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Michelle M. Francl
Bryn Mawr College

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To find fruit: A contemplative assessment of a 360 experience

Michelle M. Franci

“We gleaned the trees in the first grove, checking for what had been missed in the first picking. I thought of the number of times I had asked students what they had gleaned from a reading, without any real concept of how painstaking that is, or how much you might have to search to find a bit of fruit.

So many of the rules of life for contemplatives, drawing on [5th century Christian abbot] Benedict's early model, specify a time for physical work in addition to the work of contemplation, and many orders do agricultural work, or make bread or jam. The rhythm and pace of the work, and the discomfort of it -- the sun is hot, the lime oils are rough on the skin, the thorns prick and the small scissors are sharp enough to cut unwary fingers -- are an interesting comparison to the work of meditation. Which can have its own discomforts, as well as rhythm and pace.” 10/6/11 MF



In the fall of 2011, three faculty and eleven students began a semester-long exploration of contemplative traditions from the perspectives of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and modern science. Over the course of the semester we logged more than 15,000 miles, spending more than 600 hours together. The

opening excerpt was written after we spent a morning picking limes in a small orchard in a mountain village in rural Japan, about a third of the way through the term. The image of students and faculty gleaning a field together proved to be an enduring one for me as I assessed our work through the semester.

16th century Basque contemplative Ignatius López de Loyola encouraged a meditative gleaned of one's everyday experiences.[1] López de Loyola's approach begins with broad reflections, then revisits material again and again, each time with a sharper eye. He advocates for interspersing these ever deepening reflections with conversations with someone who has expertise in the ground being covered, but who does not have a stake in a particular outcome — an impartial expert. The intention of López de Loyola's set of repeating contemplations and consultations is not to produce an ever larger harvest of insights, but rather to winnow down the reflection to find a few significant pieces of fruit that might have been overlooked in the bustle of the everyday.

This essay uses López de Loyola's frame to glean some fruitful insights regarding our linked set of courses. Praise Agu, a student consultant from Bryn Mawr College's Teaching Learning Initiative (TLI), served as our impartial expert and sounding board. Reflections written during the semester by a faculty member and students are sharpened in the light of the conversations and reflections done with and by Praise.

Praise's key role in the process for faculty was to provide for us a consistent call to listen to and integrate into our assessment and practice the advice students would offer to their peers. It helps me be able to articulate to future groups of students, not only my own approach to a particular course, but also the perspectives of a wide range of their peers. I think this is particularly critical when courses are new, or offered infrequently, as the pool of peer wisdom is smaller and less available to students.

This iterative reflection process left us with a few sharply focussed and well-sifted pieces of advice we can use as we begin to plan to offer the course again.

The 360 structure

Our courses were offered as part of Bryn Mawr College's 360 program, which brings together faculty and small groups of students (less than 20) to explore topics from multiple scholarly perspectives. The core of our Contemplative Traditions 360 consisted of three courses — The History and Rhetoric of Buddhist Meditation, Silent Spaces: A History of Contemplation in the West, and Listening to Mind and Body: The Psychology of Mindfulness — and what we hoped were a set of well-integrated field experiences, including weekly mindfulness training drawing upon MBSR techniques (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction)[2] and travel to a Christian monastery as well as two weeks in Japan. Students rounded out their work for the semester with a complimentary course, such as Japanese language, or an independent study project that bridged two or more of the 360 courses. More details on the course can be found posted on the course website.[3]

Fostering ongoing reflection

During the semester, students reflected regularly on their experiences in a journal format, and one of the three faculty members (MF)[4] kept an online set of reflections. There were several opportunities outside of the regular class times for structured conversations among the entire group of faculty and students to process particular aspects of the work. The three faculty members met regularly to reflect on the course structure and progress.



Near the end of the term, we were joined by our TLI consultant, Praise at two of these meetings. Our process of evaluation began with a conversation between the Contemplative Traditions 360 faculty and the faculty from an upcoming 360, which Praise was a part of as well. Based on our conversations and some of the questions that were raised at the meeting with the upcoming faculty, the four of us produced an end of semester questionnaire for students to complete, and a set of questions for Praise to use in facilitating a reflective conversation with the students. Praise gathered the student responses to the written survey and from the facilitated conversation into a single document.

What did we hope to learn?

The complexity and intensity of the 360 posed many challenges to students and faculty both. As our reflections with Praise proceeded, the three faculty members found we were most interested in the integration of the various components: courses, field experiences, readings, travel. How could we weave material from such diverse sources as 21st century neuroscientists, 13th century Japanese monks and 4th century desert hermits without it becoming a cacophony of voices? How could we maintain strong links between the academic experiences in the three courses? Would the field components be integral to the scholarly work, or peripheral experiences? How could we keep the scholarly work of the course moving smoothly through multiple trips and a changing schedule?



This had obviously been an ongoing concern of the course instructors throughout our planning for the course, but once things were underway, it became harder to step back and see what was working and what was not amidst the daily press of time. Our conversations with Praise helped me regain some of the larger perspective on the ways in which integration happened - the structures we had created and but also the unanticipated structures that arose. Working with someone who was not intimately familiar with the development and structure of the course widened our vision about how the courses and the field work interlaced with each other. For example, letting Praise make the first draft of the questions I suspect kept us from focussing only on the structures we had created.

Listening to each other, to the voices of students in their contemporary reflections, a set of questions for Praise to use with the students gradually emerged, shaped around the connections between the courses and the integration of the outside experiences and travel into the academic work. We sought not only advice of the students to the faculty, but as a result of engaging in this work with Praise and of the faculty with the TLI program more generally, explicitly requested that students offer advice to their peers who might take such a course.

What did we learn about the ways in which the courses are connected?

“Yesterday we continued to learn about Buddhist meditation, spending two sessions in the afternoon with Hideo, the young abbot of a nearby temple (there are 117 in town). We anointed our hands with incense, to remind us to do our best ... then settled into a beautiful hall. We had a wide-ranging conversation with him, including a good discussion of posture and gesture in meditation (does it matter where your hands are, should you move if you are uncomfortable? Is there a Buddhist equivalent of the misericord - a small ledge that choir monks [in the Western Benedictine tradition] use to prop themselves against)? We have been discussing this in the [mindfulness] class we are taking and in my course.” 10/2/11 MF



All three of the courses were new to the college's curriculum. Each needed to have its own internal integrity, but needed to offer ways for faculty and students to tie the course together. What practices, for students and faculty, were effective in

achieving both of these objectives? How present should faculty be in each other's classrooms? How important is it for us to be aware of the content of each others' reading and discussion?

What do students need to be particularly attentive to in this course?

We heard early in the semester how one student, T, began to make such connections, mediated through the mindfulness course that was offered for the participants in the 360.

Following up on these threads, in Praise's assessment we asked students directly both what faculty did that helped facilitate these connections and what practices students had crafted on their own which helped them integrate the courses. One student noted in response to the

“After a while of contemplation at the garden, the abbot of the Monastery met us and led us in a meditation session. Before we began, he talked about Mt. Fuji and the different paths there are to get to the top, and it doesn't matter which path you take because the top is the same regardless. As students we need to take the path step by step, and breathe in good air. This abbot had an air about him that was very joyful, and this would be the same of the abbot we would meet later in the day. His talk about air led into a talk about proper posture, sitting straight so that you could take in more air, and concentrating not on the inhale, exhale of the breath into the stomach, but the *dantian*, the core. He also noted that we should count the number of breaths we take, as a form of concentration and not letting the mind wander off. I'm not sure how long we sat for, but I got to about 50 breaths, and I take relatively longer breaths than the people sitting next to me.

This was one of the best meditation sittings I've had, better than the one at the first [mindfulness class], which I thought was really [good] as well, maybe I am progressing. It felt as if my head were going farther and farther from the bottom half of my body, and before I knew it, the sitting was over, and we took a tour of the rest of the Monastery” T 9/28/11

questionnaire, *“I liked how sometimes the professors would sit in on the other classes. It felt like they were learning with us.”* Comments from several students highlighted the ways in which the faculty’s familiarity with each other’s readings helped them make connections. *“I believe the professors followed along with all the readings from every class. So when they could tie in material from other courses, they did.”*

Students, both in the questionnaire and in the facilitated session, expressed a desire to have a full syllabus for each course earlier in the term, so that they could begin to consider the broader connections from the very start.

Other students noted that they bridged the courses through some of their own earlier experiences, and that as the course progressed they used the experiences within the course in similar ways, much as T did in her early reflection. *“Because Buddhism was personally the most foreign to me, I took longer to connect in personal way — but the psych course was helpful in connecting with the idea of mindfulness.”* and *“Also, as the semester went on it became easier to connect things — especially because of out of class experiences and looking back at those.”*

What did we learn about the integration between the field experiences and travel and the scholarly work?

The flexibility to travel off campus for extended periods that the 360 offers both

“The past two days have tested my ability to stay in the moment and clear my mind (general principles of mindfulness and Buddhist doctrine) but they have also left me with a series of questions about the importance of meditation in every day life and the conditions under which meditation is most effective (can any repetitive activity be considered meditation? or does it have to be simple? How long must one practice a particular form of meditation before they acquire the ability to clear their mind and cultivate wisdom/compassion?). These questions crossed my mind after talking to Yamabiko-an (a monk that we met in Koyasan), and again after the class discussion that we had after dinner tonight.” O 10/6/11



challenges and opportunities. As O shows in her reflection, written while we were in Koya-san, Japan, the experiences provoked reflection about course materials. She notes the after dinner discussion, prompting the faculty

to think about making more of these structured opportunities during the travel. These experiences led us to develop a series of questions with Praise, in particular, “How well were the trips integrated into the course? To what extent did these trips complement your learning?”

Student commented on the impact of the outside experiences not only in response to these questions, but also in other queries, in itself good evidence for the quality of the integration. For example, in response to a query by Praise about the connections, one student offered: *“It was a little harder to compare the ideas in Professor Francl’s class to the other classes until we went to Wernersville and Japan.”*

Students found the first hand experience invaluable, both with respect to the travel: *“The trips were very well integrated, even months after the fact we still reference the experience during class, and to get a hands on experience allows for better understanding of the motivations of people practicing these contemplative practices.”* and with respect to the outside MBSR class: *“I remember that the MBSR meditation things were totally foreign to me, so it was helpful to partake.”*

Praise asked the students to explicitly reflect on the ways in which the field work could be more strongly integrated into the course: “What can be done in the future to improve/enrich the experience of 360 students on these trips?”

In response, students reiterated that they found the experiences well structured and valuable, *“I didn’t know what to expect from the trip and just kept an open mind. It was very well organized in my opinion and flexible enough for comfort.”* Several expressed a need to build in more time to process *“I think that the discussions that we had as a group at Wernersville and in Japan were extremely valuable, so I think that there could have been more of them on the trips.”* and some structure that helped make the difference between on campus and off campus experiences less stark: *“Perhaps a bit of structure on the trips. I don’t know if this is ‘needed’ but at times I felt like it was ‘too good to be true.’ I mean especially in Japan, the learning was hands on, but not really book learning. I think it [would have been] nice [to have] ‘class time’ or readings while we were there; would have enhanced the experience.”*

The fruits

Before we left Koyasan, we had one last Q and A session with Yamabikoan (the monk who we met on the first day at Koyasan). He was very helpful and informative, as always, and he shared that he would like to receive our criticism because he is trying to improve the way in which he teaches meditation to western people. Even though he is a monk and maintains older ritual practices, he still considers himself to be a modern man. I never considered it before but perhaps this is why I found his instruction on meditation so helpful - it was instruction that was, by comparison, more flexible to accommodate those who don't follow a monastic lifestyle." K 10/11/12



It becomes clear that the faculty should continue to model for students reading materials with an eye to more than one point of view, that the time we invested in

becoming familiar with each others' readings was valued by the students. Our willingness to share the questions and shifts in perspectives that the readings and in class discussions provoked in front of students and each other was also important to the students. In the future we can explicitly encourage students to build bridges between the courses and materials and experiences from their own lives. Students would appreciate a clearer view of the interlacing of the courses in our syllabi.

We discovered, too, that the structured discussions we had sporadically included should be deliberately and regularly scheduled while we are "on the road" and that students would welcome a set of readings and discussion topics that can be reasonably done while we are on the road which will help transition between the rhythms of classroom time and field time. Linking to the students' assessment of the overall integration, having in hand a rough map of the territory to be covered, in and out of the classroom, is a tool that the students expect and would use.

In her reflection while we were in Japan, K notes the commitment of the monk we spoke with to critically examining what and how he is teaching. Praise closed her reflection with the students by asking them to share any "pearls of wisdom" they might have for future students. Several noted their key role in the work at hand: "Do your part..you are the core of the 360."

Our work with Praise helped us glean from a full and lively semester's work what would be most fruitful to focus on as we plan to teach again, keeping the voices and experiences of our students at the core. Going forward, I would again seek outside expertise to help shape the assessment of my teaching, particularly in courses which rely inherently or explicitly on connections to other courses in the curriculum, for example the upper division major classes in chemistry, or the introductory science courses with their co-requirement of a laboratory course, which may or may not be

taught by the same instructor as the lecture. It need not be a TLI consultant who takes up the role of the impartial expert, a student or students who took the course in a previous year can be equally effective, I suspect. Engaging students in the development of the assessment process can help make explicit the ways in which both faculty and students perceive and nurture the relationships between related courses.

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2. Kabat-Zinn, Jon *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. Delta, 1990.
3. Course web site: <https://sites.google.com/site/contemplativetraditions360/home>
4. MF's reflections can be found at <http://contemplative360.blogspot.com/>, links to student reflections are posted there as well.