Regenerative Change: Engaging at the Intersection of Inner and Outer Work through Contemplative Learning

Heather L. Burns  
*Portland State University, hburns@pdx.edu*

Celine Fitzmaurice  
*Portland State University, celine@pdx.edu*

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Regenerative Change: Engaging at the Intersection of Inner and Outer Work through Contemplative Learning

Heather Burns, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy
Graduate School of Education
Portland State University
hburns@pdx.edu

Celine Fitzmaurice, M.A.
Senior Instructor II
University Studies
Portland State University
celine@pdx.edu

Abstract
This article explores the intersection of the inner and outer work of regenerative change making through contemplative practices at Portland State University. It describes contemplative strategies employed with graduate students and university faculty including classroom practices and a professional development retreat series for faculty. The authors discuss the importance of inner work in fostering transformative teaching and learning, and explore the connections between inner work, contemplative practices, and transformative learning theory.
Introduction

Over the years, our work has been shaped by urgency to make change in a world in which we see grave social and ecological injustices and imbalances. This desire to affect change led us both into teaching and mentoring work at the university level, and we have put a great deal of energy into teaching and learning for sustainable change. However, over time we have both realized the radical importance of slowing down and the essential nature that inner work plays in any kind of change. Slowing down enough to listen to ourselves, and to be able to engage our authentic selves and true gifts as educators, and to recognize our sense of interconnection with all life has created a shift in both what we do (our outer work) and a clearer vision for why we do it (inner work). Recognizing that colleagues and students all around us are also yearning for time to slow down to connect with each other, with themselves, and with all life, our work has shifted to facilitating more transformative inner work that honors the whole self. In particular, our exploration of contemplative practices in teaching and learning has helped reinforce the importance of slowing down and contemplation in transformative learning. In this article we provide an overview of our work. Next, we discuss the connections between inner work, contemplative teaching and learning, and transformative learning theory. Finally, we offer some examples of contemplative practices and subsequent impacts on participants.

Overview of our work

Our work at a large urban university centers primarily on transformative learning at the intersections of grave ecological and cultural challenges and immense possibilities for change. Portland State University’s motto “Let Knowledge Serve the City” speaks to our university’s efforts to partner with the surrounding community to respond to shared challenges. PSU attracts a diverse student body and our courses are populated with students representing a range of ages, and a variety of professional and life experiences. Both of us serve as educators in this university setting, addressing pressing social and environmental issues through our course and program themes. Fitzmaurice serves as a Senior Instructor for service-learning capstone courses in the university’s general education program. The capstone is a required, interdisciplinary course for graduating seniors that invites students to apply what they have learned in their majors to community needs. In addition to teaching, she also serves as a Faculty Support Facilitator for the capstone program, providing training and one-on-one support to faculty members in her program. It is in this role that she facilitates inner work experiences for faculty. Burns is the Director and a teaching faculty member of the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) program, a master’s program situated in the Educational Leadership & Policy department in the Graduate School of Education. The LSE program combines leadership development with educational theory and practice in order to foster personal and professional growth. LSE prepares educators to affect change through careers in a variety of arenas, in garden and farm education programs, in outdoor education programs, in higher education, and in many nonprofit settings. In LSE, sustainability education is viewed as a process of transforming perspectives and opening hearts in order to enact regenerative change and healing in the world.
Inner work and contemplative learning

As we have engaged in our work, we have become increasingly involved in another key intersection; the intersection of “outer” change work and “inner” personal work. Inner work, while commonly disregarded in higher education, is the spiritual work of finding meaning, developing a sense of wholeness and authenticity, and recognizing our interconnectedness (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). In our work, our sense of purpose is rooted in the need for regenerative change in our world, by which we mean processes that restore, renew, or revitalize cultural and ecological systems, in healthy ways that honor our interconnectedness with all life. We find hope and inspiration in working with many creative and engaged students and faculty who are seeking to foster regenerative change in the world. However, we also often find that the faculty and students we serve are overworked, stressed, and have developed depleting patterns in their lives. As Beer et al. (2015) ask, how can those in higher education “build an atmosphere of transformational learning if they are not themselves engaged in activities which nourish their own growth, creativity and stability?” (p. 162)

Traditional approaches to teaching and learning have focused on outer work, the development of concrete skills and knowledge to prepare students for paid work in the world (Sterling, 2002). A traditional approach to academics has focused narrowly on the mind. In a few disciplines the body also receives some attention (dance, athletics, the arts, etc.) Seldom, if ever, does a focus on the spirit or one’s personhood come into play (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). For many, the mention of inner work conjures up images of spiritual gatherings, “fluffy” reflection activities, or even escapism. This work is often viewed as strange, uncomfortable, unpredictable, and irrelevant to the mission of the academy. Additionally, inner work takes time and is a departure from the banking model of education, in which information is deposited from teacher to learner (Freire, 1970). Instead, inner work draws from the wisdom of the participants and calls for a whole person approach to learning. Teaching and learning must shift to an active and engaged model in order to provide opportunities for transformative learning that leads to sustainable change in the world. This approach honors the whole learner, and provides opportunities for reuniting the inner and outer selves (Burns, 2015).

We are engaging, therefore, in the intentional design of transformative teaching and learning and faculty support that integrates contemplative practices to bridge inner and outer work. We seek to engage in transformative teaching and learning that supports living an undivided life in which one’s outer work is aligned with one’s inner self (Palmer, 1998). Engaging in contemplative learning practices with educators and emerging leaders strongly supports the development of undivided lives.

Foundations in transformative learning theory

Our work at the intersections of inner and outer work using contemplative methods is rooted in transformative learning theory. Our understanding of transformative learning is that it may be relational, affective, extrarational, or experiential (Cranton, 2006), and that transformative learning is best facilitated through engaging multiple dimensions including affective, spiritual, imaginative, somatic, sociocultural, or rational (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). We also embrace the term “integral transformative learning” which, according to O’Sullivan (2002) is a deep cultural shift that
involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-location; our relationships with other humans and the natural world; our understanding of the relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice, and peace, and personal joy (p. xvii).

This is a transformative inner shift that alters our outward way of being in the world.

The spiritual work of transformative learning begins with us as educators (Taylor, 2006), and our commitments to personal self-awareness and authenticity. As educators we recognize that we must engage with the great needs of the world holistically and with integrity, employing our gifts as well as our vulnerabilities, while inviting others into this same transformative work. We have been heavily influenced by integrative and holistic educators (Palmer, 1998; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; hooks, 1994; Wheatley and Freize, 2011; Macy & Johnstone, 2012), ecological and whole systems thinking (Capra, 2002; Sterling, 2002; Meadows, 2008; Holmgren, 2004), transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2006; Mezirow, Taylor & Associates, 2009; Taylor, Cranton & Associates, 2012; O’Sullivan, Morrell & O’Connor, 2002; Cranton, 2006), and the recent emergence of contemplative practices in higher education (Morgan, 2015; Barzebat & Bush, 2014). We have also seen a rise in the connections between spirituality, contemplative practices, and transformative learning, as evidenced in recent issues of the Journal of Transformative Education (Ergas, 2013; Burns, 2015; Burrows, 2015; Mamgain, 2010; Morgan, 2015).

Considering the state of our world, these connections must also reflect an ecological identity and sense of interconnectedness—an aspect of transformative learning that is recognized (O’Sullivan, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2012), but not yet well reflected in this field. This ecological awareness is a recognition that we are not separate from the world we inhabit (Devall & Sessions, 2007; Thomashow, 1995). As microcosms of the macrocosm (Kumar, 2002), we are literally made up of air, water, soil, and energy. A recognition of our interconnectedness with the earth reflects a worldview that is holistic and not simply human-centered. As transformative educators, we believe that contemplative spiritual practices can enhance both our personal authenticity, wholeness, and a deep sense of interconnectedness, as well as our abilities to engage in authentic regenerative change making that emerges from this ecological way of being. This is change that is holistic, respectful, compassionate, relational, and non-violent. As Cranton (2006) says, it is about becoming more fully who we are to joyfully and authentically enter into relationship with all of life.

Example from practice: Opening circle classroom ritual

In the Leadership for Sustainability Education program inner work is an important aspect of everything we do; self-understanding is one of the program’s four key learning goals. A variety of assignments and activities encourage and support personal reflection throughout our courses. Contemplative practices are also woven throughout our courses and include walking meditation, reflective writing, poetry, reflective expression, art, and storytelling, among others. The opening circle is one central practice that Burns has developed to cultivate regular space for contemplation and connection.

Opening circle is a ritual that Burns employs at the beginning of each class session in all classes. In this circle, class members stand in a circle, engage in 5-10
minute contemplative activity, do some body movement, and engage in a community building activity. Contemplative activities in the opening circle might include a guided meditation on the breath, a guided relaxation focused on the body, a self-compassion exercise, or simply silence followed by intention setting. After quiet contemplation, the opening circle includes time for community building activities. Typically these activities involve sharing a personal highlight, a gratitude, or a life struggle. This ritual of acknowledging the spirit and quieting the self, along with reconnecting with each other in meaningful ways and practicing listening and compassion, signals that inner work is a valued aspect of our learning together. The amount of space, quietness, and openness that this short ritual creates is palpable. This ritual allows for tension release, transition from other activities to class time, and for slowing down enough to really listen to themselves and each other, which promotes deeper relationships. On occasion, students will question the value of spending limited class time on the opening circle, especially the time for sharing and connecting with one another. However, over time the value of this activity usually becomes clearly apparent as students recognize the depth of relationships and learning that occurs. In a recent study, the class ritual of opening circle was noted as a primary way that the class created community and felt connected to one another (Burns, in press).

Example from practice: Faculty retreat series

In the university’s general education program, Fitzmaurice, through her role as a faculty support facilitator, introduced inner work to her colleagues in an experimental and incremental manner. Early efforts to integrate and normalize a culture of inner work in her departmental setting included contemplative practices such as opening meetings with introductory questions that highlighted an aspect of self beyond our profession, incorporating quotes into agendas, and encouraging the use of poetry as a teaching and leadership tool. Eventually, the faculty graduated to forming book discussion groups around texts that encouraged the use of inner work techniques or deep reflection such as The Courage to Teach (Palmer, 1998) and Teaching with Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach (Intrator & Scribner, 2003). Eventually, Fitzmaurice organized a multi-day retreat series titled The Art of Teaching: Working from the Inside Out for a cohort of 15 faculty participants. The series is now approaching its 4th year and attracts faculty from a variety of academic ranks and disciplines.

The retreat series is rooted in the Circle of Trust © retreat approach developed by Parker Palmer and others affiliated with the Center for Courage and Renewal. Currently, the Center oversees the training and preparation of a growing network of global facilitators who facilitate Circle of Trust retreats for diverse participants. Several of the trained facilitators have developed programming for a higher education audience. Fitzmaurice, a trained facilitator in this model, designs and co-facilitates each series with another trained facilitator. The retreat series provides a space for faculty to slow down and reflect on their professional roles. The overall focus of the retreat is to help instructors nurture authenticity, integrity, and a sense of vocational vitality. Each retreat session explores a particular theme in depth and includes time for individual reflection and collegial conversations.

The space created in this series is vastly different from other “work spaces” in which faculty interact. First, the retreat series takes place off-campus in a garden setting,
a tranquil setting for faculty to engage in inner work. Retreat activities are carefully tailored to help participants access their own wisdom and the support of their fellow retreatants to bring themselves fully to their roles as educators. Facilitators draw on many contemplative practices in the design of each retreat. These include the use of poetry, the garden landscape, photographs, creative activities, walking reflections, collegial conversations, and silence.

The participants are encouraged to embrace a set of Circle of Trust Touchstones, to ensure the co-creation of a safe and generative environment for faculty to engage in inner work. Sample touchstones include: Trust and learn from silence; attend to your own inner teacher; and know that it is possible to leave the circle with whatever it was you needed when you arrived. Another touchstone, commit to no fixing, saving, correcting or advising one another, instructs participants to slow down and pay close attention to their own inner teacher while resisting the urge to get in the way of another person’s inner wisdom. We’ve found this touchstone to be particularly powerful as participants engage in group work.

At the end of each retreat series, faculty speak to a variety of positive impacts. A common theme is that the series helps participants return to their center and teach from a place of balance. Participants have commented on their deepened sense of collegiality with peers. Finally, many participants speak to the ways that the retreat series has reconnected them with their authentic selves and given them the courage to pursue professional activities that reflect their core values and characteristics.

Conclusion

In our work, we engage in and invite others to explore the transformative intersection of inner and outer work. It is our hope that this will lead students and faculty to engage in change work from a place of balance, authenticity and interconnectedness. Our intention is to nurture seeds of undividedness through contemplative practices. As we engage in transformative teaching and learning with students and colleagues, we continue to grow as professionals and witness the power of contemplative practice to enact change. It is heartening to see the rise in scholarship and practice surrounding the intersection of inner and outer work in the academy and we embrace the increased legitimacy of this transformative approach to teaching and learning. In the words of Tolliver and Tisdell (2006), “we are committed to learning that makes a difference in learners’ lives and increases their sense of knowing...in their heads, their hearts, their souls, and their entire being—that has meaning to them and that makes a difference in the world” (p. 45).
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