

Contemplative and Reflective Practices

Reading Time: 15-20 minutes

*“Direct your eye right inward, and you’ll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography.”
— Henry David Thoreau from Walden*

“How we know is as important as what we know. However, contemporary pedagogy and curriculum generally exclude a fundamental way of knowing—the contemplative—from any viable role in education in favor of a rational and empirical approach. Yet, contemplative knowing has been described as fundamental to the quest for knowledge and wisdom and complementary to analytic processing. The result of such integration transforms learning and the learner...

*...Long dormant in education, the natural capacity for contemplation balances and enriches the analytic. It has the potential to enhance performance, character, and depth of the student’s experience. Perhaps most important, the contemplative helps to return the transformative power of wonder, intimacy, and presence in daily learning and daily living.” — Tobin Hart, from *Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom*^[1]*

A flexible, robust and practical ecosocial literacy requires continual adjustment to the unfolding present especially in the 21st century, a time of profound societal and environmental disruption. This resilience and on-going creativity is achieved through our sensing attention and deep listening, reverent dialogue and internal inquiry, reflection and contemplation. In addition to a discerning understanding of the present moment, it requires a profound long-term perspective as well. Student learners need to be exposed to the foundations of this literacy from a young age and come to understand the importance of their gifts, creativity and contribution — their agency — in maintaining the long-term viability of our human presence on Earth. There is a clear need for the skills of reflection, contemplation, and non-cognitive listening and connection, especially our connections with nature and the cosmos. Reflective practices help bring into awareness the vast array of wisdom, insight and understanding necessary to address the complex challenges we’re now confronting.

The practices and mindsets of contemplative education, the contemplative spiritual traditions and regenerative nature-based education are unsurpassed for cultivating the inner qualities and non-cognitive ways of knowing required for our transformation to a long-lasting and practical ecosocial literacy.

Contemplative practices have figured prominently in religious, philosophical, and humanistic traditions since antiquity...from a general perspective, we can say that this form of training emphasizes self-awareness, self-regulation, and/or self-inquiry to enact a process of psychological transformation. - Richard J. Davidson, Cortland J. Dahl

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Contemplative education seeks to develop first person, experiential insight and understanding as opposed to second or third person learning. Rather than learning about specific content that you find outside of yourself, contemplative practices are aimed more towards discovering one's own personal experience and perception that is occurring and unfolding in the present moment in relationship to the content. This includes thoughts, feelings, emotions, reactions, awarenesses, intuitions, connections and other experiences that are particular to the individual learner. Further, it includes developing trust in those experiences as valid sources of knowing and wisdom.

In third person learning, something outside of ourselves is the source of understanding and knowledge and we seek to learn and then imitate that source perhaps by recitation on an exam (historical facts, for example) or completing a process ourselves without assistance (playing a musical instrument, solving a geometry proof). We're referencing an external source as the model or the origin of knowledge. Contemplative routines broaden and deepen the study to include the learner's own perceptions, relationships, contextualizations and so forth. It's not only learning *about* what happened in 1939 in Europe or learning *about* how trees communicate with one other through mycorrhizal networks, but also exploring our relationships to this information — how it impacts us and the various ways in which it might inform our relationships and worldview. Sharing these inner experiences, insights and discoveries with others deepens the process.

“Today’s great challenges call us to (re)arrange our interior dimensions to more adequately meet current, outer realities.” - Kely Bird, from Generative Scribing: A Social Art of the 21st Century, PI Press, Cambridge, 2018.

Re-arranging our interior dimensions (i.e. transforming) requires that we work from the inside out. We need to go inside ourselves and discover and reflect on how we have come to this point in our evolutionary journey.^[2]

We're interested in developing and deepening our self-awareness, our internal reflective capacity, our ability to discern and understand our own relationship to the content with which we're working and our ability to relate peacefully and supportively with others. In other words, we're seeking to engage the [inner abilities of our human lineage](#) which, when consistently implemented, give rise to a whole host of important capacities, perspectives and mindsets. We recognize and accept that these various qualities of self-awareness, insight and wisdom deepen over time through a *process* of engaging in routines that encourage self-reflection, contemplation and deep listening to others.

Contemplative or reflective learning includes a wide variety of practices and routines as part of the regular curriculum. It's built-in and integral to the experience of the course and classroom. There are [dozens of contemplative practices](#) from which to choose when designing and creating curriculum. Perhaps the most direct and often the most visible to the education community, is mindfulness awareness meditation, but this activity of non-doing is just one

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of many tools available to us. We can source contemplative practices and routines from all over the world from the world's great spiritual and religious traditions to the world's ancient indigenous cultures.

Consider this routine, easily adapted to nearly every learning environment: carefully and/or quietly **observe** something with spellbound and fascinated attention (this something could be nearly anything, for example, something in nature, a poem or artwork, the intricacy of your own finger movements while playing a music instrument), **journal**/draw/reflect about it, **share** your ideas, thoughts and experiences about it and **listen** to others' stories about it (**storytelling**); ask wonder questions about it (**inquiry**). At each step of the way, we can include contemplative practices which, over time, deepen and enrich the learning experience. Once we understand the nature of the simple routines that will help us, we'll find an unlimited **number of ways** for deepening the reflective capacity in our student learners. When this is extended over time, student learners begin to recognize and trust not only their contemplative capacity, but also the non-cognitive knowing and understanding that gradually emerges like a seedling pushing through the soil to greet the sunlight.

“There is no single way to describe or engage in contemplative practice. The Latin contemplari means to observe, consider, or gaze attentively. This definition gives clues about the varied forms of contemplative practice, which include sitting, standing, walking, and lying down; using attitudes of not doing; deep listening, pondering, and radical questioning; guided imagery and active imagination; exercises with the body; focusing techniques such as those developed by Eugene Gendlin; concentrated language experiments with freewriting, poetry, and journals; beholding; and creation of visual images to represent such experiences.” — Deborah Haynes from the essay, “Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person”.

From the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society:

“Contemplative Practices cultivate a critical, first-person focus, sometimes with direct experience as the object, while at other times concentrating on complex ideas or situations. Incorporated into daily life, they act as a reminder to connect to what we find most meaningful.

“Contemplative practices are practical, radical, and transformative, developing capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm centeredness is an aid to exploration of meaning, purpose and values. Contemplative practices can help develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and attention, reduce stress and enhance creativity, supporting a loving and compassionate approach to life.”³¹

Because of the wide variety of contemplative practices, they are easily adapted into nearly every curriculum, course or class. In some situations, active or physical practices such as

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dance, movement or yoga might work best, while in others, inquiry, reflective writing, deep listening, reverent dialogue or storytelling might work best. Still other situations might accommodate stillness and silence practices such as meditation or sitting quietly in nature. Group reflection or dialogue practices might work best in yet another classroom or course. It's been said that anything can be turned into a contemplative practice if the goal is to increase self-awareness and deepen one's understanding of the context and relationships involved.

In developing ecosocial literacy, the contemplative portion of learning takes on more of a role. While students may be exposed to facts in a typical third person way (lecture, reading, video, etc.), it is our reflection, contemplation and contextualization of that static information that catalyzes the process of transformation. Without the deep contemplation and consideration, transformation of self and worldview is less likely to occur nor will it be as deep.

While the outside source information (second or third person knowledge) is important, when developing ecosocial literacy we wish to re-engage our human capacity for reflection, contemplation and contextualization. Initially, we drop our learned tendency to debate and take sides.^[4] Our content serves a function more like the planting of seeds, offering student learners a beginning place for the process of reflection and consideration. Students may agree or disagree with the content or their ideas may not line up with their peers, but we recognize their understanding isn't meant to be either summative or static. Rather than take sides and prove their point of view in debate style conversation, dialogue becomes a matter of deep, curious listening, sharing and deepening or broadening of perspective. What's important is allowing each person to discover their own relationship to the information, share their insights with others, learn about how others are experiencing the information and providing time and space for everyone's understanding to grow, deepen and evolve.

While it's conceivable that fact-oriented exams might require students to demonstrate their 'learning' of third person content, we recognize that the process of transformation requires students to develop and deepen their understanding through contemplation, dialogue and creative expression. The idea is to give student learners the opportunity to shift their internal compass — their stories about themselves, each other and the world around them — to a place outside those taken for granted ways of working in the world, which are without question, non-sustainable, inequitable and unjust on nearly every level. It's not about *trying* to "think outside the box". It's more about throwing away the box altogether and allowing something else entirely to emerge.

For a workable, practical ecosocial literacy to develop, we are first trying to develop our self-awareness and deepen our facility, inclination towards, and skill at internal self-reflection. These **inner human qualities, capacities and mindsets** are more easily brought out if the person is comfortable with their inner world and sharing it with others. For many people, this takes time to develop since not everyone is inclined and, more importantly, there are so few opportunities and role models. We're giving student learners the opportunity to reflect

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and deepen self-awareness, which they rarely get during a typical school day. Even five minutes of sincerely reflecting on their experience of gratitude may be the most self-reflection a child does all day.

Developing a deep abiding ecosocial literacy involves something as radical as reimagining the role and purpose of our modern human societies. Currently, the vast majority of our “solutions” are really just more of the same process that brought us multiple crises in the first place. This drastic reorientation requires internal reflection, review and readjustment. It’s not something that lends itself to specific steps with guideposts along the way, which is the way we typically wish to “solve” things — by step by step doing that leads to our pre-determined, engineered outcome. Certainly we need to take action, but if that *doing* isn’t accompanied (or preceded) by deep reflection and investigation into our own underlying systems of belief and biases, we’re not engaged in transformative creativity. And we’re likely to continue getting children’s sneakers with lights and wheels in them and their equivalent.

When we go inside and seriously reflect on all these taken for granted patterns of thinking and ways of doing things we support in modern society, and especially when we do this together in groups, we’re announcing that we’re willing to throw away the guideposts and navigate uncharted waters. Lucky for us, the stars are still there and for millennia have provided some of our deepest and most trusted reference points, serving as profound metaphors and reminders of our journey on Earth. It’s no surprise that again and again, astronauts return from their time in space (especially at the International space station), with a transformed point of view about Earth and our place within it’s biosphere. We’re looking to initiate that transformation without having to become an astronaut ourselves.

Appreciative Inquiry calls our questions “fateful”, which points to the idea that questions direct our attention and what we pay attention to directly impacts our transformation and how we experience life. In other words, where we place our attention determines what is transformed. Another way of saying this is, “energy flows where attention goes”. What we pay attention to has meaning. It’s fateful.

Our presence, our attention (and the implicit *intention*) is our choice — our agency. Our ability to reflect, be in awe, become curious or fascinated is always a possibility, lying just beneath our addictions to social media, celebrity-ism, separation and the other challenges of our modern society. The quality of our attention is also fateful. Our presence, our attention, creates relationships. Whether we choose to place our full energy into our attention with one another or we choose to multi-task and split our awareness is up to us. We all know the stories of parents who are not really listening to their child because they’re checking their phones, texting, writing emails or otherwise disengaged. That child knows they’re not being completely listened to and, likewise, they know the quality of actually being listened to. They take those same experiences into their lives, schools and eventually into adulthood.

We need teachers, classrooms, schools and education systems that normalize the development of our ability to pay attention, contemplate and reflect because this is the heart of our transformative capability as humans. Without that self-reflection and realization that we have a problem, it will be very difficult to make the transition to an ecosocially literate

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humanity that is peaceful and in harmony with all of life. This future exists as a possibility. Many of us actually sense that possibility, but it will require summoning the full capacity of human awareness, understanding, humility and wisdom.^[5]

Notes

[1] Tobin Hart. *Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom*. Journal of Transformative Education Vol. 2 No. 1, January 2004 28-46.

[2] Space Shuttle astronaut Mae Jemison recalls the transformative experience she had while in space:

“The really wonderful thing that happened to me when I was in space, was this feeling of belonging to the entire universe. I actually didn’t think “here’s this Earth and that’s the only thing I belong to.” I actually imagined myself in a star system 10,000 light years away, and I felt “I also belong there.” You know, we’re as much a part of this universe as any speck of stardust, any asteroid. We’re part of this universe.”

*“The real issue is how do we operate here on this planet. There’s a story that comes from India that says, once upon a time, humans had the godhead in themselves, but we behaved so badly that the gods decided to take it away from us. And so they were trying to figure out where to hide it so that humans wouldn’t find it. “Let’s put it at the bottom of the ocean, they’ll never find it there.” And everybody said, “you know, one day humans will get to the bottom of the ocean and they’ll find it there.” Another said, “let’s put it in the sky, in the heavens.” And they said, “no, humans will fly that far one day and they’ll find it.” And then Brahma said, “I know where to hide it. Let’s put it inside humans themselves because they’ll never think to look for it there.” **We have to look inside of ourselves to figure this out.**” [emphasis added]*

[3] According to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, contemplative practices are important because of the rich variety of potential benefits they accrue, especially over time. Here are just a few:

Transforming Your Relationship With Yourself

- ▶ Generating an overall sense of calm and well-being
- ▶ Managing your stress and its impact on your body
- ▶ Deepening your self-understanding
- ▶ Sharpening your focus, concentration, and insight
- ▶ Understanding and upholding your core values in your personal and professional life

Improving Your Relationships With Others

- ▶ Enabling greater compassion and wisdom
- ▶ Helping you to see conflicts from different angles, opening up creative possibilities for problem-solving and resolving disagreement
- ▶ Improving listening and communication skills

Enriching Your Relationship With the World Around You

- ▶ Increase global awareness
- ▶ Increase appreciation for the interconnection of all life

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- ▶ Developing the ability to inquire, adapt to rapid change, and deal with complexity

[4] This is not because debate and critical dialogue are unimportant. Without question, they are absolutely necessary in a healthy and just democracy. However, in our current polarized society, we've lost the ability to listen carefully, reverently and deeply to one another. When faced with ideas or knowledge that are outside our normal scope of awareness or comfort, our initial tendencies are towards dismissal or confrontation in the form of proving the information wrong or proving the correctness of our own perspective. This is especially relevant for young students who have been raised with social media, celebrity-ism and cancel culture as their role models.

Before we can have reverent, potent dialogue, we need to remember how to listen deeply to one another. As a reminder, we say initially, "curiosity, not consensus". Later, once we've gained some skill at listening, we can say, "curiosity before consensus".

[5] This astounding capacity of human beings for self-awareness, to imagine, reflect, consider and contemplate and to be aware of ourselves didn't appear in an instant. It happened over millions of years as our early *hominin* lineage slowly differentiated from our common ancestors the great apes. This ability is just one of the many gifts we inherit from the on-going complexifying and diversifying universe itself.

Cosmologist Brian Swimme reflects on the repercussions of this evolutionary development:

"Consider, for instance, the extraordinary mental power exhibited by the red knot sandpiper when it flies nine thousand miles from the southern tip of South America to the Arctic each spring. This is a stupendous feat, but it differs in a qualitative way from the mental capacity I wish to highlight. The difference, both small and stark, shows up at the end of the sandpiper's flight. Once it reaches the Arctic, the sandpiper sets to the important tasks necessary for its survival. It does not retire to a cork-lined room and reflect on the events of its heroic journey. But that is what we do. We developed this new power of mind, reproductive imagination, that enables us to recall events and reflect upon them." - Brian Thomas Swimme from *Cosmogogenesis: An Unveiling of the Expanding Universe*.