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Words and Sense: Contemplative Pedagogies in Academic Writing

Judith Simmer-Brown
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How do contemplative pedagogies inform learning skills such as academic writing? This article draws on the Tibetan Buddhist distinction between the literal meaning of words (drangdon) and the inner sense of those words (ngedon), from an account from the sacred biography of the Indian saint Naropa (956-1041), abbot of Nalanda University. This founding Naropa University professor has adapted these criteria from traditional Tibetan education for the contemporary secular classroom. Writing pedagogies that integrate third-person inquiry drawn from conventional academic research and first-person inquiry, the result of inner research, brings academic writing alive. The author outlines writing strategies that integrate these two methods of inquiry, including progressive assignments that distinguish among personal narrative, opinion, and insight in the development of first-person inquiry. Finally, the article addresses specific challenges in teaching contemplative academic writing, including evaluations and grading, cultivating critical perspectives, and supporting rigor with academic, contemplative methods in the university classroom.

Now that it has been acknowledged that contemplative pedagogies provide innovative and important methods of learning across disciplines of the university (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Simmer-Brown & Grace, 2011), it is time to examine how these pedagogies might inform the basic academic skills that are the bread and butter of our disciplines. There is no practice that is more in need of contemplative reflection than academic writing, whose hyper-objective stance can obscure questions of meaning and relevance for the reader. Yet the best of academic writing has the potential of changing the reader's (and writer's) perspectives, discourse, and values—her very life. A pedagogy that could strengthen the hidden power and meaning of academic writing for students could make significant contributions to university education.

As a religious studies scholar who specializes in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, it is natural for me to turn to the classical religious traditions of contemplative writing as resources for appropriate pedagogies for the college classroom. Paul Griffiths (1999) has written eloquently on “religious reading” in classical civilizations from Buddhist India to Roman Africa, but he has commented that no such disciplines could be found for writing (pp. 34-57). This is less true in the Tibetan “culture of

the book,” in which the emphasis in scholarly writing was on accurate translation, skillful editing, and close commentary on the original texts of the Indian canon (Schaeffer, 2009). While Tibetan Buddhism developed a voluminous literature in a variety of genres, including canonical translations and commentaries, doxographies, histories, biographies, ritual texts, and popular literature and poetry, the ultimate emphasis seemed to be on what Griffiths (1999) calls “storage” of ancient wisdom (pp. 34-57).

Nevertheless, the concerns of the Tibetan tradition helpfully inform the contemplative writing process. Tibetan history has exhibited a “sense of disquiet” regarding the tension between the scholastic emphasis upon permanent preservation of teachings and the esoteric guarding of oral transmissions (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 3). Even while scholasticism displayed exuberance when it came to the quality and care of the writing discipline as well as the aesthetics of printing, ink-making, and papermaking, there were cautionary episodes reminding the monks and translators to study less and meditate more (Schaeffer, 2009, pp. 1-18).

In reading and writing disciplines, the underlying concern of Tibetan scholars and translators has been the relationship between *words* and *sense* (*tsig* and *dön*). The juxtaposition between these notions provides the foundation for contemplation, a parallel with the *lectio divina* traditions of the West (Casey, 1997; Griffiths, 1999, Ch. 6). Rinchen Tashi, the eminent 16th-century translator, cautioned scholars to understand the “words and sense” of the Indic text and then “translate the word into Tibetan in a way that does not contradict the sense” (qtd. in Griffiths, 1999, p. 51). The celebrated 14th-century scholar Butön Rinchendrup, in his “Letter to Editors,” instructed them to carefully understand that the word and meaning are dependent upon each other, and to begin with literal analysis of the word, from which understanding of the meaning will arise (Griffiths, 1999, p. 150). The theme of “words and sense” has proven to be helpful in guiding students in contemplative writing in contemporary Western settings as well.

Deciding Points in Contemplative Education: The Case of the Siddha Nāropa

In the opening convocation at the first summer of Naropa Institute, the founder, Chögyam Trungpa, narrated an event from the life of the great yogic adept Nāropa that has become a seminal trope in our university’s practice of contemplative education. Nāropa (956-1041 C.E.) was a renowned scholar-monk at Nālanda University in Northeast India. According to Buddhist lore, at the peak of his academic career he had an unsettling vision in which a wrathful tantric goddess (*dākinī*) appeared to him, interrupting his studies to ask him what he was doing. When he confidently responded that he was reading the classic texts of the Nālanda curriculum, she inquired:

“Do you understand them?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand the words or the sense?”

“The words.”

The old woman was delighted, rocked with laughter, and began to dance waving her cane in the air. Thinking that she might feel still happier, Nāropa added: “I also understand the sense.” But then the woman began to weep and tremble and she threw her cane down.

“How is it that you were happy when I said that I understood the words, but became miserable when I added that I also understood the sense?” he asked.

“I felt happy because you, a great scholar, did not lie. You frankly admitted that you understood only the words. But I felt sad when you told a lie by stating that you understood the sense, which you do not.” (Guenther, 1963/1971, pp. 24-25)

Knowing she spoke the truth, the great Nāropa left his teaching position in search of a yogic path in which he would truly know the inner meaning of what he studied. Many years later, the scholar-yogi returned to Nālanda as a professor, teaching in a contemplative manner befitting the great monastic university.

In that opening convocation, Trungpa declared that he wished to found a university in which the students and faculty were not content with merely the words (*tsig*) of what they studied but endeavored also to understand the sense, the meaning (*dön*). This account has served as the guiding principle of the numerous contemplative pedagogies at our University.

These notions can be traced back to the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*, “the teaching elucidating the Buddha’s hidden, underlying intention” (Power, 1995; Lopez, 1988). This discourse is a late composition (3rd century C.E.) lauded by John Power as the hermeneutical sūtra of the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) that provided crucial paradigms to interpret seeming contradictions in the Buddha’s teachings (Power, 2005). Among the paradigms introduced in Chapter 7 of the sūtra is the distinction between *neyārtha* (*drangdön* in Tibetan) and *nitārtha* (*ngedön*) that provides the key to understanding the questions of the wrathful *ḍākini*.¹ Robert Thurman (1978) developed a Buddhist hermeneutics based, in part, on this distinction.

Drangdön refers to the literal and strict but also merely provisional meaning of a teaching or text, understood through intellect and common sense. It is considered foundational to understanding, involves precise study of detail, and in tradi-

¹ For the remainder of the article, the Tibetan terminology, rather than the Sanskrit of the Indian sūtra, will be used. In Tibetan, *drang* refers to that which is straightforward and accessible but needs further clarification or explanation; *nge* refers to certainty in which there is a genuine, profound understanding; and *dön* is essence or meaning.

tional settings entails memorization and mastery of the structure and logic of the text or teaching. *Ngedön* refers to the profound, deeper meaning of a teaching or text, building on the literal meaning but requiring insight that draws on personal experience, realization, and certainty. As the *Akṣayamatīrdeśa-sūtra* (Exposition by the Great Being Inexhaustible Intention) states:

Sūtras that teach the establishment of the conventional are called [sūtras] whose meaning requires interpretation. Those sūtras that teach the establishment of the ultimate are called [sūtras] of definitive meaning. Sūtras which teach with various words and letters are called [sūtras] whose meaning requires interpretation. Those sūtras that teach the profound—difficult to see and difficult to understand—are called [sūtras] of definitive meaning. (Lopez, p. 61)

In other words, the literal meaning of the text is considered provisional, while the deeper, more profound understanding of what the text is pointing toward is considered definitive.

Within the Buddhist tradition, this hermeneutic has been used in a variety of ways, some of them sectarian and pejorative. Tibetan lineages have differed over which sūtras or commentaries represent the provisional or the definitive, sometimes with bitterness and stridency that led to warfare (Samuel, 1993). This particular way of classifying texts predominated in 17th- to 19th-century Tibet until the blossoming of the *Ri-me* (non-sectarian) movement of Jamgön Kongtrül Lodro Thaye and others, which endeavored to counteract sectarianism with new interpretations of “provisional” and “definitive” (Smith, 2001).

Trungpa (1982) taught these two in a characteristic *Ri-me* manner, saying that the classification of texts or philosophic schools was not the initial intention of these categories and was merely a sectarian way of speaking. Instead, he encouraged his students to think of the provisional and definitive aspects of every Buddhist teaching, from the most foundational to the subtlest tantric texts: “all levels of teaching have literal and profound meanings.” He also spoke of the definitive as “a style of teaching,” saying “how we approach it makes it definitive.” How we receive teachings can make them definitive as well. For example, listening too literally makes teachings provisional; taking things to heart and seeing for ourselves makes them definitive. “The basic meaning of study is that you are not fooling yourself. There is no need to pretend to understand. At the same time, there is joy in study.”

There is no need to denigrate the precision of the provisional, however. Detailed study is foundational, a prerequisite for understanding the meaning. If the student tries to leap into the definitive without preparing the ground, there can be no profundity. Trungpa (1982) spoke of the provisional as the “finger pointing at the moon,” as in the Zen teaching; the finger is absolutely necessary, but it cannot

be mistaken for the moon. It is only by looking where the finger points that one can realize the true, inner meaning of what is indicated. “Reality comes through if you’re open to it,” he concluded.

Trungpa understood that a university setting was inappropriate for a merely Buddhist understanding of these principles, and he encouraged the faculty to be inspired by traditional Buddhist presentations of this hermeneutic and apply them in a nonsectarian educational setting. He encouraged an approach to contemplative learning that helped students trust their own inner wisdom, their direct experience—for that is the definitive, constantly opening to new horizons of understanding.

Words and Sense: “Third-Person” and “First-Person Critical” Inquiries

The paradigm of Buddhist hermeneutics based on *drangdön*, or words, and *ngedön*, or sense, has served as an excellent basis for teaching contemplative writing in my graduate and undergraduate religious studies courses, many of which are concerned with the study of Buddhist texts in translation. The crucial point is how notions of the definitive or profound meaning are interpreted in secular, contemplative-based education. That is, how do we faculty members support students in finding their own unique perspectives on the profound implications of what they study? How can we also help them engage in a personal journey that continues throughout their lives, beyond their formal education? While this is an important concern for religious studies, it has application in many other humanities disciplines. This kind of learning is built on interactions between the “third-person” inquiry that is already foundational in university education and “first-person” inquiry that has the capacity of drawing from inner wisdom.

Contemplative teaching requires that we faculty appreciate the inner wisdom that our students already have: the curiosity, clarity, and inquisitiveness that are more fundamental than their attitudes or habits. If we faculty members do not begin here, our teaching becomes a futile endeavor that uploads information in an atmosphere of contempt for our students. In order to tap into this appreciation, we must have that kind of appreciation of our own inner wisdom that precedes the mastery of our academic disciplines. Why should we bother to teach if we have lost sight of this capacity in ourselves and our students?

Contemplative teaching in a textual seminar draws students into a dialogue between their inner wisdom and the objective learning necessary for reading texts. This brings the classroom alive. As a foundation, we use “third-person” methods of academic investigation, developing a thorough grounding in the literal and informed understanding of the sources we study. For example, knowing that a text was authored in the second century CE by a master who took the name Nāgārjuna and comprehending the prevalent concerns of Indian philosophy in that milieu are im-

portant foundations in the study of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās*, “the root verses that establish the middle way.” Mastering the technical vocabulary of the Sanskrit verses adds to appreciation of the sophistication of the meter and brings students into the profound detail of the reasonings. We then study the structure of the logics and refutations, the positions of the opposing view, and the conventions of the arguments. All of this relies on third-person inquiry, the *drangdön*.

In class discussions and writing assignments I bring in personal reflection in a particular way. Without careful understanding of what is involved, the classroom can become excessively subjective. First-person inquiry is always tricky. Hal Roth (2008) uses the phrase “critical first-person inquiry,” emphasizing that students should engage in mindfulness techniques “without prior commitment to their efficacy.” In Brown University’s contemplative studies program, students are asked to “appraise their experiences in order to gain a deeper appreciation of their meaning and significance” (Roth, 2008). These distinctions are very helpful, and they identify how first-person inquiry can become a powerful source of learning.

To lay the ground in my classes, I speak of three distinctive realms of investigation: 1) intellectual inquiry, based on concepts or ideas; 2) emotional response, governed by reactions and feelings; and 3) observations, based on sense perceptions and their immediate interpretation.² According to the Buddhist psychological traditions (*Abhidharma*), all three types of knowing have strengths and limitations. However, when supported by mindfulness training, sensory experience has the greatest capacity to access most directly the inherent wisdom of the practitioner, and so this training is pivotal in my classrooms. The Dzogchen and Shambhala lineages of Naropa’s founder suggest that first-person critical inquiry develops directly from mindfulness of sense perceptions. For Trungpa, distinguishing between these three areas of knowing was the foundation for contemplative education, and sensory awareness and perception were the critical elements.

Normally, students consider first-person inquiry to be limited by whether they like something or not, but it is important to distinguish opinion from first-person inquiry. If asked to elaborate, students immediately formulate a narrative or storyline that is filled with scripts about who they are and what they experience. In a contemplative setting they first learn to discriminate between these varieties of discourse, for both the intellectual and emotional are usually embedded in complex narratives from the past that have little to do with their present experience. These narratives often eclipse their inner wisdom, or, at the very least, complicate it.

Mindfulness training introduces students to their present-moment experience based especially on sense perceptions. As students are able to observe through these clearer lenses, they begin to develop a kind of fresh first-person inquiry

² These distinctions are based on the Buddhist *Abhidharma*, especially as filtered through the Tibetan commentarial traditions.

that does not merely resurrect narratives from the past. Once they begin with observation through the senses, they gain access to fresh insights and perspectives related to their more complex emotional and conceptual responses to their experience. They understand the difference between an idea copied from a source and their own personal insights. This is how I speak of “critical first-person inquiry.” Integrating third-person and first-person inquiries in this manner brings the inner wisdom of the student into direct dialogue with the wisdom of the ages derived from texts and studies from whatever tradition one studies.

Contemplative Writing Strategies: Naropa University Classroom Experiments

For decades I have experimented with contemplative writing pedagogies for my students. My undergraduates swing between extremes, writing either reflection papers that say whether or not they “like” something or cardboard research papers that assume everything they read on the Internet or in books is true just because it was written and published or posted. My graduate students have been trained in the objective voice in their undergraduate studies such that they do not trust their own intelligence, insight, or personal experience. This kind of third-person writing generally produces papers that trust only the findings of students’ mentors and advance points whenever they can cite three or more sources, even if their commonsense tells them they are ridiculous. This produces research papers that may be considered excellent in some academic settings, but which disguise the inner journeys of my students. They also lack creativity, whether inventive or intellectual. I wonder if there is any learning happening at all, and I find them deadly dull to read. Even my best students have developed a firewall between their academic skills—many of them excellent—and their inner lives, which often appear disheartened, tentative, and immature in comparison. For years, I have strategized how to bring first-person inquiry into academic writing in a way that strengthens both the first- and third-person expressions of my students. When assignments succeed in this, I have witnessed a dynamic process of learning.

Presented here are samples of the various strategies I have devised; they would be useful in any humanistic discipline.

Experiment One: Contemplative Writing Assignments in Class

This method works especially well in my undergraduate courses as a way to inaugurate the process of contemplative writing. I hand out a short paragraph of evocative text, printed at the top of the page, folded in half, and stapled. Students sit quietly, practicing mindfulness or presence in whatever way they have been trained, letting go of expectations and thoughts, resting in the present moment. On a signal (I use a small gong), I ask them to open the paper and we read the

quote aloud together, slowly, just resting our attention on the words, resisting the temptation to rush into speculation on the meaning. Then they read the quote silently over and over again, appreciating the words in this way.

Roughly five minutes later, I signal the students to turn to a partner near them and quietly begin to verbally explore the meaning together, each of them taking a little time to share what has come up. This conversation can go on for five to seven minutes. Then it is time to sit silently, mindfully, with the text, gently considering their initial investigation of the words and their exchanges with their partners, and allowing their fresh sense of the meaning in that moment to dawn. Finally, I signal that they are to write for seven minutes, bringing the words of the text into conversation with the meanings they are discovering in that moment. In different settings they may format their writing in a variety of ways: poetry, essay, or free-writes. Then they may share what they have written with their partners and give me their papers for non-graded feedback.

Experiment Two: Personal Questions as the Foundation of Discernment in Choosing a Paper Topic

When meeting individually with students regarding possible topics for term papers, I suggest they begin with something that captures their personal interest or addresses an abiding intimate question in their lives. When it is difficult for my students to begin this way, we explore a process of personal inquiry. I encourage them to develop a journal of questions and then discern what question lies behind that question, on and on, until they can find a core question in their experience. It is important that this journal remain private, though if students wish to show me their work, I assist them as best I can. Can their core question be alive for them in some way? Is there a way to explore that question within the context of the subject matter of the course? Oftentimes the question becomes far more than the personal, individual concern of the student and ties to central questions of human value and meaning. For example, when a student was distressed about a bad break-up, the question journal traced a line of inquiry that led to the veracity of finding life's purpose solely in a love relationship, and the paper focused on the distinctive romantic love tradition in Western culture.

On many other occasions, students come to me asking for extensions on paper deadlines. Let me share one example. When I question the student, he comes up with vague excuses. After further conversation, he confesses he is an habitual procrastinator. I ask him what this is, how he experiences it, and so forth—and then suggest that he write a mindfulness paper about procrastination, utilizing sources from the subject of the class. What is procrastination? How is it described in contemporary psychology? How does he experience it? What are its moments,

its parts, in mindful detail? How does it feel physically, emotionally, mentally? In other words, could the student use an obstacle of his life as the beginning point for a paper? He has roommate issues; she has drug or alcohol addictions; he has a chronic illness; she has experienced the death of a loved one. I encourage each of them to use whatever began as the “excuse” as the starting point for the investigation, for nothing is more important than placing attention on the core issues that we normally think of as distractions. The papers produced by such investigations are nothing short of remarkable.

Experiment Three: Finding the First-Person Critical Voice

It is one thing to glimpse the clarity and inner wisdom at the heart of experience, and quite another to discover how to express this experience in words. Throughout the world’s religions, glimpses like these are deemed ineffable and inexpressible, yet contemplative pedagogy must retain the responsibility in higher education to help students find appropriate expressions. How can they voice the first-person critical inquiry? How does this differ from complete subjectivity, superficial reaction and opinion, or a constant self-referential narrative?

For several of my classes, my students apply mindfulness methods adapted from early Buddhism to bring an objective eye to the most personal emotional experiences.³ Students choose a familiar emotion, such as anger, that recurs in their lives. They read Buddhist psychological (*Abhidharma*) texts and commentaries from the Indian and Tibetan traditions that are taxonomies of mental states, describing the experience of anger in vivid detail without storyline, including energetic descriptions and the effects of anger on actions and on relationships with others (Asanga, 2001; Rabten, 1975; Mipham, 1997).

For a homework assignment, I ask students to document their own experiences of that emotion, drawing from sensory, emotional, and discursive elements. Like the *Abhidharma* commentaries, the students are to take a value-neutral, objective voice. How does anger feel in the mind? In the body? In the environment in which it is experienced? Can anger be described without reference to the “reasons” for the anger (its setting, triggers, and results, circumstantially-speaking)? Can the student write about this and still feel how the anger feels? This cultivates a dynamic critical first-person inquiry.

At first, students struggle to fulfill this assignment, but with practice they discover the vitality and wisdom of their emotions; anger is not a monolithic state, but has many shades and permutations that constantly change. They also discover that their narratives about anger fossilize them into caricatures of how they ac-

³ For a complete description of student responses to this pedagogy, see Simmer-Brown (2011), pp. 229-236.

tually feel. They report that intense emotion, when unexamined and not directly experienced, drives them to cause harm to themselves and others. They also discover that there is wisdom within the emotion, and when they learn to listen to intense emotions within the context of mindfulness, that wisdom is available to enrich their everyday lives. They discover a fresh, critical first-person perspective that feels clear and true, and they begin to trust themselves and their own inner wisdom.

Experiment Four: The First-Person Voice in Academic Writing

The next stage for students is learning to include the first-person voice in their academic writing, a “slippery slope” for a university setting. But when students are encouraged to do this, they begin to weigh what they actually know (as opposed to what they are drawing from third-person sources) and to express carefully their own insights and discoveries. They begin to “own” their academic writing in a different way than previously, and this brings greater excitement and rigor to their work. I especially encourage the first-person voice in the first semester or two, so that by the time students are writing their theses or senior papers in the last seminar they take with me, the first-person pronouns are no longer necessary. In fact, I discourage the first-person voices in this final stage; by then, they have inhabited their work, and they express confidence in their own independent reflection on what they are writing.

The journal as a source. When students are writing about a matter that lies close to their personal questions, they often are at a loss about how to integrate their personal experience into the paper without disrupting the third-person inquiry. This is when I suggest that they create a discipline of first-person observation journaling while researching and writing the paper. For example, a gifted student was biracial and wished to investigate issues of identity and race in her academic writing. In her personal journals, she inquired into her own sense of racial identity while reading Nell Painter’s *The History of White People*, which demonstrates the cultural construction of “whiteness” in Western society (Painter, 2010). Her journals reflected her own inquiry that paralleled the research, drawing from personal questions that had haunted her life. The final paper was rich and nuanced, and it brought out critical perspectives on Painter’s work. When students journal in this way, they reflect freshly on these issues, including thoughts and feelings along with fresh observations coming from their personal inquiry.

Once the actual paper-writing process is underway, I suggest that students selectively (and sparingly) quote from their own journals, using them as if they were a third-person source, as a way of bringing their inner journey into the paper. It is important that this method be used only if it contributes to the effectiveness of the paper. They use the conventions from the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2010)

for unpublished works such as diaries and journals to cite their own work. With few exceptions, narratives of events in their lives have less power than their fresh insights about the core questions of the paper. These additions enliven the paper and bring to the fore perspectives and insights that might not have made it into the paper otherwise.

The preface, insert, or afterword. Another way to bring the first-person critical voice appropriately into academic writing is through the dedicated preface, inserted segment, or afterword. The body of the paper is strictly third-person, with appropriate citations, structure of argument, and flow, but the addition of the first-person voice (again, sparingly) enriches the perspective of the paper and provides depth. In these segments, my students explain their stake in the topic and why they are writing on this subject.

Integration without the first-person voice. Once students have worked with integrating their personal experience with the first-person voice, I encourage them to begin to find ways of speaking that do not use first-person pronouns too prominently. They read academic writing in which the scholar's insights are integrated quite naturally into the prose, not necessarily relying on narrative or the first-person voice. This is usually when they are at the end of their Naropa careers and preparing for graduate or PhD study or additional professional training. Most of my students quite naturally find a way to inhabit their academic writing and experiment with different ways of presenting their insights and discoveries that are in accord with the academic standards of conventional graduate institutions.

Experiment Five: Grading Rubrics that Place Personal Integration in Context

When grading student essays and term papers, I base one third of the grade on the effectiveness of the strategies described above. For new contemplative writers, I look for examples from personal experience that indicate the student's understanding of what they are analyzing. For more established writers, I evaluate their first-person paragraphs or quoted journal entries, ensuring that they enhance the student's argument or line of reasoning in an effective manner. For the more developed contemplative writer, I look for fresh insight and expression of personal discoveries in third-person writing that resonates with their experience. It is important to me to signal to the students through this kind of evaluation of their work that inner development and the personal voice are important aspects of academic writing.

Contemplative Academic Writing: Classroom Cautions

What are some of the challenges in the experiments I have outlined above? I have three concerns: the first regards the students' experience, while the second and

third relate to the contemplative professor. Sometimes students have so much eagerness to cultivate the first-person voice that they forget the entire enterprise of academic learning. It is important that students appreciate the first-person voice in writing in the full context of the academic endeavor. Third-person academic writing acknowledges the wisdom of other scholars, joins their lineage of effectively making the case for their perspectives, and speaks to a specific discourse community. We are asking students to “occupy” their writing so that they have genuine contributions for the full-blown academic field to which they are contributing. This requires a balanced appreciation of their own discoveries (first-person) placed in an environment of interactive classroom learning and listening (second-person), both of which are brought into dialogue with the respected academic disciplines they are studying (third-person). Appreciation for this full context enhances student learning.

As a second concern, I often wonder whether the strategies I have devised would work for another professor in another academic context. It is clear to me that contemplative teaching is more than a set of exercises or assignments that can easily be adopted based on reading a single essay from a contemplative professor. My own experiments have been based on over four decades of contemplative practice and study that have brought an intuitive connection to the approaches I have developed. The greatest advice I could provide is that the contemplative professor must draw from personal practice, training, and experience to devise classroom pedagogies that are appropriate to the material studied. These pedagogies are not developed in a month, semester, or even an academic year. They must be devised within the professor’s experience, gradually introduced over time, and adjusted and changed based on measures developed by the professor or department to ensure that they deliver the promised results. They must also reflect the deepest values of the professor and the academic field.

Another pitfall that accompanies the previous ones is that working in this way with contemplative academic writing is labor-intensive, requiring close reading of student work, extensive comment both in person and in writing, and follow-up over the progression of a semester or semesters. My work has been supported by dedicated graduate assistants; their perspectives, advice, and ancillary skilled coaching of students have strengthened this project. I have also done in-services with the fellows in the Naropa Writing Center so that they could properly support my students on this contemplative journey. The primary responsibility, however, has been mine, and this has required making contemplative writing a priority in my classrooms.

The main point is that contemplative teaching is a deeply rewarding journey, but one that takes imagination, patience, consistency, and focused real time with students and their writing. It also requires that the professor have a contemplative

practice at the personal core of their professional life. Students may need to be inspired to fully engage their own educational journeys rather than coast through assignments completed without any personal meaning for them. Finally, academic colleagues may not understand how the use of the subjective first-person voice may eventually enhance the intellectual creativity and nuance of student writing. It is important that the contemplative professor have a fully-developed strategy in place in order to receive the necessary academic support of the department or school and to draw students who are ready to write from their experience.

Conclusion: Educational Blossom vs. Consumer Culture

There may be more global reasons why introducing contemplative writing practice may be important in this time. Gradually, over the last decades, academic writing has unconsciously taken on the consumerist values of mainstream Western culture, and the contemplative professor has a moral responsibility to remedy this. Paul Griffiths (1999) contrasts the ancient practices of religious reading with, modern academia in which writing emphasizes

metaphors of production, consumption, use, and control. Academic readers consume the works of others and produce their own; they are defined and given status by the body of literature they control and upon which they are accredited to give authoritative (expert) voice for proper reward; they cite and mention (rather than religious read), and are in turn judged largely by the extent to which the works they produce (again, the industrial metaphor, the image of mass production) are cited and mentioned. (p. 42)

Griffiths goes on to remark that when our literature is commodified this way, literature is valuable only to the extent that it produces the desired effect. Then it can be discarded, “returned to the circulating library, sold back to the used bookstore, or given away” (p. 42). This shows the consumerist basis of our literary works.

Perhaps our contemplative methods of writing can contribute to the creation of environments where students discover writing as an unfolding process of inner discovery combined with exploration of the ancient and modern works of their intellectual and wisdom forebears. Through this work, it may be possible to develop in them a lifelong love of learning rather than a consumer’s expediency. Anything that can contribute to the wealth of the inner life of learning and respect for literature will enrich our global human culture.

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