

Project Report: *Standing Still to Learn, Contemplative and Creative Approaches to Education: New Paradigms in Teaching and Learning Symposium, UNSW, 15th May 2014*

Overview:

The aims of the *Standing Still to Learn, Contemplative and Creative Approaches to Education: New Paradigms in Teaching and Learning Symposium* were threefold: 1. To introduce symposium participants to Contemplative Education; 2. To introduce participants to contemplative tools that they can use to deal with the stressors they may be facing; 3. To introduce participants to contemplative pedagogy and specific methods for their classroom practice. Judging by the feedback from participants these aims were achieved as the majority said that: (a) after the symposium their understanding of contemplative education had increased; (b) that they were more aware of techniques that would help them use contemplative practices in their work, and (c) they had more awareness of resources (See ‘Participant Feedback’ below).¹ Participants also found the mix of presentations that ranged from medicine to fine art, to be useful, in addition to the opportunity to network with like-minded people. As one participant commented in her feedback: “Excellent symposium, wonderful to be among like-minded people discussing such a ‘simple’ but powerful tool in educational learning.”

While another answered the question, ‘What did you particularly like about the symposium’ in this way: “Networking, meeting a group



¹ In a scale from 1-6 (1, Not at All – 6, Very Much So) they answered: question (a): 7 out of 15 circled ‘6’, 2 ‘5’, 5 ‘4’, and 1 ‘3’. Question (b): 4 circled ‘6’, 3 ‘5’, 7, ‘4’, and 1 ‘3’. Question (c), 6, ‘6’, 4, ‘5’, 2 ‘4’, 3, ‘3’.

of people interested in mindful education, hearing fascinating people talk about fascinating work”.

The one-day symposium was the first of its kind in Australia and brought together participants from UNSW, Macquarie, Newcastle and Wollongong universities. The presenters included: Dr Craig Hassed (medicine) and Dr Richard Chambers (psychology) from Monash University, Melbourne, who spoke of their integration of mindfulness across Monash. Professor Prue Vines from UNSW Law described her integration of contemplative practices in her large First Year courses. Dr Michael Garbutt, a professor from COFA, UNSW, introduced aspects of his ‘slow visual studies’. Joshua Barnes a pedagogue in the



School of Education at the University of Sydney, provided an experiential exercise that referenced contemplative evaluation. Dr Britta Biedermann, an ARC Research Fellow at the Centre for Cognition and its Disorders (CCD)

within the Department of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University, who was joined by her meditation teacher Zen Roshi Gillian Coote, presented on the experiential and theoretical aspects of her work with meditation and impaired auditory attention deficits. Michael Hines from UNSW’s Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offered a workshop framed by the *metta* or loving kindness practice to help participants integrate findings from these five presentations.

The symposium was made possible through a mini-grant for student success and well-being, funded by an OLT grant administered by A/Prof Jacquelyn Cranney, School of Psychology and Annie Andrews director of CAPS. The success of the symposium can be attributed to the standard of the presenters, their generosity in giving their time freely, enthusiasm for the topic and the participants ready engagement with this. In conclusion the symposium was very successful, providing participants with an overview of current approaches in

contemplative education in Australia, an introduction to practices that they might use in their work, and provided a much needed networking opportunity.

While it was a small gathering it is already making an impact in the universities represented at the symposium. Attendees from the universities of Newcastle and Wollongong plan to develop Contemplative Education



(CE) groups. There have been a range of impacts at Macquarie University, where links have been made with their ‘reflection in practice group’. An academic advisor at Macquarie is now integrating practices from the symposium into her work, and Dr Hased has been invited to make a presentation at Macquarie in August, 2014. An attendee from the University of Sydney (UOS) is planning to start a CE group at UOS, and the Mindfulness in Education

group at UNSW has been reinvigorated. There has also been the suggestion that the CE groups at each university will come together at least once a year, possibly to co-produce a conference, and that an online platform may be created to share information. Currently



there are 6 symposium participants from UNSW, in Media Studies, Social Science, Law, Business, SEADU and the ASPIRE program who as a direct result of attending the symposium are now developing contemplative pedagogy. In addition we believe it has positively impacted the personal lives of those who attended. As one participant said in email correspondence after the symposium: “The day was a stand-out for me, and has brought

around a great deal of thinking for me about how to get something started here at UOW, ... but also much more!”

Progress of Project:

Outcomes from the proposed timeline were met and completed within the time allocated (Please see Progress Report, April, 2014, Appendix 2). In general the project remained within the limits of the initial budget, though funds received from a \$40 attendance fee were not originally factored into this budget, neither was an extra \$1,000 provided by the funder to cover travel costs for the keynote speakers from Monash University (Please Appendix 3, the ‘Final Budget’).

Participant Feedback

Fifty-three people participated in the symposium, including the eight presenters and two volunteers. There was such high interest in the symposium that registrations were closed after 2 weeks of advertising as numbers had to be capped because of the size of the room housing the symposium. Although most participants were from UNSW, people from other universities as well as different educational institutions attended. Participants’ professional backgrounds ranged widely, including academics from various disciplines, high school teachers, doctoral students, and counsellors. At the end of the day everyone was encouraged to fill out a questionnaire that covered both a quantitative and qualitative section. This is what some of them then added in email correspondence after the symposium:

“It was a wonderfully well thought out day with great people, thanks again.”

“Thanks for a great conference Patricia. Very interesting papers and very smoothly organized – I enjoyed it very much.”

“Many thanks to you and all involved for organising today's symposium. This morning, I thought within minutes that I was in the best place I could possibly be today.”

Results from the 15 completed questionnaires are summarised below (For copy of the questionnaire see Appendix 5).

Except for one participant, all returned questionnaires showed affirmative responses (4 or higher on a scale of 1 to 6, ranging from “not at all” to “very much so”) to the statements “My understanding of contemplative education has increased” and “I am now more aware of techniques to help me integrate contemplative practices into my teaching and learning.” 80% also responded positively to the statement “I am now more aware of additional resources on contemplative education that I can access.” Moreover, 11 of the 15 respondents ticked the highest category (“very much so”), believing that “it would be useful to attend further events on contemplative education.” Only one participant did not agree with this statement.

Commenting on the two statements dealing with the “format, duration, and approach” as well as the “content” of the symposium all returned questionnaires demonstrated positive responses (4 or higher). For both statements, nine participants selected the highest category to share their perception of the quality of the symposium. The statement “My expectations of the symposium were met” received a similarly positive evaluation, with only one participant selecting a 3 (“moderately disagreeing”) and one selecting a 4 (“moderately agreeing”). 14 out of the 15 returned questionnaires showing that they agreed (5) or “agreed very much so” (6) that “The mix of theoretical information and experiential practices was helpful.

The qualitative part of the questionnaire covered four questions and participants’ responses to each are briefly summarised in the following:

The first open question invited participants to write down what they particularly liked about the symposium. The responses included mention of individual presentations (esp., Hassed, Chambers, and Garbutt); the mix of theory (talks) and practice (exercises); the range of the presentations and their disciplinary diversity; as well as the atmosphere of sharing and the opportunity to network with like-minded scholars and teachers across disciplines and institutions.

The second question asked participants to comment on how the event could be improved if held again. The questionnaires did not generate much information in this area. A few respondents did agree, however, that more time was needed to explore the ideas and to

continue the dialogue. While some favoured longer individual presentations and extended question times, others promoted a two-day event dedicated to contemplative education.

The third question asked participants whether they would now use contemplative exercises in their own teaching and learning. Except for three who did not provide any response to the question, all participants responded affirmatively. Three participants wrote that they already implemented contemplative methods into their teaching; another two pointed out they would require further information and practice to actively integrate such approaches into their teaching.

The fourth open-ended question gave participants the opportunity to share other comments, questions or concerns. Nine respondents used this space to express their appreciation for the symposium and congratulated the convenors on the success of the event. Six respondents kept this section blank.

Outcomes

The symposium provided a much needed networking opportunity for those who attended. Specifically at UNSW this has led to a revitalisation of the ‘Mindfulness in Higher Education’ group at UNSW, now titled ‘The Contemplative Education group’. This group meets once a month and at the first meeting on the 10th of July, 2014, nine academics met to discuss contemplative pedagogy. This was framed by the article “Toward the integration of meditation into higher education: A review of research”. One of the central aims for the group is to support academics at UNSW to introduce contemplative practices into their teaching and this has already started with two members from the group who work for Student Life and Learning, UNSW. One is using a contemplative breath practice introduced at the meeting in July in her teaching, while the other has asked for help from the group to integrate contemplative practices at 10 low socio-economic-status schools in regional and remote NSW and 3 public/high schools in Western Sydney where she works. In addition as noted above 6 UNSW academics have signalled through email correspondence that they aim to develop contemplative pedagogy.

Additionally, informal feedback from academics at Macquarie University has indicated that they have introduced colleagues they met at the symposium to their reflection in practice group. A participant from Sydney University made a presentation on the symposium to colleagues in



the School of Education. As a result of the symposium links are currently being made with the School of Medicine, UNSW and Dr Hased and Dr Chambers at Monash University with the aim to develop courses in mindfulness for UNSW medical students, following the approach that has been taken at Monash. As mentioned earlier there are plans for the development of CE groups at Wollongong and Newcastle Universities and for all of the CE groups to communicate across an online platform, and possibly join together to present a conference on contemplative education.

We would like to thank Annie Andrews and Jacquelyn Cranney for the financial support from their OLT funds and for their advice, support and time. In addition to our enthusiasm and awareness of the need for this approach in education, their support has underpinned the success of the *Standing Still to Learn, Contemplative and Creative Approaches to Education: New Paradigms in Teaching and Learning, Symposium*, held on the 15th May, 2014, at UNSW.