

3-2019

Building a Contemplative Research Writing Course: Theoretical Considerations, Practical Components, Challenges, and Adaptability

Nadia Zamin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs>

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University and Georgia Southern University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2019 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

Peer Reviewed

Published Citation

Zamin, Nadia Francine. "Building a Contemplative Research Writing Course: Theoretical Considerations, Practical Components, Challenges, and Adaptability." *Across the Disciplines* 16, no. 1 (2019): 16-27.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Building a Contemplative Research Writing Course: Theoretical Considerations, Practical Components, Challenges, and Adaptability

Nadia Francine Zamin, Fairfield University

Abstract: Responding to the call for the contemplative teaching of writing initiated by O'Reilly (1993) and extended by Kirsch (2008; 2009), Kroll (2013), Kroll (2008), Wenger (2015), and Harrison (2012), among others, this article explores the theoretical considerations, practical components, challenges, and adaptability involved in teaching a contemplative research writing course. This article takes up the theoretical considerations of teaching a contemplative research writing course by examining the growing need for contemplative writing as a practice of mindfulness in an increasingly de-selfed academic culture (Hurlbert, 2012). Relatedly, this article examines the challenges involved when a pedagogy makes attendant assumptions about students, knowledge creation, the role of mindfulness in higher education, and the holistic decentering of the classroom space. Concerning the practical components of a contemplative research writing course, this article describes the central roles of contemplative silence (Kirsch, 2009) and freewriting, sustained inquiry writing projects, stable writing groups, and cycles of revision and reflection. Following this, this article takes up the challenges often engendered by the deployment of contemplative pedagogies in the context of higher education. Finally, this article describes the use of this course as a model for fostering writers' engagement with their own disciplinary knowledge that is adaptable for sustained writing courses across the disciplines.

Introduction

Writing about the connections between learners' spiritual and secular education and their everyday lives, Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) asked "What is the use...if it does not have anything to do with our daily lives?" (p. 116). Similarly, Owens (2001) has encouraged Composition pedagogues to root the writing class in the "local, necessary knowledge" that is "absolutely crucial to [students'] intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival" (p. 7). Nhat Hanh and Owens have asked us to consider how we might, through our valued ways of spending time (teaching, walking, writing, cooking), find crucial, compassionate, and critically aware strategies for navigating our society and daily life. The risks of not pursuing a more contemplative course in higher education are clear: We have reached a critical juncture and are in danger of fulfilling Blitz and Hurlbert's (1998) dark prophecy where the delicate balance between our violent cultural contexts and our humanitarian mission as educators has begun to tip, where we face record-setting levels of social violence and distrust, and where opportunities for peacemaking are

Across the Disciplines
A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

wac.colostate.edu/atd
ISSN 554-8244

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University and Georgia Southern University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2019 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

made rare and more sacred for their rarity. However, all is not yet lost; for though Kirsch (2008) has accurately noted that “institutional and peer pressure do not encourage much experimental – and experiential – teaching and learning” (p. 8), the existence of this special issue indicates, at least to this researcher, that a sea change is coming to the larger university writing context and that, indeed, it has already begun within the field of Composition.

Responding to both this violent exigency and the call for the contemplative teaching of writing initiated by O’Reilly (1993) and extended by Blitz and Hurlbert (1998), Owens (2001), Kirsch (2008; 2009), Kroll (2013), Kroll (2008), Wenger (2015), and Harrison (2012), among others, this article explores the theoretical considerations, practical components, challenges, and adaptability involved in teaching a contemplative research writing course, where both the specific activities involved in research writing and the larger course framing are rooted in self-awareness and compassion for the self and others, and are present-centered and non-judgmental in nature (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 6). Guided by the *koan*, or core question, *How would it change the experiences of our students if we taught to maintain a connection between their academic and rich interior lives?*, this course is rooted in writers’ own inquiry, their supported and evolving awareness of their own thought and writing processes, and the fostering of writers’ compassionate and non-fixing (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 29) stance toward those inner processes. Throughout this course, writers design and pursue research trajectories that stem from issues and questions that are personal and meaningful to them; alongside practices that are easily identified components of most source-based or research writing courses, students in this course engage in contemplative silence, freewriting, non-attachment from views, non-fixing metacognitive thinking, and non-judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 29). Taken together, these additional practices constitute a turn toward a contemplative research writing course, or, a course that supports rigorous self-examination, compassionate self-awareness, and peaceable group engagement through scaffolded individual and group intellectual and composing activities.

This article takes up the theoretical considerations of teaching a contemplative research writing course by examining the growing need for contemplative writing as a practice of mindfulness in an academic culture in which the increase of pay-per-credit policies and underwhelming official responses to incidences of racism have led to campus environments rife with mistrust, closed communication, and reactivity (Hurlbert, 2012). Relatedly, this article explores the challenges involved when a pedagogy makes attendant assumptions about students, knowledge creation, and the holistic decentering of the classroom space, all within context of the larger role of mindfulness in higher education. Concerning the practical components of a contemplative research writing course, this article describes the central roles of contemplative silence (Kirsch, 2009) and freewriting, sustained inquiry writing projects, stable writing groups, and reflection, as well as exploration, rhetorical genre-based awareness, and inductive thinking, in the fostering of writers’ self-awareness, self-compassion, and mindfulness. Following this is a discussion of the challenges that often arise in the face of contemplative pedagogies, beginning with challenges from students and concluding with the challenges posed by the instructor themselves. Though the present course is situated in the context of an upper division research writing course that attends to the specific goals of a First Year Composition course sequence, this article describes the use of this course as a model for fostering writers’ engagement with their own disciplinary knowledge that can be adapted for any sustained writing course across the disciplines. Finally, though the terms “contemplative” and “mindful” are often associated with distinct traditions by practitioners (where “contemplative” is a term frequently employed in Western scholarly contexts to describe the more traditionally spiritual contexts of “mindfulness” practices (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011; O’Reilly, 1998; Wenger, 2015; Kirsch, 2008, 2009)), these terms are used largely interchangeably here as a result of this researcher’s near-concurrent experiences of the Western scholarly and more traditionally spiritual contexts.

Theoretical Considerations

In order to begin to construct a contemplative research writing course, it is vital to consider the theoretical and philosophical considerations inherent in such an undertaking; chief among them are the growing need for more widespread contemplative pedagogies, the holistic decentering of the classroom space, and the assumptions that such pedagogies make about students and knowledge creation.

The role of contemplative practices in higher education. In many ways, we are teaching and writing in a time of crisis. Teen and young adult rates of depression are at dangerously high levels (Twenge, 2017); gun violence has reached culturally epidemic proportions (Green, Horel, & Papachristos, 2017); cultural and racial tensions have escalated to the point of widespread conflict (Brownstein, 2017); and, more anecdotally, we are encountering undergraduate students who express noticeably increased levels of anxiety, depressive behavior, and fear for their future. It is into this burgeoning climate of fear and distrust that contemplative pedagogies (here, contemplative research writing courses) enter with a Herculean task: To center and recompose ourselves and our students as rigorous, aware, and compassionate researchers and writers who operate within larger and smaller circles of joy and suffering (Hurlbert, 2012) by infusing our pedagogies with the self-healing orientations of non-attachment from views, non-fixing, and non-judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 29). Within the context of higher education, these practices create space in the classroom for writers to “come to terms with things as they are” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 29) with self-agency, compassion, and awareness while lessening the imperatives to attach identity to, judge, or “fix” objects, individuals, or outcomes.

Within these larger and smaller contexts, contemplative research writing courses “represent...a hopeful alternative” (Wenger, 2015, p. 13) to what are, at best, distancing and, at worst, dehumanizing practices that too often characterize our Composition classrooms, including compulsory writing topics and uninvested (or for-the-instructor) revision activities (Hurlbert, 2012; O’Reilly, 1993). As a pedagogy that echoes Kirsch’s (2008) approach, the contemplative research writing course forwarded here meets students where they are and, through regular engagement with grounding and compassionate writing and classroom practices, “enables students to become more willing to engage with the complex social, cultural, and political issues of our time” (p. 2) by equipping them with intellectual and composing-based tools with which they may approach, interpret, assess, contextualize, and engage complexity.

The holistic decentering of the classroom space. Similar to the concerns about maintaining a professional ethos that are often experienced by pedagogues in their first engagements with contemplative pedagogies (discussed in more detail below), the holistic decentering of the classroom space requires an analogous and conscious practice of awareness; as Mary Rose O’Reilly put it:

When I was a young teacher, I used to think the student-centered classroom was predicated on a diffusion of power. As a pacifist, I was eager to give it away. I found this to be dangerous and confusing to students. Whether we like it or not as teachers, we have inherited our father’s light saber, and we have to learn how to use it. The worst thing we can do is pretend we don’t have power. (O’Reilly, 1993, p. 70-71)

The contemplative research writing course forwarded here is similarly predicated on a careful and critical awareness of the role of the instructor in this context. To practice this awareness more fully, it can be helpful for pedagogues to consider the following epistemological questions about their pedagogical choices: *What is my (course) goal for engaging in contemplative pedagogies? What do I believe about the level of expertise and ability that students bring with them to the research writing course? What is the (possible) role of that existing expertise and ability? What, if any, role do students’ own individual concerns and contexts play in the deployment of contemplative pedagogies?* While each pedagogue’s responses to these questions will vary, contemplative research writing courses depends on instructors’ acknowledged

awareness of their beliefs concerning students and knowledge creation, as well as a further commitment to the many possibilities therein. Particularly for faculty who are new to contemplative pedagogies and who would like, for various reasons, to include contemplative practices in their research writing courses, it is useful to engage both in local meditative and contemplative communities that explore general and interpersonal awarenesses, as well as with seminal scholarly texts that consider mindful and contemplative practices in the context of higher education (including Barbezat and Bush's (2014) *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*). Put more simply, an important component in any faculty member's engagement with contemplative pedagogies is their own willingness to practice reflection, awareness, and compassion in their engagement with students.

Practical Components

The practical components of the contemplative research writing course forwarded here are rooted in in-class practices and pedagogical moves that, when practiced consistently and taken together, support writers' self-awareness, self-compassion, and mindfulness. When supported by the more familiar practices of rhetorical genre-based awareness and inductive thinking, in-class practices of contemplative silence (as Kirsch (2009) envisioned it) and freewriting, sustained inquiry writing projects, stable writing groups, and regular cycles of revision and reflection are helpful in fostering an environment of non-attachment, non-fixing, non-judgment, and contemplation in the writing classroom. Of particular note is that while it may suit the temperament and ethos of some contemplative pedagogues to ground the research writing course explicitly and overtly in such contemplative traditions as Buddhist *lovingkindness* (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 8) or Quaker listening (O'Reilley, 1998), the contemplative components of the research writing course presented here are implicit in the activities, assignments, and language that constitute the course and each practice is framed for students as one of a number of strategies for engaging in the composing process. Said another way, contemplative practices usefully *underwrite* this course by informing the methods of aware and compassionate instructor-student communication, written feedback on drafts, and oral feedback in individual conferences, as well as the peaceable and compassionate couching of in-class composing and group activities as opportunities to listen and be listened to. Additionally, though these practices should be thought to work and fit together, as would the members of a basketball team or a bustling restaurant kitchen, it is helpful when discussing the contemplative research writing course to first examine them individually.

Contemplative silence and freewriting. Based in both Kirsch's (2009) espousal of the generative capacities of regular periods of silence in the classroom and Nhat Hanh's (1987) earlier theorizing that "meditation is not an escape from society...meditation is to equip oneself with the capacity to reintegrate with society" (p. 53), students practice contemplative silence and freewriting in this contemplative research writing course with the goal of tuning-in to themselves and each other by transitioning from the details and events that are exterior to the class and grounding their attention in the present class meeting. Observed in the first ten minutes of class, a period of contemplative silence and freewriting is usefully guided by generative freewriting prompts that are related to the theme of the course or the specific piece of inquiry currently being undertaken by students. A sample of these prompts is detailed in Table 1 (below).

As Table 1 indicates, freewriting prompts begin with generation and brainstorming in mind and graduate to differently-genred prompts and prompts that require increasing introspection and reflection as the semester progresses, where the basic instruction for freewriting echoes the wisdom of Macrorie (1976): to write and keep writing for the duration of the period without self-editing or stopping. However, the prompts detailed in Table 1 differ from traditional wisdom concerning freewriting prompts in a few important ways: Couching within a larger classroom context of non-attachment from views, non-fixing, and non-judgment, these prompts are conducive to the creation of a contemplative environment by supporting writers' consideration, examination, and contextualization of thoughts, processes, objects,

individuals, and outcomes without the added instructions of predicting, altering, or judging them (this is additionally illustrated in the frequent use of present-tense in the freewriting prompts). The instruction to engage with subjects in a simplified and present-centered (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 6) way alleviates the need to oppressively criticize, negate, or debase (O'Reilley, 1993; Kirsch, 2008; Hurlbert, 2012).

Table 1: Freewriting Prompts (Organized During a Semester)

<p>Early-semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe three realistic goals you would like to achieve this semester. • Complete this thought: “I wish I spent more time...” • What are the most important questions in your life right now? • What do you need to say that you haven’t said yet? To whom do you need to say this?
<p>Mid-semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever experienced something that just could not be logically explained? • Describe one thing in your life that is simple and one that thing that is complex. • What do you know is true?
<p>Late-semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe a time when you said “no.” • How can you help? • List 25 things that you love about yourself. • What was the last thing that you read, heard, or saw that gave you hope? • Describe the last time you felt proud of yourself. • Consider your goals from the beginning of the semester. What do you know now that you didn’t then? What have you learned? What more do you have to learn?

Concerning the integration of these prompts as regular and supportive of larger classroom practice, assignment handouts related to the sustained inquiry project (discussed at length below) and other class assignments should, as much as possible, refer to and call upon students’ thinking from the period of contemplative silence and freewriting. Additionally, it is useful to use the period of contemplative silence and freewriting to begin students’ thinking on a topic directly related to a day’s lesson and to, as much as is possible, guarantee students that the content of their freewriting will always be private until and unless they choose to share it; practicing the former makes concrete for students the connection between contemplation and daily classroom practices, while the latter fosters an environment of safety within which students may explore and experiment.

As an instructor, it is important to validate students’ time spent in contemplative silence and freewriting by developing habits and guidelines surrounding the practice (particularly in educational contexts in which silence and contemplation may be less welcome, these validating habits and guidelines can make the difference between a successful practice and a failed and abandoned one). First, it is helpful to model this practice for students; that is, when students see their instructor set aside board marker and mouse in favor of silence and contemplative writing, students themselves are more likely to both begin to write and continue writing for the duration. It is also helpful to indicate that a period of contemplative silence and freewriting has a definite beginning and end within the contexts of the class (a bounded time-period), as well as that it is a period of time that is protected. A statement of the sort that follows can be useful in this endeavor:

If you arrive late (or during the period of contemplative silence and freewriting), you are kindly asked to remain in the hall until the period of contemplative silence and freewriting has concluded, at which time, I will open the door and invite you to join the class. This policy is not

meant as a punishment for tardiness, but rather it is designed to protect and support the contemplative experiences of on-time students.

Particularly when freewriting prompts explicitly serve to develop students' thinking in relation to sustained inquiry projects, students' tend to view this time as valuable for their individual thinking and make efforts to attend class on time in order not to miss a prompt.

Sustained inquiry writing projects. Modeled on Hurlbert's (2012) approach to the First Year Composition course, the major writing project in a contemplative research writing course is the Sustained Inquiry Writing Project (also called the 'Research Book'). Guided by students' own meaningful questions and individual concerns (this researcher includes the following statement in their syllabus: "Conduct real research on a topic that really matters to you!"), Research Books explore topics of personal significance from the brainstorming stage, through the proposal, research, and conclusion stages, and conclude with reflection. Following exposure to and exploration of the early-semester freewriting prompts, activities directly related to the Research Book begin approximately one-quarter of the way into the semester. The following list of the activities involved in the Research Book represents an easily adapted place to begin and can be included in any early statement describing the sustained inquiry writing project:

1. Select a topic for research.
2. Gather background information on your topic.
3. Develop a manageable research question concerning what you wish to learn about your topic and select an appropriate process through which to investigate your research question.
4. Pursue a research path in order to address your research question.
5. Incorporate existing research and scholarship into your own composing/research process.
6. Draw conclusions and make claims about your research, findings, and research question.
7. Share your new knowledge in a local or online community.
8. Reflect upon your experiences of pursuing the line of inquiry laid out in your Research Proposal.

Though directions and guiding questions for Research Books are often sourced from students' own freewriting, additional guidance can be given concerning prompts for the project, including that students may conduct an intervention study (in which they track or change a practice in their lives), embark on a personal research journey (where they engage with a larger philosophical question on an individual level), or engage in 'how to' research (where they develop an action plan regarding an area or practice of concern to them). More often than not, however, the questions that arise from students' freewriting lend themselves naturally to one of these research trajectories, and so additional guidance often proves unnecessary. Regularly and consistently contextualizing research as a fluid and experimental process in which 'mistakes aren't fatal, they're just a chance to look at it in new ways' encourages students to release into the surprises that can occur during the research process and to not become overly attached to a single question or outcome (Nhat Hanh, 1987). Students' engagement with the listed activities is usefully scaffolded and supported throughout the latter three-quarters of the course through a combination of modeling by the instructor, experimentation by stable writing groups (detailed below), and large group discussion concerning the use and adaptation of research oriented genre- and discourse community-based research writing conventions and expectations.

As is implied by the list above, sustained inquiry writing projects consist of genre components that are rooted in research processes that should be familiar to both instructors and more advanced academic writers: Steps 1-3 are easily constituent of proposal writing; step 4 corresponds with a research methodology; step 5 corresponds with the annotated bibliography; step 6 corresponds with a discussion of findings and conclusions; step 7 corresponds with a discussion of the larger implications of the current research; and step 8 signifies the more familiar rhetorical move of holistic end-of-term reflection. The parsing out of due dates that is encouraged by these steps, combined with the emphasis on in-process

reflection and revision (discussed below) and the non-attaching, non-fixing, and non-judging orientations practiced throughout the course, encourages students to engage more fully with each step of the research writing process as they encounter it, allowing them to remain more “present-centered” (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 6).

Stable writing groups. Rooted in the theories of writing groups forwarded by Cuthbert and Spark (2008) and Hurlbert (2012), a contemplative research writing class makes effective use of regular, stable peer writing groups as a means of supporting processes of exploration, experimentation, idea generation, feedback, and revision that are compassionate, engage in productive critique, and aware. Formed by the instructor following the submission of Research Proposals and guided by broad, regular, and consistent use of non-fixing and non-judging language (both by the instructor to the groups and by the groups via guiding handouts and instructions), students are placed in writing groups of four to six people based on the theme of their individual research question or their expected method of inquiry. Particularly in the former case, students are able to benefit from the adage that there is ‘safety in numbers’ and that they may feel free to explore their often intimately personal research projects within the safety of a consistent group of people who are themselves engaged in potentially intimate personal research. Similarly, writing groups that are focused, for example, around research into the prevention of procrastination or that are focused on the management of health issues are supported in their inquiry by like-interested peers. Through the handouts that guide the giving of peer feedback, instructions for writing group activities, and the use of writing groups as informing larger class discussion, the instructor may contextualize writing groups as decentered, compassionate, and non-competitive communities-within-a-community that are concerned with the intellectual and writerly growth and wellbeing of all members and to which all members may valuably contribute.

Writing groups also serve some of the more traditional purposes of small groups in the Composition course: writing group members give and receive feedback to each other’s drafts, support each other in ‘troubleshooting’ workshops (wherein specific writerly issues are addressed within and across writing groups), and engage each other’s writing directly through the composition of forwards for each other’s Research Books. By the end of term, students have developed an awareness of their writing group members’ research projects that is nearly as keen as their awareness of their own and, in doing so, are able to regularly engage in the much-needed practices of compassionate listening and response by listening to and engaging with each other’s research rigorously, interrogatively, and non-judgmentally.

Revision and reflection as contemplative activities. Within the context of the sustained inquiry writing project, ample opportunities for revision and reflection exist. Echoing the ongoing cycles of reflection and internal revision that occur between moments in a contemplative practice (Wenger, 2015), the spaces between drafting-and-due date and feedback-and-resubmission exist as opportunities in the contemplative research writing course for students to assess the rhetorical choices and moves that they have made as researchers and to, without judgment or attachment (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Nhat Hanh, 1987), contextualize their choices and moves within the larger context of their research journey. In more traditional Composition terms, these moments are opportunities for students to reflect on the rhetorical efficacy of their texts, their relation to their audience, and their attention to outside sources, conventions of style, and clearly expressed and supported purpose – efforts that can be supported with the employment of freewriting prompts that require assessment-without-judgment and writing group feedback that is at once compassionate and holistic in nature. In contemplative terms, these moments are re-framed with writers as distinct opportunities to mindfully examine the path of the research with an eye to present-centered observation and productively critical assessment rather than devaluing self-judgment, as well as to sit with the difficulty and discomfort that often characterize feedback and re-envisioning.

Challenges

Among their other attributes, contemplative pedagogies often challenge commonly-held conceptions about higher education, including orientations that value of competition, ‘don’t just sit there, do something’ approaches, judgment, and deficit thinking (about the self and others); contemplative pedagogies forward non-attachment, non-fixing, and non-judging as radically different and staggeringly simple alternatives for peaceable, rigorous, and largely decentered higher education. However, an unavoidable reality of engaging in pedagogies that challenge established mechanisms of dominance and power-relations (Hurlbert, 2012; O’Reilly, 1993) is that there will, and often from unexpected directions, be challenges. When espousing pedagogical moves that, implicitly or explicitly, forward contemplative practices, these challenges may come from students, mentors, or peers; some of these challenges will be expressed through compassionate language by individuals who are concerned with the efficacy of contemplative pedagogy, while other challenges may be abrupt, rude, or condescending. Yet another source of challenge is the instructor themselves, who may harbor concerns or hesitations about their own ethos in espousing a contemplative pedagogy. And while all of these challenges are possible, it is also possible to engage with each of them compassionately and with awareness; it is helpful when considering such a process of engagement to consider each challenge individually.

Challenges from students. The most obvious and potentially vehement source of challenge when designing and teaching a contemplative research writing course is the imagined or actual student. The practices and habits that constitute a contemplative research writing course challenge students who have long been trained to “do school” (and who, by the time they reach an upper division research writing class, have been similarly trained to “do college”) (Pope, 2001, p. 30). Silence, contemplation, non-attaching, non-fixing, non-judgment, introspection, and reflective freewriting are intellectually and emotionally rigorous practices and it is these practices about which students express the most fervent concerns in the beginning portions of the semester (it is helpful to note, however, that the ‘unusual’ practices of contemplative silence and freewriting are among those that tend to stand out the most in students reflections at the end of a semester of a contemplative research writing course, and that it is these practices that most often appear in the ‘favorable’ column of students’ evaluations of the course). To foster an environment in which students are receptive to potentially-unfamiliar contemplative practices, instructors may usefully, though implicitly, employ the practices and activities detailed above and ask their class periodically about their experiences of or resistances to the practices, share their own experiences of and challenges with the practices, and adapt the practices to fit the needs of the group (i.e., play student-chosen music during the period of contemplation and freewriting if such would be supportive of students’ writing). Of key importance here is to introduce the contemplative practices into the research writing course and allow students to experience these practices in their own ways – to engage with and grow into these practices in their own time and on their own terms – with an understanding that the personal (here, non-writing related) outcomes of students’ individual research journeys are out of instructors’ control. In doing so, contemplative research writing pedagogues make space for their students to organically experience both the pedagogy and their own unique growth and resistance processes.

Challenges from mentors and peers. The most compassionately phrased and potentially condescending challenges to a contemplative research writing course will often come from well-meaning mentors and curious-yet-doubtful peers. Kirsch (2008) eloquently addressed this challenge and begins to move the conversation in a direction of growth:

Some would say that this approach to teaching writing encourages navel-gazing and lacks focus and rigor. To that concern I respond by pointing out that deep engagement, serious thinking, and rigorous research most often emerge when we write about topics to which we have a strong, personal connection. (p. 6)

Through its explicit grounding in instructors' own reflection, awareness, and compassion, the deployment of the contemplative research writing course presented here is particularly supportive of students' "deep engagement" (Kirsch, 2008, p. 6) and critical thinking in that invites pedagogues to engage with students (through both written and verbal forms of feedback and assessment) with language that fosters flexible, rigorous, present-centered, and growth-oriented mindsets (Dweck, 2014). (In this approach, even assigned grades and evaluative feedback may be reframed as snapshots of where students' writing is *right now* and as an identification of areas for growth and development.) And similar to the above discussion of challenges that this pedagogy may invite from students, Kirsch has identified the microaggressive nature that preoccupies much of the criticism about a contemplative research writing class; that a pedagogy may not be rigorous, purposeful, *and* contemplative. O'Reilley (1993) highlighted another aspect of the 'lack of rigor' argument against contemplative pedagogies:

Where Macrorie (and I and those of our ilk) may be faulted is in our underlying assumption that *it is a good thing* to encourage an expression of the inner world...It's fair to say, too, that those of us who are attracted to these philosophies probably share an interest in both personal liberation and sympathetic identification with other people. (p. 45)

Usefully, Kirsch and O'Reilley have suggested that the 'classroom as therapy' criticism, while not without relevance, is not the most salient feature of contemplative writing courses; rather, it is the practice of making purposeful rhetorical choices and engaging with members of the classroom community from a compassionate and non-fixing orientation on the individual level of their often intimate concerns that is the true value of such a course.

Challenges from the self. Easily the most interesting and potentially fertile challenge to a contemplative research writing course will come from the instructor themselves. A research writing course that is structured around the guiding philosophical valuation of "present-centered" and "non-judgmental" (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 6) pedagogical choices is one that invites possibilities that are exciting for some and terrifying for others. The pedagogue who engages in contemplative pedagogical practices may encounter topics that they were neither expecting nor consciously prepared for. Kirsch (2008) noted this when she acknowledged, "I would not, could not, presume to know what voices—and visions—will emerge, what students will reveal of themselves" (p. 6). Given the realms of suffering and joy experienced by our students *before* they enter our classes (Hurlbert, 2012), the possibilities for what may come out of their writing minds (Wenger, 2015) while present in our classes are nearly endless. However, into this chaos of possibility, O'Reilley (1993) has offered this ageless wisdom:

Most of the healing that goes on in the English class (and maybe everywhere) is self-healing. The teacher's job is not so much to counsel as to provide an atmosphere of safety and to keep out of the way of the process. (p. 47)

If contemplative pedagogues can commit to the same practices of in-the-moment awareness and healthful nonattachment that they encourage their students to find, they will enable themselves to more fully and directly engage with their students at the level of their daily, and often closely-held, writerly concerns. And if, in their teaching practices, contemplative pedagogues can suspend their preexisting conceptions of their own rigorous ethos and practice the same art of letting go and releasing of the instinct to micromanage that is so vital to, for example, the revision process or the process of manuscript submission, they may encounter the same kinds of surprise and growth that they hope for in their students.

Adaptability

The contemplative research writing course forwarded here is designed to suit a context in which prescribed learning outcomes require that students exiting the course should, among other things, be able to critically engage with outside sources, pursue a sustained research project, correctly and accurately incorporate outside sources into their own texts, and engage in critically aware meta-level reflection on their composing and research processes. And so it is useful to note that though the present course is situated in the specific context of an upper division research writing course that attends to the specific goals of a First Year Composition course sequence that is housed in an English Department, the theoretical considerations and practical components detailed above are easily adapted for sustained writing courses across the disciplines. When taken as a model that fosters students' engagement with their own academic or disciplinary contexts, this approach to the contemplative research writing class lends itself to revision of the theme of the sustained inquiry project. When a consideration of students' own disciplinary knowledge is called for, both the sustained inquiry project and the composition of writing groups can be tailored to support a more specific, structured process of inquiry. If, for example, community service and social justice are required components of a research writing course, greater attention and time can be given to the portion of the sustained inquiry project that instructs students to "share your new knowledge in a local or online community" in service of the freewriting prompt "How can you help?" Similarly, freewriting prompts may be adjusted to focus writers' attention on specific facets of their experience or thinking (i.e., an exploration of the intersections between local space and individual engagement in an environmental sciences course). The key to the process of adapting the contemplative research writing course detailed here is that the level and extent of adaptation is limited only by an instructor's desire to adapt it to a new context, keeping in mind the compassionate, non-fixing, present-centered, and non-judgmental intentions in which such contemplative practices are based (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3).

Conclusion

In these ways, contemplative research writing classrooms are, as O'Reilly (1993) has noted, "a practice" rather than a "goal" (p. 74). Consistent with the non-attaching orientation of the course (whereby, for example, students' identities and self-worth are purposefully and consciously detached from the nature or number of revisions requested), the contemplative research writing class forwarded here is less a final or stable outcome than it is an active process that lives within the daily pedagogical choices and individual engagements that range from non-judgment on the classroom-wide scale to minute non-fixing conference interactions and is dependent upon the commitment and pedagogical flexibility of the instructor. Silence or music at the start of the class? Freewriting or an immediately begun lesson? Individually meaningful research projects or discourse community analyses? All of these choices represent valid and purposeful options that, with an engaged pedagogue, could be supported and developed into valuable and memorable classroom experiences. The practice of choosing the contemplative course, however, requires daily commitment and the admission that things may not always run expectedly or comfortably, that uncertainty is not only acceptable but that is a valuable part of the practice, and that challenging the status quo of competition, deficit thinking, and a fixing orientation with non-attachment, non-fixing, and non-judgment is a worthy step toward peaceable education.

References

- Barbezat, Daniel P., & Bush, Mirabai. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Blitz, Michael, & Hurlbert, Claude M. (1998). *Letters for the living: Teaching writing in a violent age*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Brownstein, Ronald. (2017, September 14). America's "racial generation gap" is starting to shrink. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/09/trump-race-demographics/539730/>
- Cuthbert, Denise, & Spark, Ceridwen. (2008). Getting a GRiP: Examining the outcomes of a pilot program to support graduate research students in writing for publication. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1), 77-88.
- Dweck, Carol. (2014). The power of believing that you can improve. *TED Talks*. Video retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve?language=en#t-608953
- Green, Ben, Horel, Thibaut, & Papachristos, Andrew V. (2017). Modeling contagion through social networks to explain and predict gunshot violence in Chicago, 2006 to 2014. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 177(3): 326–333.
- Harrison, Marlene Elliot. (2012). The power of 'no': Buddhist mindfulness and the teaching of composition. *Writing on the Edge*, 22(2), 36-46.
- Hurlbert, Claude. (2012). *National healing: Race, state, and the teaching of composition*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. (2011). Some reflections on the origins, of MBSR, skillful means, and the trouble with maps. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 281-306.
- Kirsch, Gesa E. (2008). Creating spaces for listening, learning, and sustaining the inner lives of students. *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, 14, 56-67.
- Kirsch, Gesa E. (2009). Perspectives: From introspection to action: Connecting spirituality and civic engagement. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), W1-W15.
- Kroll, Barry M. (2013). *The open hand: Arguing as an art of peace*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press.
- Kroll, Keith. (2008). On paying attention: Flagpoles, mindfulness, and teaching writing. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 36(1), 69-78.
- Macrorie, Ken. (1976). *Telling writing* (3rd ed.). Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. (1987). *Being Peace*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- O'Reilley, Mary Rose. (1993). *The peaceable classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- O'Reilley, Mary Rose. (1998). *Radical presence: Teaching as contemplative practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Owens, Derek. (2001). *Composition and sustainability: Teaching for a threatened generation*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English
- Pope, Denise Clark. (2001). *Doing school: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Twenge, Jean M. (2017, September). Have smartphones destroyed a generation? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>
- Wegner, Christy I. (2015). *Yoga minds, writing bodies: Contemplative writing pedagogy*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
- Williams, J. Mark G., & Kabat-Zinn, Jon. (2011). Mindfulness: Diverse perspectives on its meaning, origins, and multiple applications at the intersection of science and dharma. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 1-18.

Contact Information

Nadia Francine Zamin
 Assistant Professor of the Practice
 Department of English/Core Writing
 Fairfield University
 1073 North Benson Road
 Fairfield, Connecticut 06824
Email: nzamin@fairfield.edu

Complete APA Citation

Zamin, Nadia Francine. (2019, March 31). Building a contemplative research writing course: Theoretical considerations, practical components, challenges, and adaptability. [Special issue on contemplative

writing across the disciplines.] *Across the Disciplines*, 16(1), 16-27. Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/contemplative/zamin2019.pdf>