

The Contemplative Mind in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning



Patricia Owen-Smith

Education

"At a time when accelerated learning drives so much of what occurs in the classroom, . . . the author proposes to slow things down and to have students and teachers alike see the power and meaning in silent and slow reflection."

—HOWARD TINBERG, author of *Writing with Consequence: What Writing Does in the Disciplines*

"The book is beautifully and graciously written—a style that helps convey the book's invitation to readers: pay attention to each other's strengths and build on them in order to help fulfill the full range of educational outcomes long given voice in college and university mission statements and strategic plans."

—MARY TAYLOR HUBER, coauthor of *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact*

In *The Contemplative Mind in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Patricia Owen-Smith considers how contemplative practices may find a place in higher education. By creating a bridge between contemplative practices and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Owen-Smith brings awareness of contemplative pedagogy to a larger audience of college instructors, while also offering classroom models and outlining the ongoing challenges of both defining these practices and assessing their impact in education. Ultimately, Owen-Smith asserts that such practices have the potential to deepen a student's development and understanding of the self as a learner, knower, and citizen of the world.

PATRICIA OWEN-SMITH is Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Oxford College of Emory University. She is the founder and director of Oxford College's Women's Studies and Service-Learning programs.

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JENNIFER META ROBINSON, WHITNEY M. SCHLEGEL, and MARY TAYLOR HUBER, editors

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Patricia Owen-Smith

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SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Editors

Jennifer Meta Robinson

Whitney M. Schlegel

Mary Taylor Huber

*For my mother, Gilda Vilona Owen, whose contemplative
spirit guided me from the first moments of my life and
whose contemplative legacy remains forever in my heart*

*For my students, who indulged, guided, taught, and
accompanied me on this contemplative journey*

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THE CONTEMPLATIVE MIND
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Introduction

Envisioning the Contemplative Commons

How young we are when we start wondering about it all, the nature of the journey and of the final destination.

—Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*

THIS BOOK IS about the return to and understanding of the *contemplative* in higher education. Specifically, it is about the place of contemplative knowing and contemplative practices within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) framework. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) and SoTL share a commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning, and both seek to transform higher education. The philosophical underpinnings of the two movements reveal some similar historical junctures. Both call for radical shifts in thought and practice in an effort to recover important dimensions of learning and knowing that have been lost in higher education.

Lee Shulman, president emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, from which SoTL emerged, articulates a taxonomy, or what he calls a “table of learning” (2002). Fundamental to this taxonomy are “engagement and motivation,” “knowledge and understanding,” “performance and action,” “reflection and critique,” “judgment and design,” and “commitment and identity.” According to Shulman, this heuristic argues for “the mutually interdependent facets of an educated person’s life of mind, of emotion, and of action” (42). Shulman centers on “commitment” as a major kind of learning, one that “is both moving inward and connecting outward [and is] the highest attainment an educated person can achieve” (41).

Contemplative educators also focus on practices of mind and emotion that draw on the human capacity to know, specifically through stillness, awareness, attention, mindfulness, and reflection. A contemplative pedagogy is one that emphasizes “interior qualities of lifelong impact, such as self-knowledge and ethical cultivation” (Grace 2011, 99). Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush note that all contemplative practices “place the student in the center of his or her learning so the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world” (2014, 5–6). Therefore, both contemplative and SoTL educators prioritize the transformation of habits of the mind, deepening

of attention and insight, understanding of self as influenced by both interiority and exteriority, and commitment to and reflection on the experiential. They observe these factors as cardinal processes in teaching and learning.

Although contemplative and SoTL perspectives have important differences, they also have an obvious camaraderie and dance between them. Remarkably, they seem to disengage from one another despite our entering the world as students and learners who know and understand through contemplative means. Without hesitation we begin our lives with the ability to perceive, feel, experience, and explore the world with a contemplative lens. Young children sit, stare, see, question, ponder, think, and wonder. They are knowledge builders and scientists. Sadly, the majority of us begin to lose ourselves as knowers and learners at a very specific juncture in our developmental and educational journeys. Just as our contemplative selves emerge early in life, so do they leave us early in life, and just as our excitement and joy in learning and knowing begin in our first seconds of life, so do they often decline. Both developmental and educational psychologists remind us that in most cases these losses occur when we begin school and the alienation of the contemplative from teaching and learning begins.

Modern educational systems, from kindergarten through graduate school, impose a set of restrictions and mandates that disallow the flourishing of contemplation and deep learning. We are no longer given time and space for imagination, curiosity, and creativity and for the unfolding of what we have always had. The stillness and quiet necessary for thought development and deep intellectual inquiry become nonproductive, a wasting of time, and a squandering of resources. Students learn clearly that they may not stand in the gap of their experiences, pause, and consider. In learning these rules well, we lose our ability to attend mindfully and to reflect, or in the words of Robert Coles (1990, 335), to wonder about it all. These losses result in costs that are profound for both the individual and the world we inhabit. Many of our educational reformers argue that the higher education we know today seems to reflect this legacy of loss.

Contemplative knowing as intimately linked to learning was not always absent from our educational models and cultural histories. Deeply rooted in our wisdom and spiritual traditions, contemplative practices are definitive components in Buddhist and Taoist meditation, Hindu yoga forms, Christian contemplative prayer, Sufi metaphysical reflection, and the Jewish mystical school of thought, Kabbalah. Each of these focuses on an intentional and deepened awareness (Hart 2004). Contemplative methods also find expression in the words of many educational philosophers, poets, artists, and scientists who held tightly to their contemplative lens of childhood. Some historians point out that the Greek philosophers were the first to acknowledge contemplation as a way of knowing. Plato's dialogue and koans are but two of many such examples.

Contemplative modes were also central to the monastic schools and the ways of teaching and learning born in those schools. Augustine, Seneca, and Montaigne relied on forms of contemplative reflection. Like Plato, Augustine and Seneca used the oral