

THE UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES OF APPLYING MINDFULNESS TO CRITICAL THINKING

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Successful innovative strategies for teaching outside the box are often prompted by what instructors have learned from their experiences in the classroom. Initially, we may try something that works for us or was suggested by respected experts, but whatever we start with gets modified through direct experience with our students. We see what helps them engage the content and each other, and we see what is meaningful to them. We look for evidence in their thinking, their writing, and their interaction.

I started applying my own experience with mindfulness practices over several terms. Gradually, I arrived at a particular set of generally reflective practices that engage students with the course content and then each other before I facilitate discussion with the whole class. The turning point for me came when one student, who was in the business school, wrote "I have been in university for four years. This was the first time I had to think." It may have been the first time he was directed to take the time in class to think things through. Clearly, he felt compelled to think deeply and independently, to think for himself rather than parrot back what he read or what he was told. From then on, I wanted to understand the impact mindfulness practices could have on student engagement and learning.

The reflective practices I use apply basic mindfulness principles to individual contemplation, journal writing, listening, inquiry, and dialogue. Mindfulness practices enable us to gently suspend familiar interpretations of our experience long enough to permit "(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more than one perspective" (Langer, 1989, p. 62). The practices begin introspectively, but extend into interaction. Students reflect on a question, statement, or image, write something brief about it, and then share their responses in pairs. They are instructed to listen and temporarily suspend the tendency most of us have to compare what we are hearing to our own beliefs. They are instructed to inquire, still with suspended judgment and genuine curiosity. (For the full set of instructions see Sable, 2012, Appendix A.). They often discover there is more to what their peers are saying than they initially thought. There is more in the text or the lecture than they initially thought. They grow more confident about being curious. The following quotes are from my own qualitative research with undergraduates who applied these practices in class over 11 weeks (Sable, 2014).

According to one student:

The language difference in one way helped them [ESL students] phrase things in ways I never would have thought of phrasing it; and saying it in ways I never would have thought of saying it. One girl said that "Compassion was a sadness in everyone's heart." I never would have thought that; it blew my mind. It was really interesting to hear that. So, yes there is a language barrier, but there is also another way of thinking about it that

is completely different than I was raised. . . . she thought of the question completely differently. I would go, “Oh wow.”

In classes with international students, such structured exercises are especially valuable, but there are differences even when students with a common first language think they are in quick agreement. Another student reported:

That’s how you get to more basic stuff behind what they are saying—you ask them what they mean about certain things. . . . I find that is when they give personal examples. . . . I just feel that I can better understand where they are coming from, more personally. . . . it tended to expand my thinking, and think about things I might have missed.

Yet the unexpected consequence of encouraging mindfulness, introspectively and then interactively, was the reported sense of connectedness between students. *That sense of connectedness was stronger between students who disagreed with each other than between students who found easy agreement in their interaction.*

I’ve never developed any really good friendships through these interactive exercises . . . but I definitely feel like they make you feel like you’re connected to people. . . you just get a sense of your connection to that student and then to all the other students in the class . . . I think it’s changed my general view of how I connect with people; even outside the class . . . it’s hard to explain . . . I don’t really know any better word to use than “connectedness,” because that’s really what it is.

Students’ sense of connectedness was based on taking an uncertain journey together and risking the suspension of beliefs long enough to be challenged—hallmarks of “thinking outside the box.” Further, connectedness supports critical thinking that is more focused on deeper and broader understanding than winning an argument. It opens the door to respect, empathy, and creative dialogue.

I elaborated on the qualitative research with quantitative methods to examine the cumulative effects of these contemplative practices over time (n=43). The results showed statistically significant gains in the average number of indicators for critical thinking dispositions appearing in student journals. Results also indicated increased self-confidence and engagement with multiple points of view, confirming expectations based on the qualitative research (Sable, 2012).

The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education has documented the growing research on a wide variety of contemplative practices in the classroom (www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe). Is it essential to be expert in mindfulness meditation to explore the potential of techniques that apply principles of self-awareness to listening, inquiry, and dialogue? Although I believe it helps immensely, reflective practices in general have long been part of academia in the humanities, as well as the sciences (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012). For example, “close reading” in literary criticism, grounded theory methods in social science research, and critical thinking in general can all involve cultivating awareness of our own habitual thinking, suspending it momentarily,

and seeing with fresh eyes. Such self-awareness ought to be a pre-requisite for independent critical thinking and meaningful communication (Paul, 1990). We can acknowledge “the box” of our disciplines, its strengths and its limitations, as we teach. Students can learn to be more reflective if we model whatever experience we have with reflective practices and develop creative exercises. We each have to learn through a genuine and open iterative process what works. In so doing, students can find their own voices and a fresh awareness of themselves and others. They can come to appreciate each other’s perspectives and stories, and explore in and around “the box” of our disciplines, if we—as instructors—can model it by doing it ourselves.

References

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Author Biography

David Sable, PhD, began teaching at Saint Mary’s University in Canada in 2000, bringing with him fifteen years of professional experience in the non-profit sector as a training and education consultant. In 2012, David held a sessional appointment as Assistant Professor in the Religious Studies Department, with an equal focus on teaching and research. In the same year, David completed the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Dalhousie University in Halifax. His thesis, “The Impact of Reflective Practices on the Dispositions for Critical Thinking in Undergraduate Courses,” was nominated for Best Thesis in the Social Sciences and his work noted in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* 2012 21(4). He continues to teach part-time at Saint Mary’s University and Mount Saint Vincent University and is working on a book for educators documenting the diverse impacts of reflective practices on learning. David has been studying and practicing meditation and Buddhism in the Shambhala tradition since 1971. He was trained and authorized as a meditation teacher by the renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, and his son, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He also works as an applied mindfulness consultant to educators and training organizations throughout North America. David is a founding member of the Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (ALIA) and a faculty member of the Atlantic Contemplative Centre.