



# Reflective Learning Techniques to Address Power Dynamics in the Classroom

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1

# Objectives

- To explore a set of contemplative practices as way to balance power in the classroom,
- To hold multiple perspectives through inquiry, and
- To generate new meaning from peer interaction and reflective learning.

# The Challenge of Being an Authority

- ▶ Most students expect instructors to be a source of knowledge, an authority, and a model for respectful communication. Yet instructors often come with their own biographies, their own hierarchies, and their own point of view, sometimes intentional and some times not.
- ▶ The power dynamic in the university classroom is often in the way of interaction and reflective learning, especially around sensitive topics.

## Q. How Do We Use Contemplative Practices to Address the Power Dynamics in Class?

- Balance our traditional roles with substantial time for peer-to-peer interaction and reflective learning.
- Use contemplative practices to create conditions for exploration, connection, and meaning that emerges from present experience.

# Contemplative Practices for Reflective Learning: 2 Parts

## Part 1:

Individual Reflection:  
Focus on your internal  
experience

- Mindfulness: Your present experience
- The context you bring

## Part II:

Reflective Interaction:  
Without losing self-  
awareness, focus on the  
interaction



## Part 1: Individual Reflection

- Mindfulness Meditation: Focus on the present including your context
- Focus on a vital question; do not try to answer it
- Be open to your whole experience including your felt sense
- Then respond to the question in writing



## Part 2: Reflective Interaction (in pairs)

- Read out loud to your partner (only what you wrote)
- Listen: suspend judgment
- Paraphrase your partner's response: "Be a mirror"; receive feedback
- Be open and curious, ask open-ended questions (reflective inquiry)
- Notice what you may be assuming
- Switch roles and repeat the process
- Engage in dialogue about the question

# Why Paraphrase Your Partner's Response?

- Be a mirror: “We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.” (W. B. Yeats, (1902, 2004) *The Celtic Twilight: Faerie and Folklore*, p. 69, New York: Dover Publications)



# Mindfulness Meditation



# Contemplation Question

- ▶ What are we doing now as instructors to see ourselves clearly and understand the impact we have on our students?

# Listen and Suspend Judgment



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# Be a Mirror: Restate What You Heard



# Be Curious – Ask Open-Ended Questions “Why Do They Think That?”



# Pause – Notice What You May Be Assuming



# Create Dialogue



# Contemplation Question

- ▶ How do we use contemplative practice to create community, connection, and ultimately friendship through/across differences?



# Does Applying Mindfulness Work?

Students report that learning how to apply mindfulness to listening, inquiry, and dialogue enabled them to:

- “slow down,” settle their minds
- focus openly on the present
- relax habitual mindsets
- genuinely inquire about different perspectives
- earn respect from others and have respect for others

## Underlying Affective Dispositions

- Prudence in suspending and forming judgments
- Honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and egocentric or sociocentric tendencies
- Self-confidence
- Concern to be generally well-informed
- Willingness to reconsider and revise views; inquisitiveness
  - Flexibility in considering alternatives
  - Wanting to understand the views of other people
  - Fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning

(based on Facione, 1990, p. 13)

# Quantitative Results

- ▶ Using a paired t-test there was approximately a full point increase (1.06) in the average total of indicators per week comparing week 1 to week 11.
- ▶ The t-test provides plausible evidence (statistically significant) that the reflective practices increased occurrences of the affective dispositions for critical thinking in the participants.

# An Unexpected Outcome

Students reported they felt more *connected* when they explored disagreement than when they found easy agreement. They did not always agree, but they formed the foundation for dialogue.

# An Unexpected Outcome

Students felt connected to each other by their common search for meaning -- not primarily through conceptual agreement. It is a kind of respect, knowing that inner work must be behind everyone's journey. It is the beginning of trust.

# In Summary

- ▶ The power dynamic in the classroom may be balanced by strengthening students confidence in their underlying affective dispositions for critical thinking and connectedness. Both are essential to each other.
- ▶ Mindfulness is the foundation if it is applied introspectively and interactively. Use multiple ways to engage students introspectively and interactively -- build a sense of community.
- ▶ An essential objective is for students to be able to hold vital questions open, to explore multiple perspectives, and to understand each other through reflective interaction. This cultivates caring before making judgments and adopting beliefs.
- ▶ Be the role model as you engage students. Be the role model by engaging other faculty members in reflective interaction.