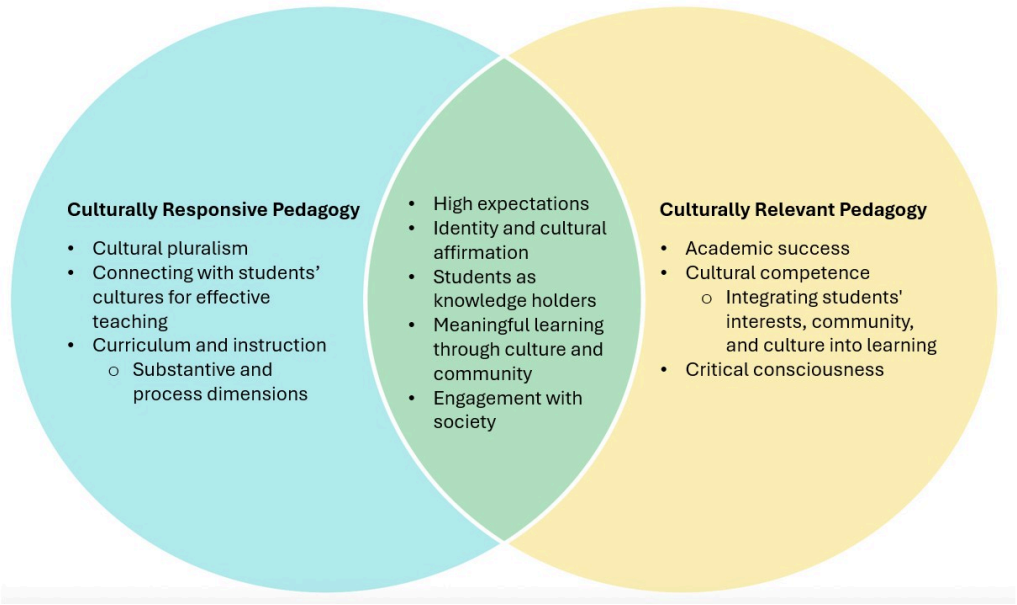
- Course content: What ideas are implicitly and explicitly reinforced?
- Instructional strategies: Whose perspectives and knowledges are centered?
- Learning activities: In what ways and how are students engaged in their learning? How are students assessed?
- Classroom environment: How do students share space? Whose needs are prioritized?

Return to your thoughtbook

Revisit your thoughtbook and re-read your initial thoughts from the beginning of the inquiry cycle. What do you think now? Feel free to add or remove ideas, ask further questions, build on initial thoughts, or anything else you wish to record.

Engage in learning

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are two approaches to education that can help educators address and decenter white narratives in teaching and learning. Though sometimes used interchangeably, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are two distinct frameworks and offer different perspectives on supporting racialized students.



Similarities and differences between Culturally Responsive and Culturally Relevant Pedagogies

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy emerged out of research on multicultural education and was developed by Dr. Geneva Gay. In Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, educators aim to more effectively teach diverse student populations by drawing upon their heritages, experiences, and perspectives. According to Gay (2018):

Culturally responsive teaching corrects this misconception and exclusion by making explicit how and why mainstream educational policies and practices are shaped by and reflective of the Eurocentric culture, perspectives, and experiences of the powerful, privileged, and demographically dominant ethnic group. In other words, what is commonly thought of as cultureless mainstream U.S. schooling is, in reality, *Eurocentric culturally responsive education."* (p. 86-87)

Key characteristics of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy include **constructivism**, building on prior knowledge, educators developing a deep knowledge of students, and teachers growing their own awareness of diversity in their classroom and larger social contexts. See **Additional resources** section to learn more about Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy emerged out of research on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as well as Critical Race Theory. In Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, educators focus on helping students achieve academic success while also affirming their cultural identities and encouraging them to question and challenge social inequities. According to Ladson-Billings (2024),

> The genesis for this inquiry came from my observation that, although teachers had access to increasingly diverse curriculum materials such as textbooks, trade books, curriculum units, classroom posters, and decorations, the students from marginal-

ized racial and ethnic groups were continuing to struggle to achieve academic success. These materials were not changing the ways teachers approached teaching." (p. 99)

The key tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. (see **Additional resources** section to learn more about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy).

Consider:

1. How may culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant teaching be similar? How may they be different? How can normative practices in your discipline be re-molded to have a more culturally responsive and relevant approach? You are encouraged to discuss these questions with a colleague from your discipline. Together, identify examples specific to teaching in your field. Use the Venn diagram below to guide your thinking.
2. Both Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy have their origins in kindergarten to grade 12 education. However, the ideas and core concepts in both frameworks can transfer to higher education. To expand your thinking about culturally responsive and relevant teaching approaches, read Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy in the Early Years: It's Never Too Early! (McAuley, 2018).

Return to your thoughtbook

Revisit your thoughtbook and re-read your entries. What do you think now? Feel free to add or remove ideas, ask further questions, build on initial thoughts, or anything else you wish to record.

Cycle two

Inquiry question and challenge

Reground yourself in our inquiry question and challenge:

- **Inquiry question:** How may Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogies help us

thoughtfully and intentionally support racialized students?

- **Inquiry challenge:** Identify a strategy you can adapt and a strategy that you can adopt to be more culturally responsive and relevant in your practice

Return to your thoughtbook

Re-read the entirety of your thoughtbook. After re-reading, circle one strategy from each column of your table:

What are my staple teaching practices?	What do I want to start doing?

How culturally responsive and relevant are your two selected pedagogical strategies? Based on what you have learned, how might you adopt and adapt them as methods for disrupting dominant white narratives in your teaching?

Engage in learning

Try your selected strategies relatively soon (within the next two weeks if possible). If you are not currently in a teaching role, consider organizing an opportunity for you to teach to a group of colleagues or peers (e.g. **microteaching**). If it is helpful, use the below guide to plan when and how you will implement these strategies, as well as your reflection immediately after using the strategies.

Topic	**Plan**
Materials	
Reflection	
What did you notice about how students responded to their learning? What did you notice about how you responded to their learning?	

You may also consider having a colleague observe you teach.

Return to your thoughtbook

Revisit your thoughtbook and re-read your entries. What do you think now? Feel free to add or remove ideas, ask further questions, build on initial thoughts, or anything else you wish to record.

Engage in learning

Further investigate the culturally responsive and relevant strategies you implemented in your teaching. What research has been done on these strategies? What do scholars in your field say about teaching and learning in your discipline? How has Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy been incorporated in disciplines outside of your own? You may consider using the below graphic organizer to help organize your research.

Research on Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy	**Research on teaching and learning in your discipline**
Topic • Source ◦ Key takeaway	Topic • Source ◦ Key takeaway
Topic • Source ◦ Key takeaway	Topic • Source ◦ Key takeaway

Return to your thoughtbook

Revisit your thoughtbook and re-read your entries. What do you think now? Feel free to add or remove ideas, ask further questions, build on initial thoughts, or anything else you wish to record.

Carrying the cycle forward

Now that you have completed two cycles of the iterative inquiry process, you can continue the process with the same inquiry question and challenge, or you can take this opportunity to develop a new inquiry question and challenge based on your emerging interests and observations. You may consider:

- What needs have you observed from your students?
- What challenges or resistance could you encounter when taking a culturally responsive and relevant approach?
- What is the culture of your institution? Of your discipline? How may that affect the teaching strategies you use?
- What are your personal areas of growth in relation to anti-racist learning?

Related content

- Doing Naj Sumar's **self-reflection activity on cultural humility** will provide you with a script to use in your teaching practice or reflect upon further
- Ridge Shukrun's piece on **the importance of self-reflection in the implementation of contemplative pedagogies** helps put these activities into perspective and explains more deeply why they are critical steps to implementing contemplative pedagogies
- You might also be interested in Theodore Klein's journalling and visualization practice: **In memoriam and a letter from the future**
- Consider reading more about **trauma-informed pedagogy** to combine a culturally responsive pedagogy with an awareness and preparedness to address inter-generational, colonial, and/or race-based trauma

Additional resources

Critical Race Theory

Beecham, M. (2022, November 15). ***Critical race theory 101: The 5 basic ideas you need to know*** (No. 5) [Audio podcast episode].

Delgado, R., Stefancic, J., & Harris, A. (2012). ***Critical race theory: An introduction*** (Second). NYU Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). Critical race theory—What it is not! In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (1st ed., pp. 34–47). Routledge.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2024). **How pedagogy makes the difference in U.S. schools**. *Daedalus, 153*(4), 96–110. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02106

Ray, V. (2023). *On critical race theory: Why it matters & why you should care*. Random House.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

EHE Distance Education and Learning Design (Director). (2015, October 8). ***Dr. Geneva Gay and Dr. Valerie Kinloch interview*** [YouTube Video].

Gay, G. (2015). **The what, why, and how of culturally responsive teaching: International mandates, challenges, and opportunities**. *Multicultural Education Review, 7*(3), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2015.1072079

Gay, G. (2018). **Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice**. In Teachers College Press. Teachers College Press. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED581130

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). **But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy**. *Theory Into Practice, 34*(3), 159–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675

Ladson-Billings, G. (2024). **How pedagogy makes the difference in U.S. schools**. *Daedalus,153*(4), 96–110. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02106

Valdelièvre, M. (2021, August 11). ***Culturally relevant pedagogy can save a bad curriculum: In conversation with Gloria Ladson-Billings*** [Audio podcast episode].

References

Click to expand reference list

Gay, G. (2018). **Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice**. In *Teachers College Press*. Teachers College Press.

Jones, S. P. (2020). ***Ending curriculum violence***.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2024). **How pedagogy makes the difference in U.S. schools**. *Daedalus, 153*(4), 96–110. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02106

Media attribution

Notebook pencil by IconPai from **Noun Project** (CC BY 3.0)

Reclaiming ancestral practices

This chapter was co-developed by attendees at the Contemplative Pedagogies Summit session titled "Exploring tensions in (re)claiming ancestral practices as a settler mixed-race educator" facilitated by Emil Briones

This gathering was held on Tuesday November 11, 2025 at Concordia University Hall Building, located on the island of Tio'tia:ke, unceded territories of the Kanien'keha:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Eleven individuals were present in the session, in spite of the challenging winter weather and navigating a transit worker's strike. Those gathered come from diverse ancestral contexts, with a considerable number who might describe their identities and experience as mixed-race. Together, people told or witnessed stories, and had dialogue on the meanings and implications of bringing in practices and teachings stemming from non-indigenous ancestral traditions and lineages into Tio'tia:ke and Turtle Island as a whole. From there, two core questions guided the dialogues:

1. **What are the possibilities for educators, practitioners, facilitators etc. in drawing on ancestral inquiry; as a practice, and what are the complexities in this?**
2. **How might the diverse, and perhaps unequal arrivals (...see below...) inform, shape, complicate bringing in ancestral practices?**

    - ... into Tio'tia:ke for those who are not Indigenous to these lands...
    - ... into the practice / role of educator / facilitator...
    - ... into the University context ...

Below is a summary of key insights, invitations for reflection, and ongoing questions that the eleven who gathered on that day generated during their time together:

- Drawing on ancestral knowledge and practices not Indigenous to the land bring up tensions, anxieties, and dissonances for some. What does it mean to bring in ancestral ways not Indigenous to the land, especially considering the colonial relations underpinning University contexts and other educational contexts? What is a relational approach, justice-oriented approach, or holistic approach to thinking through these tensions and questions? What might each perspective interrogate, question, or clarify?
- A number of those gathered meditated on the "shadow" side of some people's ancestral context – where either in part or all of one's ancestral context is linked to a dominant group (settlers, colonizers). There was an invitation to think through ways of

integrating the "shadow-side", rather than denying, invisibilizing, or totally severing. As educators and facilitators, how might acknowledging and integrating these "shadows" provide insight or direction that can lead to doing better by the traditional stewards of stolen lands and waters?

- There were many who gathered who wished to honour non–human ancestry and connection with *non-human kin* – the water, the mountains, the mushrooms, the trees, the animals, the rivers, the sky. There was an invitation extended to others to reflect on these relations, and to ask how might non-human kin show or remind us of ancestral ways and ancestral calls? How might we integrate this in ways we invite and engage with students and participants?
- While arrival into unceded stolen land is a trajectory that we often contend with as non-indigenous educators and facilitators, for some, the context of ancestral departures (displacement, diaspora, etc.) also has bearing on their ancestral context. For some, arrival into Tio'tia:ke might be marked by forced departures from ancestral lands and waters, or by generations of displacement. Some lineages and ancestral knowledge are more difficult to trace, restore, and reclaim; subjected to certain forms of violence and erasure that make the call to reflect on the possibilities in embracing and harnessing one's ancestral ways, more difficult, loaded, and riddled with unjust and painful realities.

Ancestral inquiry and reflecting on one's context of arrival into Tio'tia:ke are deeply personal tasks, and should be willingly taken on by individuals; how might educators and facilitators respectfully extend invitations to students and participants, acknowledging the vulnerability in engaging in ancestral inquiry and arrival stories? Intergenerational trauma, war, displacement, genocide – any or all of them might be weaved into one's ancestral context and there is deep care, critical awareness, and skillfulness needed for educators and facilitators in bringing these questions and invitations into their work.

Related content

- Lee & Dave's questions from the Conflicting world views chapter and their recommended reading can provide further insight into different views of connecting to the land and ancestors
- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** is another way to help you connect with your own culture and relationship to the contemplative practices in this resource
- Ridge Shukrun's piece on **the importance of self-reflection for instructors** highlights the importance of thinking about who you are, where you are, and what that means for your teaching

Conflicting world views

Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber, summary written by Erika O'Hara

In this session, Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber led a discussion on the challenges which arise from the conflicts between the Western colonial materialist world view and the Indigenous land-based relational world view. Whatever we are doing, we ought to ask ourselves: *At what cost?*

They highlighted the importance of rethinking how we interact with nature and remind us that contemplation can only help us foster new thoughts about this relationship – it can't hurt. More specifically, contemplation in nature is healing when we allow ourselves to be healed by the earth – to sit in contemplation and appreciation. Spending time in nature can help alleviate many of our troubles because it is a space where we can feel our emotions and we are reminded that if we need to cry, we can cry; if we need to yell, we can yell.

We all need the earth to survive – everything relies on the natural systems of the world – and so it is crucial to change our worldview away from materialism. However, there is no expectation that this will be easy. Teach in a "success through failure" way, which is far more communal than the individualist, city-life way. Parents for children, and educators for students, need to be role models. If you do it first, they will follow. If a child, or student, tells you a story about how they spent time with nature and if you don't have a base line, all you can do is listen – you can't understand. It is also important to accept certain realities: If you're in the city, there is no hack or trick to getting to be in nature, you have to travel for it and go to it, because it isn't here.

Contemplation, relationship-building between ourselves, others, and the earth, and the necessary changing of systems like education (along with institutions like the university) are best as grassroots activities. Change is made by those who see a problem, and come together to develop a solution without waiting to ask for permission.

They posed the following questions for deeper reflection:

Questions from Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber

Where do you call home?

How do you feel about the assimilation processes used by governments on **Onkwehon:we** around the world?

Is it okay to seize any land base to suit the needs of the economy or people?

If you feel change is needed, what would that change be, and what would you be willing to do to facilitate this change?

Related content

- The practice of making earth altars can ground us in the interconnectedness with the natural world
- Emil Briones shares insights from their Contemplative Pedagogies Summit session on **reclaiming ancestral practices** through inquiry into who we are on Turtle Island
- See Kariwentha Lee Scott's practice reconnecting with the natural world: Sitting on the earth
- **Metta (loving kindness) meditation** can be a way to generate feelings of care towards the self and others
- See David W. Robinson-Morris' meditation, **Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining**, for a generative practice of imagining a hopeful future

Additional resources

- *Basic call to consciousness.* (1978). Akwesasne notes.
- Faculty, staff, and students at Concordia can also enroll in the free, self-paced learning modules developed by Donna Kahérakwas Goodleaf, director of decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and Kanen'tó:kon Hemlock, PhD. The primer modules can be accessed on Moodle with these links:
  - Faculty and staff
  - Students

Intentional pause: Positionality

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Have a healthy snack
- Walk around your space, or even outdoors
- Think about who you are, where you are, and how you – in your body, with your life story – got here, in this place, with its history

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude this section on cultural appropriation and culturally relevant pedagogy, here are some practices focused on becoming aware of who you are and how you exist in space.

- Aimless wandering
- Movement meditation

TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY

In this section, Dr. Sandra VanderKaay shares the **free online module for educators on trauma-informed pedagogy** and the ways she applies these strategies in her classroom. Next, Katrina Grabner provides an introduction to polyvagal theory and discusses **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom**. She then follows this with a chapter outlining strategies for **developing nervus system-aware learning environments**.

Trauma-informed contemplative practices

Rosemary Reilly, PhD.

Trauma-informed contemplative practices are mindfulness-based approaches intentionally adapted to account for the neurobiological, emotional, psychological, and relational impacts of trauma. Grounded in principles of trauma-informed care, these practices prioritize nervous system regulation and present-moment grounding while avoiding techniques that may provoke re-traumatization, such as prolonged silence, intense inward focus, or body scans. By offering flexible participation, external anchors of attention, and gradual embodiment, trauma-informed contemplative practices support emotional regulation, a sense of safety, and reflective capacity by prioritizing safety, choice, empowerment, and regulation. This aligns with ethical, strengths-based, and client-centred practice (Herman, 2015; SAMHSA, 2014; Treleaven, 2018).

Below is a table comparing the different approaches to contemplative practices:

Dimension	Traditional contemplative practices	Trauma-informed contemplative practices
Underlying assumptions	Assumes participants can safely direct attention inward, tolerate stillness, and focus on their body without distress	Recognizes that inward focus and stillness may activate trauma responses / re-traumatization
Primary focus	Sustained attention, insight, and self-observation	Safety, regulation, and stabilization before deep insight
Approach to safety	Safety is often implicit, assumed, or deemed a personal responsibility	Participant safety is explicit, prioritized, and continually reinforced though shorter practice durations, eyes open or lowered rather than closed, a clear guidance and grounding cues.
Choice and autonomy	Limited choices and standardized instructions (e.g., eyes closed, silence)	Ongoing choice emphasized (e.g., to opt out, modify posture, or shift attention). This helps counteract the loss of control often associated with trauma.
Attention anchors	Internal sensations (breath, body scanning, emotions)	Present-moment grounding is prioritized. Emphasis is placed on anchoring attention to neutral or external stimuli (e.g., sounds, feet on the floor, objects such as a pebble, breath without manipulation, visual focus) rather than intense internal sensations that may trigger trauma responses.
Duration and intensity	Longer, continuous practice periods	Shorter, titrated practices with frequent grounding. Practices support stabilization by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system and building tolerance for present-moment awareness without overwhelm.
Embodiment	Deep body awareness encouraged early	Gradual, cautious embodiment **with care** to avoid somatic overwhelm. Somatic awareness is introduced gradually and gently, acknowledging that the body may hold traumatic memory.
Response to distress	Distress may be framed as part of the practice and a learning tool	Distress is treated as a signal to modify or pause the practice
Power and context	Often decontextualized from social, cultural, and power dynamics	Explicitly attends to identity, culture, power, oppression, and historical trauma, aligning with anti-oppressive and culturally responsive frameworks.

Examples of trauma-informed contemplative practices

Grounded mindfulness

These practices may include: attention to external senses rather than internal scanning: What sounds do you hear, the 5-4-3-2-1 Technique [Name 5 things you see, 4 you touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste], or grounding your hands on a surface.)

Choice-based meditation

These explicitly prioritize participant autonomy by using invitational language such as “if it feels okay” or “you might choose to notice”, allowing individuals to modify or disengage from the practice as needed.)

Brief centering practices at the start or end of sessions

For example, setting a gentle, self-determined intention or orienting attention to the room

See practices: **Orienting and tracking**, **aimless wandering**, **centering stillness**, **three-point meditation**, **arriving/breathing/focus meditation**

Loving-kindness practices

Meditation is adapted to avoid forced positive affect for those who have caused harm to the participant.

See practice: **Metta (loving-kindness) meditation**

Reflective journaling

Trauma-informed journaling emphasizes time limits, grounding before and after writing, and intentional closure, such as shifting attention back to the present environment. These containment strategies help prevent rumination or reactivation of traumatic material while supporting reflection and meaning making.

See practice: **In memoriam and letter from the future**

Movement-based contemplative practices

For example, gentle stretching or walking meditation integrate gentle physical activity to support embodied awareness without requiring stillness.

See practice: **Movement meditation**

Related content

- Explore the **trauma-informed pedagogy modules** developed for instructors by Dr. Sandra VanderKaay
- Read the pieces by Katrina Grabner on **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom** and **strategies for developing nervous-system aware learning environments** for a deeper dive into practical considerations for using a trauma-informed pedagogy
- Having a trauma-informed approach can be a way to build classroom community, see these pieces by Naj Sumar on **what community building is** and strategies for building community in the classroom for more about why this is important and how to achieve it
- Consider reading the meditation by David W. Robinson-Morris, **Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining**, to create space for students, the many with and the few without trauma, be able to envision themselves in a hopeful future

References

Treleaven, D. A. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive mindfulness: Practices for safe and transformative healing*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Herman, J. L. (1992/2015). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). ***SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach.***

van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. Viking.

Trauma-informed pedagogical strategies

Sandra VanderKaay

How did you come to this work? What is the research behind this resource?

In 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I began teaching online (like most educators). In my interactions with students both in-class (online) and outside of class (e.g., virtual office hours) I noted, at a very deep level, that many students were struggling, and there was more to the struggle than the transition to online learning. I became gravely concerned about learning. I wondered if students were even in the position to learn given the stressors of the international, national, and local contexts (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic, Truth and Reconciliation, Black Lives Matter demonstrations). I even wondered if learning was an appropriate priority. Furthermore, although I was very invested in teaching and learning through the COVID-19 pandemic and attempted in earnest to make beneficial changes, I was not aware of how to *best* adapt my teaching to better support learning in the described milieu. I began to search online and in the literature related to the scholarship of teaching and learning to educate myself on how I could best support positive learning outcomes for students despite the contextual stressors. Thus began my journey with trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP). I applied for research funding and was awarded two grants from MacPherson Institute at McMaster University, including a *Leadership in Teaching and Learning Fellowship* and I was able to conduct several research studies related to TIP including an integrative review of the literature, a survey of traumatic experiences/ACEs, and three implementation studies. Through this research I have created a website entirely devoted to TIP at **www.doitanyway.ca** with an online learning module with a downloadable PDF containing many TIP practices and a downloadable infographic. Two of the studies have already been published with others under review.

Click to open the infographic with TIP practices (PDF)

How have the strategies highlighted in the infographic shaped your classroom practice?

I consistently implement several TIP practices in my classroom teaching. In 2023 I had the opportunity to purposefully and explicitly implement 11 universal TIP practices in one course, as part of a research study, and a research assistant conducted focus groups to gather feedback regarding how the students experienced the TIP practices. Findings helped me determine which practices I would continue implementing and which I might not. However, one finding of note is that students reported that they appreciated that I would even take the time to implement TIP practices irrespective of what the practices were. In considering this feedback I would encourage educators to try implementing some TIP practices, it does not have be a lot, even just one. And, let students know that the practices are being purposefully implemented. This awareness will, in and of itself, be meaningful to students.

What is one thing you have learned along the way?

As educators, one of the most essential dimensions of trauma-informed pedagogy is engaging with and addressing our own experiences of trauma and trauma histories. By doing so, we reduce the likelihood of being triggered by students' expressions of trauma within the learning environment and are better positioned to respond with clarity and support.

Related content

- Read the pieces by Katrina Grabner on **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom** and **strategies for developing nervous-system aware learning environments** for a deeper dive into practical considerations for using a trauma-informed pedagogy
- Having a trauma-informed approach can be a way to build classroom community, see these pieces by Naj Sumar on **what community building is** and strategies for building community in the classroom for more about why this is important and how to achieve it
- Predictability can be developed through cyclical/ritual practices like:
    - **Arrival / breathing / focusing practice**
    - **Earth altars**
    - **Gratitude practices**

- **Kinstsugi collage** can be another way of reflecting upon trauma in a way that focuses on the art of repair and healing

- Consider reading the meditation by David W. Robinson-Morris, **Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining**, to create space for students, the many with and the few without trauma, be able to envision themselves in a hopeful future

Additional resources

VanderKaay, S., Begin, D., Jack, S., Lisogurski, R., Robb, C., Phoenix, M., & Vrkljan, B. (2025). **Trauma-informed pedagogical practices in post-secondary education: An integrative review of the literature**. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 16*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2025.1.17123

Wilson, A., Chen, R., Phoenix, M., Wojkowski, S., & VanderKaay, S. (2024). **Trauma-informed pedagogy: The prevalence of trauma among students in a master of science program in occupational therapy**. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education (JOTE), 8*(4), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2024.080404

How the nervous system shows up in the classroom

Katrina Grabner

On this page...

Introduction

The university experience can be both expansive and fulfilling, yet it is also a high-pressure environment, filled with potential threats to our sense of belonging and future stability. These threats, such as struggles with fitting in, the impacts of systemic racism, financial insecurity, concerns about physical safety on campus, family pressure, overwhelming workloads, and the fear of academic failure, can activate a state of constant alert in our autonomic nervous systems. Alongside these stressors, exposure to traumatic and adverse experiences is prevalent among students in higher education, with studies showing that 66% to 85% of youth report lifetime traumatic event exposure by the time they reach higher education (Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011; Smyth, et al., 2008) and approximately half of students are exposed to a traumatic event in their first year of higher education (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012). Students with cumulative trauma are more likely to drop out, get lower grades, miss classes, dissociate when stressed, self-isolate as a way of coping, experience anxiety related to deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking, and have challenges with focusing, retaining information, taking risks, and regulating their emotions (Deberard, et al., 2004; Duncan, 2000; Thompson & Marsh 2022).

A trauma-informed pedagogical stance recognizes the impact of trauma on the student body and broader educational community and prioritizes practices that support (physical/emotional) relative safety, collective care, inclusion, and potential avenues towards repair, healing and increased resilience. This approach is informed by trauma-informed care methods already being implemented in the human services field, such as practices from polyvagal theory, which studies our automatic nervous system and considers the bio/psycho/social impacts of trauma and factors that promote resilience (Levine, 1997; Porges, 2022). In the context of higher education, a nervous system-aware approach is one that recognizes that we all have highly adaptive, automatic, psycho-physiological responses designed to protect us and that these responses are shaped by our lived experiences and show up in educational contexts. With this in mind educators can intentionally cultivate environments that foster both their students' and their own neuroception of *relative safety*, with the understanding that learning is optimized when the nervous system is regulated and at ease.

A look into the term "relative safety"

Trauma therapist Peter Levine writes that, '"relative safety" is "an atmosphere that conveys refuge, hope and possibility" (2010, p. 75). Safety can be understood as a state of being free from harm, danger or threat, which can include both objective safety and subjective or a felt sense of safety. Porges describes safety as a neurophysiological state arising when our autonomic nervous system perceives itself as secure enough to engage in rest and/or connection with others (2017). This idea of 'secure enough' or 'safe enough' is at the heart of the idea of relative safety. The Merriam-Webser Dictionary defines relative as "dependent on or interconnected with something else" and "not absolute or independent" (n.d., para. 1).

It is not possible to guarantee absolute, 100% threat- or risk-free environments. however, there are moments where we are "safe enough" that our autonomic nervous system can prioritize rest, ease, play or connect with others. A sense of safety therefore varies across individuals and exits on a continuum, not as an all-or-nothing, fixed state.

Carello and Thompson write that becoming aware of the prevalence and impact of trauma among students and educators is only the first step and that the "next step is to learn how to effectively respond at both the individual and system levels" (2022, p.4). The following chapter focuses on ways that instructors can respond at an individual level in our classroom environments through an approach informed by polyvagal theory, recognizing that individual change also contributes to cultural shifts and broader systemic transformation. This is just one piece of the puzzle that can compliment broader and more

systemic models such as the Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Wheel (Thompson & Marsh, 2022) and *Healing-Centered Engagement,* which views trauma as a collective and relational process that invites holistic responses (Ginwright, 2018).

What is polyvagal theory?

Hyper-arousal (sympathetic nervous system)

One way that the clinician and author Deb Dana describes polyvagal theory is that it is the study of safety (2018). In moments of danger, our physiological and neuro-biological systems can respond to a perception of threat in an instant–before our conscious minds can create a cognitive meaning of what is happening (Geller, 2018). As the situation is assessed our autonomic nervous system will act by increasing our energy through hyper-arousal responses such as engaging with the threat (fight) or getting away from it (flight). Our body communicates to us through the language of sensation, showing us what nervous system state we are moving into or out of. For instance, when we are in a state of hyperarousal we might feel an increase in our heart rate, tight muscles, and fidgeting limbs. This is sometimes called a sympathetic charge (Geller, 2018). In this state of dysregulation, we have less connection with our prefrontal cortex making it difficult to focus and think in more complex and nuanced ways (Dana, 2018).

Hypo-arousal (dorsal vagal complex)

In extreme situations when we perceive that we won't be able to fight back or run away, we conserve energy and "play dead". This is a hypo-arousal response which has been referred to as freeze, shut-down or collapse. In this state you might notice a slowness of breath, heavy limbs or a foggy or floating feeling (Iannotti, 2021).

Social engagement (ventral vagal state)

As mammals, born in a vulnerable state, we are highly dependent on being take care of and responded to by others. We also detect danger when we sense potential threats to our feeling of belonging and connection with others. The ventral vagal branch of the autonomic nervous system is active when we engage with others through facial expression, tone of voice, and other forms of nonverbal communication. This state supports what Porges describes as the social engagement system (Porges & Furman, 2011; Porges & Carter, 2017; Kolacz & Porges, 2024). Since maintaining connection with others has been essential for human survival, we have also developed adaptive responses that can override initial impulses to fight or flee. These responses, often described as appeasement, fawning, submission, cry-for-help, serve as strategies to preserve connection and safety in the face of threat. Attunement with others can help us co-regulate, supporting a return to a ventral vagal state, the state in which we feel at ease, relaxed, connected to ourselves and others, and open to play and engagement.

Effect on the classroom environment

A tricky thing about our incredible nervous system is that once we have experienced a perceived threat to our safety, our nervous system and brain become expert detectors of anything that feels slightly familiar about that past threat and our body will often respond with the same nervous system response again and again. For instance, perhaps you are a student in class and your professor raises their voice to quiet the class. Your autonomic nervous system detects the loud voice of a male that sounds a lot like your father, and suddenly your body responds by shutting down. Now everything feels a bit foggy, and you notice fearing "getting in trouble" with this professor. Perhaps you now have a lingering feeling of "not liking" or trusting this professor, but you don't quite know why.

On the other side of this scenario, maybe you are the professor and all you see is a student in your class who always has their hood pulled over their ears and it feels like they are not "really there". Perhaps, you the professor, had a caregiver growing up who often felt "zoned-out" or absent. Your body now starts to respond to this student in a similar way by increasing your heart rate and going into a low-level fight-flight response, where you notice feeling irritated or grumpy and you can't wait for this class to be over, because you are now wondering "why do I even bother teaching?". In both cases, autonomic nervous system responses have impacted learning outcomes in ways that are difficult for both instructors and students to notice consciously.

In this hypothetical moment, both nervous systems are picking up on one another's automatic body language, such as pupil dilation, and these signals let us know that something is potentially threatening, because another human is in an activated nervous system response or survival state, creating a negative feedback loop of dysregulation between both parties. We might refer to both the student and the professor's response here as them being "activated" or "triggered" as their body detects a familiar feeling of threat.

In these moments our connection with the prefrontal cortex weakens, making it difficult to focus, make decisions, plan, or sense empathy. As the brain shifts into survival mode, processing complex new information becomes the lowest priority, which makes this especially important to address in learning environments. The good news is that there is another feedback loop that occurs when two nervous system begin co-regulating. When one person is able to soothe and regulate themselves and engage the parasympathetic branch of their nervous system, their body language can activate the ventral vagal complex in another person, helping that person feel safer and, in turn, reducing survival-mode responses in their nervous system and so on and so on (Kok & Fredrickson, 2020). In this ventral vagal state, we have greater access to play, ease, higher levels of focus, flow states and the ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes. Scenarios like the one shared above are why becoming familiar with our own nervous system needs and patterns and learning to respond to ourselves and others in curious, gentle, and non-shaming ways is crucial in learning environments.

One of the ways we can begin to create conditions of relative safety in our classrooms, recognizing that while we may not eliminate all threats, we can support students to feel comparatively safer, better regulated, and more connected, is to begin to increase our own nervous system literacy and then develop our capacity to notice, recognize and respond to the signals our body is sending us about when we are entering into survival responses such as fight or collapse. Sounds simple right? Curiosity and gentleness are key as there are many complex and very good reasons why our body may be preventing us from feeling or responding to our nervous system signals[1]. The more we increase our capacity to sense our own internal signals and learn to attend and soothe either individually or with others, the more we grow our ability to have awareness of others and their potential needs. Here are some common ways you might notice survival responses showing up in yourself or in your students:

Hyper-arousal: fight, flight

- Irritation
- Oppositional behaviour
- Limit testing
- Fidgeting, a buzzy, busy feeling inside

1. There is also no shame in needing the support of a trained, nervous system aware, therapist along the way.

- Leaving class suddenly
- Panic or high anxiety
- Racing thoughts
- Fast speaking
- Pacing
- Needing to move
- Difficulty thinking, focusing
- Difficulty connecting with others
- Difficulty making eye contact
- Big reactions or outbursts
- Trembling or shaking in limbs
- Verbal aggression, physical aggression
- Trying to manage arousal through sensory input such as headphones on in class

Hypo: collapse/shut-Down/freeze

- Looking dazed
- Not listening
- Daydreaming
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty focusing
- Tired, low energy
- Difficulty connecting or making eye contact
- Not feeling like they are there when you engage with them
- Curled-up posture

Fawn, submit, appease, cry-for-help

- Highly fearful of rejection, such as perceiving feedback in class as rejection. This may be highly activating, and you might notice tears or fight, flight, freeze responses
- Lying to protect self from rejection
- Denying needs, prioritizing needs of others first, not even noticing needs
- Seeking proximity (others might feel smothered)
- Lack of boundaries (oversharing, e-mailing constantly)
- Difficulty making decisions (always asking, “what do you think?”)
- Looking for reassurance (“do you see me? are you there for me?”)
- Difficulty sensing self because so much energy is spent scanning other people to sense if they are okay
- Not feeling settled until one knows everyone else is happy with them, or at least calm and not upset with them

- Difficulty saying no or sticking with boundaries
- Trying to align with others with more power

Related content

- Rosemary Reilly's **vagus nerve breathing** practice can be one way to connect with the nervous system in the classroom
- **Noticing the movement of attention** can be one way of mindfully attending to the nervous system in the classroom
- Consider reading some of Katrina's other contributions such as **strategies for developing nervous system-aware learning environments** and **orienting practice**

References

Click to expand reference list

Carello, J., & Thompson, P. (2022). **Developing a new default in higher education: We are not alone in this work**. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-informed pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92705-9_1

Dana, D. (2018). ***The polyvagal theory in therapy: Engaging the rhythm of regulation*** (pp. xix, 299). W. W. Norton & Company.

DeBerard, M. S., Spielmans, G. I., & Julka, D. L. (2004). **Predictors of academic achievement and retention among college freshmen: A longitudinal study.** *College Student Journal, 38*(1), 66–80.

Duncan, R. D. . (2000). **Childhood maltreatment and college drop-out rates: Implications for child abuse researchers**. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15*(9), 987–995. https://doi.org/10.1177/088626000015009005

Frazier, P., Anders, S., Perera, S., Tomich, P., Tennen, H., Park, C., & Tashiro, T. (2009). **Traumatic events among undergraduate students: Prevalence and associated symptoms**. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*(3), 450–460. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016412

Galatzer-Levy, I. R., Burton, C. L., & Bonanno, G. A. (2012). **Coping flexibility, potentially traumatic life events, and resilience: A prospective study of college student adjustment**. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 31*(6), 542–567. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2012.31.6.542

Geller, S. M. (2018). **Therapeutic presence and polyvagal theory: Principles and practices for cultivating effective therapeutic relationships**. In *Clinical applications of the polyvagal theory: The emergence of polyvagal-informed therapies* (pp. 106–126). W. W. Norton & Company.

Ginwright, S. (2018, May 31). **The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement**. *Medium.*

Iannotti, L. (2021). **Somatic experiencing and sexuality: Trauma resolution, embodied integration, and sexual health**. In *S. Dodd (Ed.), The routledge international handbook of social work and sexualities*. Routledge.

Kok, B. E., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2010). **Upward spirals of the heart: Autonomic flexibility, as indexed by vagal tone, reciprocally and prospectively predicts positive emotions and social connectedness**. *Biological Psychology, 85*(3), 432–436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2010.09.005

Kolacz, J., & Porges, S. W. (2024). **Social co-regulation of the autonomic nervous system between infants and their caregivers**. In J. D. Osofsky, H. E. Fitzgerald, M. Keren, & K. Puura (Eds.), *WAIMH handbook of infant and early childhood mental health: Biopsychosocial factors* (Vol. 1, pp. 169–183). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-48627-2_11

Levine, P. A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing Trauma: The innate capacity to transform overwhelming experiences*. North Atlantic Books.

Levine, P. A. (2010). ***In an unspoken voice: How the body releases trauma and restores goodness***. North Atlantic Books.

Porges, S. W. (2022). **Polyvagal theory: A science of safety**. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience, 16,* 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227

Porges, S. W., & Carter, C. S. (2017). **Polyvagal theory and the social engagement system: Neurophysiological bridge between connectedness and health**. In P. Gerbard, P. R. Muskin, & R. P. Brown (Eds.), *Complementary and Integrative Treatments in Psychiatric Practice* (pp. 221–239). American Psychiatric Association.

Porges, S. W., & Furman, S. A. (2011). **The early development of the autonomic nervous system provides a neural platform for social behavior: A polyvagal perspective.** *Infant and Child Development, 20*(1), 106–118. https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.688

Read, J. P., Ouimette, P., White, J., Colder, C., & Farrow, S. (2011). **Rates of DSM–IV–TR trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder among newly matriculated college students**. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 3*(2), 148–156. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021260

Smyth, J. M., Hockemeyer, J. R., Heron, K. E., Wonderlich, S. A., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2008). **Prevalence, type, disclosure, and severity of adverse life events in college students**. *Journal of American College Health: J of ACH, 57*(1), 69–76. https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.57.1.69-76

Thompson, P., & Marsh, H. (2022). **Centering equity: Trauma-informed principles and feminist practices**. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-informed pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education* (pp. 15–33). Springer.

Strategies for developing nervous system-aware learning environments

Katrina Grabner

Here are some ways, when we notice feeling activated in our nervous system or we notice a student is activated, we can respond:

Notice

Cultivate a curious, gentle state of awareness within yourself. Notice your own body's clues, such as sensations, which may help you notice if you are in a survival response. It might be a simple thought such as: "I notice a part of me is in flight response right now". This helps you to "un-blend" from that part which may be taking over, this is also a practice of mindfulness and externalization (Fisher, 2017).

Regulate

When activated what does your nervous system need for grounding and soothing? Can you feel your feet on the ground? Can you look slowly around the room you are in and orient to where you are through your senses? Is there any movement that might be supportive for you in this moment? Can you notice your breath or deepen into your breath? Do you need space, such as a boundary? Maybe you gently put a hand on your arm for soothing. Maybe you take a short walk to the bathroom and allow your body to shake and move for a few minutes. Perhaps you need to sense the safety and co-regulation of another, and you call a close friend on your break.

Grounded presence

Become aware of your:

- facial expressions (can they soften?)
- eye contact (less or more depending on student and yourself, don't push anything)
- tone of voice (can it lower or soften?)
- posture (are you in a bear posture or curled in?) (can you find a neutral spine)(if you are standing up and the student is sitting can you lower yourself to a sitting position)
- gestures (can you slow them down?)
- can you be more congruent (words match body language)
- can you connect in some way to a felt sense of warmth, positive regard or compassion toward the student ("I wonder if they are in a survival response right now too...")

Attune

- Validate and reflect back what you are hearing both to the student an also to yourself as you have your own inner self-talk:
    - Be curious about their internal state in a meaningful way
    - "I notice that you may be upset right now"
    - Collaborative problem solving with "I wonder..." statements
        - "I wonder how we might figure this out together?"
    - Affirm: "I appreciate that you are sharing what your needs are right now"
        - "I might not be able to meet this request fully, however I'm so glad you are noticing your boundaries and voicing that."
    - Respond in a timely manner when possible
- Understand that when a student is highly activated, they are going to have difficulty learning, focusing, or responding. Don't put that student on the spot in front of others in these moments. Mostly likely they will only go further into their survival response as they feel shame. When possible, wait and try to respond one-on-one.
- Be patient with your students and yourself. Building trust takes time and for students with past education wounds it may take the whole semester for them to begin to sense relative safety with you or trust. However, one positive experience with you, may change the way they relate to many other professors moving forward. We really can play a big role in reparative learning experiences!

Cultivating a grounded presence prior to class

Educators can intentionally cultivate a grounded and regulated presence before entering the classroom, preparing themselves to meet students. While the concept of therapeutic presence has been extensively discussed within therapeutic contexts, its relevance in educational settings has received less attention. Therapeutic presence supports a sense of safety and connection by engaging the ventral vagal pathways of the parasympathetic nervous system (Geller, 2018). Research suggests that presence of ventral vagal activation resulting from therapeutic presence is viewed as a prerequisite for empathy and the development of a sustained, attuned therapeutic relationship (Geller, 2018; Hayes & Vinca, 2011; Pos et al., 2010). In practice, cultivating this grounded presence might involve taking time before class to "open up the space, gather thoughts, get nourished, and center inside...standing in stillness, feeling the soles of feet as they touch the floor, and taking a few deep and slow breaths can facilitate this process. (Geller, 2018).

Long-term strategies

Longer term ways we can support a greater sense of relative safety in our learning environments can include:

- addressing the impacts of systemic oppression
- cultivating a sense of belonging in the classroom environment
- offering choice when it comes to accessibility and environmental needs (fidget toys, doodling, bathroom breaks)
- offering movement breaks when possible
- being aware of sensory overwhelm for certain students as sensory overwhelm can impact our nervous system state. eg. the impact of noise levels in the classroom
- being aware of triggers for students such as topics about war or family violence and offer choices about leaving if needed and warnings about content
- developing your capacity to stay present when you experience discomfort during difficult conversations
- participating in various contemplative practices both individually and collectively which often bring us into a ventral vagal state (greater nervous system regulation)
- incorporating several different channels for student feedback
- moving away from punishment and shame as forms of motivation for students as it often leads to students having less access to their prefrontal cortex and can create learning that is motivated from a 'please and appease response' survival response

- being clear with yourself about your own boundaries and needs at work, so that you can communicate clearly with students and co-workers
- seeing repair is normal and important and not a sign of failure (become a skilled repairer- don't be ashamed if this is a journey that takes time and practice)
- addressing ways from the top-down that our university can cultivate a culture that fosters co-regulation and a felt sense of ease and relative safety, which radiates outward to students
- being aware of other resources for students that you may direct them to depending on their needs and situations

Most importantly, stay curious with yourself and your students and don't forget that everyone's nervous system is doing its very best to protect and sustain life. As we co-create environments where we sense greater relative safety and find more ease in our bodies, it is possible for our nervous systems to adapt and develop new patterns.

Related content

- Rosemary Reilly's **vagus nerve breathing** practice can be one way to connect with the nervous system in the classroom
- Developing nervous system-aware learning environments can also by a **strategy for building community in the classroom**
- Listen to **instructor and student testimonials** on how incorporating CP&P into the classroom has reduced student stress and anxiety.
- **Noticing the movement of attention** can be one way of mindfully attending to the nervous system in the classroom
- Consider reading some of Katrina's other contributions such as **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom** and **orienting practice**

References

Click to expand reference list

Fisher, J. (2017). ***Healing the fragmented selves of trauma survivors: Overcoming internal self-alienation***. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315886169

Geller, S. M. (2018). **Therapeutic presence and polyvagal theory: Principles and practices for cultivating effective therapeutic relationships**. In *Clinical applications of the polyvagal theory: The emergence of polyvagal-informed therapies* (pp. 106–126). W. W. Norton & Company.

Hayes, J., & Vinca, J. (2011). *Therapist presence and its relationship to empathy, session, depth, and symptom reduction* [Paper]. Society for Psychotherapy Research, Bern, Switzerland.

Pos, A., Geller, S., & Oghene, J. (2011). *Therapist presence, empathy, and the working alliance in experimental treatment for depression* [Paper]. Society for Psychotherapy Research, Bern, Switzerland.

Intentional pause: The nervous system

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Spend some time in silence, away from as much stimuli as possible (e.g., an unused office or classroom)

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude this section on trauma-informed pedagogy, here are some practices focused on tuning in to your nervous system and giving it some rest from the tasks of a busy day.

- Vagus nerve breathing
- Box breathing
- Xi-xi Hu breathing technique
- Centering stillness

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

In this section, Naj Sumar begins by addressing the question **“What is community building?”** and what it means for the classroom. He then follows this with some **strategies for building community in the classroom**.

What is community building?

Naj Sumar

Photo by Andy Barbour from Pexels

Our classrooms are no longer just spaces of learning; they are rich tapestries of diverse perspectives, communication styles, and ways of thinking. Building community in the classroom means more than just bringing students together. It is about making room for student diversity. It is about developing critical skills like effective communication, teamwork, self-reflection, and creative problem-solving—abilities that prepare students not just for navigating one classroom, but for the world around them.

Community can have different meanings to different people. While it might seem out of place in the higher education classroom, many educators recognize that student success goes far beyond grades. Building positive emotional connections, a sense of safety, and having the confidence to engage in their academics creates a sense of belonging for our students (Tran, 2020). In a university setting, classrooms can become learning communities (Rovai, 2002), where a student's feeling of belonging can fuel academic achievement. Effective community-building necessitates educators focus on students as active participants in

learning. In a learner-centered model of teaching (Weimer, 2013), emphasis is placed on collaboration. Students actively engage with course materials, work with their peers, learn to value diverse perspectives, and build critical thinking skills. Community in the classroom is ultimately an approach that sees learning as a shared journey, where students and instructors work together to explore and understand new ideas. The strategies outlined in this section offer many options to build community in the classroom and make a positive impact on students and their learning environment.

Why is community building important?

Creating a classroom community is important because students learn better when they feel welcomed, valued, and respected. Especially in culturally diverse learning spaces, recognizing each student's unique voice helps all students grow intellectually and personally (Zhao, 2007).

Building community can enhance both student satisfaction and academic performance. When instructors create opportunities for students to connect, this drives genuine interest in learning from and with each other (Perry, 2022). In fact, relationships between students can translate to peer learning that occurs outside of class (Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullan & Nyeste, 2014). Students self-organize to create opportunities for learning outside class, such as forming study groups and sharing notes. It is unsurprising then that community-building has also been linked to student satisfaction rates in course evaluation (Liu et al., 2007).

Many scholars have identified a link between classroom community and student learning, participation, and achievement outcomes (Rovai, 2002). Myers et al. (2015) found that community-building supported learning in both the emotional and intellectual domain, in turn positively impacting student participation and behaviour. Community building has also been found to supports classroom management (Perry, 2022). Fostering the development of relationships in the classroom helps build capacity for students to have respectful discussions, reducing the potential for conflict, and easing the instructor's management of classroom dynamics.

Related content

- Listen to our **instructor and student testimonials** on how incorporating CP&P into the classroom has helped build a sense of community
- One **strategy for building community in the classroom** can be to commit to a recurring practice at the beginning or end of class such as **arriving/breathing/focusing**, or **gratitude practices**

- **Earth altars** can be a way to build community in the classroom by sharing creative work, meaning, and culture
- Another way to bring the classroom together is by doing a **contemplative collage practice**, which helps build confidence in navigating space within a community
- **Metta (loving kindness) meditation** can be a way to generate feelings of care towards the self and others

References

Click to expand reference list

Liu, X., Magjuka, R. J., Bonk, C. J., & Lee, S. (2007). Does sense of community matter? An examination of participants' perceptions of building learning communities in online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 8*(1), 9–24.

Myers, S. A., Goldman, Z. W., Atkinson, J., Ball, H., Carton, S. T., Tindage, M. F., & Anderson, A. O. (2016). ***Classroom citizenship behavior scale*** [Database record]. APA PsychTests. https://doi.org/10.1037/t49893-000

Perry, C. E. (2022). Building community in culturally diverse classrooms at university. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education, 13*(1), 65–72.

Rovai, A. P. (2002). **Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in asynchronous learning networks**. *The Internet and Higher Education, 5*(4), 319–332. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00130-6

Sidelinger, R. J., Bolen, D. M., Mcmullen, A. L., & Nyeste, M. C. (2015). **Academic and social integration in the basic communication course: Predictors of students' out-of-class communication and academic learning**. *Communication Studies, 66*(1), 63–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.856807

Tran, L. T. (2020). **Teaching and engaging International students: People-to-people empathy and people-to-people connections**. *Journal of International Students, 10*(3), xii–xvii. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2005

Weimer, M. (2013). ***Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*** (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Zhao, Y. (2007). Cultural conflicts in an intercultural classroom discourse and interpretations from a cultural perspective. *Intercultural Communication Studies, XVI*(1), 129–136.

Strategies for building community in the classroom

Naj Sumar

On this page...

Classroom guidelines

Classroom guidelines help create a clear and welcoming learning environment. They provide transparent and explicit information about the classroom, setting important boundaries around classroom conduct (Goodman, 2011). When instructors share what they are and why they are being implemented, guidelines set important ground rules that help students understand what's expected of them.

Effective guidelines are more than just set rules. They are fundamental to building community and creating the climate necessary for peer engagement, classroom discussions, and engaging with diverse views.

Below are sample guidelines to consider the kind of classroom community you wish to have in your classroom.

From Sensoy and DeAngelo (2014):

- Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.
- Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which

comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.
- Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader group-level patterns.
- Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
- Recognize how your own **social positionality** informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course.
- Differentiate between safety and comfort. Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth.
- Identify where your learning edge is and push it. For example, when you think "I already know this", instead ask yourself "How can I take this deeper?" Or, "How am I applying in practice what I already know?"

From the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence (n.d.) at Carnegie Melon University:

- Listen actively and attentively.
- Ask for clarification if you are confused.
- Do not interrupt one another.
- Challenge one another, but do so respectfully.
- Critique ideas, not people.
- Do not offer opinions without supporting evidence.
- Avoid put-downs (even humorous ones).
- Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- Build on one another's comments; work toward shared understanding.
- Do not monopolize discussion.
- Speak from your own experience, without generalizing.
- If you are offended by anything said during discussion, acknowledge it immediately.
- Arrive on time.
- Turn your cell phone off.

Including these guidelines in your syllabus can give students a clear understanding of how you will teach your course. This approach helps create a sense of predictability and can be especially effective for interactive classes or those covering sensitive topics. Inviting students to contribute their own suggestions can also help ensure the guidelines address everyone's classroom needs. This can also allow students to feel a sense of ownership over

the guidelines and reflect on their own sense of comfort and safety in the classroom. Setting aside time at the beginning of the semester to add to the guidelines can also be the first community building activity for your students.

Reflection activities

For both instructors and students, reflecting on identity and how it shapes one's engagement in the course and the world around them is crucial to how we show up in the classroom. **Here is a resource** that simplifies the concept of identity and its importance. This can help instructors and students develop foundational knowledge for understanding both themselves and their peers.

In the realm of instructor self-reflection, instructors can benefit from asking themselves the following questions when preparing their course and its materials:

- What expectations do I have about this topic?
- What standards related to my own cultural ideas might I use to evaluate students and their contributions in the classroom?
- How might my expectations about this topic impact my evaluation of and interactions with students' differing opinions?
- What might I think about students who don't meet my expectations and standards?
- What impact might that have on how I interact with students in the classroom?

The answers to these questions can be helpful to frame your own approach as an instructor, and some can even be shared with students at the beginning of the semester to introduce your vision of the course and the role of community in your classroom. Communicating your expectations and cultural ideas about the topic, for example, can role model self-reflection, continuous learning, and authenticity. This can also set the tone for learning as an imperfect science, frame the relevance of personal knowledges and experiences, and validate that you welcome unique perspectives.

These questions can be equally helpful for students to reflect on, with appropriate modifications. It is important to connect these questions to pedagogical goals, course materials, or additional information. This will provide students with clear reasons for answering these questions, such as applying their knowledge. Responding to these questions can feel vulnerable or challenging for some students, so being clear and transparent can support their comfort and learning.

In-class activities

Perspective-taking activity

At the start of the semester, asking students what the course's main topic means to them can be a powerful way to encourage students to personally connect to the course and share their own interests related to the topic. The activity can be structured in the following way:

- **Individual reflection:** Give students some time to write down their thoughts or brainstorm ideas about what the course topic means to them personally. This can include their past experiences, knowledge, career aspirations, or cultural background.
- **Pair discussion:** Have students pair up and take turns explaining their perspectives to each other. Encourage them to ask both clarifying and exploratory questions during these conversations.

This activity promotes exchanges of different viewpoints while also helping students develop important skills such as reflection, teamwork/collaboration, and communication.

Varying participation

Acceptance is a crucial component of a student' sense of belonging in the classroom. Many students may worry that acceptance hinges on shared views, levels of intelligence, or levels of comprehension. In other words, students fear being different (Perry, 2022). In practice, students may fear participating in class, avoiding sharing their views or asking questions.

One strategy to build acceptance is to use small group activities in class. Instructors can ask student to share their ideas about course content in small groups, and subsequently report back summaries of what was discussed (Perry, 2022). A similar strategy is to offer multiple participation methods, such as written and spoken responses to instructor prompts, or synchronous / asynchronous / blended opportunities to participate. This can help support and normalize different approaches to course content as well as communication styles.

Instructors can also incorporate **digital tools for participation** that offer a degree of anonymity. This can include poll or word cloud tools, like Microsoft Forms. These allow students to use their devices to engage and ask questions (Turgeon & Van Drom, 2019). Additionally, they allow for the range of views and ideas of students to be represented, invalidating presumed needs for uniformity. They can also be useful for reducing competition by allowing students to ask questions anonymously, while giving insight into their learning.

Teaching philosophy statements

Instructors can write **teaching philosophy statements** to convey their idea of community and what that will mean in your classroom. These can also communicate how their view yourself as an instructor, your idea of what teaching and learning is, and how you view your students. By adding these to the syllabus, or introducing the statement in the opening class, students can have a clear sense of the who their instructor is.

Teaching strategies

There are many teaching techniques that instructors can use throughout the semester to foster community. First, instructors can learn their students' names (Hogan & Sathy, 2022). While this may feel daunting in large classes, instructors can aim to learn a handful each class. This not only helps instructors build rapport and reduce anonymity in the classroom but also helps introduce students to their peers (Barkley & Major, 2020). It is helpful to use student names each time you address students, learning through repetition while also showing that you have taken time to learn names. Instructors can learn names through encouraging students to use name tags, asking students who participate to state their name, or student surveys to link names to other information about the learner.

Instructors can also build community by reserving space for student questions. While many students may feel anxious or nervous about interrupting class time, instructors can encourage questions as a display of engaging with course content. For example, instructors can introduce participation marks for students asking questions. When time permits, instructors can also designate space at the end of class for questions. This can create a consistent structure for students, while also maintaining the importance of spaces for questions. In larger classes, instructor might want to incorporate online forums using Moodle for students to ask questions and receive responses from their peers.

Related content

- Consider reading Naj's other chapter on **what it means to build community in a classroom**
- Donetta Hines' **arriving / breathing / focusing practice** can be a way to bring the class together and build community through a recurring ritual
- Check out the section on **trauma-informed pedagogy** to consider the ways making a safe classroom can set the tone and allow students to participate more fully in the community you

create

- Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber's discussion of **conflicting world views** describes how Western and Indigenous perspectives can be at odds in the classroom, and what can be done about it.
- Another way to build community is through **earth altars**, as it gives the students and instructors the opportunity to share their creative mindfulness work

References

Click to expand reference list

Barkley, E. F., & Major, C. H. (2020). **Tips and strategies for building community**. In E. F. Barkley & C. H. Major (Eds.), *Student engagement techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed., pp. 26–37). Jossey-Bass.

Eberly Centre for Teaching Excellence. (n.d.). ***Establish guidelines for interaction.*** Carnegie Mellon University.

Goodman, D. J. (2011)***Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups (2nded.).*** New York: Routledge.

Hogan, K. A., & Sathy, V. (2022). ***Inclusive teaching: Strategies for promoting equity in the college classroom***. West Virginia University Press.

Sensoy, Ö., DiAngelo, R. (2014). **Respect differences? Challenging the common guidelines in social justice education.** Democracy & Education, 22 (2), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.65214/2164-7992.1138

Turgeon, A. & Van Drom, A. (2019). ***Des outils numériques pour soutenir une approche pédagogique inclusive.*** ProfWeb.

Perry, C. E. (2022). Building community in culturally diverse classrooms at university. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education, 13*(1), 65–72.

Intentional pause: Relationships

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Reach out to a friend, family member, community member, colleague, or student
- Let them know you were thinking about them and maybe make plans to meet sometime to reconnect
- Invite co-workers (especially if someone is new) out to lunch, or for a quick break.
- If you have a new colleague, ask how they're settling into the workplace (or even the city, or country) – share something interesting about your community that they may not know (e.g., where the best sandwich place is, nearby street parking, etc.)

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude this section on building community, here are some practices focused on attuning to our relationships with others.

- Metta (loving kindness) meditation
- Gratitude practices

MINDFULNESS AND PRESENCE

In this section, Joseph Siddiqi, artist and instructor in the department of Studio Arts at Concordia, will begin by addressing **“What is mindfulness”?** in an illustrated introduction to the topic. He follows this by showing us **two approaches to mindfulness**, one which distinguishes between subject and object, while the other the subject is the object of mindfulness. Finally, he concludes with a video presentation on **noticing the movement of attention**, particularly as an insight made between connection mindfulness with painting practices, but can be applied to other disciplines.

What is mindfulness?

Joseph Siddiqi

In this video, Joseph provides an illustrated introduction to mindfulness practice which can be broken down into three overall steps: choose an object, keep it in mind, and skillfully engage with or return to that object.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=162***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Related content

- Katrina Grabner's **orienting** practice can be one way to engage in mindfulness in the classroom
- Gabriela Petrov's **aimless wandering** practice can be one way to engage in mindfulness both within and outside of the classroom
- Anne Archambault's **three-point meditation** practice is a way to engage in mindfulness of the body and surroundings in the classroom
- Learn **how mindfulness and contemplative practices can be a response to awe**, and how we can incorporate awe into the classroom
- Donetta Hines has written a piece referencing five core design principles on **how to translate contemplative practices into pedagogies**
- Consider reading Joseph's other pieces on mindfulness such as **two approaches to mindfulness**, **noticing the movement of attention**, and **centering stillness** practice

Additional resources

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). ***Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life***. Hachette Books.

Two approaches to mindfulness

In this video, Joseph Siddiqi talks about two approaches to mindfulness. In the first approach, there is a distinction between subject and object, where the subject is observing the object. In the second approach, the subject is the object, open to what comes to them in the moment.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=167***

Click here to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Related content

- Katrina Grabner's **orienting** practice can be one way to engage in mindfulness in the classroom
- You can read more about how noticing and attunement are also **trauma-informed strategies for developing nervous-system aware learning environments** in this piece by Katrina Grabner
- Consider reading Joseph's other pieces on mindfulness such as **"What is mindfulness?"**, **noticing the movement of attention**, and **centering stillness** practice

Additional resources

Islam, M. (2016). **J Krishnamurti's insight on meditation**. *Tattva Journal of Philosophy, 8*(1), 19–26. https://doi.org/10.12726/tjp.15.2

Lippelt, D. P., Hommel, B., & Colzato, L. S. (2014). **Focused attention, open monitoring and loving kindness meditation: Effects on attention, conflict monitoring, and creativity – A review**. *Frontiers in Psychology, 5.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01083

Wilber, K. (2001). ***No boundary: Eastern and western approaches to personal growth***. Shambhala.

Noticing the movement of attention

Joseph Siddiqi

This presentation grew out of an insight I had in my own studio practice—specifically, a connection between painting and mindfulness.

I share this with students during lectures in my painting and drawing classes. After introducing the core ideas, I invite students to try a short mindfulness practice focused on an object of their choosing. Afterward, I ask questions that help frame mindfulness not as a rigid state of concentration, but as a dynamic process of noticing, returning, and being present with experience as it unfolds.

My aim is to help students develop a deeper relationship to perception—through simple exercises that slow down the process of seeing and open up space for reflection. I'm trying to help them discover how attention works: how quickly it moves and jumps to conclusions, but also how it can settle, open, and return to the present.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=170***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Related content

- You can read more about how noticing and attunement are also **trauma-informed strategies for developing nervous-system aware learning environments** in this piece by Katrina Grabner
- Anne Archambault's **three-point meditation** is one way to be mindful of both the body and surroundings
- Katrina Grabner's **orienting** practice can be one way to engage in mindfulness in the classroom
- Gabriela Petrov's **aimless wandering** practice can be one way to engage in mindfulness both

within and outside of the classroom

- Consider reading Joseph's other pieces on mindfulness such as **"What is mindfulness?"**, **two approaches to mindfulness**, and **centering stillness** practice

Additional resources

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* Harper & Row.

Intentional pause: Skillful attention

We would now like to invite you to take a break from your reading. These intentional pause points have been placed throughout the OER, at the end of each section, to create time and space for you to check in with yourself.

Take a moment to...

- Do something intentionally as slow as you can
- Write a short, positive note to yourself
- Drink some water and/or have a snack
- Walk around your workspace

Try out a contemplative practice

To conclude this section on mindfulness and presence, here are some practices focused on applying our attention skillfully.

- Arriving / breathing / focusing practice
- Orienting
- Centering stillness

PRACTICES AND PRACTICAL RESOURCES

In this section, contributors generously share instructions and scripts to various contemplative practices that they have done themselves in their work with students. Reflecting the diversity of our faculty interest group, these practices range in how "practiced" they may be.

Each practice starts with the general "branch" in the **Tree of Contemplative Practices** that it may fall under, followed by a story from the contributor of how they came to this practice – in the spirit of **cultural awareness and appreciation.**

Keeping **trauma-informed pedagogy** in mind, things to be aware of are noted as well as potential alternatives that students can do.

Finally, contributors share additional resources for further learning about each practice.

Arriving/breathing/focusing practice

Donetta Hines

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness and Ritual/Cyclical

This is my adaptation of two practices that I first experienced thanks to others: Susy Molgora, my yoga instructor, and Beth Sherman, a presenter on my "Mindfulness in Writing and Literature classrooms Roundtable" at the 2020 Northeast Modern Language Association Annual Convention, and contributor to the **special cluster of mindfulness in writing and literature classroom articles I subsequently co-edited in Modern Language Studies.**

Susy begins each yoga class with a series of mindful mind-body-breath arriving phrases. When I began practicing yoga with Susy, I'm not sure how many times I heard the phrases until one day, their power suddenly became clear to me—in my mind and my body. I realized that up to that moment, I had only been partially present in my yoga classes. Although my body had been present in the class, my form would frequently need adjusting because my mind was still elsewhere, thinking about the classes I would teach later that day, recalling a conversation with someone, planning dinner or errands, etc. Until one day, the power of Susy's affirmations crystallized and I "gave myself permission" to fully focus my mind on Susy's guiding prompts and to fully feel my body as it experienced each moment, pose, micro adjustment, and flow of yoga. I still remember how amazing that "first" fully present yoga class felt, finally understanding how yoga fosters full presence by integrating body and mind and why Susy repeated the same phrases each class. To this day, I tell myself these phrases for all my activities and notice a marked increase in my presence and focus.

I resonated with Beth's basic breathing practice after experiencing it and learning that she used at the beginning of her first-year undergraduate writing courses with students who had little to no prior experience with mindfulness practices, similar to my teaching context at the time. One key difference was that Beth and Susy were both seasoned practitioners, and I was just beginning to offer explicit mindfulness practices in my online courses and looking for ways to feel safe, comfortable, and experienced enough to begin.

With Susy and Beth's permission, I adapted their practices for my online classes on Zoom (classZooms) first; after all, it was Fall 2020, in the midst of COVID-19 restrictions, and I sensed that my students and I could benefit from mindfulness for its potential to enhance

presence, attention, focus, connection, self-regulation, and embodiment in our sudden and ongoing social and physical isolation and seemingly disembodied teaching and learning environments. (See note below about adapting for in-person contexts).

For me the invitation to close email, browsers, and unneeded windows, silence phone, allow outside and past/future things and people to "wait" really helps me transition and settle into the space and focus my mind, energy, and attention for the people in the room and tasks of the day. Especially when I first started contemplative practices in the classroom, these arriving phrases also prepared me to further settle my mind and body, readying and relaxing me enough to be able to guide my new students (many of whom were completely new to meditation!) with the breathing/focusing lines. Even when combined, these practices are short enough to constitute an accessible starting practice for anyone new to this form of contemplation/mindfulness yet valuable for anyone more experienced, in a similar way that every yoga practice includes a mountain pose or downward dog.

Cultural or historical origins

Although basic breath practices are widely recognized as originating in/from spiritual practices and traditions in Buddhism and Hinduism, they have been introduced to secular Western mindfulness by Buddhist leaders like Thich Nhat Han and the Dalai Lama and by Western teachers and scholars, including Sharon Salzberg and Daniel Siegel. Many in Judaism, Christianity, and other faith traditions have also claimed deep resonances with the culturally and historically Buddhist and Hindu practices. My practice here aligns more closely to secularized versions, with deep gratitude and respect for the traditions from which they emerge and with which they resonate.

What to be aware of

Trauma-informed research, such as that of Gabor Maté, and pedagogy, such as that of David Treleaven, have revealed and increased awareness of the ways past experiences of trauma are "triggered" and re-experienced in our bodies and our breathing. Since a "breathing practice" like the one I offer here uses the breath as the explicit focus, or anchor, of the practice, I also offered trauma-informed adjustments/alternatives before and during the practice:

- "Invite" students to the practice while also offering them an alternative, such as to sit quietly and take these few moments just for them, to rest or simple settle into their chair;

- Make ample use of "if" and ample use of open, accepting language of diverse experiences, using language like "if the breath is in any way triggering or not accessible to you at this moment, I invite you to instead focus on a part of their body that feels accessible to you." I then refer to "your breath or body anchor" during the practice.
- Sounds, words/mantras, and images of beloved people, pets, safe-or-special-feeling places are other alternatives.
- Also offer options for eyes to be closed or open, softly and restfully gazing ahead.
- Words and metaphors, like "anchor," can also be triggering or less accessible for certain forms of neurodiversity that conceptualize the concrete more easily than the abstract and figurative (Hutton 2025) or for anyone who is not familiar with what an anchor is or how it works. Thus, one could replace or pair the word "anchor" with "object of focus."

Ways to use this in the classroom

I first used this script in an online context, starting on Day 1 and consistently for several classes until students seemed at ease with it, as I describe above, and then I began to vary it with other brief practices to foster other capacities, like curiosity and positive affect, and experiences, like body scans, prompted-writing, and visualizations. Once teaching went back to in-person, the script required minor adjustments to change language from "class-Zoom" to "classroom, "turning off microphone/screen" to "coming into silence." The prompts about closing email, Windows, and browsers and turning off or silencing and putting away any other devices are just as relevant in an in-person context.

Once I had the opportunity to experience **Katrina Grabner's orienting/tracking practice,** I realized that with the short arriving/breathing/focusing practice I present here, I had been trying to foster arrival, presence, attention, self-awareness and regulation, and whole-person integration, as Grabner's practices do. Since experiencing Grabner's, I think Grabner's is better to use at the beginning of the term, with my practice brought in after a week or two as an alternative "arrival routine" at the beginning of some class sessions, at which time other kinds of practices can be woven in as well.

In addition, brief opening practices like this foster the transition from *before* class here and now *in* class, to focus mind and body *in* and *for* classroom presence. Since learning requires attention on the material as it is being presented, as well as intentional, engaged, repeated practice of the material, with attitudes of curiosity, openness, discernment, resilience, growth mindset, self-compassion, and learning about oneself as a learner and member of the classroom community, contemplative practices can even become the path "of" education (Ergas & Hadar, 2019).

Goleman & Davidson report in *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (2017) what research shows about how meditation practices can strengthen the 5 "abilities" required for attention (p. 128):

1. **Selective attention**, the capacity to focus on one element and ignore others [including "orienting"]
2. **Vigilance**, maintaining a constant level of attention as time goes on
3. **Allocating attention** so we notice small or rapid shifts in what we experience
4. **Goal focus**, or "cognitive control," keeping a specific goal or task in mind despite distractions.
5. **Meta-awareness**, being able to track the quality of one's own awareness—for example, noticing when your mind wanders or you've made a mistake."

Although the "altered [brain] traits" the title refers to occurred in lifetime intensive meditators, Goleman & Davidson found robust evidence that even beginning meditators report less mind-wandering and improved attention after just 8 minutes of mindfulness practice (p. 251). After two weeks of such brief, incipient practice focus and working memory also improved (251). Meanwhile, other research showed that two months of mindfulness practice could lead to less activation of self-relevant regions of the brain (251), meaning that focusing becomes more effortless and automatic, less distracted by emotions and self-referential/constructed narratives. To extrapolate Goleman & Davidson's work to our learning environments and communities, it is easy to see how students and educators alike benefit from less mind wandering and emotionally-based distraction, more effortless focus, improved attention and working memory, and fewer self-referential/constructed narratives.

Intentionally experiencing and noticing different kinds of awareness/attention (in breath, body, visual, mind's eye) with contemplative practices gives educators and students the opportunity for choice and change in how we focus or direct our attention. Such intentional, consistent contemplative attention practice is also self-reinforcing; Siegel paraphrases psychology/early neuroscience scholar Donald Hebb, PhD, who is known for his dictum "Neurons that fire together, wire together," when he writes, "Where attention goes, neural firing flows, and neural connection grows" (Siegel, 2018, p. 39).

Script

Welcome everybody. We'll start by taking a few intentional minutes to settle into this space, this classroom/Zoom, with a brief "breathing/focusing" exercise. Please mute your microphone, and if you like, you may turn off your video during the exercise.

In addition, please close all windows and programs except for Zoom, and turn off and put away any other devices, such as phones or tablets. Let's give ourselves the gift of focus, the gift of being fully present here in this learning space, this learning community for the next 80 minutes or so. Let yourself be in a comfortable position, either seated, or standing, like me.

If it feels good, allow your spine to straighten, but not stiffen, and feel the crown of your head gently floating toward the ceiling, feeling spaciousness in the back of your neck, in your shoulders.

If you are seated, rest the soles of your feet gently on the floor, with the back of your hands gently resting on your legs, palms up, giving your hands a break, a chance to breathe, doing the opposite of what we do all day with our hands on the keyboard and mouse. And take a deep breath in...and out....

...Notice the sensation of the air as we breathe in...and...out...

Noticing anywhere that may feel tight, like our shoulders, perhaps from so much computer time, and imagine breathing air into that space to relax it, and just breathe in...and out...

...Even engaging in a bit of intuitive movement like a shoulder roll up, around, and down; up, around, and down; up, around and down.

The breath is an anchor. It helps us have something to return to when we can't quiet our thoughts or calm our nerves or our body is tight from too much computer time. This simple act of breathing, in...and out...

...Your attention may wander, and it will, and that's okay.

Simply noticing what is happening and returning to the breath is a powerful calming and refocusing aide.

So let's enjoy the next few breaths on our own, and then meet back in the main classroom/Zoom.

Related content

- For more breathing exercises, check out:
  - **Vagus nerve breathing**
  - **Box breathing**
  - **Xi-xi Hu breathing technique**
- A predictable cyclical/ritual practice like this one can be one strategy to help **build community in the classroom**
- You can also see Joseph Siddiqi's **centering stillness** practice for a similar practice
- When done routinely, this practice can become a strategy to **build community in the class-**

room

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Sherman, Beth. (2022). Contemplative Pedagogy in the College English Classroom and Online. *Modern Language Studies, 52*(1). 76-89.

Brahinsky, J., Mago, J., Miller, M., Catherine, S., & Lifshitz, M. (2024). **The spiral of attention, arousal, and release: A comparative phenomenology of jhāna meditation and speaking in tongues**. *American Journal of Human Biology, 36*(12). https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.24189

Brahm Centre (Director). (2021). ***Trauma sensitive mindfulness | Dr David Treleaven*** [YouTube Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgL20FNPLVM

Ergas, O. (2019). **Mindfulness in, as and of education: Three roles of mindfulness in education**. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 53*(2), 340–358. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12349

Hanh, T. N. (2025). ***The miracle of mindfulness: An introduction to the practice of meditation***. Beacon Press.

Hannay, C. (2022). **Hindu perspectives on mindfulness, meditation, and yoga**. Mindful Teachers.

Harrison, E. (2017). ***The foundations of mindfulness: How to cultivate attention, good judgement, and tranquility***.

Hutton, S. (2025). ***Dual anchor: A neurodiversity-informed meditation for wandering attention***. Mindful.

Selva, J. (2017). ***The history and origins of mindfulness.*** PositivePsychology.Com.

Tomasino, B., Chiesa, A., & Fabbro, F. (2014). **Disentangling the neural mechanisms involved in hinduism- and buddhism-related meditations**. *Brain and Cognition, 90,* 32–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandc.2014.03.013

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

References

Ergas, O., & Hadar, L. L. (2019). **Mindfulness in and as education: A map of a developing academic discourse from 2002 to 2017.** *BERA Review of Education, 7*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3169

Goleman, D., & Davidson, R. J. (2017). ***Altered traits: Science reveals how meditation changes your mind, brain, and body***. Penguin.

Hutton, S. (2025). ***Dual anchor: A neurodiversity-informed meditation for wandering attention***. Mindful.

Siegel, D. (2018). ***Aware: The science and practice of presence – The groundbreaking meditation practice***. Scribe Publications.

Orienting

Katrina Grabner

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Movement

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=195***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

It is common for students and ourselves to rush from one classroom or activity to the next without giving our bodies time to arrive or "land in" together. The practice described below supports nervous system regulation through sensory-based noticing.

Often contemplative practices, as well as nervous system regulation activities, begin with stillness or breathwork activities. However, for some people this can be activating and overwhelming to start with–particularly for those who have experienced some form of trauma, are neurodivergent or have physical conditions such as chronic pain or autoimmune conditions that keep the body in a state of hyperarousal. As someone who identifies as being neurodivergent and having an autoimmune condition that can cause my body to experience higher levels of fight-or-flight nervous system arousal, I often find it difficult to start with stillness activities. In the past I would even feel shame or a sense of failure if I was not feeling settled during a breathing practice. Yet, I still needed time, perhaps even more so than others, to allow my body to transition from one space to the next, taking in cues of safety in my new environment. When I began training in Somatic Experiencing, a body-oriented therapeutic approach to trauma treatment (Somatic Experiencing International, n.d.), I was introduced to the simple practice of orienting. On the surface the activity described below might seem like a stillness practice, but it involves the subtle movement of our neck and our eyes. Then depending on what we sense both outside ourselves in our environment and what within our body it may involve responding through further movements.

Cultural & historical origins

The behaviour of an animal when it experiences and responds to novelty is called an "orienting response" (Levine, p.92). This is a coordinated pattern of muscle movement and perceptual awareness and is a dual response of reacting plus inquiring. Ivan Pavlov, a Russian physiologist first described these orienting responses as the *shto eta takoe* (что это такое) reflex, often translated as, the "what is it?" reflex (Barry, 2009).

What to be aware of

By having students keep their eyes open and use their senses, this is a more trauma-informed way of regulating. It is important to be aware that sometimes when someone has a history of or is currently experiencing trauma, the act of slowly down and having their nervous system responses begin to "de-armour" can cause more activation.

This does not mean that we do not do activities that bring us into present moment awareness, it just means that we are aware that everyone's bodies will respond differently to these activities as needed and that is why options and choice are so important at every step. It is also important to understand that this activity involves noticing where we are and of course, if our classroom space for any number of reasons isn't safe enough (by safe I don't just mean physical safety, but also emotional safety), due to the systemic oppression experienced by for example, members of visible minorities, persons with disabilities, women, the LGBTQIA2S+ community..., this activity may not be regulating. If we are doing these contemplative practices, but not also working towards cultivating a felt sense of relative safety in the classroom environment, then we might be supporting students in letting their guard down in an environment that they actually need to have their guard up.

This is also why you will notice several different offerings of types of movement are introduced, because they provide different ways of being with the needs of the body as it experiences different levels of nervous system energy in the body. One last point regarding a trauma-informed approach to this activity, is that in the optional section where we begin to notice our sensations we begin very small just by noticing what happens when we see or hear something that we are positively drawn towards. This is a way that we resource ourselves and move from orienting towards potential threat and into potential areas of support.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This may be a way that you begin a class to support students and yourself in arriving into the space together. If the space you are in is experienced to be a "safe enough" space, and if you are experienced by your students to be "safe enough", than this practice may support their nervous systems in picking up on potential *relative safety* clues, that allows their body to move into a state of more ease during the time of learning. This more regulated nervous system state allows them to have more access to their prefrontal cortex to focus better, to think with more complexity and to enter flow states. This ventral vagal nervous system state also supports social connection and engagement and can lead to a positive feedback loop of co-regulation.

To learn more about relative safety and the ventral vagal nervous system, read Katrina's piece on **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom.**

The practice shared below can also be helpful in supporting oneself and students after a particularly activating of difficult class discussion, experience or during a break to bring oneself back into the here and now.

Instructions

The following is a suggested script for how you might introduce this practice in class. Note that you can stop at any section, you do not need to do all three.

Video demonstration

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=195***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Part 1

1. As we begin to arrive in this space together, if it feels right for you, I invite you to take a moment to feel your feet on the ground and the chair beneath you.
2. Now with your eyes open or if you have a visual impairment, you can use your ears for this activity instead, I'm going to invite you to very slowly turn your head from one side to the other, allowing your eyes to explore and notice the room around you. I'm even going to invite you to look behind you.
3. As you very slowly look around you might notice different colours and textures. Your ears might tune into different sounds and your nose might even notice different smells. You might look down and notice your hands or the ground. You might look outwards noticing the room as a whole and even the outside world if there is a window. You might even notice me and my presence and that is welcome as well (I like to give a smile here, to support a sense of social engagement, care and safety coming from my presence which is one way I do my best to promote safety).
4. As you sense around you, you might become aware of areas that your eyes or ears are more drawn towards than others. Perhaps the colour of a backpack calls to you or the way the light lingers on a shelf. Maybe you notice that looking around feels like too much right now, but looking down at the green ring on your hand feels better. Allow yourself to linger or take a moment with what feels most "right" to you in this moment.

Part 2, going deeper

To deepen into this practice and to move students towards greater interoception you might ask "what do you notice happening in your body as you look at the area you were drawn towards or noticed 'liking' in some way"? For example for me, I notice something in my chest open up as I look outside the window at that tree. Or I notice my shoulders start to come down a bit. Also, it is okay not to notice any physical sensations too. We are just being curious. There is no right or wrong way to be curious.

Part 3

1. As you start to sense the sensations that are present in your body you might respond in some way. For example, you might notice your body wanting to rest or lean back into your chair, or you might be picking up on energy in your feet and hands and you might allow them to fidget or move. All sensations are welcome and depending on what you

noticing happening you might respond differently.

2. If you notice feeling big energy you can move your feet up and down quickly like you are running or you might shake your hands right now. Maybe you try pushing down into your chair with your hands for a few seconds at a time. Perhaps putting a hand gently on your heart or on your opposite arm feels good and containing or supportive right now. Maybe your body has the urge to stretch and yawn, allow that. Or you might sense that your jacket is itchy or that you don't like the way you are sitting in your chair and you make some changes to assist your body, in moving towards greater comfort and ease.

Alternatives

If you have any visual impairments, you can do this by turning your head slowly and noticing what you hear in different parts of the room. You might pay attention to if there is a particular sound that you notice being drawn towards or feeling some enjoyment hearing.

Related content

- This practice is a way of noticing the movement of attention, which is an aspect of **mindfulness and presence**
- Like orienting, Gabriela Petrov's **aimless wandering** practice involves an awareness of the self and surroundings, but can also include a movement component where one follows their attention
- This orienting practice can be a way of practicing **mindfulness** by becoming more aware of surroundings
- You can read Dr. Sandra VanderKaay's piece on **trauma-informed pedagogical strategies** to read about how and why this perspective is important for a harmonious and effective classroom
- Consider reading Katrina's other pieces on h**ow the nervous system shows up in the classroom** and **strategies for developing nervous system-aware classrooms**

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Dana, D. (2021). *Anchored: How to befriend your nervous system using polyvagal theory*. Sounds True.

Dana, D. (2023). ***Polyvagal practices: Anchoring the self in safety***. Norton Professional Books.

Hübl, T. (2023). ***The polyvagal theory, welcome VS warning, and regulating the self with Deb Dana and Dr. Stephen Porges*** (No. 9) [Broadcast].

Levine, P. A., & Kline, M. (2008). ***Trauma-proofing your kids: A parents' guide for instilling confidence, joy and resilience***. North Atlantic Books.

Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.

Ogden, P. (2022). ***SP PEACE protocol for clients***. Sensorimotor Psychotherapy.

Simon, T. (2021, November 9). ***Becoming an active operator of your nervous system.*** [Broadcast].

Somatic Experiencing International. (n.d.). ***SCOPE crisis stabilization and safety aid***. Trauma Healing.

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

References

Levine, P. A. (2008). *Healing trauma: A pioneering program for restoring the wisdom of your body*. St. Martin's Publishing Group.

Vagus nerve breathing

Rosemary Reilly

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness

Cultural & historical origins

The vagus nerve breathing meditation combines ancient philosophical and spiritual practices with a modern scientific understanding. Physicians in ancient Greece and Rome recognized the vagus nerve's influence on breathing and voice while during the Medieval period, it was viewed as a spiritual link between the body and the soul. The true nature of the vagus nerve, a cranial nerve that stimulates and interfaces with the parasympathetic nervous system (rest-digest response), was not fully understood until the 19th Century. Modern research highlights its role in relaxing the sympathetic nervous system (fight-flight-freeze-fawn response), regulating stress, mood, and brain function, and increased well-being.

What to be aware of

Meditation practices focused on vagus nerve stimulation can be helpful in managing trauma symptoms and promoting relaxation and trauma recovery. On purpose breathing or intentional breath work helps those who have experienced trauma to navigate the physical and emotional impact. By engaging in these practices, individuals can potentially reduce stress hormones, lower heart rate, and promote a sense of safety, which can be beneficial for trauma recovery.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This breathing technique does not require any special equipment or set up and can be conducted in a short time. It can also be done with any size group. It is particularly useful when one is feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious. It is most effective when done in the morning upon waking or in the evening before retiring. But it is beneficial at any point in the day. Some key benefits are:

- Activating the vagus nerve through deep breathing helps to regulate the body's stress response and reduce anxiety levels.
- Vagus nerve stimulation can lower blood pressure and improve heart rate, contributing to a healthier cardiovascular system.
- By calming the nervous system, the vagus nerve breathing meditation can promote a sense of calm, reduce feelings of overwhelm, and improve cognitive function.
- The vagus nerve plays a role in digestive processes and stimulating it can help improve gut function and alleviate digestive discomforts.

Basically, one exhales longer than one inhales, alternating nose (inhale) and mouth (exhale), and adding a "Shhhhhh" sound (mimicking the sound of the ocean) while exhaling. As well, while exhaling one allows the belly to fall back towards the spine. This is the movement that stimulates the vagus nerve.

Instructions

1. Close your eyes, if you feel comfortable to do so, and tune into your breathing. (Allow the participants to do this for a couple of minutes).
2. While I will count the breaths, feel free to go at your own pace.
3. Take a deep breath in through your nose, all the way down into your belly, in order to center yourself. Now breathe out slowly through your mouth.
4. Now, breathe in through your nose counting to 4 (1-2-3-4).
5. Hold at the top of the breath counting to 7 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7).
6. Exhale through your mouth making a "Shhhhh" sound counting to 8 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8). Push your belly back towards your spine as you exhale.
7. Repeat steps 3 to 5 for at least 3 minutes, maintaining the 4-7-8 rhythm.
8. Closing the practice (if done in a group): One final round together:

    - Breathe in through your nose counting to 4 (1-2-3-4).

- Hold at the top of the breath counting to 7 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7).
- Exhale through your mouth making a “Shhhhh” sound counting to 8 (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8).

9. Now, allow your breath to return to normal. And when you feel ready, open your eyes.

Alternatives

Individuals who do not want to participate can sit quietly. If they wish, they can just focus on their normal breathing. They can also read a short blog on the vagus nerve entitled **Longer Exhalations Are an Easy Way to Hack Your Vagus Nerve**

Related content

- You can learn more about polyvagal theory in Katrina Grabner’s piece on **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom**
- For more breathing exercises, check out:
  - **Arriving / breathing / focusing**
  - **Box breathing**
  - **Xi-xi Hu breathing technique**

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Goodlet, N. (n.d.). ***Vagus nerve stimulation breathing practice*** [Audio recording].

Polyvagal Institute. (n.d.). ***Podcasts & videos***. Polyvagal Institute.

Sacre-Dallerup, C. (n.d.). **Vagus nerve breathing meditation** [Audio meditation].

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

Box breathing

Rosemary Reilly

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness

Cultural & historical origins

Box breathing, also known as square breathing, is a simple yet effective technique that can help manage stress and promote focus and relaxation. Originally, it is a basic yogic breathing technique, Sama Vritti Pranayama (������������). Sama means “equal” and vritti means “mental fluctuations” and translates as “equal mental fluctuation breathing”. Sama Vritti does not originate from ancient texts but is widely taught and embraced in both spiritual and secular settings. At its heart, Sama Vritti Pranayama teaches us to breathe with intention- slowly, deeply, and evenly. It involves controlling the natural breathing process by equating the durations of inhalation, retention, exhalation, and a second retention before inhaling again. The main goal of this practice is to reduce mental chatter and distractions. It can also help slow down the heart rate, increase oxygen to the brain, and reduce anxiety.

What to be aware of

This can be a deceptively challenging technique due to the relative difficulty to hold one’s breath as opposed to the more natural rhythm of inhaling or exhaling. The ability to engage with this practice depends on each person’s fitness and lung capacity. The ability to optimize breath and holding can improve with practice and regular practice can strengthen lungs and improve capacity. Pregnant women and people with high blood pressure, lung, heart, eye or ear problems and vertigo or other balance-related conditions should not hold their breath after the inhale. People with low blood pressure should not hold their breath after the exhale. Instead, individuals with these conditions should simply work on equalizing the length of the inhalation and exhalation.

If anyone feels dizzy, lightheaded or discomfort, they should stop and return to a normal relaxed breathing pattern. If an individual is struggling with the breathing pattern, simply shorten and lower the count to 2 or 3 until it feels easier. While Sama Vritti Pranayama can

be a beneficial practice for trauma survivors, it is crucial to approach it with caution and guidance. While it can help regulate the nervous system and promote a sense of calm, some individuals with trauma histories may find the breath retention aspect triggering. See Alternatives for options to provide.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This exercise can easily be done anywhere at any time, but the best time to practice is when needing to cultivate inner peace, balance, groundedness and focus, and to reduce anxiety.

Instructions

1. Be comfortably seated with your spine straight and neutral with your eyes closed (or lower your gaze and soften it).
2. Bring awareness to your breath, breathing slowly and evenly.
3. When ready to begin box breathing, empty your lungs with a complete exhale.
4. Inhale: Inhale slowly and steadily through the nose for a chosen count of 4. (It can be helpful if you count the number out loud: Inhale-2-3-4. This count can be adjusted to the natural capacity of the participants to keep it comfortable and strain-free).
5. Internal Retention: Hold the breath for the same count: Hold-2-3-4.
6. Exhale: Exhale slowly through the nose for the same count: Exhale-2-3-4.
7. External Retention: After exhaling, hold the breath again for the same count: Hold-2-3-4.
8. Repeat: This completes one round of Sama Vritti Pranayama. Continue this breathing cycle for a few minutes. Beginners should start with 5 to 8 rounds and gradually increase the intensity, duration, and complexity of their practice.
9. Conclude: After the final round, take a few moments to allow participants' breathing to return to its natural rhythm.

Alternatives

Individuals who do not want to participate can sit quietly. If they wish, they can just focus on their normal breathing. They can also read a short blog entitled **How to Practice Sama Vritti Pranayama (Box Breathing) – Benefits, Steps, Variations & More**.

For those whose health conditions contraindicate breath retention, or for a trauma-informed approach, Equal Breathing is the most basic form of Sama Vritti, and a good place to start. It simply means inhaling and exhaling for the same length of time, without holding your breath. The first step is to choose a count that is natural and stress-free. For instance, you might begin with a 3:3 count. Over time, you extend it to 4:4, 5:5, and so on until you hit 10:10. The objective of this exercise is to establish structure and make inhale and exhale equally smooth and steady.

Related content

- For more breathing exercises, check out:
  - **Arriving / breathing / focusing**
  - Vagus nerve breathing
  - **Xi-xi Hu breathing technique**
- You can learn more about polyvagal theory in Katrina Grabner's piece on **how the nervous system shows up in the classroom**
- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Sigel, S. (n.d.). ***Sama vritti pranayama (four part breathing)*** [Audio recording].

Walker, B. (n.d.). ***Box breathing*** [Audio recording].

Yoga Wellness Center (Director). (2020). ***SAMAVRITTI PRANAYAMA | Immunity booster yoga | Yoga wellness center*** [Video recording].

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

Xi-xi Hu breathing technique

Rosemary Reilly

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness

Cultural & historical origins

The Xi-Xi Hu (呼吸 hū xī, Chinese for “to breathe”) technique is from the Qigong tradition, an ancient Chinese system of physical exercise and meditation that combines movement, breathing, and mental concentration. This technique helps to relieve stress and fatigue, stops overthinking, and promotes clarity, calm, and ease by encouraging fuller and deeper breathing. It is done ideally in the morning but can be used at any time to recharge and refresh the respiratory system.

What to be aware of

Some individuals may experience dizziness, headaches, or palpitations. It is generally a safe technique, but it is critical to encourage participants to start slowly and listen to what their bodies are telling them. If participants begin to feel these effects, they should stop the technique and resume their normal breathing. If these persist, they should consult their physician.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This breathing technique does not require any special equipment or set up and can be conducted in a short time. It can also be done with any size group. Some key benefits are:

- Creates more lung capacity by using deep expansive breaths.
- Clears and releases toxins from the body with a full exhalation and energizes and improves circulation with an intake of oxygen.

- Supports immune function and can help release physical tension.
- Calms and balances the nervous system.
- Reduces stress and anxiety.
- Keeps the body and mind in free flow, promoting greater awareness of physical and emotional sensations.

Generally, this technique involves two short inhales through the nose, getting progressively deeper, and one long exhale through the nose or mouth (whichever is preferable). Some practitioners encourage exhaling slowly with a whispering Hu sound. This practice is best done for 2 to 5 minutes and can be done while seated or standing. Maintain a slower rhythm to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (rest-digest response), while a more vigorous rhythm activates the sympathetic nervous system to energize oneself.

Instructions

1. Close your eyes, if you feel comfortable to do so. Exhale and relax your body.
2. Notice the rise and fall of your breath. Visualize your breath going in and out. (Allow the participants to do this for a minute or so).
3. If you are comfortable, you can place one hand on your belly and the other on your chest.
4. Start with 3 regular breaths then one deep breath, and then one long exhale.
5. Now, begin the Xi-Xi Hu technique:
6. Take 2 short inhales through your nose.

    - The first inhale should be drawn into the lower level of your lungs, expanding the belly.
    - The second inhale should be drawn into the upper level of your lungs, expanding the chest.
    - Now exhale slowly through your nose or mouth until you completely empty your lungs.

7. Repeat for 2 to 5 minutes with a minimum of 10 repeats in order to receive the full benefits.
8. Closing the practice (if done in a group): One final round together:

    - Take 2 short inhales through your nose.
    - The first inhale should be drawn into the lower level of your lungs, expanding the belly.

- The second inhale should be drawn into the upper level of your lungs, expanding the chest.
- Exhale slowly through your nose or mouth until you completely empty your lungs.

9. Now, allow your breath to return to normal. Notice how you are feeling. And when you feel ready, open your eyes.

Alternatives

Individuals who do not want to participate can sit quietly. If they wish, they can just focus on their normal breathing. They can also read a short blog entitled **Three Ways To Purify Your Chi And Release Tension**

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- For more breathing exercises, check out:
  - **Arriving / breathing / focusing**
  - **Vagus nerve breathing**
  - **Box breathing**
- You can read more about the effects and value of including **trauma-informed pedagogical strategies** like this one in Dr. Sandra VanderKaay's piece

Additional resources

Tan, W. (n.d.). ***Qigong breathing morning meditation to energize*** [Audio recording].

The Tai Chi And Qigong Way (Director). (2014). ***Dr Roger Xixi hu breathing practice from the Omega Institute***[YouTube Video].

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

Aimless wandering

Gabriela Petrov

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Movement, stillness, deep listening, improvisation

on the water
the reflection
of a wanderer
– Santōka Taneda

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=225***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

I learned this practice in 2016 at Naropa University in Boulder, CO, a pioneering institution in Contemplative Education. I learned it from Erika Berland, a certified Somatic Practitioner and senior meditation teacher in the Shambhala lineage. I did a version of the practice where you walk aimlessly for thirty minutes and allow yourself to be guided by the environment. I began wandering around the parking lot of the university campus, just off a long highway that extends into the Flatiron mountains. I looked at details on cars, the sky, and sun-dried weeds. Eventually, I found myself staring at a bright green Praying Mantis. I had never seen one before but recognized it from nature shows. I watched it rubbing its little "hands" together for a while. The sharp details of this experience stayed with me.

As an artist, I know the value of having experiences of deep observation to draw from in my creative work. This practice opens space for our mind and body to wander without an agenda, allowing us to discover what we might not notice if we were aiming to achieve something specific. In teaching this practice over time, I find that students are more available to stay present, receive information and be attuned to their sensory experience. These skills are very important for artists and can also support the learning process of students in other disciplines.

In discussing this practice with my teacher, she spoke to its origins in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. She and other teachers in the lineage like Gaylon Ferguson will emphasize different aspects of the practice, depending on their approach. For example, Ferguson describes the process as a "welcoming" of what's already there in terms of our awareness, while Berland invites an awareness of our somatic experience as it arises through our senses.

I have integrated aimless wandering into my teaching of the Six Viewpoints approach to performance as developed by postmodern artist and theorist, Mary Overlie. Overlie taught a practice called "grazing" that draws on mindfulness awareness in observing the space around you by simply allowing information to enter through the senses. Like a cow, you graze or "chew" on what you observe around you, letting details become more and more visible.

Becoming aware of sensory information can bring up discomfort for some students. For example, someone with chronic pain might be concerned about bringing more attention to their pain. It can be useful to offer the invitation of "welcoming" whatever arises, without needing to go further with it. Aimless wandering is ultimately a personal exploration and students can be reminded that they don't need to engage in a way that doesn't work for them. In the words of Miriam Cummings, an artist and performance educator, "you choose what you use."

I have taught this practice in performance studios, lecture rooms and parks. It can be done almost anywhere as the invitation is to wander aimlessly from exactly where you are and simply notice what arises. This practice is also flexible in terms of time, but I would recommend between 10 and 20 minutes as a starting point. I would also recommend giving time afterwards for students to either draw, write about or discuss what they noticed.

Instructions

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=225***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Step 1: Start where you are

Starting where you are, bring attention your breath. Let the breath become a starting place for bringing awareness to your experience of the present moment. Then, expanding on your awareness of the breath, begin to notice other sensory information.

What do you see? What do you feel? What do you hear?

Step 2: Shift of awareness

As you open up your awareness, notice any agendas or aims that might arise. Agenda here can mean goals, stories or judgments like, “I should focus on this,” or, “I am bored, so I’ll rush through it.” Observe and welcome these thoughts as they arise, and gently come back to your experience.

Step 3: Wander

As you practice coming back to your experience and noticing what arises, you are welcome to wander aimlessly in the space. Maybe you hear a sound and follow it. Maybe you see something and move towards it. Maybe you feel a sensation in your body and move or stretch in response. Welcoming whatever sensations arise, you are free to wander. Welcome any agendas or aims, and keep coming back to the experience. No aim is necessary.

Step 4: Return

Taking the time you need, notice how you might move towards concluding this practice. You are welcome to return to a simple awareness of the breath.

Students can do this practice by wandering in the space, or they can do the practice sitting or lying down by allowing information to come to them through sight, hearing, smell, taste and/or touch. If students become overwhelmed, they can sit or lie down to rest. They can use self-soothing touch by lightly tapping themselves on the face or chest or gently squeezing their own arms or legs with their hands. They can also look around the room and silently name five things they see to shift their awareness more externally.

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- Also check out Anne Archambault's **movement meditation** for another practice that can provide an alternative to stillness practices
- This practice can be a way to practice **approaching mindfulness in different ways**, depending on where your attention takes you
- Learn more about how Gabriela uses meditations like this in her classroom by listening to the **instructor and student testimonials**

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Berland, E. (2017). Sitting: The physical art of meditation. Somatic Performer LLC.

Buzzsprout. (2024, April 4). **Erika Berland; embodiment and the meditative journey** [Broadcast].

Dilley, B. (2015). **This very moment: Teaching thinking dancing**.

Ferguson, G. (2024). **Welcoming beginner's mind: Zen and Tibetan buddhist wisdom on experiencing our true nature**. Shambhala Publications.

Festival of Faiths (Director). (2025, February 17). **Slow down and experience consciousness| Gaylon Ferguson | #FOF2024** [YouTube Video].

Overlie, M. (2016). **Standing in space: The six viewpoints theory & practice softcover**. Fallon Press.

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

Centering stillness

Joseph Siddiqi

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness

I became interested in Eastern philosophy as a teenager and have been practicing mindfulness meditation since 2018. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while teaching painting and drawing courses online, I noticed a sharp increase in student anxiety and creative blocks. To help students manage their fears and access creative flow, I began sharing mindfulness practices—specifically my own experience and how meditation helps me feel centered and grounded in the present moment.

My formal training in mindfulness meditation began through multiple 10-day residential courses at the Dhamma Suttama Vipassana Meditation Centre in Montebello, Quebec. This experience led me to deepen my theoretical understanding of the practice by reading Ledi Sayadaw's "Manuals of Buddhism" (English translation), which led me to connect with a community of Sri Lankan Buddhist Forest monks. I have studied with them weekly since 2020 and for the past couple of years have attended week-long silent retreats held by the senior monk and meditation teacher.

At Concordia, I've expanded this foundation through several institutional programs: the Centre for Teaching and Learning's Contemplative Pedagogy initiative, the Faculty of Fine Arts Mindful Campus initiative, and completion of specialized training including the Mindful Self-Compassion program (MSC), the Mindfulness for Resilience program (MRP), and the Mindfulness for Resilience national teacher training intensive.

Cultural & historical origins

I investigated the background of this practice and found it was rooted in a late 19th and early 20th century counter-colonial movement in Burma (present day Myanmar). Briefly, prior to colonization, Buddhist meditation in Burma was the domain of a small number of forest monks who had learned these practices in a master-disciple tradition stretching back several centuries. Other monks and lay people performed rituals and ceremonies but didn't practice meditation—it was considered too difficult and time-consuming for the average person to learn.

When European colonists arrived in Burma and started to spread Protestant teachings and values, a group of forest monks who feared that their traditional way of life and practices would be lost, decided the best way to save the teachings would be to make them widely available to the lay people. Texts in Pali, the ancient language of the historical Buddha (circa 480-400 BCE), which were only understood by the monks, were translated into Burmese, the common language of the people, by monks like Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). Teachers like U Ba Khin (1899-1971) later began teaching meditation practices in structured formats, including 10-day residential retreats, which was considered the minimum time required for a beginner to get a taste of the practice.

In the mid-to-late 20th century, the Burmese texts were translated into English and the practices spread into Europe and North America through two main lineages. The first is commonly known as Vipassana meditation (popularized by S.N. Goenka, following the U Ba Khin lineage), which emphasizes body-scanning techniques and structured 10-day retreat formats. The second is called Insight Meditation (based on Mahasi Sayadaw's (1904-1982) teachings), which focuses on noting techniques and mindful observation of present-moment experiences. While both are forms of vipassana (meaning 'to see things as they are' in Pali), they represent distinct methodologies for the beginner within the broader movement. These practices, which stem from Theravada Buddhist sources, share similarities with those popularized by Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022), which stem from the Mahayana/Zen tradition. Today, many of these practices are largely removed from their original roots and are commonly referred to as mindfulness meditation, which is widely practiced by people in a secular way that has proven to be very effective in relieving stress and reducing anxiety.

What to be aware of

Keep in mind that not everyone will want to engage in a stillness practice. Before engaging, the person must already be somewhat at ease—if they are too stressed out or highly anxious, then they might be better off doing something else, like a movement practice or a creative activity.

Always give the students the option to opt-in to the practice, or simply observe, or do something else. It must be clear that it is optional and not a requirement—no grading here!

Also be aware that relaxing the mind can cause certain unwanted thoughts and feelings to pop-up, and so there should be a fair amount of discussion about the practice before engaging in it. For example, I found it best to talk about the theory and my own experience for a few classes in a question-and-answer style discussion with the students before leading a practice: this gave the students lots of opportunities to voice their concerns and offer me

great advice from their perspective; it also gave me the chance as a teacher to make it clear how the practice was related to the course content, which was important for many of the students who were skeptical about terms like ‘mindfulness’ and ‘meditation’.

Ways to use this in the classroom

My full-year painting and drawing courses are held in large open studios in the Visual Arts Building, with classes scheduled 4 hours per week for 24 weeks. The students are there to develop their artistic and creative interests and are open to experimenting with new ideas and ways of thinking. My strength is teaching materials and techniques, promoting a skills-and-challenge-based approach to learning art. One of the tools I share with students is M. Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, which uses meta-awareness of one’s mental state to self-direct one’s creative process; in practice, to apply this concept one needs a certain amount of mindfulness—the ability to notice one’s present moment thoughts, feelings and sensations in a non-judgemental way.

When leading the practice, I ask the students to gather around the centre of the studio classroom and take a comfortable position seated in their chairs; for those who are feeling overly anxious and/or would rather just work on their paintings, I ask them to adjust their work station so that they can easily glance over if interested and otherwise hear what is being said (I noted that giving this option to the students can make a big difference, for some later told me how much they appreciated being able to listen and benefit from the talk in their own way).

I would keep the practice short and sweet, no more than a few minutes at first, just to help students feel centered and grounded. I would follow the practice with a Q&A session, asking “What did you notice?” Having them talk about their experience is one of the most rewarding and beneficial parts of the practice, as it builds community and self-confidence in the students.

I found that a good time to use this practice, once the students were introduced to it, was before a stressful activity, like a class presentation (group critique) of their personal artwork.

Obviously, and most importantly, the teacher must be well-practiced themselves. This is not something that can just be read out from a script! If so, there is a good chance of confusing the students—the teacher must exemplify the practice, otherwise best to leave it alone.

Instructions

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=229***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

What is meant by "mindfulness practice" and "object"?

In this demonstration, "mindfulness practice" refers to the practice of skillfully keeping a chosen object in mind. The "object" is any feeling, thought, or sensation which you can notice (or become aware of).

To learn more about this approach, take a look at Joseph's video talks **introducing mindfulness** and **two approaches to mindfulness.**

Notes

- To facilitate your practice, chose a time and place where you can be alone and quiet
- Take a comfortable position—the more comfortable your body feels, the easier it will be to calm your mind and focus your attention on your chosen object
- Forget any expectations or demands you may have about 'mindfulness practice'; be a beginner
- You may wish to close your eyes or lower your gaze if that helps to quiet your mind
- When you start your practice, take a deep breath, hold it for a while, and slowly release; repeat a couple of times, to centre yourself, then breathe normally (there is no need to force or control your breathing during the practice)
- Without any choice, notice the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and outside sounds passing through your mind—call this 'choiceless awareness', when you are just noticing what is available—you are simply awake: your ears are open, and you hear; your body is functioning, and you feel; your mind is working, and you think
- After a few moments of choiceless awareness, start to settle your attention on your chosen object, e.g. the breath

- Notice that breathing is happening naturally, wherever it is most prominent for you—it may be in the belly, in the chest, in the throat, at the nostrils, or elsewhere; choose one spot and slowly settle your attention there
- Suddenly, you may notice that your attention has wandered into a thought, or a sound, or some other sensation—as soon as you notice that, silently bring your attention back to the breath, and settle on the spot where it is most prominent
- Again, the mind wanders into another object; again, you notice that has happened and silently bring your attention back to your chosen object
- When you end your practice, take a deep breath, hold it for a while, and slowly release
- What did you notice? What was your experience? What happened when you realized that your mind had wandered? How did you know that your mind had wandered? What happened when you returned to your chosen object?
- When you noticed that your mind had wandered away from your chosen object, was that a sign of being mindful or unmindful?

Alternatives

- Journal, doodle, draw, knit or any other quiet activity that occupies your hands but leaves your ears open to listening.
- Bringing attention to the body can be unsettling for some. Alternatively, choose an external object to focus attention, such as sounds or holding something, or imagine a special person, place, pet or plant as an anchor for attention.
- The key to success is choosing an object which you enjoy attending to! Avoid objects which cause stress or anxiety. Keep in mind that it may be difficult at first as beginners tend to be harsh on themselves and may easily get discouraged by their judgemental self-talk.

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- Check out the piece by Donetta Hines on **how to translate contemplative practices into pedagogies** to learn how a practice like this can be brought into the classroom
- Consider reading Joseph's other pieces on mindfulness such as **"What is mindfulness?"**, **two approaches to mindfulness**, and **noticing the movement of attention**
- Learn more about how Joseph uses meditations like this in his classroom by listening to

the **instructor and student testimonials**

Additional resources

Centre for Mindfulness Studies, OCAD University. (n.d.). ***Mindful campus***. Mindfulness Studies.

Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University. (n.d.). ***Mindful campus initiative***.

Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Suttama (Director). (n.d.). ***Vipassana meditation: Meditators' experiences*** [Video recording].

Sitting on the earth

Kariwentha Lee Scott

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness, ritual/cyclical

Awareness through Haudenosaunee worldview and "All Our Relations"

How do You commune with the natural world?

We are all a part of the natural world in every way and are unable to exist without our Mother the Earth.

When we recognize how scrumptious that fresh picked apple is we are acknowledging that being, maybe we even express our appreciation to it.

What about the fresh breeze that sneaks in and touches our face in the midst of a heat wave? What about the medicines growing close to our doorsteps, a reminder that we may need their help during the winter.

- All our natural foods come from the soils of the earth, our water comes from the skies and underground water supplies.
- We breathe air, we drink water, our food is grown in soil.
- What we refer to as "All Our Relations" provides everything we need to survive and prosper in our body, mind and spirit.
- It is up to each one of us how we recognize and express thanks for/to "All Our Relations".

Photo by Peter Fazekas from Pexels

The Healer within – what does this mean?

I think of it as the place inside of humans that knows how to learn from communing with our natural world.

It is quiet and observant of ourselves and the other (whether it is a person, a gust of cool air, a bug, a frog or other living being) we have the opportunity to listen deeply, with every cell of our being. Listening deeply can mean opening all of our senses and our awareness to possibilities. We can listen to Ourselves, to our own needs, our health and our wellness.

Do we need fresh air, do we need quiet, do we need to unravel an issue, do we need someone to show us how to do that etc.?

We share the earth with many beings, mammals, fish, insects, water, winds and tend to forget we can commune with these beings as we do with humans. All of Our Relations/ Nature supports us as we discover what it is that we need for ourselves and our communities.

Instructions

This is a solo activity.

Sitting on the earth is an opportunity to check in with yourself. Some good ways to start is to introduce yourself to nature.

Acknowledge the life around you and take a really good look at what grows and lives beneath, above and all around you.

Acknowledge these beings and express your gratitude for everything they provide; that you may have fruits, vegetables, water, clean air, etc.

Ask yourself about your needs and wants in your life at this time, then listen and open yourself for the answer(s). The live beings that share the the earth with you may have something to share with you.

Related content

- While outside, you can also try the **earth altars practice** shared by LeeRay Costa
- See other stillness or ritual/cyclical practices shared by our contributors: **arriving/breathing/focusing**, **aimless wandering**, **orienting**, **box breathing**, **centering stillness**

Movement meditation

Anne Archambault

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Movement

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=231***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

I'm a kinesthetic learner myself and have always learned best through experiential learning and movement. The idea of incorporating gentle movement into the classroom emerged from observing the physical toll that prolonged sitting and screen-based learning can take on students. I've experienced firsthand how intentional movement can enhance focus and support emotional well-being.

Although I integrate various forms of group work and student participation during class, I've found that taking a moment to care for the body—the vehicle of our learning—has been beneficial for most students. These short movement sequences are designed not only to release physical tension, but also to invite a sense of lightness, embodiment, and connection within the learning environment.

Cultural & historical origins

This practice draws on principles from yoga, expressive arts, and somatic movement education, which have roots in ancient Indian as well as modern Western somatic therapies. The approach here is secular and adaptable to your level of comfort with movement practice.

What to be aware of

Use invitational language (“if it feels comfortable, I am inviting you…”) rather than directive cues.

- Allow for accessibility adaptations—standing is not required.
- Remind students that all movement is optional and they can remain seated or simply observe (all screens must be turned off though)
- Movement may stir emotions; normalize this and provide space for re-grounding afterwards, such as a big exhale or use laughter.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This movement sequence can be used midway through a long class or following heavy or emotionally intense material. It invites energy, eases physical discomfort, and helps reset attention. It can also foster a more relaxed and engaged group dynamic.

- Duration: 3–5 minutes
- Class size: Any
- Materials: None
- Set-up: Open space if possible; students can also stay seated

Instructions

1. Invite students to stand (or remain seated if preferred)
2. Begin with a deep breath in, lifting arms overhead; exhale slowly.
3. Remind students that the more pleasant the movement feels, the more effective it is. As a result, the movement may look different for each person.
4. Guide students through simple joint movements:
    - Ankle rolls, knee movement back and forth
    - Hip circles or sways
    - Shoulder rolls forward and back
    - Gentle head turns from side to side, looking to the right, looking to the left very slowly

- Stretching arms overhead, side bends, or torso twist

1. Encourage light shaking or “shaking out” arms and legs to release energy.
2. Optionally, invite students to smile or make a face—it can be playful.
3. Close with a few deep breaths and a return to stillness.

In this video, Anne demonstrates how she would guide her class through the movement meditation.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=231***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

Alternatives

- Students can perform the movement seated, adjusting range and pace
- Offer chair-based stretches for students
- Provide the option to step outside the class for a few minutes

Additional resources

- Invite students to share a movement practice they would feel comfortable leading with the class, and review it with them beforehand.
- With so much diversity in the classroom some students may be happy to share a movement practice from their tradition.

Evidence of benefits for students & educators

Based on student reflections I’ve had the privilege of receiving over the past few years, movement has:

- Helped release muscular tension, particularly in the neck, shoulders, and spine
- Created a sense of energy, connection, and emotional lightness
- Increased readiness to engage with the next segment of the course

Related content

- Gabriela Petrov's **aimless wandering** practice is another kind of movement meditation where the attention is followed and moved towards
- Learn more about how Anne uses meditations like this in her classroom by listening to the **instructor and student testimonials**

References

Brown, K. W., Berry, D., Eichel, K., Beloborodova, P., Rahrig, H., & Britton, W. B. (2022). **Comparing impacts of meditation training in focused attention, open monitoring, and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on emotion reactivity and regulation: Neural and subjective evidence from a dismantling study**. *Psychophysiology, 59*(7). https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.14024

Davidson, R. J., & McEwen, B. S. (2012). **Social influences on neuroplasticity: Stress and interventions to promote well-being**. *Nature Neuroscience, 15*(5), 689–695. https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3093

Goyal, M., Singh, S., Sibinga, E. M. S., Gould, N. F., Rowland-Seymour, A., Sharma, R., Berger, Z., Sleicher, D., Maron, D. D., Shihab, H. M., Ranasinghe, P. D., Linn, S., Saha, S., Bass, E. B., & Haythornthwaite, J. A. (2014). **Meditation programs for psychological stress and well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis**. *JAMA Internal Medicine, 174*(3), 357–368. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.13018

Three-point meditation

Anne Archambault

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Stillness – sensory awareness

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=241***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

This practice emerged from my experience with somatic mindfulness and body-based awareness work. I've long been interested in how attention to the body, sound, and breath can help students regulate stress and return to presence. The simplicity and accessibility of this sequence made it a strong candidate for integration into class. Students are often balancing school, work, and personal pressures. It also allows me to model what it means to take a pause—an essential skill in the helping professions.

Cultural & historical origins

The three-point meditation draws on foundational mindfulness practices from Buddhist traditions, particularly those that emphasize Vipassana (insight meditation) and body scanning. Secular adaptations of these practices—such as in MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction)—have informed this approach. It's important to recognize and acknowledge the Buddhist and contemplative roots of these practices while presenting them in a way that is inclusive and accessible to diverse student populations.

What to be aware of

- Allow students the option to keep their eyes open or soft-focus if closing them is uncomfortable.

- Be mindful that body awareness may trigger discomfort for some; remind students they can skip any part.
- Normalize wandering thoughts and provide gentle redirection without judgment.
- Use inclusive language, avoid command-based tone, and offer opt-outs at any point.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This practice works well at the start or midway through class, especially when transitioning between topics or periods of extended screen use. It can help reset attention, reduce overwhelm, and ground students in their bodies.

Instructions

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: ***https://opentextbooks.concordia.ca/contemplative-pedagogy/?p=241***

Click to download a transcript of the video (PDF)

- Duration: 5 minutes
- Class size: Any (works well online or in person)
- Materials: None
- Classroom setup: Quiet space, minimal distractions, students seated or standing comfortably, ask that all computers, tablets, and/or phones be put aside

1. Invite students to sit or stand comfortably and put aside phones/computers.
2. Offer the choice to close their eyes or lower their gaze.
3. Body awareness: Guide attention to the contact points of the body with the floor/chair; hands, feet, back, legs. Notice warmth, pressure, or sensations.
4. Sound awareness: Invite students to notice sounds in the room (e.g., ventilation, distant movement) aside from your voice. Invite students to notice sounds far from them, out-

side even. Invite them to bring the attention back to the room. Allow for 20–30 seconds of quiet in each phase.

5. Breath awareness: Ask students to bring awareness to their breath—first notice the sound of the breath, then focus on the coolness of the breath in the nostril as they inhale, later focusing on the movement of the breath, what move first when the inhale starts, when the exhale starts. Remind them it's normal for the mind to wander; gently bring attention back to body, sound, or breath.
6. Close with a few deep breaths and an invitation to return awareness to the room by opening the eyes and stretching, even standing for a moment if it feels right for them.

Alternatives

- Offer students the option to focus on an object (e.g., holding a pen or stone) instead of internal awareness. Focusing on the breath creates stress for some students.
- Provide a written version of the meditation for self-guided pacing if they wish to practice at home.

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- See the piece by Donetta Hines on **core principles of contemplative pedagogies** to learn how a practice like this can be brought into the classroom
- Learn more about how Anne uses meditations like this in her classroom by listening to the **instructor and student testimonials**

Additional resources

- Roger Gabrielle https://rogergabriel.com/
- Calm app https://www.calm.com/
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (free guided meditations)
- Writings and teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh on sound and breath as anchors for mind-

fulness

Evidence of benefits for students & educators

Student reflections show:

- a calming effect and increased capacity to focus
- greater awareness of mental/emotional state before re-engaging with class
- a sense of presence and connection despite external pressures

Research supports that multi-sensory mindfulness (body, sound, breath) improves attention span, reduces anxiety, and strengthens emotional regulation (Goyal et al., 2014; Davidson & McEwen, 2012).

References

Brown, K. W., Berry, D., Eichel, K., Beloborodova, P., Rahrig, H., & Britton, W. B. (2022). Comparing impacts of meditation training in focused attention, open monitoring, and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on emotion reactivity and regulation: Neural and subjective evidence from a dismantling study. *Psychophysiology, 59*(7),

Davidson & McEwen, (2012). *Social Influences on Neuroplasticity: Stress and Interventions to Promote Well-Being*

Goyal et al., (2014). *Meditation Programs for Psychological Stress and Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*.

Earth altars

LeeRay Costa

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Creative, ritual/cyclical, and stillness

Photo by Kendra Coupland from Pexels

"It is the return to nature that allows us to return to our true selves." – Lucia Pec, @my.creative.nature

I began making earth altars on the beach many years ago, as a form of quiet, creative expression. This included altars made out of natural materials and objects, as well as plastic and trash. I have always been a creative person but I did not readily connect my personal art-making to my other contemplative practices. It wasn't until I discovered the work of Day Schildkret that I began to more intentionally merge these practices. After attending a retreat on "Morning Altars" (as he calls them) with Day, I began to make earth altars on my forest hikes in the Blue Ridge Mountains where I live, and post photos of them to my social media accounts. Personally, I find the creation of earth altars to be a profoundly moving practice that reminds me of my interconnectedness with the natural world. I had long been integrat-

ing other contemplative practices into my work with students (e.g., breathing, meditation, yoga, forest bathing, etc...). But it was while co-teaching a course called *Naturing Community, Nurturing Connection* that I led my first earth altar workshop – bridging my interests and training in cultural anthropology, spirituality, contemplative practice, and environmental studies/activism. Since then, I have been invited to share my earth altar practice in other university venues, with students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

Cultural or historical origins

People across time, cultures, and nations have practiced making a diversity of forms that we might include under the umbrella term of "earth altars." Nature-based art and the creation of sacred altars or sites reflect a wide range of spiritual, religious, and secular traditions and values (e.g., Indigenous spiritual traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more). Altars can be made by individuals as part of personal contemplative practices, or by groups as part of collective rituals and/or celebrations and offerings. They may honor relationships to the ancestors, spirits, diving beings, mother earth, and human and non-human relatives. Or they may reflect ceremonies for healing and transformation. Some examples include the medicine wheels or sacred hoops created by Native American (Indigenous) communities, Navajo (Diné) sand paintings, stone circles made by the Celts and Vikings, Indian rangoli, and Tibetan Buddhist sand paintings.

What to be aware of

Students have varying levels of experience and comfort with being in natural/outdoors spaces. Letting students know a few weeks ahead of time about the activity and inviting them to share any relevant information with you can be helpful in supporting students. It may be useful to talk one on one with concerned students to provide more detail about the activity and what to expect.

Note that for students raised in some Christian traditions, the creation of earth-based altars might be interpreted as "pagan," or "sinful," and feel contrary to their faith. Thus, developing alternatives or modifications to the activity to accommodate a range of student needs is advised. Emphasizing the focus on presence, stillness, and reflection (which are meaningful practices across spiritual traditions) is important. Making the sharing of experiences dur-

ing the debrief optional also allows students to have more control over what and when they share. This can be followed up with a written or audio-recorded reflection shared only with the instructor.

Ways to use this in the classroom

Explain how the contemplative practice will enhance students learning and/or support learning objectives. Include important considerations that educators leading the practice must be aware of, such as duration of the practice, timing, class size, materials needed, classroom set-up, etc.

Contemplative pedagogy and the use of contemplative practice focuses on the whole student – mind, body, and spirit. As Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush write: The use of contemplative and introspective practices in teaching and learning "promote the exploration of meaning, purpose, and values and seek to serve our common human future. Personal introspection and contemplation reveal our inextricable connection to each other, opening the heart and mind to true community, deeper insight, sustainable living, and a more just society" (2014, p. xv). Such practices help students to cultivate humility, patience, compassion (for self and others), presence, and accountability. They support focused attention on both self and course content, engagement with complexity and contradiction, enhanced critical thinking, and the easing of anxiety, depression, and stress.

Like any contemplative practice, the creation of earth altars helps students to slow down and tune in to present-moment awareness. While stillness and meditation can be challenging for some students, adding the activity of creativity and play (through earth altar making) can help students ease into this contemplative practice in a more familiar way. This practice can be used in a variety of ways, and creatively paired with course themes and questions – whether focused on the environment or not.

The instructor should cultivate familiarity with the practice on their own before introducing it to students. Dedicating sufficient class time for preparation, practice, and debrief of the activity is essential. This is not an activity to be rushed (and would be contradictory to the spirit of the practice). Think carefully about where you will conduct the activity – are there appropriate places on campus to gather natural elements for the altars? And to build the altars? Ensure enough time to get to these spaces before releasing the students to wander and create their altars.

I recommend providing students with a bag to collect items for their altars, and small scissors IF you decide it's ok to cut leaves/flowers from living plants (you may decide to use only what you can find on the ground). If you plan to make the altars with materials provided by you in the classroom, then you will have to gather all the elements ahead of time and set them up on a table before class for students to forage from.

Instructions

There are no rules for making an earth altar – just open yourself to observation, creativity, intuition, play, and presence. Earth altars can be as diverse as the humans who make them – any shape or design, in any location, made of a wide variety of materials that appeal to the creator. (However, it may be prudent to offer warnings about poison ivy and other dangerous plants if relevant to your context. Students should also be mindful not to take any plants/flowers that have been intentionally, and painstakingly planted by campus grounds crews).

For those who would like a guide, consider these steps offered by Day Schildkret in his beautiful book *Morning Altars* (2018, page 16-17 – modified here):

1. **Wander & Wonder:** forage for treasures to use in your altar. Remember to ask for permission when removing items from their home place. Follow the 1/3 – 2/3 rule – never take more than 1/3.
2. **Place:** listen for a place that calls you, to locate your altar.
3. **Clear:** use your hand or a brush to clear the space to create a blank canvas for your altar.
4. **Create:** use your collected items to design patterns and shapes, crafting your altar.
5. **Gift:** set an intention or devote your altar (to a person, group, or idea) as a ritual or form of gratitude.
6. **Share:** photograph and share your creation with others.
7. **Let Go:** practice releasing your creation to the earth and elements, bearing witness to impermanence and change.

Alternatives

Students who do not wish to create earth altars can be invited to spend quiet time in nature, the woods, the beach, and/or the classroom as an alternative. Invite them to practice stillness, breathing, meditation, movement, observation, and/or reflection on aspects of nature. This is more akin to forest bathing (*Shinrin-yoku*; see resource below). For students with

mobility issues, instructors may consider providing natural materials for students to make an earth altar on a desk in the classroom, or in an area outside the classroom that is easily accessible (sidewalk, nearby grass area or flower bed).

Related content

- Earth altars can be a way to **reclaim ancestral practices** and reflect on the questions posed by Emil Briones about our connection to the land
- The sharing of earth altars can be one strategy to help **build community in the classroom**
- While outside, you can also try a **sitting on the earth practice** shared by Kariwentha Lee Scott

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2014). ***Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning***. Jossey-Bass.

Goldsworthy, A. (1990). ***Andy Goldsworthy: A collaboration with nature***. Abrams.

Journal of Contemplative and Holistic Education

Journal of Contemplative Inquiry

Journal of Contemplative Studies

Kimmerer, R. W. (2015). ***Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants***. Milkweed Editions.

Li, Q. (2022). **Effects of forest environment (shinrin-yoku/forest bathing) on health promotion and disease prevention—The establishment of "forest medicine."** *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine, 27*, 43. https://doi.org/10.1265/ehpm.22-00160.

McGrady, M. L. (2018). Contemplative pedagogy in the classroom: Engaging students' self-awareness to enhance learning. *Academic Leadership Academy, 93*, 1.

Mortali, M. (2019). ***Rewilding: Meditations, practices, and skills for awakening in nature***. Sounds True.

Penguin Books UK (Director). (2018, April 24). ***The art and science of forest bathing with Dr Qing Li*** [YouTube Video].

Schildkret, D. (2018). ***Morning altars: A 7-step practice to nourish your spirit through nature, art, and ritual***. WW Norton.

Community & inspiration

- Instagram accounts: @morningaltars, @my.creative.nature, @earth_altarscapes, @lauraloescher.art, @jamesbruntartist
- Participant submissions for the earth altars workshop during Concordia Contemplative Practices Summit 2025 https://padlet.com/leeraycosta/earth-altars-concordia-contemplative-practices-summit-l45f7fobvkbncnvg

Evidence of benefits for students and educators

- Increased sense of well-being (integration of mind, body, spirit)
- Improved academic performance
- Development of healthy life skills
- The development of deep concentration
- The development of increased respect, empathy, and compassion (for self and others)
- The development of humility, patience, presence, and accountability.
- Improvement in communication skills
- Enhancement of creativity & leadership skills
- The development of connectedness and a stronger sense of community
- Recognition that all knowledge is culturally constructed and partial
- Affirmation of diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, ways of knowing, and dignity and worth of all people
- Increased sense of agency and making a difference in the world
- An easing of anxiety and depression, and reduction in stress
- Strengthening immune system function, and decreasing effects of trauma (Berila p. 13 additional citations)

Citations: Owen-Smith 2018; Berila 2016; Snowber 2016; Sable 2014; Barbezat and Bush 2014; Rendón 2014; Zajonc 2008; Goleman 1994).

References

Click to expand reference list

Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2014). ***Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning***. Jossey-Bass.

Berila, B. (2015). ***Integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy: Social justice in higher education*** (1st ed.). Routledge.

Goleman, D. (1995). ***Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ***. Bantam Books.

Owen-Smith, P. (2018). ***The contemplative mind in the scholarship of teaching and learning***. Indiana University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt200616w

Rendón, L. I. (2023). ***Sentipensante (sensing / thinking) pedagogy: Educating for wholeness, social justice, and liberation*** (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003446941

Sable, D. (2023). Reason in the service of the heart: The impacts of contemplative practices on critical thinking. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry, 1*(1), 1–22.

Snowber, C. (2016). ***Embodied inquiry: Writing, living and being through the body***. SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-755-9

Zajonc, A. (2008). ***Meditation as contemplative inquiry: When knowing becomes love***. Lindisfarne Books.

Contemplative collage practice

Beth Berila

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Creative – contemplative arts

Photo by George Milton from Pexels

Contemplative expressive arts are accessible and inspiring ways to access deeper knowing, build community, work with what is, and co-create collective visions. There are many forms of expressive arts contemplative practices, of course. This piece will focus on collage, as it can easily be done without any creative background.

The workshop[1] I facilitated for the Contemplative Practices Summit (2025) used collage to explore inclusion and belonging: what is, what we long for, what blocks it, and what we collectively vision. Depending on the time you have available and the group you are working with, each stage of the prompts can take longer or shorter, but it is powerful if there is time to move through all the prompts. This collage practice can be adapted to a variety of topics and explorations.

I advise sending people the workshop purpose and framing along with some journal prompts prior to the workshop. The journal prompts should include an invitation to find 8-10 (or more) images that represent what they journalled about or discovered in their journaling (Alternatively, you can send a recorded guided meditation or visualization). But the idea is to help participants begin their reflection journey prior to the actual workshop and also to bring several images that are meaningful to them, so they don't have to spend time actually looking during the workshop itself.

For the actual collage making, how you go about it will differ based on whether you are facilitating it in-person or digitally. If in-person, have many different art supplies available, such as glue, scissors, magazines, decorative paper, paint, stencils, etc. If digital, use a tool like a whiteboard so participants can easily add images. (Some tools allow participants to participate anonymously, which may be important, and you want to make sure you prepare participants if they need an account beforehand or can just join your account). If doing the event digitally, allow a few moments to give a little tutorial about the technology for people for whom it is new.

The beauty and magic of collage (and most expressive arts modalities) is its ability to tap into our intuitive, deeper knowing and longing as well as our creativity, so we want to set that tone for the practice.

For the workshop I facilitated, I started with some short centering breaths, and since we were doing our practice digitally, I invited people to offer kindness and compassion to someone else on the screen on their exhale and receive it on their inhale. There are other ways to facilitate connection digitally, and some element of that would be helpful, especially if the participants may not know each other–some way to facilitate a sense of connection before asking them to co-create and even be vulnerable with one another.

Then I gave a little context and framing about the topic of the workshop, in this case, a combination of contemplative expressive arts, belonging, and inclusion. We want the bulk of the time to be for the practice.

1. I will use the term "workshop" in this article, but this practice is well-suited to classroom space as well. Timing and how the sections flow would be adjusted based on the length of time available and how often you meet.

Framework for a collage workshop

- Opening/framing
- Centering or connecting practice
- Any content necessary
- Visualization practice
- Collage practice
- Reflection on experience
- Discussion
- Closing

The collage practice

To move people into the contemplative collage practice, I guided them through a visualization about a felt sense of belonging. You can adapt the visualization to what you want to explore, but the idea is to support participants to drop below their thinking mind to access other forms of knowing in their being and to dream beyond what currently is.

Inviting them to keep their felt sense alive, you can offer the first prompt and encourage them to begin creating. Depending on time, you can guide them all through each prompt in order, or you can make them all available simultaneously and they can move toward what calls them.

The prompts I offered in this workshop were:

Layer 1: Root

Add images/words/patterns that represent where you feel grounded — your sense of origin, strength, or connection to land, lineage, or embodied self.

Layer 2: Relation

Add images/words/patterns that represent the communities or relationships that shape you — chosen family, mentors, cultural roots, social movements, neighbors, ecosystems.

Layer 3: Fractures

Include images/words/patterns to express the complexities — moments of exclusion, migration, loss, ruptures, or tensions. Can we allow them to exist in the same space as the roots and relations?

Layer 4: Becoming

Weave in words, images, or symbols of the belonging you're growing toward — visions of justice, inclusion, healing, and interdependence.

After they have had time to create, bring this iteration to a pause and allow some reflection, perhaps journaling first, and then discussing. It can be helpful and hopeful to end with what we collectively want to create, so there is a forward-looking energy and a kind of commitment toward co-creation.

Community discussion and what to expect

One beautiful element of contemplative practices is that whatever arises is rich with meaning and, in fact,*is*the work. The same is true in this practice. Work with the "meta" aspect of it. Rather than thinking, "oh this didn't work;" or "oh, I should have anticipated that and made sure it didn't happen," we can lean into what arises as precisely what needs to be addressed. Of course, we need to work to create some degrees of safety and community in order for that to be possible, and attend to power dynamics in the room. But when we do, the process is very rich.

For example, here are some things that can arise, and ways to explore it in the context of belonging and inclusion (which, of course, can be adapted to your focus/topic):

- "There's no more room for my image. I don't feel like there is space for me."
- "Someone put their image on top of mine, so I feel erased."
- "Something is wrong with the technology so my image keeps disappearing. I feel excluded."
- "Oh wow. Someone made their image smaller so there was room for me."
- "Wait, I see someone trying to find space for their image. I actually don't need to take up so much room with mine. I can make mine smaller and still feel present and seen."
- "All the slides are full, but we have more we want to add. How do we collectively handle

that?"

As hopefully is evident, all of these situations and more are already present in our attempts to find and build belonging and inclusion. People already feel there is no space for them. They feel excluded or wonder how to relate to others present. So when they arise in the practice, we can work with them. We can discuss, as a community, how we want to address those issues and what would move us closer to more holistic belonging and inclusion. (Having space for what we long for, what blocks our belonging, and what we want to co-create so everyone feels belonging invites that exploration).

We can facilitate the discussions of these "meta" issues in a few ways. As participants in the Contemplative Practices Summit (2025) noted, we can establish some community agreements prior to the practice. We can prepare participants for sitting with discomfort, as that can arise when we feel excluded from belonging in the practice. We can ask participants how they want to handle when these moments (these potential ruptures of belonging) arise. Depending on the participants, what is really beautiful is how often people will course-correct during the practice (without necessarily having to prompt it), such as when someone made their image smaller so someone else had room for theirs. This can lead to a dialogue about how we need to be together in community to facilitate belonging.

In the workshop I facilitated, I named prior to starting that we want to be conscious of not writing over or covering over someone else's contributions. When making a collage in-person, people might layer their images, tear them, paint over them, or juxtapose elements so parts can no longer be seen. That is very powerful in an individual collage but it can result in erasing other people's contributions if we do that in collective collages. So we can have a discussion about that, either preemptively, in the moment when it happens, or after, depending on what will best serve the particular participants. The point is that those challenges are precisely the work–what arises is what needs to be explored.

We can also layer the collages over time. We could revisit it at various times in the semester (if in a course, not a one-off workshop). We could integrate different elements each time we revisit it or consider what else we notice when we return to the collage over time. We can also have artifacts to take with us. For instance, people could make an individual collage first around the theme and then create a collective one, if there is time.

Contemplative expressive arts, in this case, collage, are fun, creative ways to explore a theme and access deeper knowing. I find students and participants have a lot of fun and that the process of creating collages builds community and connection which continues throughout the other class sessions. Have fun creating!

Related content

- Read the chapters by Naj Sumar on **what community building is** and what **some strategies for building community** in the classroom can be
- **Earth altars** are another kind of practice that can bring the classroom together through sharing creativity, values, and meaning
- **Metta (loving kindness) meditation** can be a way to generate feelings of care towards the self and others

References

Berila, B. Connecting it all: Expressive arts pedagogy for community, inclusion, and belonging. (2025). *Contemplative Practices Summit*. Concordia University.

Kintsugi collage

Amy Cooper

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Creative – contemplative arts

Kintsugi – the art of/and repair

This practice was initially designed as an arts-based method folded into my doctoral research exploring critical forms of human rights education (HRE). It was used during a three-day participatory HRE workshop for community workers on how to advance racial justice within their youth-serving organizations. Specifically, the practice aimed to explore resistances faced by community workers in their anti-racism efforts and provide space for repair, learning and transformation. Given the diverse group of IBPOC community workers participating in the workshop, each with their own complex stories of racism and discrimination, it was important that the activity support reflection, care, and restoration.

Cultural & historical origins

The practice is inspired from the Japanese art of golden joinery called kintsugi (金継ぎ), where broken pottery is put back together with lacquer and gold dust. The art of kintsugi acknowledges that a broken pottery, such as a bowl or plate, can never return to its original state; instead, by showcasing the breaks, it is made anew. Drawing from the aesthetic philosophy of wabi-sabi (侘び寂び), where perfection lies in the imperfect, the golden fissures are the in-between spaces of beauty and possibility.

Figure 1: Example of kintsugi. Photo by Matt Perkins from Unsplash

This practice is also tethered to my Japanese mother, an avid potter, who was born during WW2 and settled in Canada in the early 1970s. It honours her experiences with racism, as well as my own, and comes from a place that recognizes that we are all a bit broken but where transformation can emerge from the fissures.

What to be aware of

Given this process calls for a prompt that invites an exploration of a negative experience for renewal and transformation, be mindful of how this may be triggering for participants as well as yourself. Ensuring a trauma-informed lens will help support people's safety and meaningful participation. For example, consider who is in your class/group, what experiences may emerge, and their relationship with each other. Consider also what processes or spaces participants can have access should they need a break during and/or after the activity. Please be sure to consult our **section on trauma-informed pedagogy.**

Ways to use this in the classroom

The practice aims to reorient a previous negative experience towards growth and transformation. It is important to identify a prompt that is related to class objectives and to situate the activity and its facilitation in a way that allows for thoughtful exploration.

It requires at least 45 minutes, but the time depends on the number of students/participants and the breadth and depth of the associated group discussions. Be mindful of the timing of the activity and how you close the reflection.

Before you begin, remind students that participation comes in different forms and is voluntary. It is also important encourage participants to shake off any inhibitions or fears they may have regarding art-based practices. The art is in the process of individual creation, not the final product. Further, finished pieces are for the students themselves to keep and do what they want with.

Materials: White and coloured paper (preferably card stock), markers, gold-coloured art supplies such as paint, markers, glitter glue, etc.

Instructions

The process described below is a modified version from the activity I led during a longer three-day workshop. Participants had established a trusting relationship with each other and were used to sharing their stories and experiences for discussion.

This practice is divided into three parts:

Part 1: Setting the stage (5-10 min)

1. Explain to participants that you will be doing an arts-based practice to explore resistance and transformation. Encourage students to set aside any concerns or inhibitions that come with the term art, as the art here is focused on the individual process of making and creating, and not the finished product.
2. Ask students to individually reflect on their ordinary moments of resistance in their anti-racism work (or topic of your choice), such as being told to “stop rocking the boat” or “we’re not ready to do this work”.
3. After a few minutes, ask students to capture their resistances in 3-5 key words or images (e.g. doodles) on a piece of card stock (see Fig. 2)
4. Invite volunteers to read and simply show their words and/or images to the group.

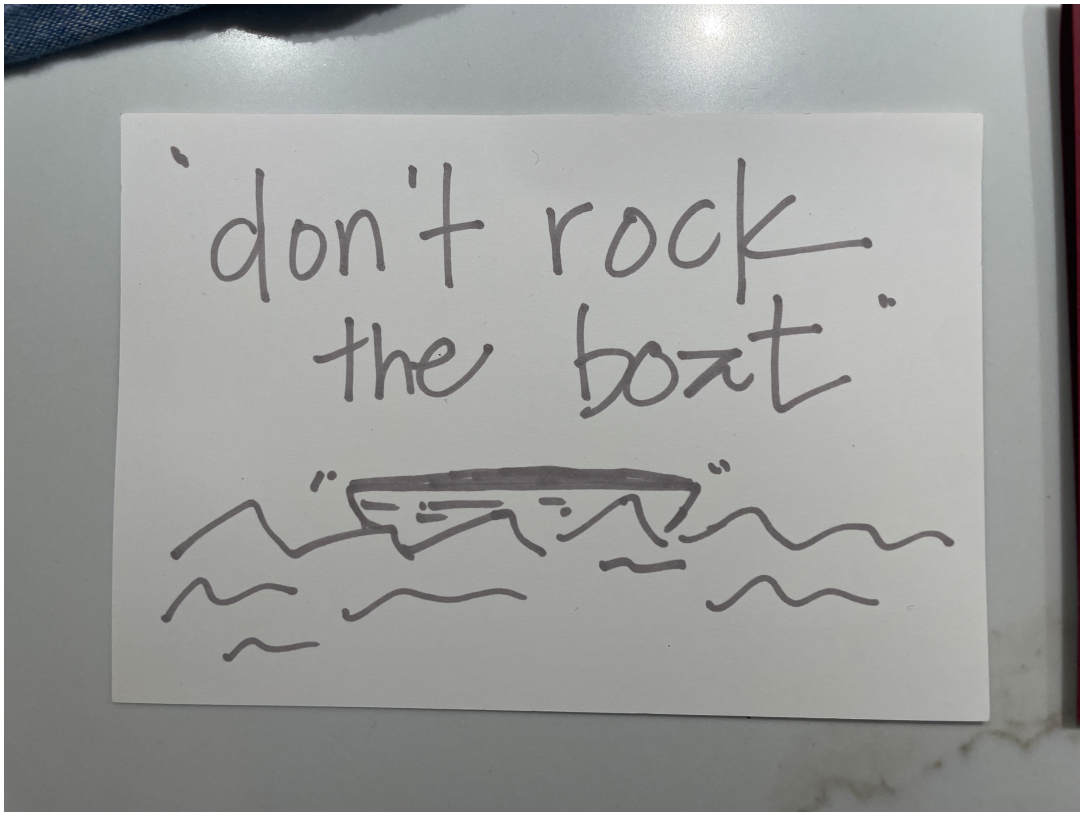


Figure 2: Example of part 1 – resistance on card stock © Amy Cooper

Part 2: Destruction and Repair (15 min)

1. Explain the art of kintsugi – where broken pottery is put back together with lacquer and gold dust. The bowl or plate never returns to its original state; instead, by showcasing the breaks, it is made anew. These fissures are where the beauty and possibility lie, the in-between space where faults and failures help us learn, repair, and transform.
2. Tell participants to tear the card stock into 4-5 pieces and invite everyone to start their repair work by putting back their pieces using the gold paint, glitter and gold, or other materials at each table (see Fig 3).
3. Provide some guiding questions for students to consider as they repair their pieces in silence, such as: Where do you find strength when faced by a challenge? Where do / can you find joy as you move forward?

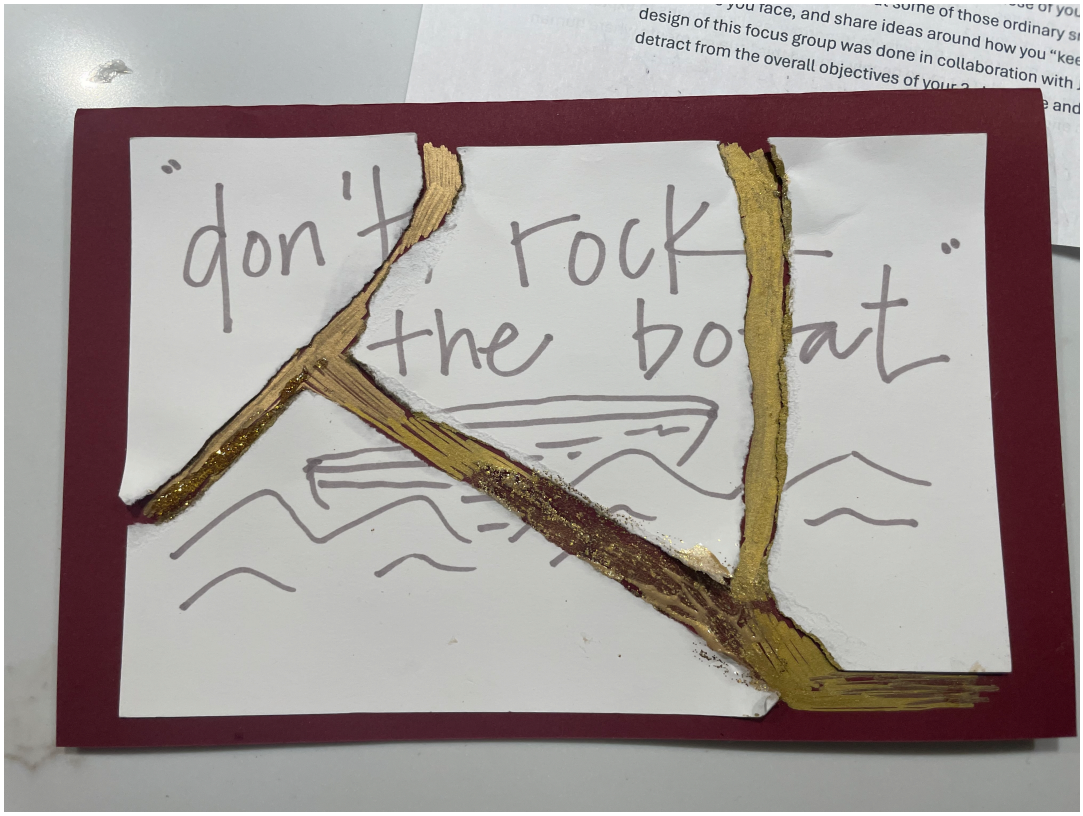


Figure 3: Example of part 2 – finished piece © Amy Cooper

Part 3: Sharing learnings (10-15 min)

1. Invite students to share discussion based on the following questions. Ensure you allow space for silence and do not force people to respond. If a large group discussion doesn't seem appropriate, invite students to discuss with their neighbour or write in a reflection journal instead.
2. How do you feel about your resistance now?
3. What have you learned about yourself in these moments?
4. How do you work through these resistances? What do you do to sustain yourself in these more challenging moments? Where do you find hope and renewal?
5. Close the discussion by thanking participants and summarizing and/or suggesting strategies for hope and renewal. For example, you could share breathing techniques that promote grounding, reduce anxiety, and balance the nervous system.

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- Check out the piece by Ridge Shukrun on **the importance of self-reflection in the implementation of contemplative pedagogies**
- Consider reading more about **trauma-informed pedagogical strategies** to help be address any trauma that may surface in the practice of breaking and repairing

Additional resources

Princer, M. K. (2022). ***Putting the pieces back together: Using a kintsugi-influenced directive to promote self-forgiveness and resiliency in young adults with shame and guilt*** [Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy, Dominican University of California]. https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.AT.03

Metta (loving kindness) meditation

Rosemary Reilly

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Generative

Cultural & historical origins

Metta meditation originated in India over 2,500 years ago and can be traced back to the early Buddhist scripture, the *Metta Sutta* (Discourse on Loving-Kindness), attributed to the Buddha himself. It emphasizes the cultivation of loving-kindness towards oneself and others as a path to liberation and spiritual growth and has gained prominence as an integral part of the Buddhist path. Over time, Metta meditation spread beyond the Buddhist tradition and became embraced by practitioners of various spiritual backgrounds worldwide.

What to be aware of

Some scripts of this meditation have the individual focus on someone with whom the person has a difficult or conflictual relationship. This may be triggering for survivors of violence. Therefore, it is best to avoid this aspect of the meditation. An additional consideration is that some individuals might find it easier to focus on a pet than a person, so it is important to provide this option.

Ways to use this in the classroom

Metta meditation does not require any special equipment or set up, and can be conducted in a short time. It can also be done with any size group. Practicing this allows individuals to develop an inclusive heart and encourages embracing the interconnectedness of all life, recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every being. Some key benefits are:

1. Enhanced emotional well-being: Cultivates feelings of love, kindness, and compassion towards self and others. This practice has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression. It promotes positive emotions, leading to greater overall emotional well-being. Enhanced well-being supports learning, especially in challenging circumstances.
2. Improved relationships: Fosters a sense of empathy and connection. This practice helps dissolve feelings of anger, resentment, and judgment, creating a more harmonious and compassionate approach to relating with others both inside the classroom and during field experiences.
3. Increased self-compassion and self-acceptance: Encourages individuals to develop self-love, self-acceptance, and self-compassion. Loving-kindness towards the self nurtures a positive self-image, reduces self-criticism, and fosters a greater sense of self-worth. In developing a kind and gentle attitude towards the self leads individuals to increased self-care and overall well-being. Removing self-criticism and poor self-image supports learning.
4. Stress reduction and relaxation: Activates the relaxation response in the body, leading to a reduction in stress levels. Regular practice lowers heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels. This can help students to be more effective during their studies.
5. Cultivation of positive qualities: Cultivates positive qualities such as patience, generosity, forgiveness, and gratitude. It promotes a positive mindset helping individuals to develop a more optimistic and compassionate outlook on life. This practice encourages individuals to become more aware of their thoughts, emotions, and actions, leading to greater self-awareness and personal growth. This can support students in areas of their life outside of the classroom.
6. Increased resilience and coping skills: Equips individuals with a valuable tool to cope with challenging situations and difficult emotions. This practice enhances emotional stability, adaptability, and the capacity to respond to adversity with grace and compassion. This can allow students more autonomy and support their ability to self-manage their learning and growth, improving confidence as they navigate challenging circumstances.

Instructions

1. Find a quiet and comfortable space: Sit with an upright posture, keeping your spine straight and relaxed. You may close your eyes or just soften your gaze.
2. Set your intention: Begin by setting your intention for the practice. Remind yourself that you are cultivating loving-kindness and compassion towards yourself and others.

3. Be aware of your breath and breathe easily without trying to change it: Simply be aware of it. Also notice any feelings that arise as part of the practice.
4. Start with self-love and well-wishes: Close your eyes and bring your attention inward. If you wish, you can place your hand on your heart. Begin by directing loving-kindness towards yourself. Repeat silently:

    - May I be happy.
    - May I be healthy.
    - May I be safe.
    - May I live with ease.

    Hold each phrase in your heart, genuinely wishing these qualities for yourself.

5. Extend loving-kindness to a loved one: Bring to mind a person or a pet for whom you are happy to see and have deep feelings of love. Repeat the same well-wishes for them:

    - May you be happy.
    - May you be healthy.
    - May you be safe.
    - May you live with ease. Send your genuine intentions of love and well-being to this being.

6. Expand to neutral individuals: Gradually expand your circle of loving-kindness to include people you have neutral feelings towards, such as acquaintances or strangers. Offer them:

    - May you be happy.
    - May you be healthy.
    - May you be safe.
    - May you live with ease.

Send your genuine intentions of love and well-being to these individuals.

7. Embrace all beings: Finally, expand your loving-kindness to encompass all living beings. Visualize the interconnectedness of all beings and radiate loving-kindness to the entire world. Repeat:

    - May we be happy.
    - May we be healthy.
    - May we be safe.
    - May we live with ease.

Send your genuine intentions of love and well-being to all living beings.

8. Closing the practice: Take a few moments to sit in stillness and bask in the warmth of loving-kindness you have cultivated. Gently bring your awareness back to your breath and slowly open your eyes.

Alternatives

If students prefer to opt-out of the practice, they can just sit quietly or, if they prefer, they can read a provided reading on **The Importance of Compassion and Kindness in Today's World** or **journaling prompts about self-compassion.** To adapt it to make it accessible, there are closed caption options on YouTube videos for those with hearing challenges.

Related content

- Naj Sumar's **self reflection on cultural humility** can help you situate yourself in relation to the cultural roots of this practice
- Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber's discussion of **conflicting world views** describes how western and indigenous perspectives can be at odds in the classroom, to which this metta practice can be used to reunite the class in a community of care
- Metta practice can tie in nicely with **gratitude practices**, as they both generate a sense of positive recognition
- Theodore Klein's journaling/visualization practice, **In memoriam and a letter from the future**, can be a way to follow up on the kindness generated by a metta practice and think about a better future

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2023). ***This loving-kindness meditation is a radical act of love***. Mindful.

Magee, R. (2021). ***Loving-kindness to support racial justice work***. Mindful.

Ruth King (Director). (2023). ***10-minute metta practice***[YouTube Video].

Shapiro, S. L., & Carlson, L. E. (2017). **Mindfulness and self-care for the clinician. In *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*** (2nd ed., pp. 115–126). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000022-009

Tricycle (Director). (2021, August 25). ***10-minute lovingkindness meditation with Sharon Salzberg*** [Video recording].

Visit our **reference and resource library** for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

In memoriam and a letter from the future

Theodore Klein

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Journaling/visualization

Photo by Towfiqu barbhuiya from Unsplash

I have been a Soto Zen lay practitioner for 30 years. In the Zen tradition there is an emphasis on realization, on seeing clearly here and now. Reflecting on impermanence—especially our own mortality—is a great motivator.

In the early 2000's, I taught writing to at-risk youth in California, and I was surprised by how much insight could be gained from short free-writing exercises. In 2017, I took an online course in the science of happiness through UC Berkeley's **Greater Good Science Center (GGSC)** that helped me reflect on how meaning, purpose, and visualizing the future all affect our baseline life satisfaction. At the time, I was teaching for The Princeton Review, helping students improve their results on standardized entrance exams for universities and graduate schools by savoring future accomplishments—visualization exercises that were calming, energizing, and remarkably effective at optimizing performance.

At the same time, my brother Dan Klein, who teaches Improvisation at Stanford University, shared an exercise he uses in Executive Education in which leaders project themselves into the future and give their retirement speeches. After completing my MBA, I started helping adult learners (in my **Concordia Continuing Education** and **John Molson Executive Centre** courses and workshops) visualize future accomplishments, as though they had overcome all the obstacles to their fulfillment. I then invited them to write their own obituaries—it turns out to be a profound exercise for a lot of students. Following this with a letter from their future self to their present self really empowers students to incorporate the insight they generate from this exercise into their life today.

Cultural or historical origins

There is a rich history of meditating on death, or reflecting on mortality, in a wide variety of religious and cultural traditions—from Stoic philosophers, ancient Romans, Egyptians, Buddhists, and Catholics to European art genres including danse macabre and vanitas, memento mori jewelry and coins. In high school I became fascinated by Japanese death poems and Tibetan tantric practices that made the reality of death a source of inspiration.

In the last decade, there has also been a lot of research into the value of prospection, or connection with your future selves (see additional resources below).

In addition, this exercise draws from the work of Kristin Neff on self-compassion, since it requires students to give themselves generous praise, encouragement, and care, and consider their dreams and goals free of the inner critic.

What to be aware of

Some students have adverse reactions to thinking about death, or the possibility of their own death. While the emphasis should be placed on this exercise as a way to imagine an amazing life (and not the process of death or dying itself), it is important to give students a range of prompts they could use if they don't want to write their obituary; they could write their Retirement Speech (after imagining a very successful career, however they define success) or an Acceptance Speech for a major lifetime achievement award.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This exercise is a good way to zoom out. It is a chance for students to recognize what matters most to them, what dreams they are harbouring, and what a vivid, joyful life looks and feels like for them. Students tend to generate intrinsic motivation for their classwork when they can meaningfully connect it to their life. For example, they may be "only" studying biology this term, but they are actually finding the cure for a terminal illness further down the road.

The two exercises combined may only take a few minutes to introduce, and 17-20 minutes to execute, but the students need some time after to process the emotions that arise, and there may be tears. It is good to do this exercise at the end of a class so that students can spend some time daydreaming, reflecting, talking about what they are feeling, and perhaps seeking some solitude afterwards.

This exercise can also unleash a lot of joy, optimism and positive energy, all of which changes the attention they bring to their coursework. If possible, I recommend students write with pen or pencil on paper and turn off their computers/phones. Every time I lead the exercise, I do it too with my paper and pen. This is an exercise that can be repeated throughout one's life, and it changes with us—illuminating both what we want and how we have been limiting ourselves.

Instructions

1. Ask students to take out pen or pencil and paper.
2. Give students 10 minutes to write. Tell them to write what comes to mind. Let them know they don't have to share this with anyone. Let them know they can opt out or take a break if they need one.
3. Give students a choice of writing: **"Your Obituary"** (as if you are someone else writing about your life after you have died); **"Your Retirement Speech"** (what you will have accomplished; what you will have been most proud of at the end of your career); or **"A Lifetime Achievement Award"** (your acceptance speech, which may include expressing thanks, championing causes, humour, etc...)
4. Let students know they don't have to be "realistic." They can write the life they would want to have had. They may surprise themselves by what they imagine.
5. Do the exercise with your students and enjoy it!
6. Remind students when there is one minute remaining.
7. Ask students how that felt. Let them know that it is common to have strong emotions during this exercise.

Now invite students to write "A Letter from the Future"

1. Instruct them to "imagine you have overcome the obstacles to your fulfillment. Write a letter from a future self to your present self, giving advice and encouragement. Be as specific as possible. Combine advice with lots of praise. Keep the pen moving. And don't worry about writing well."
2. Let them know they can imagine themselves far in the future having lived their best life, or one of their best lives.
3. Give students 7–10 minutes to write, depending on how much time you have.
4. Remind them when there is 30 seconds remaining to sign the letter from their future self.
5. Ask students how that felt.
6. After the exercise, acknowledge it is beneficial to visualize, savour, and feel joy about future accomplishments. We don't need permission or success to feel happiness about the future. In fact, it will make the futures we desire more likely to occur by priming the mind for finding solutions. And research demonstrates the more intimate we feel with our future selves, the better life choices we will make in the present.

Alternatives

If students are overwhelmed or uncomfortable with the exercises, give them the opportunity to sit quietly and daydream about an ideal day at different points in the future. Positive-constructive daydreaming (Singer 1975) is extremely beneficial and can help students experience some of the benefits of this exercise. If students have difficulty physically writing, and they have access to more secluded spaces, they can also record audio versions of these exercises in lieu of writing.

Related content

- The piece on **conflicting world views** by Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber prompts readers to reflect on their relationship to the land and consider this in how they have been, and would like to be in the future
- Ridge Shukrun's piece on **the importance of self-reflection in the implementation of contemplative pedagogies** can help you think about what you have learned from doing this practice

- Check out David W. Robinson-Morris' meditation, **Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining**, for a generative practice of imagining a hopeful future

Additional resources

Click to expand additional resource list

Allen, S. (2019). ***Future-mindedness***. Greater Good Science Center.

Best possible self. (n.d.). ***Greater Good in Action***.

Publications by Kristin Neff. (n.d.). ***Self-Compassion Institute***.

Zedelius, C. M., Protzko, J., Broadway, J., & Schooler, J. (2020). **What types of daydreaming predict creativity? Laboratory and experience sampling evidence**. *ResearchGate, 15*(4), 596–611. https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000342

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

References

Singer, J. L. (1975). **Navigating the stream of consciousness: Research in daydreaming and related inner experience**. *American Psychologist, 30*(7), 727–738. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076928

Gratitude practices

Rev. Jennifer Bourque

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Generative, ritual/cyclical (if used in opening/closing a gathering).

Gratitude practices vary widely. Some are simple: a child learning to sign "thank you" before they can speak, a note of appreciation to a colleague, a quick "thanks" when stepping off the bus, a moment of appreciation before a meal. Others are more formal or closely tied to particular worldviews or contexts, like harvest rituals or an author's acknowledgments in a new book. In different fields, gratitude is understood as an emotion as well as a cross-cultural virtue (Eamons & Crumpler, 2010). At the **Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre**, we've found ways to invite people to express their gratitude during gatherings as an invitation to embody and articulate a particular value (i.e. gratitude) among groups with diverse world-views and practices. It's often become a moment of getting to know each other on a more human level: people list things they are grateful for which may be profound or silly. Below, I suggest ways that this practice might be adapted from a co-curricular setting to other university contexts.

What to be aware of

It may be helpful to introduce this practice in a way that avoids suggests either that gratitude is the only or primary emotion participants should feel, or that they need to name something "important" in this practice. The facilitator of this practice can acknowledge experiences of challenge in or beyond the group and introduce the practice in a way that is invitational. In the example below, the facilitator give examples of different things participants could mention in their opening. This practice could follow any ground rules or group engagements that help participants develop trust, to allow them adequate security to share honestly while setting guidelines around expected responses in the context of groups with diverse life experiences.

Facilitators or instructors should use caution when introducing this practice in situations of conflict or stress to ensure participants do not feel that they are being asked to ignore difficult realities; other forms of opening or other gratitude practices (e.g. recognizing individual contributions privately) might be better suited to these cases.

Ways to use this in the classroom

This practice does not require any equipment or set up as described (though some of the alternatives require some materials) and is designed to be used with a group of any size during an opening or closing moment in the classroom, meeting or other gathering. It is designed to create a moment of transition into and out of the group, provide for a sort of contemplative "ice-breaker" that focuses on the individual's connection to others and the broader world rather than their personal characteristics and accomplishments. A few additional benefits:

- It models a contemplative practice that is quick and easy to adapt and use outside the gathering (Tolcher, Cauble & Downs, 2022).
- It creates the conditions for connection between participants without prior relationships and may develop new connections among participants with existing relationships.
- Participants can relate the practice to their own worldview and values.
- Gratitude is positively correlated with altruism, connection and mental and physical wellbeing (Bono & Sender, 2018; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010). Gratitude practices can increase student wellbeing (Tolcher, Cauble & Downs, 2022).

Instructions

As an opening:

- After the group has gathered, set any needed "norms" and given an overview of the time together, the facilitator invites participants to share their names, any other relevant information and one thing from the last week they are grateful for.
- They can explain that this is a way of connecting with each other and can tell participants about some of the benefits of on-going gratitude practice, if relevant.
- The facilitator can suggest examples (e.g. "you might be grateful for something that's really important to you—getting a new job or receiving a significant gift—or something more ordinary, like the sun today or a cool piece of art you saw on the way here".)
- The facilitator should make it clear that participants are free to pass, only answer part of the prompt, or to defer their contribution until later in the opening.
- The facilitator could hold a moment of silent reflection; this could allow participants to reflect on their own before sharing.

- Participants can be invited to share in any order—around the circle, by inviting the next person to speak, by speaking up when they are ready, or any other format.

As a closing:

- Invite participants to share what they are taking away from the class/gathering. This can be done aloud or in writing.
- The facilitator may encourage participants to think about this in terms of gratitude—for themselves, co-participants, the space, the material covered and scholarship behind it—if appropriate or may model gratitude.
- The facilitator is encouraged to model gratitude by thanking participants for their presence and contributions.

Alternatives

The practice can be adapted with any accessibility considerations otherwise used in the gathering (e.g. microphones, translation, offering the option to write instead of speaking). Participants should feel free to pass, answer part of the question, or ask to "pass for now" so they can contribute later. As this is an opening and ice-breaker activity, participation can include listening only, but it may be valuable to encourage all participants to remain in the gathering during this practice.

If the facilitator wishes to adapt this practice, they could set up a gratitude wall or tree so participants can add their gratitude over time/without their name.

Gratitude wall materials:

- white board, chalkboard, posterboard or blank wall space
- appropriate writing materials (dry erase markers, chalk, pens/pencils/markers)
- (optional: Post-It notes)

Gratitude tree materials:

- Branch(es) in a study container (vase, jar or bucket)

- Hanging tags with string/ribbon
- Writing materials (pens/pencils/markers)

Set up the gratitude tree or wall in an appropriate area of your gathering space. Invite participants to add things for which they are grateful to the wall or tree over the course of the gathering. As above, the facilitator can suggest examples, discuss the importance of gratitude and ensure that participants know the practice is optional.

Related content

- Gratitude practices can be another way to extend loving-kindness to another individual– see **metta-meditation for more**
- Gratitude, used during and at the end of a course, is another **strategy for building community in the classroom**
- You can extend gratitude to the earth and land you live on, with a **sitting on the earth practice from Kariwentha Lee Scott**

Additional resources

Gratitude Practices. (n.d.). *Gratitude For Life*.
Greater Good Magazine. (n.d.). *Gratitude*. Gratitude | Articles & More.

Visit our reference and resource library for additional resources on evidence of benefits for students and educators.

References

Bono, G., & Sender, J. T. (2018). How Gratitude Connects Humans to the Best in Themselves and in Others. *Research in Human Development, 15*(3–4), 224–237. **https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2018.1499350**

Emmons, R. A., & Crumpler, C. A. (2000). Gratitude as a human strength: Appraising the evidence. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 19*(1), 56-69. **https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.1.56**

Tolcher, K., Cauble, M., & Downs, A. (2022). Evaluating the effects of gratitude interventions on college student well-being. Journal of American College Health, 72(5), 1321–1325. **https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2076096**

Wood, A. M., Froh, J. J. & Geraghty, A. W. A. (2010). Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. Clinical Psychology Review. 30(7), 890-905. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.005**

Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining

David W. Robinson-Morris, PhD

Category / branch (in the tree of contemplative practices): Generative & activist

Photo by Marija Zaric from Unsplash

In moments of deep dis-ease, confusion, unrest, and inhumanity it is important that we re-member the contemplative audacity of rooted of things, of beings who are at home with themselves in every environment and who by nature of their individual and collective trans-formation force, transmute, and/or alchemize the environments that they find themselves planted within. This is the audacity of rooted things and the ultimate act of contemplative resistance—to be so centred, so grounded, so rooted and at home with self and others that we become unshakable; we become so energetically in tune that we can shift the energy and ride the air.

This must be the possibility that we embody and project into shaping an unknown future in spite of any barriers.

We access this audacity—this embodied hope—through action and the imagination.

The imagination is not a cognitive engagement but a super sensory rendezvous, a bodily attunement with the energy of the seen and the unseen. The imagination is the ultimate projection of new possibilities of how we and the world can and might be different, new, and whole. The imagination transgresses the conditions of the present and refuses the lie that we must and the world(s) we inhabit must remain as they are.

This practice allows us to come home to self, access the imagination, and embody hope. This practice calls us to rise from our chairs, our desks, our pillows transformed and ready to act to collectively to make real a world where all can thrive.

May these words take root.
May you embody the audacious hope of rooted things.

And we begin.

The meditation

Breathe.
Take the deepest breath you have taken all day.

Begin by arriving.
Wherever you are, feel the weight of your body finding its place in the world.
Let yourself settle.
Let yourself be held.

Take a slow, steady breath in through the nose—
the deepest breath you have taken all day.
Let it release from the mouth like a long exhale of permission.

You are here.
We. Are. Here.

Welcome yourself home.

Bring your attention to the meeting place between your body and whatever supports you.
Feel the rootedness available to you even now
Feel the stability of the earth beneath,
the quiet truth that you, too, are a rooted thing.

With every breath, allow yourself to drop gently into your centre.

Say quietly inwardly:

I root myself in the truth of who I am,
and the becoming that is already unfolding.

Breathe.
Let your breath widen.
Let your breath deepen.
Let it welcome you home.

Bring your attention to the centre of your chest.
Feel the beat, the pulsing of your heart space.
Imagine a seed.
Imagine a seed planted at the centre of your chest.
This small, persistent seed is full of ancient knowing.
It knows its way toward light.
This is the seed of audacious hope.
This is the seed of hope that refuses despair,
Hope that grows through, up, and around concrete.
This is the hope that moves toward seemingly undetectable light in empty darkness.
Imagine this seed.
See this seed commanding it roots downward and outward
Deep, steady, unflinching, searching for water in places unseen.
Imagine this seed.
See its shoots rising—rising unbowed upward
Seeking, probing, striving toward light
Possibility: a future not yet made manifest, a becoming.

Whisper:
I carry the audacious hope of rooted things.
I am the audacious hope of rooted things.

Breathe.
Let this image fill you.
Let the roots grow.
Let the stalks expand.

Do not resist.
Notice.
Embrace.
Befriend.

Contemplative audacity is not denial.
It is the immense courage to stay awake, to feel, to witness and choose to remain rooted in possibility and action.

Speak to yourself:
Even here. Even now.
Even now, I am becoming; transformation is possible.

Breathe.

Now, imagine the roots of your seed extending,
extending outward and intertwining with the teeming, searching, tenacious roots of others.
See yourself as part of an ecosystem
An ecosystem of seekers, educators, dreamers, organizers, healers, students, and reimagine-lutionaries.
Feel the determination of this interconnected root system, this web of audacious hope.
Feel the possibility it carries, the generative potential it encapsulates.
Feel the liberation that becomes imaginable when we root together.
In the quiet assurance of our still small voice, we ask:
How might we become otherwise, together?

Breathe.
Let this question rest in and on your body.
Let it live there.
Listen.

What do you hear?
What are you imagining?
What does this *otherwise, together* look like?
What does this otherwise, together feel like?
What does this otherwise, together sound like?
What does this otherwise, together taste like?
Who is present?
What has been transformed?
This is the practice of imagining.

Breathe.
Hold on the vision.

Remember the feeling.
It is your senses that will allow you to know.

Place your hand over your heart or your abdomen.
Feel the warmth of your own touch.
Remember that you are here,
You are whole,
You are becoming—higher, deeper, more connected.

May I allow the seed of hope to root and flourish.
May I root deeply.
May I be at home in my body.
May I embody hope.
May I resist with love.
May I imagine higher and think deeper.
May I meet inhumanity with greater humanity.
May I become what I have called forth.

Take one final deep breath.
Accept what you are ready to hold and let go of what cannot remain.
When you are ready, return gently to the room.

Related content

- Theodore Klein's journaling/visualization practice, **In memoriam and a letter from the future**, can be a way to apply the hope generated in this practice towards visualizing a future hopeful self
- Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber's piece on **conflicting world views** by Kariwentha Lee Scott and Karonhiaktatie David McComber reminds readers of the importance of grassroots efforts towards a better future
- After building a sense of hope and connecting with this value of CP&P, take a moment to (re)visit the first question: "**What are contemplative practices and pedagogies?**" – How do you feel about CP&P after having done this practice?

Additional resources

The accompanying lecture that Dr. Robinson-Morris presented for the 2025 Contemplative Pedagogy Summit at Concordia University **can be found here.**

David Robinson-Morris (Director). (2021). ***Freedom is our birthright, ease is our resting post*** [YouTube Video].

Reference and resource library

Inspired by Kouri-Towe and Martel-Perry's **Better Practices in the Classroom** (2024) open-access guidebook, we have created a Zotero library to house all the references and additional resources that all of our contributors have shared.

How to use the Zotero library

You can click this link to access the Zotero library: **Link to Zotero library**

You can find items by sorting the lists alphabetically, or by using the search function in the top-right corner.

You can also browse the tags in the bottom-left corner. These group similar items by section within the OER or shared subject. For example, if you are interested in building a better classroom community, simply click on the "Classroom Community" tag and zotero will list all of the articles referenced in the OER, articles which provide evidence of benefits of classroom community building, or additional resources selected by the authors.

Clicking on any item in the Zotero library will bring you to its appropriate access point, be it a YouTube video, academic article, or a link to purchase a book.

Glossary

constructivism

a theory of learning that believes learning happens through active engagement in experiences and interactions.

CP

contemplative practice(s)

critical discernment

Here meaning the capacity for judging what is true and what is ethical.

cultural appropriation

the adoption of elements or practices of another culture or identity in an inappropriate or unacknowledged manner.

intrapersonal competency

Also known as the self-awareness competency. The ability to consciously and proactively engage as a change agent for sustainability. This involves the ability to be aware of one's own emotions, desires, thoughts, and behaviors as well as one's positionality in society and one's own role in the local community and (global) society and in the local community. Building on this, the intrapersonal competency involves the ability to reflect and act on that self-awareness and to regulate, motivate, and continually evaluate one's actions and improve oneself, drawing on and developing emotional intelligence.

learner-centred pedagogy

Can also be referred to as 'student-centred' learning or pedagogy. This educational approach prioritizes the needs and interests of the learner and encourages them to take a more active role in the learning process through interactive, experiential and collaboration.

lectio divina

an ancient Christian practice of meditative, prayerful scripture reading with four steps: lectio (reading), meditatio (meditation), oratio (prayer), and contemplatio (contemplation)

Onkwehon:we

The Mohawk word for Indigenous peoples

presencing

The ability to stay present to your internal environment at the same time as engaging with your external environment. (Giangrande et al.,2019, p. 6).

social positionality

eg. race, class, gender, sexuality, ability

About the contributors

Contributors appear in alphabetical order by first name. External contributors (those who contributed to the OER but are external to the contemplative pedagogies faculty interest group) are listed at the bottom.

Anne Archambault

Anne brings 30 years of experience as a seasoned educator, yoga teacher and trainer, and recreation therapy specialist in mental health. She is a part-time faculty member in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University, where she integrates trauma-informed principles and contemplative practices into experiential learning. Anne also facilitates yoga and personal development workshops in corporate and community settings. Her approach fosters safety and connection, creating inclusive spaces for reflection and growth. She is known for her gentle, embodied presence and deep commitment to meeting people where they are.

Anne lives in Montréal, on the island of Tiohtià:ke, the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka, with her family.

Pages:

- Instructor and student testimonials
- Three-point meditation
- Movement meditation

Amy Cooper

Co-editor

Amy Cooper is a PhD candidate and part-time lecturer at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. She has 20 years of experience as a human rights educator, designing and facilitating rights-based programs for NGOs, community-based partners, and government institutions in Canada, Egypt, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine. Previously, she sat on the education advisory committee for the Ontario Human Rights Commission and was a contributing expert to the UNODC youth initiatives. Through community-based action research and arts-

based methods, her doctoral dissertation considers analytical and practical opportunities for human rights education to address systemic racism in Canadian youth-serving organizations.

Pages:

- Kintsugi collage

Cristina Galofre Gomez

Cristina is an Educational Developer at Concordia's Centre for Teaching and Learning. She has 20 years of experience in education with a multi-disciplinary background in human-centred design, instructional design, educational technology, and project management. She holds an MA in Educational Technology.

Cristina is interested in designing inclusive learning experiences and opportunities to build and share knowledge together, deepen relationships and connections with one another and nurture positive human qualities for flourishing.

Cristina has been co-facilitating Concordia's faculty interest group on contemplative pedagogies at with professor Rosemary Reilly since 2018.

Pages:

- What are your goals for students?

Donetta Hines, Ph.D.

Donetta coordinates McGill Writing Centre's Thesis Writing Program, comprising thesis writing groups, workshops, writing sessions, and retreats. Recipient of her faculty's Award for Distinguished Teaching in 2020/21, Donetta has taught academic and research writing for graduate and undergraduate students across the disciplines, conducted writing workshops and retreats for students, post-docs, and faculty, and convened a long-standing Peer Writing Group for graduate students and post-docs at the MWC since 2013.

Donetta began teaching and training in language and writing pedagogy during her graduate studies at the University of New Mexico and Cornell University. Having earned her PhD in the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University, Donetta's research and teaching in graduate communication encompass practices and pedagogies that foster inclusivity, diversity, equity, accessibility, and well-being; contemplative practices and pedagogies; scholarship of teaching and learning; and interdisciplinary humanities.

Pages:

- What are contemplative practices and pedagogies?
- Core principles of contemplative pedagogy
- Arriving/breathing/focusing practice

Erika O'Hara

Research assistant / student-partner

Erika is a master's student in the Educational Studies (Adult Education Concentration) program at Concordia. She is currently researching epistemic fragility as it manifests within university professors who have participated in decolonial professional development education. This has cultivated an interest in understanding how and why educators might resist change in their teaching practice, as well as a desire to explore the embodied experience of epistemic fragility more closely. Contemplative pedagogies, as alternatives to hegemonic Western teaching styles centered on reflection and connection, are intertwined with this research.

Erika's other areas of interest include queer studies/theory, feminist studies (particularly care, vulnerability, and community), Mad studies, and leisure education for liberation and critical consciousness.

Erika lives in Guelph, Ontario, the traditional lands of the Attiwonderonk and the Haudenosaunee, held as treaty lands with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. She studies and conducts her research at Concordia University on the island of Tiohtià:ke, unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka.

Pages:

- What are contemplative practices and pedagogies?

Gabriela Petrov

Gabriela Petrov was raised in Toronto by Czech immigrant parents and now lives in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. She is a faculty member at Concordia University's School of Performance and a doctoral researcher working in the development of critical somatic pedagogies as frameworks for performance research-creation. She has taught artists independently and at institutions including McGill, and Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado where she received her MFA in Contemporary Performance. For fifteen years, Gabi has practiced postmodern approaches to performance, including Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints. She has studied Body-

Mind Centering® for over a decade in five different countries and will graduate in spring of 2026 with her certification as a Somatic Movement Educator. In her artistic practice, Gabi uses somatic movement and improvisation to explore how we inhabit spaces of performance and everyday life. As a research associate with the Performative Urbanism Lab for Spatial, Social and Scenographic Experimentation (PULSE), Gabi is expanding her inquiry to include how we embody spaces of encounter with emerging technologies.

Pages:

- Instructor and student testimonials
- Aimless wandering

Jennifer Bourque

Rev. Jennifer Bourque is the Chaplain and Coordinator at Concordia's Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre (MfSC). She oversees the MfSC's work and runs programs and workshops, consults on questions of religious inclusion and provides spiritual care to students. She holds a B.A. in Religious Studies and a Masters of Sacred Theology (STM). Prior to Concordia, she worked as a chaplain/spiritual care professional, primarily in hospital and long term care.

Pages:

- Contemplative pedagogy and awe
- Gratitude practice

Joseph Siddiqi

Joseph Siddiqi is a Montreal-based artist and educator. His recent work—including oil on linen and colored pencils on paper—explores abstraction, color, and the contemplative side of painting and drawing. He has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation. His paintings are held in public and private collections, including the Canada Council Art Bank (Ottawa), Colart Collection (Montreal), and Athabasca University Art Collection (Northern Alberta). His work has appeared in solo exhibitions in Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, and Montreal. He holds an MFA in Painting from Boston University and teaches in the Department of Studio Arts at Concordia University. Alongside his studio practice, he writes and teaches on contemplative pedagogy, mindfulness, and the inner life of artistic work.

Pages:

- Instructor and student testimonials
- What is mindfulness?
- Two approaches to mindfulness
- Noticing the movement of attention
- Centering stillness practice

Josephine Guan

Josephine Guan is an Educational Developer at Concordia's Centre for Teaching and Learning. In her role, she supports professional development for graduate students and teaching assistants, and consults with instructors on accessible pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning. She also leads the CTL's open educational resource initiatives such as this resource, ***A guide to embedding education for sustainability in higher education courses*** and ***Teaching and learning guide for teaching assistants.***

Josephine has an MDes in Inclusive Design from OCAD University, and previously taught and worked in the field of illustration and design.

Pages:

- What are your goals for students?

Katrina Grabner

Katrina is a Registered Canadian Art Therapist (RCAT), Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC-BCACC), educator, artist, and Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP). Her practice integrates nervous system–aware, trauma-informed approaches in art therapy. Katrina brings a special interest in trauma-informed, neurodivergent-affirming teaching pedagogies, fostering safety, belonging, expression, and play in higher education. Katrina grew up on Treaty Six Territory (central Alberta) and for over fifteen years she supported adults, youth and children at several non-profits on Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver). She now lives, studies and teaches on the island of Tiohtià:ke, unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka. Grabner is faculty with the Creative Arts Therapies Department, is a PhD student in Individualized Studies at Concordia and is currently facilitating Concordia's **faculty interest group** on Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and "Healing Centered Engagement" in Higher Education.

Pages:

- How the nervous system shows up in the classroom
- Strategies for developing nervous system-aware learning environments

- Orienting practice

Naj Sumar

Naj Sumar is an educational developer specializing in Inclusive Pedagogies at Concordia's Centre for Teaching and Learning. He supports the development of inclusive practices in the classroom and provides tools to sustain these changes. His approach draws on critical frameworks that examine interlocking systems of power in order to understand adult learning and the context in which learning occurs. Driven by a desire to make learning more accessible, fun, and collaborative, Naj designs meaningful experiences and resources that engage different learning backgrounds, styles, and abilities. In the past, Naj has worked in community development, organizational development, and student life.

Pages:

- What is community building?
- Strategies for building community in the classroom

Ridge Shukrun

Ridge Shukrun is an educator and facilitator dedicated to creating inclusive and reflective learning environments. With a background in Theological Studies (MA) and instructional design (C-TEACH), his research focuses on the intersection of authentic spirituality, ethics, and the secular age, with a particular interest in the work of philosopher Bernard Lonergan. Ridge specializes in transformative learning strategies and dialogue facilitation. He has served as an Interfaith Facilitator at Concordia's Multi-faith and Spirituality Centre (MfSC).

Pages:

- The importance of self-reflection in the implementation of contemplative pedagogies

Rosemary Reilly, Ph.D.

Rosemary C. Reilly is a distinguished professor affiliated with the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University. She has made notable contributions and is known for her teaching and research. Her contributions have helped shape contemporary understanding in her area of expertise and creativity, the use of contemplative and arts-based

practices in the higher education classroom, and the impact of trauma on adult learning and community relationships. She is a 2024 recipient of the **3M National Teaching Fellowship award.**

Pages:

- Trauma-informed contemplative practices
- Metta (loving-kindness) meditation
- Xi-xi hu breathing practice
- Vagus nerve breathing practice
- Box breathing practice

Stephen Yeager, Ph.D.

Co-editor

Stephen Yeager is a Professor of English at Concordia University with a specialization in medieval literature. His articles have appeared in journals like *Pedagogy and Profession: New Chaucer Society, Critical Inquiry, English Language Notes*, and *The Journal of Medieval and Early-Modern Studies*, and his most recent monograph is *Chaucer's Problem of Prose: History, Media, and The Canterbury Tales* (University of Toronto Press, 2025).

Theodore Klein

Theodore Z. Klein develops and facilitates programs in Empowerment, Flourishing Leadership, Effective Communication, Creative Collaboration, and Next-Level Networking at the John Molson Executive Centre, the Leadership Institute, and What Comes Next, LLC; and he is a Senior Instructor at Concordia's Continuing Education, where he teaches Communicating with Emotional Intelligence, Influencing with Integrity & Impact, Refining Management Reflexes, and Innovation & Problem Solving, among other courses. Originally from California, he completed his MBA at HEC Montréal and his Soto Zen lay ordination in the lineage of the San Francisco Zen Center. His dharma name is Hokugen Ryushin ("North Source Dragon Mind").

Pages:

- In memoriam and letter from future practice

External contributors

Beth Berila

Beth Berila, Ph.D. is the author of ***Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education*** (2nd ed., Routledge, 2024). As a long-time contemplative and yoga practitioner, she integrates mindfulness into her social justice teaching and work. She is the Director of the Gender & Women's Studies Program at St. Cloud State University. She is also a transformational leadership coach and facilitator. **Learn more about Beth at her website here.**

Pages:

- Contemplative collage practice

Clarissa de Leon, Ph.D.

Clarissa de Leon is an educator with over a decade of experience spanning elementary and post-secondary teaching, as well as education development. Her expertise lies in fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism within educational spaces. Clarissa has taught in the Queen's University Faculty of Education and has worked as an Educational Developer at Queen's University and St. Lawrence College. She also works as an independent anti-racism and anti-oppression education consultant. Her past projects have included collaborations with the Limestone District School Board and The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Clarissa completed her PhD in Education. Her doctoral research focused on supporting BIPoC graduate students in their anti-racist teaching development.

Pages:

- Inquiry cycle for culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy

David W. Robinson-Morris, Ph.D.

Dr. David W. Robinson-Morris is an author, scholar, and strategic advisor working at the intersection of imagination, equity, contemplative practice, and institutional transformation. He is the Founder & Chief Reimaginelutionary of The REImaginelution, a strategic social impact consultancy that helps organizations design liberatory futures through imaginative inquiry and values-driven strategy.

With nearly two decades of cross-sector leadership, his career spans higher education, healthcare, philanthropy, and nonprofit administration. He most recently served as the inaugural Executive Director of the Institute for Black Intellectual and Cultural Life at Dartmouth College and is the founding Executive Director of The Center for the Human Spirit and Radical Reimagining, a dream-think tank activating collective imagination to dismantle systemic inequity.

In service to advancing contemplative pedagogy and practices in higher education and society, Dr. Robinson-Morris led the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind), an international community of contemplative scholars and practitioners. Under his leadership, CMind deepened its mission to integrate racial, social, and environmental justice into contemplative education before sunsetting in 2022.

The author of Ubuntu and Buddhism in Higher Education (Routledge, 2019) and co-editor of Contemplative Practices and Acts of Resistance in Higher Education: Narratives Toward Wholeness (Routledge, 2025), his scholarship draws from the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, Eastern contemplative traditions, and the belief that imagination is humanity's most powerful tool for transformation. A respected academic and thought leader, his work has appeared in Lion's Roar, academic journals, and public forums across the country. He is a frequent lecturer and consultant across sectors, nationally and abroad.

Pages:

- Rooted hope: an audacious practice of imagining

Emil Briones

Emil Briones (en: they/them; fr: ael/elle) is an organizational development consultant, community-based researcher/facilitator/mediator/educator, and musician based in Tiohtià:ke, unceded Kanien'keha:ka territories ("Montréal"). They are a settler and mixed-race member of the Filipinx diaspora (Southern Tagalog, Hiligaynon, Chavacano), and is also of part Western European ancestry. Born in the Philippine islands and moved to Turtle Island as a child, they use the words transfeminine, non-binary, and bakla to further describe their identity and experiences of gender. Since 2009, their practice has been informed, nourished, and

challenged by community care/organizing, the performing arts, ancestral inquiry, the critical social sciences, and non-profit management. They are trained in various group facilitation and learning approaches, and conflict mediation, including through programs by St. Stephen's Community House and the Lewis Method of Deep Democracy. From 2016 to 2021, they served as Faculty Lecturer at McGill University's Faculty of Oral Medicine and Dental Sciences, where they taught a course on critical social topics in oral health. They continue to support groups and organizations in their learning and change journeys through the power of connection, relationships, and collective leadership.

Pages:

- Reclaiming ancestral practices

Kariwentha Lee Scott

Lee is passionate about the wellness of women and girls.

Over the years, she has initiated community learning opportunities including Satatenó:ronk (Care for Yourself), Konwati'shatstenhsherawis (Women supporting Women), and participated in Oheró:kon (Girls Rite of Passage) along with other women. All in the hope to expand awareness of female transitions/rites of passage from girl to womanhood and the power to be themselves.

These included the development and delivery of important yet practical pieces of cultural knowledge and the female cycle.

She has completed both the Barbara Brennen School of Healing and the Wilderness Fusion 4yr. programs along with other Hands On modalities including Cranial Sacral Therapy.

Pages:

- Conflicting world views

Karonhiaktatie David McComber

is from Kahnawake, which is part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. I'm a husband, father and grandfather and am a retired high school teacher. I continue to be active in education in our community, working part-time at the First Nations Adult Education center, helping to teach trades to our youth. I'm also part of Iontionhnhéhkwen Wilderness Skills, whose goal is to share skills and raise awareness with the intention of fostering and deepening a relationship with the land.

Pages:

- Conflicting world views

LeeRay Costa, Ph.D.

LeeRay is a lifelong contemplative practitioner and has been actively integrating contemplative practices into her teaching since 2012. Trained as a feminist cultural anthropologist, she currently serves as Executive Director of the Batten Leadership Institute, and Professor of Gender and Women's Studies / Anthropology at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. She is co-editor of the book *Contemplative Practices and Acts of Resistance in Higher Education: Narratives Toward Wholeness* (Routledge, 2024). Her current interests include engaging spirituality, contemplative practices, and creative expression in the service of leadership, human flourishing, and transformative social change.

Pages:

- Earth altars practice

Sandra VanderKaay, Ph.D.

Sandra VanderKaay is an assistant professor in the School of Rehabilitation Science at McMaster University, a CanChild Scientist, and the Director of Clinical Education for the MSc OT program. Her current program of research is focused on trauma-informed pedagogy, and clinical reasoning and ethical decision-making in occupational therapy practice, including ethical decision-making in school-based occupational therapy. Sandra's most recent research study involves exploring the OT role with children and youth with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Sandra's teaching foci include pediatric OT practice, clinical reasoning, and ethical decision-making. Sandra has been a registered occupational therapist since 1996.

Pages:

- Trauma-informed pedagogical strategies

Versioning history

This page provides a record of edits and changes made to this book since its initial publication. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.1. If the edits involve substantial updates, the version number increases to the next full number. Due to the guide's continuous updating, the addition or removal of a resource is not recorded on this page.

Version	Date	Change	Affected web page
1.0	March 2026	Original publication	N/A