A Tale of Two Modules
– Contemplating Professional Development

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Abstract

This paper explores how a contemplative approach was used to teach and assess professional development modules on postgraduate, business programmes at two third-level institutions in Dublin, Ireland. It describes how students learned meditative practices during class which were applied in independent, reflective, assessment tasks and examines how these activities were combined to achieve learning outcomes related to future professional development and associated career plans. The paper briefly compares and contrasts the literature on contemplative practices with the daily experiences of teaching and assessing utilising meditative tools. Through the lens of contemplative pedagogy it explores the effect these tools can have on different student cohorts, learning objectives, module content, assessment activities and outcomes. It examines how contemplative techniques increase capacity for self-awareness, while also improving cognitive and critical thinking skills. Additionally, it describes how a contemplative learning methodology fosters connection between students and educators through resource sharing and the development of interpersonal skills. The paper contributes to the discussion on how the integration of mindfulness practices with traditional pedagogical approaches provides students with tools to improve their capacities for introspection, reflection and action. Feedback indicates that students appreciate learning from a holistic approach that incorporates theoretical concepts and practical interventions, as well as the insights they offer for future professional development.

Keywords

Contemplation, Pedagogy, Reflection, Teaching, Assessment, Independent Learning
1. Introduction and Motivation

The authors are lecturers on postgraduate programmes at different, third-level institutions in Dublin, Ireland who have collaborated on the development of two new modules concerned with the professional development of students wishing to pursue business and management careers in international and technology-related businesses. Profiles of the two modules are given in Appendix 1.

Traditionally the constructivist/interpretive paradigm has been dominant in teaching and assessing such modules. Student learning events have included listening to lectures; reading support notes, set books and articles; taking part in in-class discussion of case studies; and role-playing business scenarios; practicing writing business reports and preparing verbal presentations – activities that mirror their intended, future business management roles. The authors set out to explore the impact of augmenting traditional teaching techniques by incorporating contemplative pedagogy as an integral element of the learning outcomes and associated assessment tasks: namely including meditative; creative imagining and reflective activities.

For assessment purposes a requirement for both modules was for students to produce written evidence of achieving learning outcomes that included some measurement of progress through the application of both interpretive and contemplative activities. Following in-class lectures, workshops and independent learning activities students were requested to undertake assessment tasks with a strong reflective component, for example, reflective reports setting out how they met the criteria for a management role in a business; to provide a personal profile (curriculum vitae); and to prepare a professional development plan for themselves.

2. Literature Review

The constructivist/interpretive paradigm contends that the social world is created by people through their own cognitive processes and facts only become relevant through their meanings and interpretations (Young & Collin, 2004). In this paradigm access to the world of experience operates through the concepts constructed by the perceiving subject and the knowledge derived from these thoughts (Flick, 2014).
These concepts and knowledge are used to interpret or reinterpret experiences and/or to understand and attribute meanings, both of which are also fundamental processes of contemplative pedagogy. Contemplative pedagogy interleaves contemplative practices to cultivate inner awareness through first-person investigations and introspective practices such as mindfulness and self-inquiry (Grace, 2011). Such practices typically include stillness activities (e.g. quieting the mind), movement practices (e.g. walking meditation), creation processes (e.g. art), activist practices (e.g. work experience), generative practices (e.g. prayer), ritual/cyclical practices (e.g. visioning) and relational practices (e.g. reflective journaling) (Duerr, 2014). These activities have been widely utilised in religious and art studies for hundreds of years, but the past decade has seen growth in their use outside these faculties and has caused a ‘quiet pedagogical revolution ... in colleges, universities and community colleges’ (Zajonc, 2013: 83). In most third-level institutions, however, contemplative pedagogy, and its allied practices, is viewed as ‘new and sometimes controversial’ (Coburn et al., 2011).

Brown (1999: 70) says ‘contemplative teaching begins by knowing and experiencing ourselves directly. We unlearn how we habitually think, sense and feel so that we can return to the present moment freshly and clearly’. Students inculcated by a contemplative teaching pedagogy learn contemplative practice. At its core, Zajonc (2013) suggests such practice comprises two facets: focused attention meditation entailing voluntary attention to a chosen object; and open awareness mediation involving non-reactive monitoring of the content of experience from moment to moment. Zajonc (2013) stresses the importance of mindfulness practices that initially involve focusing activities consisting of moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness of something. These focusing activities are commonly provoked with aural signals (a whistle or a bell) or visual cues (such as the image of a spider’s web on a slide) as a prelude to other pre-contemplative activities (such as deep-breathing) to slow down the physical and mental pace of the learner. Focusing repeatedly can lead to concentration training that emphasises any other physical or mental object. In art studies the object might be a painting, in business studies the objects used could be sounds and images related to themes such as management, leadership and international business.
Focusing enables students to direct their thoughts towards the deeper, open awareness practice that follows. Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984) provides a scaffold for this second stage of contemplation. The four steps of the Kolb model (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation) allow learners to become mindful at any stage of the reflective cycle. Contemplative thinking can be drawn upon to link the concrete to the abstract, for example, by inviting students to recall a particular business meeting, to mentally analyse how the event relates to the module materials, and consider application to their professional lives. While the Kolb cycle is used to stimulate open awareness the same goal can be achieved equally well through other open awareness techniques such as a brief meditation on the topic, completion of a reflective journal entry, or drawing of a conceptual map.

Brooker (2013: 12) adds a third step to the contemplative process where the divergent step (open awareness) is followed by a convergent step (structured, reflective thinking) in order to refocus and bring closure. Practitioners of contemplative practice observe not only what is happening in their environment, but also what is simultaneously occurring within themselves, the observer (Brown, 1999: 70). A key component throughout the entire process is the ability to sustain contradictions of what might, at first appearance, be impossible polarities – what Batsleer (2009: 20) refers to as CATUR – the elements of complexity, ambiguity, tension, uncertainty and risk which are a feature of management careers.

3. Teaching Activities

Using the literature as a guide the authors constructed teaching plans that included a range of tools to support teaching in class and which could be later be utilised independently by students between classes to assist their learning. In Module A, for example, a typical in-class activity involved an opening call (blowing a referee’s whistle to attract attention); followed by a short warm-up or slow-down activity (for example, a basic relaxation exercise such as closing the eyes) to create focus; trial of a contemplative activity involving open awareness techniques (first demonstrated by the lecturer, and then practised by students). Each activity finished with a debrief discussion and time for reflection to ensure students appreciated the role of the
activity in their learning and its link to an intended outcome. Individual contemplative activities demonstrated and practised in class for Module A included assumption surfacing (Mason and Mitroff, 1981); focusing (Gendlin, 1981); in-and-out listening (Nolan, 1989); mind mapping (Buzan, 1982); and prayer.

Guidance was provided by the lecturer so that students were encouraged to perform a practice, or a group of practices, independently after class. Included in these follow-on activities were the application of reflective models (Kolb, 1984; Gibb, 1988); boundary examination (deBono, 1982); keeping of dream diaries (McKim, 1989); meditation techniques; and visualising. Students added their own practices and preferred activities and shared their knowledge and understanding of these with lecturers and other students e.g. prayer rituals from their own religion.

An example of how these techniques could be combined in class is shown in Appendix 2. This set centred on a simple imagery exercise that was used as a precursor demonstration in class, and followed up outside class with a longer (20 minute), guided visualisation using a pre-recorded MP3 file (Henry, 2000) that was made available to students:

4. Assessment Activities

Teachers can informally assess student’s engagement in contemplative practice on the basis of their steadfastness during in-class activities and verbal reporting of after-class activities. More objective measures can be employed to support this (for example attendance records, completed psychological and behavioural questionnaires, physical evidence of doing practices between classes) although the more common forms of assessment inquiry are subjective (open-ended questions in class; reviews of experiences reflected in written reports; and noting contemplative practices mentioned journals). Many typical, in-class interpretive assessment techniques can be readily adapted for use in contemplative learning situations e.g. the outputs of a post-meditative focus on a student’s career plan can be mapped using a simple pro-con grid; a team imaging practice related to competences can be reflected on using a force-field analysis (Miller, 1987). Appendix 3 contains an example of contemplative assessment in Module B.
In both modules learning outcomes were assessed using a reflective journal (weighted 10% in the case of Module A and 45% in the case of Module B). Reflection describes processes where individuals explore their experiences to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their learning (Boud et al., 1985). It prompts people to consider events/experiences and to evaluate the outcome of such events/experiences. Maintaining a reflective journal, which comprises a collection of notes, observations, thoughts and other relevant material built up over a period of time, enhances learning through the process of writing and thinking about the events/experiences that people encounter (Watson and Reissner, 2014).

Students taking the modules were tasked with keeping a journal based on their reflection-on-action (thinking that takes place after an experience) (Schön, 1987); to reflect on critical incidents (Webster and Mertova, 2007) that were intrinsic within the natural progression of the Masters programme and/or extrinsically produced by external events, and/or personal to their own lives (Measor, 1985); and encompass their responses to these critical incidents in their written reports. Students were invited to embrace dialogic reflection (considering the decisions and judgments made and possible reasons for these) and critical reflection (accounting for the broader historic, cultural, and political values in framing practical problems to arrive at a solution) (Hatton and Smith, 1995). They were encouraged to draw upon formal analytical tools, such as Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and Gibb’s (1988) model of reflection (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis of meaning, analysis of alternatives, action plan).

Other written outputs assessed on both modules related to career development and included, *inter alia*, a written analysis of a managerial role (Modules A and B); a written evaluation of three potential candidates for a senior management position (Module A); and preparation of individual curriculum vitae (Modules A and B). In reviewing these tasks the assessors considered the students’ observations and comments that acknowledged their thoughts, mental and physical sensations related to feelings and facts.
5. Learner and Teacher Outcomes

Student feedback was derived from four sources: informal verbal comments made in class; commentary from the end-of-module evaluations; entries in the reflective journals; and comments in the other parts of the report (role evaluations and development plans).

Students in Module A reported that while initially sceptical of contemplative practices they felt encouraged, and later became willing, to try them out. The main barrier to adopting such techniques was fear of peer which quickly changed to share and care and, eventually, the creation of an open and mutually supportive peer community. The experiences of Ravinder, (female, early thirties, Indian, 10 years work experience) encapsulates what most students felt:

“Inclusion of contemplative activities developed my awareness that there are other ways of knowing that can be integrated with cognitive learning. We learned in an enjoyable way that I will not easily forget”.

Students reported that self-assessment techniques helped them to reflect on their past work experiences and learning, and to contemplate their future careers. Juliet (female, late thirties, French, 5 years work experience) said:

“I felt a greater capacity for self-awareness. I experienced higher levels of focus and the practices helped with my general concentration. I also felt I improved cognitive and critical thinking skills over the course of the module”.

An unanticipated, but very useful, outcome that emerged from the use of contemplative techniques was that it fostered greater connection between students and educators through the sharing of experiences and resources. John (male, early-fifties, Irish, 30 years work experience) claimed:

“Swopping ideas for meditative and reflective practices gave me insight into how different cultures work. It also had the indirect effect of enhancing interpersonal skills such as active listening and open communication”.

In Module B the majority of students rated the use of a reflective journal in assessment as above average (‘4’ and ‘5’ on a 5-point semantic scale). The grades achieved by the students for completing the reflective journal were indicative of the positive feedback emanating from the evaluations. Six students obtained a first, nine
an upper second and six a lower second. The average grade was 66.14 per cent, with the range from 50 to 93. Similar results were obtained for students on Module A (average 64.5 per cent with the range from 50 to 87).

The journal entries highlighted the conversion nature of the Masters programmes, requesting individuals predominantly schooled in the functionalist paradigm to undertake a task situated in the interpretive paradigm (Flick, 2014). In Module B the challenges and the benefits faced by someone with an engineering undergraduate background maintaining a reflective journal is epitomised by Daniel (male, mid-20s, Irish, less than three years work experience):

“This process did not come naturally to me. ... Previous to this Masters, I would have deferred to the opinion of a single individual, which I would have a significant level of respect for, or widely accepted a validated theory that was proposed. ... Critically reflecting on instances throughout my journey though the Masters, allowed me to question my own assumptions, the causes or origins of these assumptions and how these assumptions affected my ability to make the most out of any learning opportunity ... I [can] truthfully say that the Masters has taught me more ... it is a practice that I will be continuing on in whatever direction my career takes me”.

The advantage of integrating theory and practice in a reflective journal to improve future action is captured by Barbara (female, mid-40s, Irish, more than 20 years work experience):

“Referring back to Kolb’s generalisation stage, I have noted many experiences that I can now take into future actions, in the work environment and elsewhere. I will take on board how I should interact with others, to get the best out of us both, from delegation, mentoring and clarifying roles to enjoying working with others, being challenged by them and being open to new ideas. I hope to use the time management skills and the reviewing techniques to work smarter, to get the basics right and the take a more measured approach. This process has been a great learning curve for me. I intend to use the reflective journal again, particularly in new and challenging situations”.
6. Conclusions and Future Work

A key question for any learning intervention is: does it help the learner to achieve the aims and intended learning objectives set out in the syllabus? Contemplative practices supplement and complement, rather than replace, traditional constructivist/interpretive activities used in business and management teaching and assessment. They improve engagement with the module materials and support the achievement of the intended learning objectives.

Students focus better, more fully immerse themselves in the observed moment, are better able to sustain contradictions and become more reflective.

Effective contemplative pedagogy needs to link teaching practices directly to intended learning objectives. For Module A practising these techniques was a fun break from normal class activity there was always a need to ensure students understood their relevance to the aims and objectives of the modules. Both modules related to professional development, and in instructing students to carry out any activity it was necessary to locate it within their wider learning on the topic and demonstrate how it could aid decision making about their career choices.

Contemplative techniques are readily incorporated into assessment techniques. It can be difficult, however, to set out objective criteria for classifying achievement. Both lecturers felt they had to rely on subjective measures in assessing – at times it was a case of replacing the old adage of “I know a first when I see one” with “I know a first when I feel one”! This is an area which requires further exploration.

Module content does not need to change substantially in order to include contemplative practices in teaching or assessing. Contemplative activities work best when they are incorporated seamlessly and quickly into other learning events. The integration of mindfulness and reflective practices with traditional constructivist/interpretive approaches provides students with tools to improve their capacities for introspection, reflection and action. Students appreciate learning from a holistic approach that incorporates both theoretical concepts and practical interventions. More importantly, it equips them with a valuable life skill.
References


### Appendix 1: Summary of Two Postgraduate Professional Development Modules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masters’ Programme Details:</th>
<th>Module A – Leadership and Management Development</th>
<th>Module B – Professional Development</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MSc in International Business Management. One year full and two year part-time programme. Progression programme for those who previously studied a Level 8 business or management programme or equivalent who wish to pursue management careers in international business.</td>
<td>MSc in Technology and Innovation Management. One-year full-time programme. Conversion programme for science, engineering and technology graduates who wish to develop an innovation, management and commercial perspective on technology, and/or pursue careers in a technology focussed industry.</td>
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<td>Student Cohort:</td>
<td>25 full-time and 12 part-time students from Ireland, the UK, continental Europe, USA, South America, Asia and Africa seeking to advance studies in a metnational environment.</td>
<td>21 students, part of the Irish Government’s Springboard initiative (providing places for unemployed people in areas where there are employment opportunities on courses up to Master’s level).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Module Overview and Key Objectives:</td>
<td>Addresses the knowledge, skills and attributes required for future positions in international business. Facilitates personal and professional development and develops a capability for lifelong learning over the student’s entire career.</td>
<td>Addresses the preparation, process and practice required by students entering and participating in the contemporary workplace. Facilitates the student’s self development in terms of oral and written skills, engendering a sense of competence and self confidence.</td>
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<td>Allows the student to reflect on, improve and self manage, whilst portraying a professional presentation of their skills set. Equips students with the knowledge, techniques and skills to engage in, and report on, an applied consultancy project.</td>
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<td>Delivery Methods:</td>
<td>36 contact hours over 2 semesters taught in 3-hour blocks. 64 self-directed learning hours.</td>
<td>24 contact hours over 2 semesters taught in six 4-hour blocks. 52 self-directed learning hours.</td>
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<td>Assessment Tasks:</td>
<td>Written, personal reflections (weighted 10%). Analysing a managerial role in a case study company (30%). Preparing a CV/letter based on a simulated role and reflecting on the submitted application (weighted 30%). Formulating a prospective career and self development action plan (weighted 30%). In-class discussion (formative).</td>
<td>Writing a reflective journal (weighted 45%). Preparing a CV/letter based on a simulated role and reflecting on the submitted application (weighted 20%). Formulating a prospective career action plan and a consultancy project planning report (weighted 20%). Participating in an end-of-module interview (weighted 15%).</td>
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Appendix 2 – Example of Contemplative Teaching in Module A

**Call to attend, focus and relaxation:** Sounding a bell quietly; resounding the bell. Deep breathing technique.

**Open awareness visualisation:** “Close your eyes gently. Now imagine an orange. Notice the colour. The variation in the colour. What is the shape like? How round is it? How deep are the pits in the skin? Imagine taking a knife and cutting into the orange; first into the skin - can you hear the sound as the knife cuts? Now imagine yourself cutting out a wedge - can you feel the texture. Pick it up and bring it to your face - can you smell it? Imagine yourself biting into this delicious piece of orange - does it taste sweet? Now open your eyes.

**Refocus:** Visual cue – a slide showing a juicy orange with a segment cut out.

**Boundary examination:** Are you salivating at the thought of eating an orange?

**Group debrief:** Help-hinder matrix followed by silence and personal reflection.
Appendix 3 – Example of Contemplative Assessment in Module B

**Objective:** Consider events/experiences related to the Masters programme, reflecting on what you learned from these events/experiences, and your consideration of how this may affect your practice in the future (based on reflection-on-action).

**Weighting:** 45% of overall marks.

**Instructions:** Structure and format the journal appropriate to an academic work. Keep within a word count of 2,000 to 4,000 words (excluding appendices and bibliography).

**Assessment Criteria:** Assessment based on the extent of evidence that the student has moved beyond description to commentary and reflection on the following categories: Theoretical underpinnings (30%) – appropriate reference to relevant theories, demonstrating a knowledge and understanding of how critical reflection theories apply to the topic; practical application (60%) – appropriate reference to relevant practice and own learning, demonstrating an ability to apply knowledge of the topic to real world situations; academic presentation and coherence (10%) – appropriate writing style, structure, logic, headings and sub-headings, font, format, pagination and adherence to APA referencing.