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The Contemplative Pause: Insights for Teaching Politics in Turbulent Times

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ABSTRACT

A quiet revolution is unfolding throughout higher education in the form of contemplative pedagogical practices. The mind's ability to adopt a metaposition relative to its own contents, thereby consciously integrating somatic, emotional, and mental experience, has profound implications for learning. According to its proponents, contemplative pedagogies can enhance student attention, cognition, emotional wellbeing, and creativity, as well as reduce stress. These capacities are increasingly vital in the face of escalating world tensions, political polarization, and electronic distractibility, yet political scientists are surprisingly invisible in this quiet revolution. This essay offers a general description of and rationale for contemplative education, making the case that these practices are particularly valuable in the political science classroom and for subjects like climate change that will profoundly affect our students' future. Attending to the "inner curriculum" can foster new skills for self-awareness, tolerating intellectual and emotional ambiguity, embracing diversity, civic discourse, and collaborative action. Some specific practices are offered, along with general guidelines for educators who might wish to experiment with contemplative practices. Finally, survey data from students in several courses suggest that they clearly find value in these practices. While these preliminary data are encouraging, they also raise many questions for a larger research agenda for assessing the value of contemplative practices in the political education.

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Introduction

A quiet revolution is unfolding throughout higher education (Zajonc 2013). Instructors in virtually every field are developing practices that encourage students to actively integrate their subjective experience into their objective learning. According to its proponents, the contemplative turn can enhance student attention, cognition, emotional wellbeing, and creativity, as well as reduce stress (Barbezat and Bush 2014; Eaton, Hughes and MacGregor 2017; Sanders 2013). These capacities are increasingly vital in the face of escalating world tensions, political polarization, and electronic distractibility, yet political scientists are surprisingly invisible in this quiet revolution. In this essay, I first offer a general rationale for contemplative education and an overview of basic

practices. Secondly, I examine how the contemplative pause can facilitate multilayered learning in the political science classroom—particularly in the face of hot topics. Attending to the “inner curriculum,” I argue, can foster new skills for civic discourse and collaborative action. In the third section, I outline my own “person/planet politics” approach to teaching and offer some general guidelines for political science educators who might wish to experiment with contemplative practices. Finally, I offer general assessment results gathered from a survey administered to undergraduate students in my global environmental politics and world food politics courses over the past several years.

Rationale and overview

While meditative and contemplative practices have been historically associated with religious and spiritual traditions, a wide range of secular practices has emerged in the West in recent years. Among these, “mindfulness” is the most well-known, most well-researched, and most widely integrated into K-12 education (Rechtschaffen 2014; Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013). Mindfulness practices typically involve awareness of the breath, often with a specific focus on the nostrils, the chest or the abdomen, but these practices can also focus observing physical sensations, emotions and/or thoughts. Other secular contemplative practices include open awareness (simply observing where the attention goes) and focusing on a specific inner experience (a thought or idea) or an external object. The common ground uniting all of these contemplative practices is present-moment awareness rooted in acknowledging and accepting one’s subjective experience. A growing body of research finds that these practices enhance individuals’ wellbeing on several counts: stress reduction, enhanced concentration and information processing, and greater comfort with ambiguity and diversity (Jha et al. 2010; Lueke and Gibson 2014).

Regardless of their personal benefits, why should political science instructors interested in conveying specific course content want to devote precious class time to the contemplation of subjective experience? I offer two sets of reasons: the first is rooted in the centrality of attention itself to any educational project and the second applies more distinctively to political science educators.

First of all, contemplative practices are concerned precisely with giving practical instruction for cultivating the all-important yet widely neglected faculty of attention. As the educational philosopher Oren Ergas (2017) argues, attention is the foundation of both mind and education (27–32). Without attention, there can be little if any education—which means that every educator should have a primary concern for attention. All contemplative practices—whether inside or outside the classroom and whether oriented toward emotions, physical sensations, or thoughts—entail directing the attention to one’s subjective experience. Yet once we direct our attention to the contents of the mind, and therefore to attention itself, one of the first things we notice is how quickly and how much it roams. The ability to harness and direct one’s attention is therefore a prerequisite to the academic endeavor.

Second, we as educators have a well-founded aspiration to convey our subject matter to our students, yet this endeavor presumes a view of education as some version of

cognitive export from mind to mind. This transference model leaves out a crucial element: the subjective experience of our students' receiving minds. No matter how well we convey our subject matter, it is inevitably received in complex, fast-moving, and highly individualized fields of emotional and somatic experience. So, while it is true that education is a mind-making process, it is equally true that, as Ergas (2017) puts it, "the mind is an education-making process." And when the content is charged, as political science tends to be—and increasingly so, cognition is more likely to be overwhelmed or colored by emotional and somatic experience. Political science educators are therefore especially well advised to attend to the "inner curriculum" of our courses.

As academics, our training was primarily cognitive. Yet there is a strong consensus that learning is fundamentally embodied, emotional, social, and experiential—and, we should note, generally in that order and largely unconscious (Kahneman 2011). The brain did not evolve to collect abstract knowledge; rather, it mediates between sense perception and action to discern first what is happening and then how to physically respond. The limbic system is active at every stage of cognition, infusing perception, analysis, and decision making with emotions, which are registered somatically, reinforcing cognition's embodied character (Taylor and Marienau 2016, 53–57). Learning is also social. Beginning with infancy, neural pathways are shaped by relationships and expressed in language and other culturally mediated modalities (Zull 2002). All of this means that cognitive learning entails sensory and emotional experience and processes that are largely unconscious.

Yet the mind has the capacity to observe itself, i.e., to separate awareness from the contents of awareness, to bring attention to its own qualities of attention. The mind's ability to adopt a meta-position relative to its own contents, thereby consciously integrating somatic, emotional, and mental experience, has profound implications for learning. This generally underdeveloped capacity requires an introspective turn that can be done alone but can also be facilitated in the classroom. As valuable as this introspective turn might be outside the classroom for fostering self-awareness, it also opens a wide door for educators who wish to integrate the "inner curriculum" into their teaching. Because it is generally underdeveloped, this metapositional capacity needs training. In other words it takes time and practice, which is why most of the world's religious traditions have developed disciplined meditative practices. Fortunately, this metapositional shift itself can happen with a moment's noticing; sustaining it long enough to generate true insight, however, usually takes at least a few minutes.

With respect to self-inquiry, the body can be our students' most profound teacher. Breath, heart rate, posture, internal tensions: all of these make the body an excellent barometer of internal states, but this requires harnessing the outwardly-focused attention. Beyond pausing for somatic perception, instructors might more intentionally structure the pause. For instance, in a fast-moving lecture or a heated discussion, the popular injunction to "take a deep breath" can slow things down, enhance self-awareness, and help students to integrate their cognitive learning with their somatic experience. While interjecting a contemplative pause during a heated discussion has the practical benefit of defusing tension, it also engages the typically neglected arena of somatic learning. For some students, a moment of noticing during an intense exchange that their hearts are racing and their hands are sweaty, for instance, can be profoundly

edifying—particularly if this noticing can be done without judgment. Becoming aware of one’s own physical reactions can open up new possibilities for self-reflection, integrative thinking, and skillful communication.

The second arena for integration is emotional, which can be crucial when the course content is political. The classroom’s cognitive bias means that a host of complex emotions may be simmering beneath the surface, very likely unconsciously affecting the learning environment. Simply pausing to invite students to identify their emotions and associated physical sensations for a minute can be akin to pressing the refresh button, thereby clearing the air and deepening the attentional focus—including for the instructor’s. “Naming it to tame it” (Siegel 2011) engages the mind’s capacity for metaposition and generally brings a calming effect while enhancing concentration, with potentially surprising consequences. I have encountered students who, sitting in the heat of anger, discovered deeper levels of less polarizing emotions like fear and sadness.

Moving beyond general emotional and somatic self-awareness practices, content-driven contemplative practices can provide important opportunities for students to assimilate course material and develop a stronger sense of themselves in relation to it. This could mean a strategically placed moment of silence, or asking students to keep a journal integrating their emotional and intellectual reflections on course material, or offering a guided meditation to enable the day’s lecture to more fully land in their inner experience. The mind’s affinity for metaphor can be put to good use in designing integrative contemplative practices. In a lecture on seeds in my food politics course, for instance, I offer a practice that weaves course content into the metaphor of the generative self as a seed. Guided classroom practices can be done solo, such as contemplative writing, or in dyads or triads, such as deep listening. One simple exercise that can be woven into virtually any course content is a guided contemplation at the end of class around the question, “Who am I in relation to this?” I have done this practice fruitfully on many occasions. As with any contemplative practice, the key is to allow enough silence for genuine introspection rather than filling the space with words and analysis—which, for many educators, means going against the grain.

Since its inception in 2009, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) has engaged scholars from virtually every academic field—including a handful of political scientists. Through its *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, professional conferences, and webinars, ACMHE is at the organizational vanguard of the quiet revolution in contemplative education. Its website is a rich resource for learning the basics of introducing contemplative practices into the classroom (ACMHE 2017). The contemplative pause can enhance virtually any classroom setting: lectures, seminars, simulations, case studies, student debates, active learning, etc. This pause is entirely contingent upon our willingness to set aside a few minutes of precious classroom time to allow students to more deeply integrate *our* content-driven curriculum with *their* inner curriculum. In my experience, this time is well spent.

Contemplative pedagogies in the political science classroom

Even under ordinary conditions, the classroom is the site of simmering anxieties: the uncertainties intrinsic to learning, the looming prospect of grades, the risk of peer or

parental disapproval, etc. Political science turns up the heat by engaging essentially contested concepts like citizenship, power, legitimacy, freedom, justice, rights, etc. When the subject matter is contentious, which seems increasingly so in our field, repressed emotions can turn the classroom into a pressure cooker; conversely, unleashed emotions can raise the simmer to a boil. If educators can integrate the inner curriculum into content-driven learning, however, such moments can become supremely teachable moments.

One silver lining of the contentious issues that increasingly infuse political science courses is that they heighten students' curiosity—not only about content but about the subjective and intersubjective dynamics they spark. By tapping the potentially synergistic relationship between the outer and the inner curriculum, instructors enable students to become conscious of what they might otherwise experience unconsciously. A well-structured pause helps students to consider all of the following and more: their tacit assumptions; why they think as they do; what they want to be true; what this reveals about their values; how their bodies respond when others disagree with them or when they articulate their own opinions; what (if anything) could change their minds; what they infer from facial expressions (Petty 2017). In a nutshell, the pause literally helps students to self-integrate. In the presence of strong emotions, a contemplative pause can paradoxically foster a sense of social solidarity. Whatever our beliefs and opinions, most of us know how it feels to be triggered. The triggers that make for hot topics can themselves become objects of study, thereby enriching content-based learning while simultaneously enhancing integrative somatic, emotional, and social learning.

In contrast to hot topics, some subjects might seem remote and abstract. Under these circumstances, contemplative practices can enliven and personalize the course content. I learned this firsthand while teaching international law, global environmental politics, and world food politics. Even though these topics have huge consequences for ordinary people, many students experience them as far beyond their personal experience, and therefore remote and abstract. I found that an illustrative video followed by a contemplative pause can personalize course content. One premise of my “person/planet politics” approach, discussed in the next section, is that we never study anything as if it is only happening “out there” for once we learn about it, it is “in here.”

All of this has powerful implications for social learning, civic discourse, political agency, and collaborative action. Reframing disconcerting views as puzzles to be solved rather than enemies to be defeated engages the mind's capacity for metaposition. As Zull (2002, 64) observes, when we become genuinely curious about viewpoints contrary to our own, we become less judgmental; as others perceive this, their sense of threat tends to decrease. Even the most maddening positions can be approached in this manner. For instance, we might ask our students to mine “alternative facts” for their moments of truth, including the very real narratives and emotions behind them. They need not believe these “facts” but they might understand them more deeply. Nor does a wider perspective foster inaction. Quite the contrary: pausing is perhaps the best antidote to the flailing impulse to speak or act reflexively. In the face of increasingly complex, contentious, and global problems, contemplative pedagogical practices can help us to expand our repertoire and engage our students more holistically.

Person/planet politics

The inner curriculum is particularly important for subjects that will profoundly affect our students' future. Consider that they have grown up during the warmest two decades in recorded history, a time that represents the hinge-point when our home planet left behind the Holocene, 10,000-year "sweet spot" in which human civilization emerged. Our students literally inhabit a different planet from the one on which we came of age. The question of who they are in a changing climate therefore becomes an existential one. Likewise, grappling with the *anthropos* that has inadvertently unleashed the Anthropocene must surely include an inner curriculum that links person, planet, and politics (Litfin 2016).

I have developed dozens of contemplative practices with specific content—including for international trade, stratospheric ozone, world hunger, biodiversity, plastic, water, global justice, and climate change. Each practice guides the students into a process of self-inquiry integrating somatic, emotional, and cognitive experience around course content. The background question is always: "Who am I in relation to this?" I generally balance the inwardness of self-inquiry with a return to the intersubjective space. In a large lecture, this might mean "taking the classroom pulse" by asking each student for a one-word response. In minutes, a cascade of words can switchback from the back of the hall to the front, running the gamut from "overwhelmed" and "hopeless" to "amazed" and "grateful." Invariably, this torrent of words ends with a pregnant pause, a moment of focus far more potent than anything my Powerpoint slides might evoke.

Every practice began as an experiment. Some were spectacular successes and some were awkward failures, but over time I saw their value and became more skillful in their design and enactment. As I became more comfortable with the element of surprise inherent in contemplative teaching, I also learned how to spontaneously devise and introduce practices on the fly. Students' responses to anonymous survey data show that, rather than compromising the intellectual challenge, these introspective practices foster a more profound learning experience.

The contemplative pausing is not a magic potion; rather, it is an adventure. Like any journey into the unknown, it comes with risks. Teaching is a social act, which means that our performance anxiety can be heightened when we invite students to engage in unconventional classroom behavior like closing their eyes or attending to their emotional and somatic experience. I offer the following guidelines gleaned from my own experience:

- Formulate a clear intention for student learning.
- Be sure to leave adequate time, which might mean less time for content.
- Lower anxiety by acknowledging that the pause will not be graded.
- If possible, darken the room; at a minimum, request that students not look at one another.
- After the pause, engage the intersubjective space while respecting privacy.
- Be creative and open to surprise.

Most importantly, we need to model the kind of self-awareness we wish to foster.

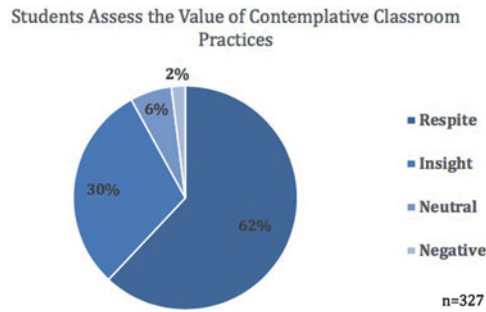


Figure 1. Students assess the value of contemplative classroom practices.

Assessment

I have been experimenting with contemplative pedagogical practices for two decades, with the general sense based upon anecdotal feedback they were generally well received. Since 2012, when I began making these practices a more integral part of my teaching, I have directly polled my students to assess their value in a very general way. Using our university's online survey tool, I have asked approximately 500 undergraduate students in two 300-level lecture courses (Global Environmental Politics and World Food Politics) the following question on a weekly basis: "With respect to this week's contemplative practice, which of the following answers best reflects your experience?" The sum total of their answers follows:

- I appreciated the respite from my busy life but generally did not gain any significant insights (Respite, 62%).
- I gained some important insights into myself and/or the world (Insights, 30%).
- I feel neutral about the exercises (Neutral, 6%).
- I do not feel that these exercises were a good use of class time (Negative, 2%).

See Figure 1.

These results indicate that a large majority of students (92%) found value in the contemplative practices. While I might feel disappointed that more than twice as many experienced respite as opposed to genuine insight, there are four good reasons to temper this disappointment. First, any exercise that generates important insights for 30% of the students in a matter of minutes is probably worthwhile. Second, the students in that 30% will vary from one week to the next. The same student, for instance, might describe one week's practice as a waste of time and find the next week's practice wildly inspiring. Third, the fact that some students have gained profound—in some cases, life-changing—insights during these practices makes me inclined to interpret the 30% response favorably. For instance, one student remembered living in his Guatemalan grandmother's village and knew that he wanted to become a grade school environmental educator; another had an "aha" moment about international trade and went on to pursue a graduate degree in ecological economics. Fourth, respite is arguably an underappreciated value in our harried and electronically distracted culture. Attention, as we have said, is the basis for both mind and education; the exhausted and distracted mind simply cannot be attentive, much less creative.

Perhaps the biggest question emerging from this data is how to interpret the value of respite. Whereas we might personally work more effectively after a nap, we most likely would not agree upon naps as a worthy pedagogical practice. A “napping to insight ratio” of 2:1 would therefore qualify as mixed evidence at best. There are four reasons, however, to be more sanguine. First, unlike general mindfulness or meditative practices, content-driven contemplative practices are less akin to naps. Although students might free-associate or space out during a guided practice about, say, electronic waste or the global commodity chain of a cup of coffee, this is clearly not the point of the exercise. Their noticing this fact, however, is part of the point; recognizing one’s own distractibility can be humbling and instructive. Second, the “napping to insight ratio” tends to decline over the course of a 10-week quarter. I attribute this to the fact that learning is a social process: when “nappers” learn that their classmates are gaining significant insights into themselves and/or the world through these practices, their level of engagement often increases. Third, I find that students exhibit more focus, greater creativity and clarity of thought, and more sensitivity to one another after a contemplative practice—so much so that if a discussion is flagging or I find myself lecturing to a sea of blank faces, I might spontaneously launch into a practice. Fourth, while it would be difficult to quantify, students affirm the value of respite. John, a freshman in my “Planetary Politics” course, concurs and extrapolates his experience to congressional politics:

Thankfully, contemplative practices done at the beginning of almost every class have helped me slow down and think. While I don’t usually gain intense insights or amazing revelations, my mind is refreshed and in a learning space post-practice. I have also noticed a change in my peers after contemplative practices; the classroom is usually quieter and more focused after practices.

Imagine if Congress held contemplative practices before passing or creating legislation. Would better decisions and better laws be made? Although I do not have the answer to that question, I do believe the atmosphere would be much less contentious if everyone was in a calmer headspace. (John 2017)

While my results are encouraging, they are far from definitive. I made no effort to establish control groups or compare this particular use of class time with other uses. Moreover, the results rely upon students’ self-reporting and therefore say nothing about the impact of contemplative pedagogies on academic performance. My preliminary research opens up a host of further questions. I am currently designing a large-n study that will assess the impact of contemplative practices on students’ perceptions, attitudes, sense of agency, and academic performance. This study will involve multiple instructors and include control groups. The emerging field of contemplative education opens up a rich arena for innovative research.

Conclusion

According to developmental leadership researcher Sharon Parks, the threshold of emerging adulthood is marked by the cultivation of critical thought and a corresponding recasting of one’s relationships, including one’s relationship to authority. This entails an intellectual and emotional journey from dependence on assumed sources of

authority, which in turn entails relentless inquiry and discernment: What is true and worthy of trust? Who am I really? What matters? In what and with whom can I invest my life? By what narratives do we live and die? In taking responsibility for her own thinking, an emerging adult ripens to the task of composing “a worthy dream” for her life. For Parks, emerging adulthood is a “stem-cell moment in human becoming.” At this critical juncture between conventional knowing and critical-connective thought, a strong mentor can serve as a “developmental lure” (Parks 2017).

But what does it mean to come of age when prevailing practices are unraveling the tapestry of life and political institutions seem increasingly precarious? And what does it mean to serve as a mentor under these conditions? No doubt, we as political science educators have a responsibility to teach the relevant facts, concepts, and theories, but in our capacity as mentors we are also called upon to attending to our students’ larger experience as they cross the threshold into adulthood. In the arena of contemplative inquiry, the point is not so much to have the right answers but to have the courage to *not know*, the skillfulness to help guide our students into the depths of their own experience, and the compassion to abide with them there as their native wisdom unfolds. Our students’ capacity for self-awareness, integrative thinking, holding multiple perspectives, tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity, and working with difficult emotions will be essential to answering the vital issues of the 21st century. Political scientists therefore have an important and unique role to play in the quiet contemplative revolution unfolding throughout higher education.

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