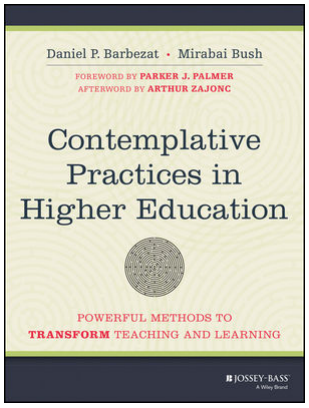

Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning

Barbezat, Daniel P.; and Bush, Mirabai
Wiley, 2014

Book Review

Tags: contemplative pedagogy | student learning | teaching meditation

Reviewed by: Mary Hess, *Luther Seminary*
Date Reviewed: November 30, -0001

We live and teach in a world of massive distraction. It is difficult to find spaces or times in which people are simply still, let alone inhabit silence. College students claim they are effective "multi-taskers" but more and more research is suggesting that multitasking is not a route to deep learning, and can even begin to shape attention practices in detrimental ways. What can we do? One generative inquiry into these challenges comes from the field of contemplative practice. What is contemplative practice? The authors of this book define it broadly, noting that these practices

> certainly include meditation, but not all are meditative in the traditional sense. . . . They all place the student in the center of his or her learning so that the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world. Through this connection, teaching and learning is transformed into something personally meaningful yet connected to the world. (6)

Bookended by a foreword written by Parker Palmer, and an afterword by Arthur Zajonc, this book is a much needed and pragmatic resource for anyone teaching in a higher education context. It is based on nearly twenty years of research into contemplative practices in higher education, including the work of 152 fellows who worked on classroom experiments in more than one hundred colleges and universities. Barbezat and Bush provide a concise but thorough overview of this research, while keeping their focus on teaching and learning practice.

The book is divided into two sections, the first concentrating on theoretical and pedagogical background, the second a guide to contemplative practices in higher education classrooms. Issues such as neuroplasticity, the challenges of reflecting on first-person experience, and a range of theoretical resources for introducing and developing meditation and introspection are explored in the first section. In the second section the authors draw from a vast array of pedagogical experiments in a diverse assortment of disciplines to resource specific exercises in mindful reading, writing, listening, movement, and action. These resources include specific writing prompts, examples of syllabi, and a rich collection of bibliographic entries for further study.

The authors also address directly the challenge of the religious studies classroom: "The most problematic place in the academy to introduce contemplative practices has been religion departments, where the concern has been that a professor who practices the religion he or she is teaching would not be sufficiently objective. Teaching contemplative practices to students raises a further concern: proselytizing" (105). Here the authors are quick to point out that contemplative practices of this sort are about "students discover[ing] their own internal reactions without having to adopt any ideology or specific belief" (6).

But is this really an appropriate response? My primary critique of this significant book is to ask what it means to invite students into a "technology" of embodied practice without at the same time inviting them to inhabit the beliefs within which that technology arose. Are we really willing to remove context in this way? Or is the contextual collapse we are already living within (cf. Michael Wesch) necessarily confronted by the intentionally attentive work of contemplation? Can practices of meditation and introspection so ground our knowing as to build the kind of insight, compassion, and systemic analysis necessary for living in a deeply present way in our postmodern world?

There are likely no clear or single answers to these epistemological conundrums. As one of the teachers whose work is explored in the book, Mary Rose O'Reilly, writes: "I learned that the single most important thing a contemplatively centered classroom teaches the teacher is not a pedagogical recipe but *pedagogical flexibility*" (188).

For my part, I am hopeful and energized by the various experiments with which these innovative educators are engaged. Given that education must, at heart, "create environments for students to inquire and challenge themselves about the meaning of their lives and the lives of others" (200), this book offers both rich reflection and pragmatic resources for doing so.

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