

Teaching and Learning Japanese Aesthetics Through an Immersive Art Experience

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Abstract

Lecture continues to be a dominant pedagogical mode of university teaching. While it can be an efficient way to deliver course content, delivering content is not the same as fostering actual learning. Today's classroom is a "mini globe" of students coming from different parts of the world, speaking different languages, while often learning yet another language through an already foreign language. While international and domestic students are important sources of income for the university, it is also important to make them feel welcome and to ensure that their learning is not compromised. Struggling with textbooks and lectures can be especially challenging. This is where experiencing the subject can be particularly helpful.

Getting students physically and emotionally involved in the learning process gives them better spatial and temporal awareness as well as awareness of each other. Sensory engagement offers students the therapeutic effects of cultural experience as well as a better understanding of the subject.

Research confirms that contemplative forms of inquiry can offset the constant distractions of our multi-tasking, multi-media cultural environment. Thus, creative teaching-and-learning methods that integrate the ancient practice of contemplation innovatively meet the particular needs of today's students and teachers.

This presentation highlighted the teaching and learning experience derived from the course "Japanese Aesthetics as expressed through Chanoyu."

Keywords: Contemplative; International; Cultural experience; Experiential learning

Report

Mindfulness can be considered both a teaching and a learning competency especially valuable in our shattering times. In the "Proceedings of the 2015 Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase", Margaret Anne Smith of the Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New Brunswick, Saint John quotes staggering data on students' mental health findings, where 37.5 % of students in Canada "felt so depressed, it was difficult to function"; 56.5% "felt overwhelming anxiety"; and 9.5 % seriously considered suicide (Smith, 2015). Based on my own experience of nearly twenty years in the classroom, I can conclude that these numbers are soaring and will only grow in the future. I argue that contemplative

practices are very effective to support and maintain a more stable, productive and overall happier student in our universities.

Over the past five decades, interest in the contemplative practices of world wisdom traditions has been steadily expanding all throughout Western culture. According to the 2003 survey on transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education conducted by the Fetzer Institute, 90% of respondents from a wide range of post-secondary institutions stated that contemplative and spiritual dimensions of learning are "important" or "very important." This is a powerful number that overwhelmingly establishes the need for contemplative opportunities for students, not only as an extracurricular activity, but also as a core part of the course. Perhaps, contemplative arts-based teaching methods innovatively meet the essential needs of today's learners. They liberate our innate ability to deal with stress, attention deficit and anxiety by focusing on the present. Therefore, contemplative practices could be included as methods of teaching in practically any discipline. They foster focus, presence and so-called "multiple awareness" with an aim to stop the habitual noise of the mind and to open the inner sources of self. They do not aim to avoid reality or run away from it. On the contrary they nurture mindfulness as a way to relate to reality. Contemplative forms of inquiry go beyond a particular learning context and are especially useful today to balance dispersed attention created to deal with modern digital culture. They cultivate deepened awareness, focus, concentration and insight. A pedagogical approach that includes contemplative methods presumes that learners are responsible for their own knowledge and are regarded as co-creators of the learning environment and of knowledge itself.

At the same time, the teacher is a guide but also a co-inquirer. Contemplation helps by discovering other ways of knowing, experiencing and being and it complements well traditional methods of liberal arts education. As Tobin Hart (2004) states, "Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness... These approaches cultivate an inner technology of knowing..." While not being an answer to all problems, offering experiences of contemplative practices in my classroom allowed me to observe remarkable results.

Contemplative practices in the classroom and students' response

My experience in including contemplation directly in the classroom activities consist of courses on Japanese language and culture I teach at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada. While I include some language into my culture courses and some culture into my language courses, they are distinctly different, though complementary, classes. Interestingly, one student noted that I was "a completely different person" in these two different subjects. After analyzing students' responses to including elements of contemplation into the learning process, I realized that students particularly appreciated the opportunity to participate, to have hands-on learning opportunities, to be able to foster "the ability to observe details carefully," to learn by experience and to "gradually learn how to engage all senses."

Based on overwhelming student demand, I have created and successfully taught a course on Japanese Aesthetics as reflected in the practice of Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony. Leaving out many practical aspects of the course, after offering it for seven years I can conclude that experiential learning is a powerful device that acts as a counterweight to mental issues and really contributes to the well-being of our students as learners and as fellow human beings of the 21st century. Here are some excerpts from the students' response to the course:

"I felt like I was actually taking something out of the course for me, not just my degree."

“I feel like I’ve incorporated new aspects/ideals into my life that’ll remain with me forever.”

“The idea of truly seeing each moment and not wasting time thinking of what is to come was very useful for my life...It showed me that there is more to things that one can see on the surface...It is an amazing experience, and one that should be taken advantage of.”

Conclusion

Contemplative practices are very effective to support and maintain a more stable, productive and overall happier student in our universities.

While contemplative practices are directed inward, they also inspire curiosity and expand inter-cultural understanding. They help to develop a more compassionate view of the behavior and values of others, especially of those who are unlike us. They facilitate acceptance of and compassion towards the other. In turn, awareness of the other and of the world also cultivates insight and inward exploration. When we are mindful we view a situation from different perspectives, see information presented afresh, attend to the context and then finally create new categories through which this information can be understood.

Research confirms that these contemplative forms of inquiry can offset the constant distractions of our multi-tasking, multi-media cultural environment. Thus, creative teaching methods that integrate the ancient practice of contemplation innovatively meet the particular needs of today’s students and teachers.

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