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**Book Review: Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning (by D. Barbezat and M. Bush)**

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## Book Review: Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning (by D. Barbezat and M. Bush)

### Abstract

This book review on Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush's book titled *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* aims to provide exposure to the possibility of enhanced student experience through contemplative practices across various fields of study and across universities globally. This book review summarizes and evaluates the book with the hope that it will help readership decide if this is a book they would like to purchase as part of their strategy for student learning. This book review, based on a contemplative approach to teaching and learning at the university, is important because it can inspire faculty to implement these strategies for deeper learning within university students. Also, varied contemplative practices are introduced that cultivate the common outcome of greater focus that can serve as a foundation for an internal ethical compass of a university student. Barbezat and Bush's book is significant to university learning and teaching practice as it challenges the notion of narrowly focused technical training and instead encourages faculty and students to examine how their thoughts and actions affect themselves and others. This book proves a worthy contribution to university learning and teaching practices across fields of study by offering an introduction and guidance on how to implement a fresh yet at the same time age-old practice to pedagogy that can cultivate deeper student learning by helping bring abstract concepts into embodied understanding.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Provide opportunities for students to make personal meaning in their lives through the course material
2. Encourage students to examine how their thoughts and actions affect themselves and others
3. Cultivate a student's internal ethical compass through contemplative practices
4. Acknowledge the importance of the teacher having a contemplative practice of their own
5. Allow for contemplatives practices in the classroom to cultivate deeper student learning by helping bring abstract concepts into embodied understanding

### Keywords

contemplative pedagogy; experiential education; ethics cultivation

**Barbezat, D., & Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. Jossey Bass. 231 pp. \$37.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-118-43527-4**

Written for those in academia, specifically seeming to speak to teaching faculty, Barbezat and Bush (2014) present contemplative practice as a pedagogy for the higher education classroom in their book, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. They put contemplative practices into context by stating “Contemplation is not the opposite of thinking but its complement. It is not the emptying of the mind of thoughts but the cultivation of awareness of thoughts within the mind” (p. 123). The aim of this book is to illustrate how contemplative practices can transform and renew learning in higher education by cultivating focus and attention building, deeper understanding, compassion, and personal meaning. The book is comprised of 11 chapters broken into two parts: part one is comprised of four chapters and offers a theoretical and practical background and part two is comprised of seven chapters offering a guide to specific contemplative practices.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for why contemplative practices are important in higher education institutions. The authors share themes from prior books that have illustrated the shortcomings of student education at the tertiary level. Examples include the tendency of college courses to focus on the goal versus the path to that goal and the pursuit of knowledge creation and knowledge storage at the cost of students finding personal meaning in their lives and their ethical compass through the course material. Introspective and contemplative practices are then introduced as a solution with the objectives of attention and analytical problem solving, deeper understanding, connection and compassion, and personal meaning put forward and detailed out for the reader. The chapter ends with cautionary tales such as admitting that contemplative practices are not a panacea for observation and insight, that these practices meant to replace other effective teaching learning methods, and that the teacher introducing contemplative practices have personal experience with them due to their subtle nature.

Chapter 2 puts forward research on contemplative practices; specifically, the traditions of meditation and introspection. Barbezat and Bush highlight studies that show meditation increases concentration and attention and can change parts of the brain that were previously thought to be hardwired. It is also shown that meditation can help students with depression, anxiety, and general physical health as well as increased connection, generosity, and loving kindness to ourselves and others. Introspection and the critiques of introspection are then discussed in the context of modern psychology to help the reader effectively frame introspective exercises such as helping to guide students to description versus interpretation and metaphors.

Chapter 3 provides a first-person account shared by both authors on how they integrate contemplative practices into their respective classes focused on economics and social work. This is helpful for the reader to illustrate that these practices can be effectively applied in very different fields of study and cultivate attention, deeper understanding of the course material, and enhance intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships among students in both settings. While shown as powerful and beneficial techniques in these two settings, Chapter 4 cautions that contemplative practices should be used by all faculty in all settings. Like all practices, Barbezat and Bush acknowledge critiques of contemplative practice techniques such as the religious roots of many contemplative practices as well as problems faced during implementation of contemplative practices

such as respecting student traditions, acknowledging human differences and commonalities, and managing student interaction.

With part one of the book setting the state for why contemplative practices are important, showcasing research conducted on contemplative practice traditions, and presenting the benefits and cautions of these practices, the second part of the book offers teaching faculty methods for implementation in the college classroom. More than half of the book is dedicated to the introduction of specific contemplative practices and how they have been applied at various higher education institutions as well as the impact they have had on students enrolled in these courses. These contemplative practices include mindfulness, contemplative approaches to reading and writing, deep listening and beholding, contemplative movement, compassion and loving kindness, and guest speakers, field trips, and retreats that were shared by faculty as part of a Center for Contemplative Mind in Society Contemplative Practice Fellowship program. There are many examples of student impact put forward by the various professors reporting on the contemplative practice used in their course, but the evidence behind these impacts was at times light. It would have been helpful for faculty to include how these student impact perceptions were obtained whether that be through formal survey results, focus group results, or informal conversations with students to ensure that student sentiment is clearly transmitted to the reader. However, the first-person sharing of contemplative practice integration across faculty, fields of study, and universities proves useful and inspiring for faculty either currently or considering adding contemplative practices to their courses. Furthermore, it is instructive that the authors shared accounts based on various contemplative practices that cultivate the common outcome of greater focus.

The aim of this book is fulfilled with the authors demonstrating how contemplative practices can transform tertiary education and serve to cultivate a more ethical society based on compassion and reflection. Barbezat and Bush emphasize that these goals can be accomplished through university students practicing this form of experiential education to cultivate self-awareness of their inner-being. Therefore, varied contemplative practices cultivate the common outcome of greater focus that can serve as a foundation for an internal ethical compass. This first-person learning theme is weaved throughout the book including an emphasis on the importance of the teacher having a contemplative practice of their own. They assert that while this first-person inquiry is a personal experimentation with the laboratory being the student's self, this faculty first-person contemplative practice can increase effectiveness in the classroom as a facilitator. By faculty examining their own inner experience through contemplative practice, they can better relate to what students may experience through this self-inquiry process and help guide them in their journey.

Barbezat and Bush's book is significant to university learning and teaching practice as it challenges the notion of narrowly focused technical training and instead encourages faculty and students to examine how their thoughts and actions affect themselves and others. Through first-person learning, Barbezat and Bush illustrate how abstract concepts across fields of study can be learned deeper through effective contemplative learning strategies. While the integration of contemplative practices in higher education that focus on the personal learning of the student can be trickier and more intensive than strictly focusing on the textbook for the class, they note the benefits of deeper learning and critical personal inquiry.

This book proves a worthy contribution to university learning and teaching practices across fields of study by offering an introduction and guidance on how to implement a fresh yet at the same time

age-old practice to pedagogy that can cultivate deeper student learning by helping bring abstract concepts into embodied understanding. As contemplative practices are a first-person versus third-person pedagogy, students are encouraged to analyse concepts personally versus something separate from the student. This can create meaning and purpose for the student and help them tap into their ethical compass. There is an ethical responsibility to care for our planet and other sentient beings on it. This book is recommended to faculty across the academy for ideas on how to implement contemplative practices into their courses to help tap into this ethical responsibility at higher education institutions by teaching students how to internalise course material and make meaning of it. This will support the higher education institution not only in fulfilling its mission statement, but also to hopefully produce more global ethical leaders in the future.