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# The Contemplative and Critical in Community

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*In this paper, I reflect on my experience of organising and participating in the Contemplative Pedagogy Symposium in the UK in August 2018. The event brought together educators with an interest in contemplative pedagogy, living and working together as a learning community for four days. A sense of deep connection developed as we dared to explore social justice, discrimination, industrial action, the neoliberalisation of higher education, and how our work in the classroom engaged with or was affected by these issues. The feeling of community that emerged from being able to sit with what was beautiful and ugly, joyful and painful has flowered in the months since and generated the energy and commitment to sustain difficult and important work. The event clearly demonstrated to me how the contemplative can bring us into a closer relationship with the critical. Contemplative practice is about not putting our heads in the sand but developing the awareness and responsiveness capable of holding our own vulnerability whilst engaging creatively with that which threatens us. It is through working closely with other educators who are similarly committed, open, and kind that I have come to see how contemplative practice can develop the courage and patience we need to let down our defences and see the world differently.*

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## CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

**M**y own experience as a white female lecturer working in UK higher education (HE) and the experiences that colleagues have shared with me suggest that the values which sustain and motivate individuals working in HE are increasingly at odds with the prevailing culture (Harland & Pickering, 2011). An occupation rich in purpose and meaning, with profound implications for society, is increasingly reduced to simplified metrics that cannot hope to capture that which is

most important to teachers or learners. The culture of performativity (de Lissovoy, 2018) creates ever greater pressure to produce measurable outcomes but leaves little space for discussion about what is actually of value. This creates an atmosphere of individualism and competition which risks isolating students and educators alike and may well be contributing to worsening mental health within universities (Thorley, 2017; Morrish, 2019).

In contrast, contemplative pedagogy emphasises the importance of developing awareness of our intention and values and establishing community and connection in teaching and learning; emphasising the importance of our relationships with ourselves, our colleagues, and our students as well as those between students (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Napora, 2017). Given the current HE environment in the UK, recognising the importance of community as a means of providing sustenance and renewal for those working in higher education is particularly timely.

However, community is not only important for well-being; it also affects how we learn about the world, come to understand our lived experience, and respond to the global challenges we face. Barbezat and Bush (2014) note: "Of all the qualities cultivated in contemplative education, compassion and connection are perhaps the most important...We have little hope of surviving without unprecedented level of cooperation and care for each other" (p. 188).

The importance of community is also brought out in Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, which suggests that individuals are able to construct a critical view of the world through dialogue with others and recognition of their interconnection (Freire, 1997). This critical view reveals how power is expressed within society, those who benefit and those it oppresses. Whilst this approach is of real value in creating social change, there is a risk that in isolation it may lead to the oppressed going on to become the oppressor; the roots of the human desire for power and domination are not explored. The value of contemplative practice and the development of critical subjectivity which it encourages lies in illuminating the root causes of what motivates us to unknowingly act as oppressors. Kaufman (2017) puts it this way:

By anchoring ourselves in our own personal practice of contemplation, and by coming to realize our non-dual, interdependent, and impermanent nature, we begin to shed the 'it's-all-about-me' mentality of greed and wanting that underlies the quest for power, control, and domination. (p. 14)

The connection between contemplative and critical pedagogy is of interest to me because both draw out the value of community and engaging with the "other" whilst acting as a healthy counterbalance to each other. A more critical lens challenges preconceptions of contemplative practice as being a predominantly individualistic and even narcissistic enterprise (see Barratt, 2018, 2019; Mah y Busch, 2014; Purser, 2019), whilst the exploration of subjectivity and meaning-making facilitated by contemplative practice enables debate about how we should respond given that we are embedded within and perpetuate systems of power and control through our actions in the world.

In this paper I focus on a very specific community of 24 individuals who came together for a four-day contemplative pedagogy symposium in the UK organised by the Contemplative Pedagogy Network. I led the organisation of the event, supported by three other UK-based academics. The symposium drew together educators from different disciplines, institutions, and countries. I therefore use the term *community* to describe a learning community of professionals coming together to develop their knowledge and skills; however, I also use it to mean the experience of connection and togetherness that arose while we were together.

The thread that runs through this reflection is how being with others can help make the connection between the critical and the contemplative more tangible, in particular how contemplative practice provides fertile ground for critical exploration within the learning community. I will start by looking at how the design of the symposium supported the development of community. I will then explore what arose during the symposium paying particular attention to the relationship between contemplative and critical perspectives and my experience of this interplay.

## **DESIGNING THE SYMPOSIUM TO CULTIVATE COMMUNITY**

I first developed an interest in contemplative pedagogy in 2014 after designing a course on the development of compassion for health and social care professionals. Whilst looking for relevant material I discovered and joined the Association of Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (AC-MHE). Since that time I have explored different aspects of contemplative education with a diverse range of educators, often in my work with the Contemplative Pedagogy Network, as well as organising training events within my institution and trying out different approaches within my own teaching. I found that educators sought support in two key areas. Firstly, they wanted more information about how contemplative pedagogy manifested in teaching and learning, practical ideas that they can use in their teaching. Secondly, because they often felt isolated within their own institutions, they wanted to connect with other educators who were also interested in talking more meaningfully about their roles and higher education more broadly.

With this in mind, the programme for the 2018 Contemplative Pedagogy Symposium started with lunch on Monday and ended with lunch on Thursday. Monday afternoon and evening were used for introductions and initial explorations of contemplative pedagogy. Tuesday featured four workshops, each presented by educators who had used contemplative pedagogy in their teaching. Wednesday and Thursday were organized using Open Space Technology (OST), which meant that nothing was planned in advance; the agenda was set by the participants, who proposed questions they would like to explore or workshops they would like to run. Thus, throughout Wednesday and Thursday morning there were a series of concurrent sessions that participants could choose between. (For more detail about OST, see Herman, n.d.)

The symposium organisers and I wanted to create a nonhierarchical space which facilitated the active involvement of everyone present. Everyone who provided a workshop session or led a contemplative activity at the event was also a participant. This approach helped participants to value the knowledge present and facilitate the deepening of that knowledge through continued dialogue about the learning events after they had finished. It also created a sense that we were working collectively to explore topics and allowed individuals to develop their own confidence and sense of meaning in what we were collectively exploring.

An additional way that the importance of community was built into the design of the event was by encouraging participants to attend the full event and live on campus together. We deliberately kept numbers small: 24 participants attended, including the organising team. I felt that I benefitted greatly from my proximity to everyone, and it made my job as event coordinator much easier! It provided time and space for me as a fellow participant to raise questions and explore differences with others in more relaxed ways. I also appreciated getting a more holistic sense of those in attendance, the things that shaped their lives, and the ways their experiences informed their teaching.

### **COMING TOGETHER AND RAISING QUESTIONS**

To start to build trust and initiate dialogue about contemplative pedagogy, the first group event was a “fishbowl” (Gordijn et al., 2018), a form of group reflection. The whole group sat in chairs in a large circle. Five volunteers were asked to sit in a smaller centre circle and engage in conversation about the question “What is contemplative pedagogy?” for a set period of time. Those seated in the outer circle listened carefully, and when a bell was rung those on the outside could respond to what they had heard before it was handed back to the centre again.

I remember this fishbowl feeling emotionally intense for me. There was a sense of responsibility for having brought these people together, relief at the energy and engagement in the room, and apprehension as some difficult questions—about how contemplative pedagogy meets injustice and discrimination—were put on the table almost immediately.

In conversation with me a few days later, one participant expressed how excited she had been during the fishbowl when she had realised that issues of race and discrimination, which really mattered to her, were on the table. For me this was an important moment of realisation that the fear that arose in me when people raised critical questions was not a reason to avoid them. I have a strong dislike of confrontation which sometimes stops me from engaging in challenging dialogue. Contemplative practices, particularly mindfulness and self-compassion, have helped me to hold and respond creatively to that fear and take things less personally, relieving the pressure to be an “expert” who always knows the answers.

This was pertinent throughout the event, as I realised that being able to sit with difficult and conflicting emotions was crucial to the meeting of the contemplative and the critical.

On the evening of the first day, there was an invitation to walk a labyrinth. Nearly everyone took the opportunity to do so. Although experienced in diverse ways, the sense of quietness and togetherness that emerged from this task seemed an appropriate way to close the first day, embodying the values that the event sought to explore by providing the opportunity to communally engage in contemplative practice. During my labyrinth walk I became very conscious of the sense of responsibility I was holding. There was a real tenderness in my heart from watching everyone engage with care and thoughtfulness. I was conscious that my mind was caught up on people who were arriving late and my need to attend to them, and this required a conscious quieting of my own mind, made easier by the powerful silence in the room. I started to sense a humble reverence for those who had come, especially those who had limited experience of contemplative practice or how to relate it to their work but had trusted their desire to attend.

### **HOLDING THE CRITICAL AMIDST CARE AND CONNECTION**

Leading the organisation of this event was an important step in my professional life. It was clear from my relationships with the rest of the organising team that we shared the same values with a particular emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and honesty. The strength of our collective practice—our shared contemplative practice, such as meditation and labyrinth walking, as well as the care and respect shown to each other—meant that I felt transparent in my work with them, pushing me to really own what I was bringing to the role and where I was falling short of my aims. I was particularly conscious of how my sense of insecurity, which has in the past led me to occasionally be quite controlling and made it hard for me to let others in, caused me to coerce others in small ways. Working with this team became a profound practice which helped me maintain a critical view, whilst our shared contemplative practice helped check my defensiveness and encouraged me to listen, breathe, and let things unfold. In our evening meetings it was great to check in with each

other and offer support. Their honesty made me feel safe and held, and I felt able to share about where I was stuck or any vulnerability that the day had touched upon. I felt a deepening sense of respect for each member of the team developing as the event progressed.

Ever since taking the lead in setting up the Contemplative Pedagogy Network in 2014, I have struggled with self-consciousness and a sense that I am not qualified to be doing this work. Organising this event and recognising the talents and contributions of those who attended was terrifying to my fragile professional identity, yet through community and their kindness I learnt to soften and open more—to rejoice in and be renewed by their inspiration rather than being threatened and undermined by it. Being able to witness this internal process has helped to deepen my exploration of how I exercise power, the impact this has on others, the different sources of privilege from which I have gained, and the oppressive influences which have made things harder for me.

There were two particular moments over the course of the event when I experienced the importance of the relationship between the development of a critical view—in which we start to see society and our role in it differently—and contemplative pedagogy. I will now look at these in more depth and consider the importance of community in each case.

The first moment was at the end of a workshop in which the black female presenter had talked about her mindfulness work with black youth in the US. She had run out of time to do the exercise she had planned, so instead she burst into song. I was moved to tears within moments; we all sat captivated and our understanding of her work moved from our heads into our hearts. The words were from a poem called *Heritage* by Countee Cullen, the melody her own. As she sang the line “What does Africa mean to me?” suddenly her work was given context, a place in history, as we glimpsed her subjectivity and the meaning she attributed to her work. Watching, we were bound together in awed silence. When imagining how the event might go, I had had a sense of wanting to create something different, and in that moment something completely unplanned and unanticipated yet profoundly beautiful arose and held us together. The interplay and merging of the intellect and the heart, through first learning about her activities and the theories behind them and then hearing the beautiful expression of song, provided a critical view



touched with tenderness. Listening to her sing, I had a sense of knowing her more deeply, and in that knowing I saw myself more clearly, getting a sense of my history, my heritage, and my present life that was not cognitive but felt. I don't think this shift of perspective, conceptually difficult to describe as it is, would have been possible without relationship and the beauty that cut through to my heart. I could not have "thought" my way to it. In seeing something that I had not previously recognised I felt a sense of shame yet also, along with that, connection and aliveness. This moment has since led to reflection on my whiteness, my history, and how they have impacted my work. If I were to choose to burst into song after presenting my work, what would I sing?

The second example came during a discussion about the industrial strike action that occurred in the UK in February and March 2018. The strikes, arranged by the University and College Union (UCU) in response to changes made to the pension arrangements of many HE professionals, resulted in UCU members stopping work for up to 14 days. A symposium participant put forward a proposal to discuss the action and their experience of it. I was interested to learn more because it had been the first time I had engaged in strike action and I had found the experience draining. Through dialogue with others I came to see my experience differently and understand more deeply how contextual factors were framing my experience and causing friction between my sense of myself and the decision to go on strike. Being in an environment where the value of contemplation, care, and awareness was understood and modelled to the best of our abilities, I felt listened to, and there was space for expressing divergent views. The most painful aspect of the strike for me had been the diversity of strongly held views, on all sides, and the resultant fear that I was doing or saying the wrong thing. I found it very difficult to know what was deemed appropriate for someone who was "on strike," since people approached this in very different ways. I also found it stressful to consider the consequences for my colleagues and students.. At the time I had felt that everyone else knew what they were doing and I didn't, but after the discussion I recognised that they too were finding their way through a difficult, emotive situation. This insight into a shared vulnerability that I had thought was just mine helped to awaken my compassion and understanding for others involved.

In both of these examples it was through sharing space with others and allowing them to influence how I saw and experienced the world that the interplay of the critical and contemplative proved fruitful. In the first example I was moved through the emotion of the song to connect more deeply to the person who was singing, to appreciate her work in a more holistic way as an expression of her history, and in turn I felt my own life in a much broader context. I felt a willingness to look at the role I, as a white person, have indirectly played in determining the outcomes of the young black people she was working with. There was some shame in this recognition, which was made tangible through the depth of her sharing and the beauty of the song. I got an embodied sense of this that I had bypassed when considering the same issues at simply a cognitive level. In the second example, being held in a community made me feel safe enough to explore by views and fears around a difficult topic and has made me more resilient for future work that questions and challenges power and oppression.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

When I reflect back on this event, there is something intangible about what we created. I wanted to write this to share my learning as the event organiser and to bring home the importance of community for us all, especially given its capacity to help the contemplative and the critical meet in transformative ways. It provides a space in which we can be held by our shared vulnerability, providing care and understanding yet at the same time coming to see more clearly through the critical examination of difference.

At the end of the symposium each participant got to choose a postcard that they believed in some way reflected their experience, given some time to make notes about what they wanted to remember, and invited to take the postcard home. One participant very generously gave me their card, explaining that they wanted to me to know what the event had meant to them. They had written:

In the last few years it's been discovered that in forests trees communicate through fungus which connect the roots of the members of the woodland...Often I feel like a plant pot. Here I've felt that connection and com-

munication through my roots. It's a nourishing connection that makes me stronger and more powerful, more able to grow.

Through learning about contemplative pedagogy, deepening my own contemplative practice, and engaging with literature on critical/radical pedagogy, it has become apparent to me that these approaches to teaching and learning can complement each other. Reflecting on this event has provided me with tangible examples of this interplay and the crucial role that community has played in making them manifest.

I started this article by considering the current competitive, individualistic nature of work in Western HE contexts. Whilst I recognise the need to address much of what has been reported about the potentially harmful environment of HE, my experience at the symposium, as well as with many colleagues within my institution, shows that there are also examples of care and support for each other and dedication to students. The willingness of participants to immerse themselves in the symposium so wholeheartedly illustrated the value of creating space that balanced contemplation and introspection with exploration of external challenges. My experience at the symposium and with the Contemplative Pedagogy Network demonstrated how the contemplative can bring us into closer connection with the critical through our relationships with each other. In the current context of Western HE and the stress that it causes both staff and students through increasing individualisation and competition, contemplative pedagogy is particularly valuable, because community is embedded within it. It is through working closely with other educators who are similarly committed, open, and kind that I have come to see how contemplative practice can help us develop the courage and patience we need to let down our defences and see the world differently.

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