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Artfully Aware

Contemplative Practice in the Classroom

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Artfully Aware: Contemplative Practice in the Classroom

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Abstract: Contemporary college students face enormous challenges to their growth as whole human beings. Increasing environmental stressors, fears about the future, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, face the emerging adults we work with in our higher education institutions. The state of students' minds, bodies, and emotions are central to learning. When creating a learning environment that encourages a contemplative attitude, students become receptive, open and simultaneously passive, letting information enter through sensory awareness and direct experience. Contemplative practice therefore depends on cultivating an understanding of oneself, as well as one's relationship and interdependence of others and the world. This paper will present the interplay between the artistic experience: process, the making of art; product, the completion of an object or image and reflection, through aesthetic contemplation. These three approaches to learning through art, offers an alternative way of knowing that strengthens students' capacity to generate a sense of calm, reduce stress, enhance focus, and cultivate self-awareness skills basic and essential to learning.

Keywords: Contemplative, Art Pedagogies, Learning, Aesthetics, Self-Inquiry

Art is contemplation. It is the pleasure of the mind which searches into nature and which there divines the spirit of which nature herself is animated.
—Auguste Rodin (Rodin 1912, 7)

Introduction

Contemporary college students face enormous challenges to their growth as whole human beings. Increasing environmental stressors, fears about the future, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, face the emerging adults we work with in our higher education institutions (Wu 2000). The state of students' minds, bodies, and emotions are central to learning. The presence of anxiety, illness, boredom, and distraction greatly reduce the ability to function effectively and efficiently and hinder learning and the capacity to integrate new information (Hart 2008). To elaborate further Hart explained,

The greater the complexity and demands—the external stressors—the greater need for psychological and emotional balance and resilience. In a state of chronic stimulation or low-grade anxiety it is difficult to concentrate, step back and watch ourselves... In other words, our emotional state is significant not only for our well being but also for our capacity to learn. (Hart 2008, 14)

When creating a learning environment that encourages a contemplative attitude, students become receptive, open and simultaneously passive, letting information enter through sensory awareness and direct experience. In the current educational system, empirical-rational thinking is emphasized, with objectivity, logic and reason the primary tools for gaining access to knowledge. Yet students, whose worlds are saturated with information, rapid sound bites, and stimulus, require equal access to tools that cultivate their inner capacities for discernment. With the greater complexity and demands from the outer world, it is even more fundamental that students cultivate an inner life, and it is by attending to the “inner,” that one's awareness and understanding of the outer world is deepened. Dustin and Ziegler (2007, 3) explain, “The recovery of the inner...requires faithful attention to and a certain kind of reverence for the

‘outer.’” Contemplative practice therefore depends on cultivating an understanding of oneself, as well as one’s relationship and interdependence of others and the world.

Contemplative practices add a missing element that enhance the rational and sensory, offering students pragmatic benefits for improving their relationship with themselves, other people, and the world. These practices can also generate a sense of calm, reduce stress, and increase focus and awareness. The experience of art, when offered as a contemplative practice, provides an alternative way of knowing that quiets the mind, cultivates the aforementioned sensory qualities, and, at the same time, also strengthens imagination and insight. Dustin and Ziegler (2007, 2) discussed how visual art provides an approach that is “not at odds with daily life; [but] in fact, essential to life itself.” In this sense, art is about an active engagement, an act that is entwined with the art of daily living. While much has been written about the features of contemplative practices in higher education (Barzbeat and Bush 2013; Zajonc 2009), little has been written about the arts’ ability to cultivate students’ capacity for contemplative learning. This paper will present the interplay between *process*, the making of art; *product*, the completion of an object or image and *reflection*, through aesthetic contemplation. These three approaches to learning through art, offers an alternative way of knowing that strengthens students’ capacity to generate a sense of calm, reduce stress, enhance focus, and cultivate self-awareness—skills basic and essential to learning.

Art as Life

Art has always been an essential part of our lives and represents an interdisciplinary approach integrating the multiplicity of roles, as well as the core issues of human experience. Art provides an intimate connection to all facets of the lived experience, allowing each of us to live life more fully while, at the same time, seeking meaning. Dissanayake (1988, x) explains that there “remains something to be said about the relationship of art (understood as a general human endowment or propensity) and life (understood biologically).” Art has been a part of the fabric of humanity from the beginning of time, and according to Dissanayake (1990, x), “it must contribute something essential to human life.” Through the process of making art, we engage in an experiential activity that affects us internally and touches upon emotion and thoughts while also offering a tangible object that serves as a source of self-awareness. Dustin and Ziegler (2007, ix) discuss that for many artists, “the ‘making’ of art is, fundamentally, an exercise in contemplative seeing” and for such artists the practice of art is “inseparable from the practice of being alive.” This practice according to Dustin and Ziegler, is what shapes a full and well-lived life.

John Dewey, a prominent education reformer, believed that aesthetic experience and artistic production provide, “freedom of intelligence” when referring to internal and cognitive freedom through arts experiences (Dewey 1938). The benefit of the art experience, emphasized process over product, which affected one’s life through personal meaning, improvisation, creativity, and nourishing the inner life. Furthermore, the arts have also been found to promote wellness and restore well-being (Malchiodi 2005; McNiff 1992). The making of art is an experiential mode of learning and self-inquiry. Using the arts as a foundation for contemplative practices offers a model for aiding interiority while promoting wellness. Poet and potter, M.C. Richards, who taught at the legendary Black Mountain College in the mountains of North Carolina, emphasized the importance of the artistic experience for human beings. Richards urged that when one’s artistic capacity is sleeping, it should be awakened, and in so doing, the awakening of the artistic spirit will strengthen and aid a person in his or her personal growth (Atkins and Williams 2007).

Contemplative Practices, Art, and Well-Being

Since the late 1960's scholars researched contemplative practices (Haynes 2009). Contemplation has been described as a third way of knowing that both complements and enhances the rational and sensory. Research demonstrated contemplative practices can change physiological states, which can shift affect and cognition and greatly benefit students who are overwhelmed, fatigued, and experiencing high levels of stress (Hart 2008). Through a range of approaches, such as breath awareness, meditation, silence, lectio divina, and the arts, the contemplative mind is opened and activated and shifts states of mind with the intention of cultivating awareness, concentration, and insight (Hart 2004).

Two categories of contemplative practice addressed in this paper include contemplation of behavior and elevation of awareness. Contemplation of behavior leads students in becoming aware of their behavior and reflecting on ways that they may harm themselves through stress-related responses such as anxiety, and fear. The high level of stress experiences by contemporary students can prevent them from being aware of the positive aspects in their life. Contemplative art experiences elevate awareness, strengthens vision, and opens the space for expanded ways of seeing and being. By engaging in contemplative practice such as meditation and art making, students learn valuable tools that allow them to rise above their anxieties and behold beauty in simple and mundane experiences. When students develop the capacity to be deeply reflective, interrogative, and exploratory their own experiences dealing with complexity and change becomes easier. In contemplative education, the process of learning involves "looking not only at the outer data but also opening into our selves" (Hart 2008, 236).

Art experiences may result in flow of ideas, inspiration, or insights; this a kind of opening may also lead to spaciousness and a sense of calm. Throughout all contemplative practices it is crucial for the participant to have an ongoing commitment to self-discovery. Supporting a contemplative approach in classrooms strengthens students' capacity to silence the chatter of the mind and reduce the stressors that interfere with assimilation of knowledge. Different than traditional modes of acquiring knowledge through assimilation of information, contemplative awareness opens space for receptivity and embodied knowing: that is, knowing that is located in the lived body. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), it was the body, along with the mind that understood and experienced the world; the two were entwined. Providing students with multiple modalities for growth allows them "to be open to the information while simultaneously being open to themselves. This is, we might say, *reciprocal revelation*. In this sense we recognize that *what* we know is bound to *how* we know" (Hart 2008, 248).

Cultivating artistic practice and sensibilities is an integrative approach that draws upon one's intuitive abilities as well as logical and linear thought processes, with the aim of facilitating inner awareness and self-expression. Rosch (2004, 38) explains, "both meditation and the arts tap into basic intuition...[arguing] meditation and art can illuminate each other and can do so beyond particular artistic styles or practices." Art creates a lens that allows for seeing the world in new ways through the communication of thoughts and feelings. The process of creating art opens the possibility for inducing positive change and enhancing health and well-being.

To become aware and let go of the chatter of the mind allows for cultivation of students' interior space. Creating experiences for students that support their ability to perceive and then weave meaning from the threads of their experiences strengthens interiority and aids in meaning-making. Contemplative practices have long been used in the worlds' wisdom traditions to develop one's interiority and find other ways of knowing that extend the way information is acquired through experiential and direct experience. "Interiority in education is about developing spaciousness within us in order that we may meet and take in the world that is before us" (Hart 2008, 2). Emotional resilience and balance are significant components of interiority that offer a means for enhancing the process of learning. Strengthening students' interiority can lead them to

develop core values that encompass and support both their educational and personal lives, and establishes practices that extend beyond their academic years.

Learning to See Again

With the abundance of visual stimuli that is part of modern society, we look but we often do not truly see. Learning to see requires stillness and attentiveness to the world in all its subtleties. “Contemplation has the etymological and experiential roots in *theoria* [author emphasis], in what was a participatory act of seeing” (Dustin and Ziegler, 139–140). The Greek word *theoria* corresponds to the Latin word *contemplatio*, which is defined as “‘looking at’, ‘gazing at’, ‘being aware of’” (Johnson 1997, 24). Artists have long known that to truly see, one must be still, observe, and connect with the object to be painted, drawn or sculpted—to capture an essence not often seen by merely looking.

Georgia O’Keeffe, a well-known painter who captured essences of the natural world painting exquisitely organic shapes and rich colors, eloquently stated, “Nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small it takes time—we haven’t time—and to see takes time, like having a friend takes time” (ThinkExist.com 2015). Developing the ability to see contemplatively requires a soft gaze, patience, and openness to connect with what is being observed: in doing so, there develops interconnectedness. No longer are you a simply an observer, but in a relationship with the object of observation cultivating a deeper and perhaps richer connection of the object of observation. As an artist, paying attention is a way of being present in the world.

Contemplative seeing has wide-ranging implications for developing pedagogical methods in multiple disciplines. Philosophers, such as Plato, Thoreau and Heidegger demonstrated through their work what it means to live more fully and to be fulfilled in their daily life by seeing contemplatively; consequently, they cultivated heightened senses and awareness in order to live fully engaged with the world (Dustin and Ziegler 2007). In educational settings, this approach reaps similar benefits. “Focus, concentration, and awareness are vital to education itself, as well as to living fully” (Dustin and Ziegler 2007, 2). Creating space for students to develop contemplative seeing allows them to gaze both inward and outward, cultivating interiority, and developing a deepened sense of interconnectedness with the outer world.

Art as Contemplative Practice: An Honors Course

Different than traditional college classes, *Art as a Contemplative Practice* introduced experiential, reflective and embodied knowing alongside traditional models of reading, writing, and discussion. Designed as a studio-based course, students’ explored art as a contemplative practice through on-going and regular practices of viewing and making art. The aim was to infuse learning with experience of awareness, insight, and compassion for oneself and others. Throughout the course, there was constant interplay between *process*, the making of art, *product*, the completion of an object or image, and *reflection*, the aesthetic experience with a focus on the creative process. The primary emphasis, however, was on the process, not product, to develop an understanding of how the creation of objects or images can affect students’ internally, through thoughts and emotions, and externally, through visual expression. While assignments did have final outcomes based upon course objectives, the evidence and final assessment of the final project emerged out of the art-making process and self-reflection. To direct the process, lectures included contemporary, historical and cross-cultural art, artists, and processes, to promote the exploration of humanity’s shared experiences through visual concepts. Such examples include spaciousness, consumerism, perspective, receptivity, harmony, balance, nature, silence, and mystery.

Structure was established with rubrics, assignments, and available materials to create an interdependent learning environment with the invitation for students to engage and be aware in

their own process of inquiry. Each assignment included a rubric to ensure a level of professional engagement with art materials. When introducing art assignments, student responses were varied; some were perplexed at the non-linear assignments and non-traditional forms of assessment, others were also eager to engage with materials and surrender to the unknown.

Art Making: Process and Product

Contemplative art-based experiences can be divided into two elements, the *process*, in which the goal is to simply observe the mind while engaging in the creative process (e.g. painting, writing, etc.); and the *product*, where the focus is on the resulting object as the artist explores, with mindful intention, the outward form of an inward expression. In both elements, the intention of the practitioner is the same: to engage with contemplative awareness aimed at bridging the inner world with the external world.

Observing students who were unfamiliar or wary of engagement with the visual arts, the emphasis on process removed barriers by focusing on creative expression and exploration of materials. By reframing the focus away from product and on the process, students were able to surrender rational thinking and open themselves to feelings and sensations that revealed insights and encouraged emotional wakefulness. Dewey (1938) emphasized artistic experience rather than the product of art-making, believing that almost any classroom activity could provide an artistic experience if it involved artistic skill and aesthetic characteristics. Building upon Dewey's framework, students were encouraged to explore a range of materials with the aim of familiarizing themselves with mark-making, color, and how these interplay with personal creative expression. Being aware of their hands moving the materials, students could let go of rational thought, technicality, and skill needed for art-making. Dustin and Ziegler (2007, ix) describe artistic process as "a kind of doing that is not simply a matter of producing results, or a means to an end; and that contemplative seeing [and art making] could, in this sense be the most deeply practical and the most fully human of human activities."

Initially the emphasis in this class was on process, however, once students were comfortable with material, tools, and techniques, the process was minimized and products were required to illustrate final visual investigations around the aforementioned themes. From the preliminary work completed in class that was part of themed assignments, students were directed to design a personal 14-day contemplative art practice. The aim was to reduce the focus on one singular product and encourage experimentation to loosen the hard-lined purpose to create one final product, and instead, let art making become a vehicle for personal awareness, focus and concentration. In this sense, the work, the work was designed by being receptive and open, became intuitively guided, and let information enter through sensory awareness and direct experience.

In both process and product, the process of creating and making senses were heightened, emotions engaged and present, and time seemed to slow or stop. This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1996) described as flow, as a state of being totally absorbed in an activity. The past and the future do not exist and time and space melt away. Mindfulness can also be described using the same language; moment-by-moment awareness is sustained through thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. This emphasis on focus and concentration in the moment emerged throughout students' engagement with art as they connected to the present moment, the materials, and sensory experience. The following sections present a sampling of artistic experiences offered to undergraduate students in an honors course on art and contemplative practice.

Beholding

Anaxagoras, a pre-Socratic philosopher, believed that one's purpose in living is to "behold" (Dustin and Ziegler 2007). Beholding can take on many forms from moments of quiet with everyday objects or as in this assignment, beholding one work of art over a period of time. The

concept of experiencing a work of art to elucidate emotional response can also be found in *Einführung*, a German term created by the philosopher Robert Vischer to describe the projection of human feeling into art objects (Jeffers 2009). Vischer explained this phenomenon: “I transpose myself into the inner being of an object and explore its formal character from within, as it were” (Jeffers 2009, 3). By being present with the brushstrokes, shapes, colors and content of the work Vischer’s aim was to experience a physical familiarity and relationship to the object of the art. It was the aim of this project for students to connect with the art and define their experience using all their sensory abilities.

For this contemplative practice, I adapted an assignment by Joanna Ziegler, former professor of visual arts and art history at Holy Cross (Barzbezt and Bush 2014). Students were invited to self-select a work of art located on campus to view over a period of five weeks and explore the aesthetic qualities of the work. Aesthetics is a philosophy of the senses, exploring nature, expression and perception of beauty, as well as the psychological response to beauty and artistic experiences (The Free Dictionary 2016). The aim was for students to develop a practice of aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetic contemplation, like sitting meditation, is a discipline that is enhanced through regular practice (McNiff 1992). To receive the benefits of aesthetic contemplation it is necessary to take the time to look attentively and to gaze with heightened visual awareness.

Work selected could be found in any building on campus or be an outdoor sculpture. Instructions included spending fifteen minutes viewing the work and to go the same time and same day of the week, thereby creating a ritual of this practice. I encouraged students to refrain from reading the wall text, or even speaking to others and to be still to hear their own inner voice. Students were instructed to sit in silence in front of the painting or sculpture and respond to the question: *What do you see?* After students’ initial observations of sitting in silence and beholding the work of art, they would then reflect and journal on the following question: *How do you feel physically and emotionally?* I encouraged students to pay attention to what was going on in their life at that time and how it might impact how they viewed the work. I also asked them to consider what was going on in the environment around them, and how, if at all, did the work of art evolve over time. After the fifth visit and final reflection, students were asked to read back in their journal and synthesize their experience in a one-page summary. The aforementioned overarching questions explored how aesthetic reflection alters your perception of the image, as well as offering personal insights and awareness. Pieper described the aesthetic experience as,

[T]he ultimate fulfillment, the absolutely meaningful activity, the most perfect expression of being alive, the deepest satisfaction, and the fullest achievement of human existence must needs happen in an instance of beholding, namely in the contemplating awareness of the worlds’ ultimate and intrinsic foundations. (Pieper 1990, 22)

By contemplating the visual qualities, as well as the viewers’ personal experience, seeing becomes a model for deepening awareness. Therefore, the simple process of looking can also be one of the most profound if one beholds with the intention of truly seeing and experiencing a work of art.

Mindful Drawing

Frederick Franck (1973), artist and author, used drawing as a meditative technique, which he described in his best-known book, *The Zen of Seeing*. Using drawing in this manner allows for the cultivation of mindfulness by letting the eye fall naturally and easily on what is in front of you; the intent is to develop open awareness. The drawing itself is merely a by-product and recorded history of the experience of making the drawing. Daily, for a period of 14 days, students were asked to draw from a list of suggestions that ranged from concrete prompts, such as drawing an object they see every day, a food they ate, a detail of something in nature, to more

abstract representations such as drawing a memory or the visual expression of an emotion they are feeling. The aim was to awaken their ability to see possibilities in the everyday, whether within themselves or in the world in which they live. I encouraged students to use all their senses to become aware of the space they inhabited to gather information and inform their practice. With each drawing they were asked to be aware of what they were doing and feeling and let their entire body be engaged in the process. To scaffold this process and reduce the fear of having to draw, I led students through a series of exercises adapted from Betty Edwards (1979), from her book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. One exercise was blind contour drawing, which requires looking and paying close attention to every detail of what lies in front of you while not looking at the paper and pencil as it moves. Another involved drawing an image while looking at it upside down, and, drawing with your non-dominant hand. These exercises require the greatest level of observation and full attention to detail. In addition, they served to establish a baseline for students to engage in their individual mindful drawings, which were a combination of concrete to abstract, objective and subjective.

Conclusion

Dustin and Ziegler (2007, 54–55) when referencing Okakura Kakuzo, in *The Book of Tea*, ask, “why living should *not* be an art, why are daily rituals should *not* be ‘artistic,’ and what this could really mean.” To further this line of reflection, how can an art practice be contemplative, practical, and strengthen learning for students within and beyond the walls of the academia? In educational settings, we have failed to recognize how aesthetic and artistic seeing, thinking, and doing together enhance our students’ daily experiences. The value of these artistic and contemplative practices recognizes that the internal and external are bound to one another, transforming one another, in a kind of reciprocal interaction (Hart 2008). With the greater complexity and demands of the outer world, it is even more fundamental that students cultivate an inner life. An antidote to the demands of constant activity and stimulation, art as a contemplative practice offers an alternative way of knowing by moving beyond the confines of words and habitual patterns to shift the perspective, nourish the inner life, and open the contemplative space in learning environments. Experiences in the arts can balance the precision of analytical mind with affective knowing, while fortifying learning that can increase students’ capacity to generate a sense of calm, enhance focus, and cultivate self-awareness.

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