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Promoting a Contemplative Learning and Teaching Community – Dr. Maryann Krikorian



To date, several recent higher education news articles reported on the current struggles students face during their higher education experience. For instance, findings from the Gallup-Purdue Index Report indicated that, of 30,000 college students, only 14% reported

having a professor whom they perceived cared about them (Inside Higher Ed, 2014). This finding draws attention to the potential need for an ethic of care that may foster positive learning environments for optimal learning outcomes. Moreover, according to the American College Health Association 32% of student respondents reported feeling so depressed that it was difficult to function (Inside Higher Ed, 2015). This report draws attention to the negative feelings students may experience from a lack of present focus. Lastly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2015) surveyed business and nonprofit leaders about their views on current college graduates. Findings from the survey found 95% of employers indicated how college students would benefit from having experiences with people whose views are different from their own. Such experiences call for a nonjudgmental and unbiased approach to listening that might also be useful for real world intervention.

In higher education, the recognition and development of the intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions may promote a positive learning trajectory, more just and compassionate students, and a skill-set that meet the needs of diverse populations in the 21st century (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer, 1983; Rendón, 2009). A holistic understanding of the student as an integrated

whole person should be reinforced through a curriculum that engages the mind, body, and inner self (Palmer, 1983). The purpose of this article is to share a conceptual analysis addressing three theoretical foci: 1) Emotional intelligence; 2) Contemplative practices; and 3) Practical suggestions in higher education.

Emotional Intelligence

The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) dates back to Socrates (469–399 B.C.) and what we know from documentation provided by his student Plato. Noddings (2012) explained that Socrates explored social causes, political issues, and topics concerning self-awareness with his students through the Socratic Method. What was then seen as self-knowledge is now viewed as an element of EI (Goleman, 2006). The value of EI has been a point of discussion since the Greek period, illuminating the vitality of emotional life for the human capacity (Noddings, 2012). To date, many developmental theories have supported emotional capabilities, such as Howard Gardner's multiple/personal intelligence theories (Gardner & Hatch, 1989), Peter Salovey's EI theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), and Daniel Goleman's EI theory (2006). Gardner (1993) redefined the traditional concept of intelligence by moving beyond the focus on cognitive aptitudes. His multiple intelligence theory is grounded in seven different ways of knowing. Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as the capacity to monitor one's own emotions and the feelings of others. Goleman (2006) described EI as a meta-ability consisting of mental processes and behaviors involving any level of reflection, learning-strategy selection, and intentionality that may result in an improved lifestyle. These theorists argued that objective views of human intelligence are narrow and may be strengthened by including human emotions.

Contemplative Practices

According to experts in the field of Contemplative Practices (CP) (e.g., Barbezat & Bush; 2014), EI may be used to frame the construct of CP in higher education. Barbezat and Bush (2014) specified five constructs of CP: 1) EI,

2) reflection, 3) listening competency, 4) mindfulness, and 5) self-compassion. Moreover, research in the area of CP highlighted the following findings: 1) possible improvement to instructional strategies, 2) probable connection to course content, 3) plausible enhancement to critical thinking skills, 4) likely reduction in negative emotions, and 5) plausible increase in calmness. Hammerle (2015), Vine (2012), and Im (2010) conducted research that yielded findings in support of instructional strategies and its implementation in classroom settings. Findings from Bagshaw (2014) and Im supported a potential relationship between CP and a greater sense of connection to course content. Kemeny et al. (2012) supported how CP may reduce the rehearsal of negative emotions. Sable (2014) and Helber et al. (2012) suggested a possible increase in executive functioning through CP. Lastly, Miller and Nozawa (2012) as well as Beer (2010) noted a possible increase in calmness through the integration of CP. There are many potential benefits to CP. One major advantage may be mental balance and wellbeing (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer, 1983; Rendón, 2009).

Practical Implications

Future implications may include examining the faculty-student dynamic more closely with consideration to CP. Faculty may consider setting clear objectives and goals specific to student-faculty working alliances directly with students. Engaging students in a more reciprocal relationship may strengthen their perceived level of control over their learning. This adjustment may ease or decrease negative emotions from a lack of present focus. Moreover, faculty may also consider evaluating students' developmental needs to enhance self-exploration. For example, faculty may engage students in the development of their own personal vision and/or philosophy of life and education to promote intimate connections to content knowledge. Lastly, faculty may consider reassuring students that the classroom is a safe place to show vulnerability and discuss sensitive material. For instance, faculty may take advantage of opportunities to confront binary perspectives by pedagogical approaches

based on action-reflection and/or influence helping skills performance through the integration of interactive small group-work (i.e., debates). CP and its practical suggestions may help students develop a deeper sense of themselves and their place in the world (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer, 1983; Rendón, 2009).

Practical suggestions may also help refine current curriculum and training programs in support of a more holistic approach to education. CP may compliment the admissions processes to recruit well-rounded students in content and affect. Academic program directors may consider that students who pass the first applicant screening for admissions have been approved for desired academic prerequisites, and the second applicant screening may potentially focus on dispositional characteristics to ensure well-rounded applicants. Areas of CP may guide interview questions during applicant interviews where students are evaluated on thought-process in place of the actual answer. Additionally, students may benefit from an elective course concentrated in areas of CP (i.e., helping skills) to practice strategies that may enhance skill-sets in their field of study. Lastly, areas of CP may inform faculty lesson plans or curriculum development to help support students' behavioral skills in hopes of decreasing stress, anxiety, and burnout. Faculty may consider developing innovative professional development opportunities to enhance affective states that will positively influence student learning and well being.

Conclusion

This article is designed to be a conceptual analysis of contemplative practices to enhance student learning outcomes and well being. To date, such contemplative models in higher education are scarce and need to be constructed further. Additional research is recommended to support CP for future benefit to practice. Despite its limitations, CP and its potential benefits to emotional life and learning still merits investigation in an effort to address such gaps in the literature.

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