Creating a Contemplative Classroom
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The other day, a colleague asked me how to create a contemplative classroom? As faculty at Naropa University, a “Buddhist-inspired” university, the quality and practice of contemplation and meditation pervades all of our classes on campus. So, what might we consider “contemplative”? As the Contemplative Mind in Society has illustrated on their website (http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree), there are a host of practices that could be considered contemplative, which include meditation, yoga, prayer. Indeed, the image of a tree evokes a fruition or blossoming of a joining of personal somatic awareness and conscious thoughtfulness.

Contemplative practice doesn’t always mean mindfulness meditation – although contemplative practices are often deeply rooted in tradition, history, and extensive personal application. In this essay, I’m not going to talk about the many different contemplative practices, as this has been well documented and there are an ever expanding array of different modalities (ref tree of contemplative practices). What I’d like to explore is how the learning environment – a.k.a. the classroom – is created through mutual experiences of one's body, speech, and mind. I’m basing my observations on what I teach my Master of Divinity students in our Contemplative Communication class. We use the framework of “basic attendance,” first taught within the Contemplative Psychology program at Naropa, to explore facets of contemplative communication. (Trungpa, 1982).

The Bow. Classes begin with a pause, and ends with a pause. So it is with Naropa University’s contemplative classrooms. The pause, often embodied in the “Naropa bow” (http://www.naropa.edu/the-naropa-experience/contemplative-practice/the-bow.php) establishes a brief moment of not-doing and not-knowing – a rarity in our contemporary Western world. It gives one an opportunity to stop in the midst of our rush to achieve, get ahead, and move on to the next thing.

Yet the beginning and end do not predicate what flows in between – the classroom content. Whether the topic is meditation practice and theory, eco-psychology, or research methodology – classroom content emerges from the joining of academic expertise with the pause of not-knowing. Faculty bring to their classrooms a commitment to an academic discipline, often acquired and honed in traditional Western academic settings, as well as an openness and curiosity informed by their personal contemplative practices.

Body: Personal and Environmental. Body refers not only to one’s physical body, but also to the physical environment(s) of the classroom. There is a natural interplay in how our experience is contextualized by the cultural, environmental, and social setting(s) that are not only found
within the classroom walls, but equally what is found “outside” of those walls. Observations of the “environmental body” may inquire: What is in the classroom? And how are the seats and students and teachers are arranged to evoke a contemplative atmosphere? Is it indoors or outdoors? What time of day is it, and what is the weather outside? Observations of the more personal body might include: What stances do the instructors as well as the students take? Are students slumped over? Sitting in a circle? Does the instructor sit behind a desk, or stand up while others are sitting?

The physical and physiological relational structures that are established in a learning setting naturally predicate the flavor of communication that takes place within the classroom. At Naropa, instructors may elect to arrange the class in a circle, with the instructor an “equal” participant within that arrangement. Or, instructors may prefer the more traditional seat behind a table or desk, with students arranged in rows or in two semi-circles.

**Speech: Verbal and Energetic.** The arranging of these personal and environmental aspects of “body” helps to determine the quality and tone of communication that takes place within a learning environment. By speech we not only are referring to the literal words that are spoken, but also their quality and how the act of speaking might (or might not) evoke a mindful and contemplative quality. In general, it refers to the energetic quality that is evoked by the interplay of instructor, students, and material. This does not imply that all discussion taking place within a classroom should have a uniform quality. A classroom with a mindful flavor of discussion might aspects of genuine listening, a give and take, as well as an authenticity of expression. Mindful speech has been presented as six points which include: listening to one’s own speech, listening to the speech of others, slowing down speech, enunciating clearly, simplicity or choosing words well, and including silence as part of speech. (Rockwell, 2012)

Speech includes a “gap” or “fresh start” – which infuses class sessions at Naropa. This brief moment allows for the instructor, as well as the students, to momentarily let go of concerns and busyness that we all bring along with us, results of an increasingly inter-connected and electronically stimulated society. At the inception of the class sessions at Naropa, and at the end, a brief silence, a bow, marks a mutual willingness to let go, even for a moment, the cares and discussion we might bring to the classroom. It allows for a “fresh start” to the topic of discussion at hand – establishing a space that could hold a heated discussion on climate change as well as a measured analysis of Buddhist texts.

**Mind: What is Taught and What is Experienced.** Mind refers to what is most commonly understood as the content that is presented through lectures, books, homework, and so forth. In the contemplative classroom, the “content” also includes one’s personal experience, how the words or images on the textbook page may “come alive” within the landscape of one’s own experience. While the more concrete and traditional content is often rooted in what may be read, heard, and written about, an inner understanding that may arise from the contemplative classroom includes the students’ and instructors’ genuine emotional and somatic connection to the material.
One challenge is to be able to balance the contemplative quality (which often brings a sense of spaciousness) with the sharpness and precision of content. Ultimately, any learning should be relevant, timely, supported by contemplation and reflection, but also able to face argument. A reflective aspect within a classroom may give psychological and cognitive space to digest and consider content. Students are encouraged to both demonstrate knowledge imparted from readings as well as personalization that comes from contemplation and personal investigation of the material (Ray, 2004).

**Balance and paradox.** There is a natural tension between the content orientation of the “left brain,” and a more intuitive understanding evoked by “right brain” contemplative modalities. These aspects of classroom learning are both important, and may require management of their paradoxical perspectives, rather than coming from one or the other alone (Johnson, 2014). Each approach has potentially enriching and limiting qualities, and one role of the instructor is to steer classroom learning between these two polarities.

For instance, a contemplative classroom may be more spacious, and allow for the “unpacking” of emotions that often reside below the surface. However, too much space may not contextualize the learning harvested from this unpacking, and result in unclear learning objectives. Conversely, a classroom which emphasizes didactic learning regarding emotions may emphasize theories, but limit a more individualized, personal understanding. In Buddhist learning environments, these two aspects are seen as two wings of a bird, both necessary for flight.

In conclusion, participation in the contemplative classroom, either as instructor or student, requires the balancing of these perspectives. The qualitative aspects of what creates a contemplative classroom may be experienced through the domains of body, speech, and mind. And, the pause – evoked by a brief bow, allows one to briefly step into the liminal, unknown space, where the kernel of possibility lies. Any classroom is a learning community. To infuse the classroom with a contemplative sensibility supports a more deeply experienced and personal understanding for all participants.

**References**


Ray RA. How to Study the Dharma, Shambhala Sun, May 2004.
