



Attention as skill: Contemplation in online learning environments

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This is an exploration of the need to cultivate attention as a skill in online learning ecosystems. Taylor's College is an alternative pathway provider to the University of Western Australia. It is redesigning its diploma program delivery, equivalent to the first year of university, to include non-traditional spaces both online and physical. One of the concerns of online spaces is in equipping the students with the skill of attention control. In online environments it is easy to have reactive attention to stimuli that is not always within one's control. I suggest having an internal locus of control for attention is a skill to be cultivated to ensure effective learning in online environments. This research looks at the field of contemplative education to see what is offered in this space. Contemplation involves attention and awareness.

Keywords: contemplation, mindfulness, online, tertiary education, learning, e-learning, digital

Technology is open for many unmindful uses. As an example, problems can emerge when we post content online, without first taking a breath and considering what the implications might be. Other issues of unmindful use of technology include online bullying, disconnection from face-to-face social relationships, developing a passive learning style, and literally training ourselves to be inattentive and unfocused (Hassed & Chambers, 2014). Today our attention is pulled in a multitude of directions through technology and the media. Miller (2014) argues that this results in fragmented consciousness, where we are pushed and pulled by the outside world. However, from contemplative awareness, we see things as they are now.

There are already several campus initiatives across America in the contemplative studies space including Brown University's Contemplative Studies Initiative, Centre for New Designs and Scholarship at Georgetown, Emory Collaborative for Contemplative Studies, Mindful Awareness Research Centre at UCLA, The Center for compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University, and UCSD Center for Mindfulness (The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, n.d.). In Australia There has been some work in UNSW in contemplative studies through a symposium on Contemplative Education at UNSW, May 15th, 2014 (University of New South Wales, n.d.). Additionally, Australia now has its first government accredited tertiary institution grounded in Buddhist values and wisdom. Incorporating the mindfulness arm of contemplation, it organised the International Conference on Mindfulness, Education and Transformation 2014 (Nan Tien Institute, n.d.). These are leading institutions which provide both face-to-face and online learning environments and have considerations for the students' use of attention especially with regards to completion of the programs.

Digital learning ecosystems give rise to the need for enhanced digital contemplative methods (Bush, 2010) which in turn can assist in enhancing attention. There is some effort to outline ways in which the body, social isolation, identity and aesthetics in online education can be approached mindfully. Douglass (2007) suggests that a way to investigate whether the format really serves students or contributes to their isolation is by honestly assessing our own relationship with technology. Some have gone as far as referring to contemplation's esoteric roots. In an asynchronous environment, where students can participate on their own schedules, it is possible to require every student to participate in each session, which is more difficult in synchronous settings (Coburn, 2013). In online learning, there is a built-in opportunity for reflectiveness, although that opportunity needs to be cultivated. Educators are seeking to increase attention, contemplation, wisdom, and compassion by using the very digital media that seems to be decreasing these capacities (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

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