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# Meditation in the Classroom: Cultivating Attention and Insight

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Title: Meditation in the Classroom: Cultivating Attention and Insight

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Grade level: The meditation activity is focused on the Undergraduate level, but may be adapted for ages pre-Kindergarten (see Kaiser-Greenland, 2010, for teaching mindfulness meditation to pre-K and grade school age children) through Graduate school levels.

Keywords: Meditation, Listening, Learning, Contemplative Practices

### **Content**

Course title: The Meditation Activity has been Field Tested in the following courses:

- (1) Listening to Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine
- (2) Communication Theory
- (3) Introduction to Research Methods
- (4) Nonviolent Communication and Peace
- (5) Seminar in Research Methods in Lifespan Communication

Course level: Primarily Undergraduate

Goals:

Care must be taken by the instructor not to overemphasize achieving the goal(s) of meditation. Often, when there is too much emphasis on *trying* to reach the goal, the benefits of meditating can be hindered. On the other hand, when the goal of meditation is held loosely, then the goal is more easily approached. For this class meditation activity, the instructor might loosely hold several interrelated goals for their students: cultivate experiences of first person attention, concentration, and awareness while simultaneously developing capacities for insight, imagination, exploration, and discernment of ideas related to class content and applications to everyday life. Another goal of the class meditation is to provide an opportunity for students to share and dialogue about their personal insights discovered during meditation.

Type / Aspect of listening in focus:

The proposed meditation activity is a kind of self-listening. However, the content of the meditation may involve additional listening contexts in the life world like listening to others, nature, and the divine (Baesler, 2015). In the class meditation activity, the period of meditation is followed by inviting students to share part of their meditation experience with the class where the focus is on listening to others.

#### Description:

There are many types of contemplative practices that cultivate deeper listening in the life world contexts of self, others, nature, and the divine including meditation, prayer, art, poetry, dance, and so forth (Baesler, 2015). See Barbezat and Bush (2014) for an extended discussion of the purpose and types of contemplative practices in higher education. Thus, meditation is situated as one of many types of contemplative practices.

Virtually every known religion/spirituality has some type of meditative practice (Beverluis, 2000). Of the many types of meditation (see Goleman, 1972 for typology), the particular type of class meditation described herein combines two traditional meditation practices: concentration and insight. The class meditation utilizes focused attention on a symbolic center while simultaneously holding an attitude of openness and acceptance of insights related to that center. The meditative skills of concentration and openness are also generalizable to broader listening processes. For example, in human communication, listening may involve an intentional focus on another person (their thoughts, feelings, needs, and behavior), and being open and accepting of the ideas that emerge from dialogue with that person (Rosenberg, 2005).

The intention of introducing meditation at the beginning of a class period in the undergraduate classroom is three-fold. First, meditation can assist students in transitioning from the stressors of the day (e.g., class, work, and relationships) to a more relaxed and open learning environment. The simple preliminary meditation behaviors of sitting erect with eyes closed and breathing deep can stimulate feelings of relaxation and renewal. Second, the meditative skill of concentration, focusing on a symbolic center, and attending to ideas that percolate from that center, hold the possibility of arousing wonder and curiosity for students, preparing them for listening and discussing the upcoming class content. Third, students that share their meditation experiences with each other provide intellectual fuel for the often unexpected and rewarding dialogues that follow meditation.

#### Preparation and Procedures:

Ideally, instructors introducing meditation into the classroom have a daily meditation practice that they can draw from to model the meditation posture and attitudes for their students. When instructors have lived a long term daily meditation practice, they can respond to student questions about meditation from the ground of their own personal experience. There is no substitute for an authentic teacher that has traveled the path of meditation for many years (or at least many months!). I recommend instructors engage in a daily meditative practice that they are comfortable with for at least several months before attempting to introduce students to meditation in the classroom context. For those not familiar with meditation, or those just beginning to meditate, see Nelson (2001) for an introduction to different types of meditation in a variety of spiritual traditions that cultivate concentrative and insight types of meditation that are central to the proposed meditation activity described herein.

To begin I suggest introducing the idea of meditation the first day of class, as the first item on the agenda. Provide a context for the meditation. For example, “I invite you to meditate with me on a word, or phrase, for a few minutes. This is not an esoteric practice that requires you to believe in a particular type of religious dogma, but rather a method of reflection designed to assist you in relaxing the body and cultivating the skills of attention and awareness.”

Instruct students to “turn off” all electronic devices and “turn on” to their inner world through meditation. Provide instructions on how to meditate. Choose a word or phrase for the class to meditate on that represents a theme for the course content for that particular class period. Write this word/phrase on the white/chalk board next to the word “meditate.”

Introduce the basics of meditation, steps seven through ten below, the first day. All of the posture related instructions (steps one through five below) are helpful in creating a sense of stillness and self-respect, but they are optional for those that prefer a different posture. Add additional steps to the basic ones each time the class meditates in the future until all the steps are covered. After several additional steps have been introduced, review all of the steps with the class by asking them to hypothetically describe “how to meditate” to a friend who is unfamiliar with meditation, that is, draw the steps of meditation out of the students rather than tell them the steps.

1. Sit with the spine erect, like a violin string attached to the base of the spine and extending up through the crown of the head; taut but not too tight. This assists in

comfortable deep breathing. Further, the head is erect and centered, not too far back or forward, nor too far right or left, with the chin tucked slightly in.

2. Legs are uncrossed with feet flat on the floor. This promotes blood circulation in the lower body and prevents numbness in the legs.

3. Hands rest comfortably on the thighs, palms open and positioned up or down. For most individuals, this position is comfortable and promotes a sense of stability.

4. The mouth is closed or slightly open with the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth, or resting gently against the back of the lower teeth. This position decreases salivation and the need to swallow frequently, promoting a sense of stillness in the body.

5. Eyes are gently closed, or eyes can remain open if one is not comfortable with closed eyes. If eyes remain open, the gaze should be soft and focus on an area about three feet in front of the body at a forty-five degree angle downward. The proximal goal is to cultivate an interior focus related to the symbolic center by decreasing possible distractions from the external environment.

6. Exhale completely, then breathe in slowly and deeply through the nose, hold briefly, and breathe out slowly and fully—do this two or three times. Next, let go of the conscious instructions about breathing and breathe naturally. The steady, slow, rhythmic breathing facilitates a sense of calmness, relaxation, and focus.

7. Bring conscious attention to the symbol of the day (the word or phrase written on the white/chalk board) by silently repeating the word/phrase a few times. Then, hold the word/phrase symbol as your “center” or touchstone for the remainder of the meditation. This step provides a mental focal point for the meditation.

8. Cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance of any thoughts, feelings, or images that emerge and are related to the symbolic center. Witness these without judgment. Allow ideas space to emerge and grow.

9. If you find your thoughts moving too far away from the symbolic center (e.g. thinking about your next class, or planning a menu for dinner), then acknowledge where you are (e.g., “I have moved from my center”), and gently return to the center by silently

repeating the symbolic word/phrase. This step requires some discernment and discipline, and is only invoked when one is aware that one feels disconnected from the symbolic center.

10. Continue nurturing the presence of the symbolic center, being opening and accepting of ideas related to the center, and returning to the center as needed, until the meditation time is brought to a close.

After providing preliminary instructions, and answering questions about the meditation activity, initiate the actual meditation in class by taking up the meditative posture, and reminding the students of the instructions out loud the first few times you meditate together as a class. For example, “Let us begin our meditation by sitting comfortably with our eyes closed...breathing easy...gently holding our meditation word as our center...allowing ideas to emerge from this center...and when distracted, gently returning to the center.”

Initially, the class might meditate for two to three minutes—keep track of time with a watch, or set a mobile phone device to quietly “chime” at the end of the meditation. Gradually increase the meditation time each class period until, at the end of a sixteen week semester, the class is meditating for ten to fifteen minutes.

The meditation period is concluded by further verbal instructions from the instructor such as: “As you feel ready...bring your meditation to a close...reconstruct the classroom in your imagination...gently open your eyes and re-orient to your external environment and your classmates...take a few deep breaths and stretch a bit if you wish.”

At this point after the meditation, there is the option to instruct students to write about their meditative experience for a few minutes. Writing about one’s experience after meditating can be valuable because most meditative insights tend to evaporate from working memory rather quickly. Writing can clarify, solidify, and assist with the elaboration of insights from meditation. For example, an image that appeared briefly during meditation, when unpacked by the writing process, may uncover hidden meanings of the image. Generally, students find it easier to share something from their meditation experience when given an opportunity to write about their experience. Perhaps there is something about the act of writing itself, engaging the kinesthetic modality, seeing one’s experience in concrete words, or simply having time to gather one’s thoughts, that helps students prepare to share part of their meditation experience with the class.

After the meditation and optional writing activity, invite students to share part of their meditation experience with the class. Students might share something about the actual experience of meditation and/or content related to the ideas that surfaced during the meditation. I try to lessen the impact of potential demand characteristics associated with asking students to share their meditation experience by reminding students that they are free to keep their experience private, that there are times we may not feel like sharing, and that is okay. I also remind students that sharing their experience is not a graded activity. In addition, as students begin to share, I do my best to validate their experience. Depending on the content of what they share, I may ask them to elaborate (e.g., if a student shares a one word response, I might ask, “Could you tell us more about that?”), or I might relate their insight to the course content that we will be covering that day, or I might use their response as an opportunity to provide further meditation instruction (for instance, if a student shared, “My mind just kept racing, I couldn’t focus on the center,” I might respond with, “That is a very common and normal experience...our minds can be like grasshoppers jumping all over the place...gently keep coming back to the center, knowing that each time you do, you are strengthening your ability to concentrate). The sharing of meditation experiences in class is often surprisingly fruitful in facilitating class discussion about the topic of the day.

#### Tips and Debriefing:

Adding a period of meditation to the beginning of class may initially feel awkward for instructors, and for students, that do not have a regular personal meditation practice outside the classroom. For the instructor, I recommend devoting 20-30 minutes of daily meditation in the early morning and/or evening—there is no substitute for this disciplined practice for a period of several months (at a minimum) before attempting to teach meditation to students in the classroom.

In the beginning, there may be a few students that respond critically to the meditation practice with comments like “I don’t like meditating,” or “I don’t see the point of meditating.” I have found it best to affirm these feelings and provide more information for them to consider. For these kinds of critical comments, I might respond, “Yes, meditation can feel awkward at first...consider meditation as a form of self-exploration...by paying close attention, you may discover surprising things about yourself...hang in there a few more times before you decide to give up.” I find that in almost all cases, by the third or fourth meditation session, students have adapted to the meditation practice, and some of them may even express how they look forward to the meditation time.

Sometimes students come with previous negative cultural conditioning associated with the word meditation. In such cases, I explain that our class meditation does not require any religious/spiritual belief system, and that they may want to reframe our meditation time as a process of reflection, contemplation, or introspection.

A few students every semester enjoy the meditations so much that they want to learn more. For students already grounded in a particular religious/spiritual faith, I recommend they explore resources about meditation and/or prayer in their particular faith (see Beversluis, 2000 for resources). For other students less inclined toward religiosity or spirituality, I recommend exploring “mindfulness meditation” beginning with either Hanh (1991) or Kabat-Zinn (1994). These two resources are based on the Buddhist tradition, but they can be learned in a secular form.

#### Assessment:

I do not recommend formally assessing students’ meditative experiences as part of the course grade as it sets up the expectation that there is a “right” or “best” meditation experience. The continuous sense that one’s meditation experience is being evaluated is antithetical to the purpose of meditation. Ideally, one meditates for the sake of meditating, and the insights and skills that develop are secondary benefits of the practice for oneself and for others.

However, if one needs to create an evaluative component to the meditation (e.g., to satisfy the administration that students are learning something during their meditation experiences), I recommend some form of self-assessment. For example, students could journal about what they have learned from their meditation experience each week, and then evaluate themselves with a letter grade at mid and end of term based on some rubric that the instructor creates such as “quantity and quality” or “effort and insight.” Alternatively, students could create their own rubric for grading individually, or as a class, and then the instructor could approve and/or recommend revisions to the rubric. In addition, students might create a poem of their meditation journal learnings that they recite to the class. I also have students develop a one page explanation of the purpose and meaning of the poem. Students can self-assess the poem and explanation, or the instructor can create a rubric for this evaluation. The spoken word of poetry has more meaning and power to convey the affective dimension of human experience than the written word because of the nonverbal characteristics (e.g., facial expression, body movement, loudness, pitch, rate, pauses, and so forth) of the medium.



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