

Reflective Teaching

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Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across Disciplines

Gunnlaugson, Olen; Sarath, Edward W.; Scott, Charles; and Bai, Heesoon, eds.
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Book Review

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In the ongoing conversation about whether higher education exists to make students wise or to teach them marketable skills, contemplative inquiry has attracted a lot of attention. Among the criticisms of college faculty is that they view students as “brains on a stick,” an amusing metaphor idea credited to former Harvard dean Harry Lewis in John Miller’s essay “Contemplation: the Soul’s Way of Knowing.” Miller’s is one of twenty-two essays by researchers and practitioners in contemplative learning assembled here as “a resource for confronting current teaching and learning challenges” (7). Though some contributions have a stronger proselytizing tone, the editors’ stated goal is to “raise awareness” of how contemplative studies can inform, enrich, and sustain the disciplines and instructional contexts of higher education (4).

The authors represent a cross section of experience and education, including tenured faculty, graduate students, administrators, an engineer, and a former monk. Though contributions come from many academic disciplines, the social sciences have the largest presence. Only two authors write from the field of Religious Studies; teacher-scholars interested in specific applications to theology and religion will be better served by the book *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* by Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace (reviewed in *TTR* 16, no. 3, 2013).

As with any anthology, most users will read selectively, but the four parts of the book work well as a whole, articulating the rationale for and benefits of contemplative methods, identifying practical classroom and campus applications, and reflecting on future directions in

the field. Part 2, "Domain Specific Perspectives," is the most pedagogically helpful, with entries from political science, history, economics, and information sciences, among others. Many of the practices are grounded in Buddhist teachings, chief among them mindfulness meditation. Widely embraced as a balm in an age of distraction, meditation has become separated from its roots in the wisdom traditions, which is problematic for both sectarian and secular institutions. Other contemplative activities such as silent reading or detailed observation may have religious or philosophical forms, but are well established methods for teaching and learning.

Those considering adopting contemplative pedagogies may wish for more data on their effectiveness than this volume offers. Though research results appear in many of the essays, only two authors examine studies of mindfulness practice in depth, one from the laboratory and the other from the classroom. As Alfred Kaszniak observes from his work in the cognitive sciences, the results are "encouraging," but he notes that there is almost no research on the "educationally relevant consequences of meditation practice with students that would allow for relatively unambiguous interpretation" (207).

Administrators and teachers with more ambitious goals of transforming an institutional culture or curriculum will find Part 3, "Individual and Collective Transformation," relevant but perhaps not especially practical for dealing with resistance to this pedagogy. Daniel Vokey, for example, presents contemplative inquiry as an antidote to what he calls "academic materialism": higher education's attempt to preserve the status of an elite minority by promoting competition, fear, and isolation (260). Such an indictment, though arguably true, will likely appeal more to the already converted than to the skeptics still suspicious of contemplative education.

The book's concluding essays on the philosophy of "intersubjectivity" take the conversation in a "mystical" direction that will attract advocates and critics alike. Educators who seek a more prominent role for spirituality in the classroom will appreciate the presentation of teaching as a sacred process and teachers as spiritual mentors; critics will be troubled by the view of teaching as an extension of one's own spiritual practice. Teachers and scholars of comparative religion will perhaps be uneasy with Edward Sarath's claim that among the highest priorities for contemplative education is the cultivation of a "21st century spiritual intelligence" through the "melding" of wisdom traditions (369).

I think most college faculty could agree that students are not just "brains on a stick" and the liberal arts should foster in them a deeper engagement with self, others, and the world. But reasonable people can disagree about how to create that engagement. This volume will

educate the simply curious, inspire the deeply committed, and advance the conversation among proponents and skeptics of contemplative inquiry, which is all to the good for the larger discussion of why we teach.

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