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Balancing Inner and Outer Technologies:  
Mobile Devices & Contemplative Practice

Nicky Duenkel

## **Abstract**

This article briefly considers elements of an exploratory study undertaken in a small first year university class in Community Studies in which both mobile devices and contemplative practices were intentionally integrated. Incorporating these two pedagogical elements provided valuable insights, each in their own right, and together they created scaffolding for a Contemplative Inquiry Assignment in which students were encouraged to mindfully observe their patterns of engaging with social networking and mobile devices. This experiential learning helped students raise awareness and make conscious aspects of their social network patterning in ways that no reading or lecture could.

**Keywords:** contemplative pedagogy, mobile devices, technology, social networking, concentration, attention

## **Introduction**

Paradoxical though it may seem, the very technologies that claim to connect us to one another and to the world faster and more effectively may also — at times and in various ways — be producing the opposite effect: disconnecting and distancing us, alienating us from ourselves and the world around us. (Levy, 2006, Introduction, para. 3)

Whether actively embraced by educators or not, mobile technologies are entering the educational arena (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2004). Given their ubiquity, it serves us as educators to explore how to best use the unique capabilities of these devices to benefit learning environments, preparing students for the rapidly changing world they are both entering and creating. Concurrently, there is growing research exploring impacts of the internet on our ability to concentrate. It has been proposed that time online is affecting how we think in other

environments, as we become less likely to exercise parts of the brain involved in deep concentration. Yet the vital capacity to engage with critical and creative thinking skills hinges upon our ability to activate deep thought processes (Carr, 2011). Contemplative practices, used for stilling the mind and cultivating attention (Hart, 2004), may act as an antidote to the fragmented, inattentive mental states that digital technologies appear to promote.

Though mobile devices are often perceived as distractions to learning (Brown, 2012; Porath, 2011), as a teacher I felt that completely prohibiting them in my university classes was counterproductive, especially given how prevalent they are in the culture at large. As I sat with this juxtaposition I realized that as a student I too had lost my focus in classes when mobile devices were unheard of. Clearly this is not a new phenomenon! As Rosenberg (2009) suggested, years ago when we'd notice a student distractedly passing a note across the classroom, we didn't ban the paper and pen with which the note had been written. "Blaming technology is not the answer" (p. 95).

In alignment with Parry's query, "How could people live balanced lives in the middle of these technologies" (2013, para. 31), I wondered if the potential for distraction with mobile devices could be countered or complemented by a concomitant focus on mindfulness or contemplative approaches. As a result, I chose to integrate both mobile devices and contemplative pedagogy into a first year university Community Studies class. My intentions were threefold: 1) To consider the impacts of incorporating a range of simple, secular methods of contemplation and reflection adapted to this particular classroom environment; 2) To investigate how intentionally including mobile devices could enhance a face- to-face learning

environment; and 3) To explore the interface and tensions between these two educational practices.

This article briefly describes my efforts to include both of these educational elements, bringing particular attention to a Contemplative Inquiry Assignment. The intention of this assignment was for students to mindfully observe their patterns of engaging with mobile devices and social networking over the course of two days. This was offered as an experiment in the laboratory of students' lives, to bring awareness to both their uses of technology and to their thoughts and feelings about how the patterns revealed were impacting their lives.

### **Exploring contemplative practices in education: Developing mindfulness**

The rational-empirical approach has long been the modern standard for legitimatizing and disseminating knowledge, due in large part (at least initially) to the pressure of industrial needs for efficiency, growth, and speed of production (Hart, 2004). Hart also acknowledged that there has been a parallel process involved in knowing—that of contemplation. This element has offered significant contributions to many disciplines, yet has remained largely absent from secular educational curricula and pedagogy. However, contemplative pedagogy is not only gaining momentum in K-12 settings (Schoeberlein & Koffler, 2005), there is also increasing awareness of the potential benefit of contemplative practices within higher education (Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003). The forces advancing this approach believe that, as Hart (2004) has proposed, “If we knew that particular and readily available activities would increase concentration, learning, well-being, and social and emotional growth and catalyze transformative learning, we would be cheating our students to exclude it” (p. 30). Zajonc (2003) also affirmed that, “Neglecting the spiritual and contemplative aspects of life is equivalent to neglecting half the facts” (p. 54).

Contemplative practices, integrated into classroom education and beyond, have been shown to provide countless benefits, including increased attention and enhanced concentration, improved empathy and compassion; reduced anxiety and stress symptoms, development of reflection and self observation skills, and to better the ability to build community and positive interpersonal relationships (Murphy, Donovan, & Taylor, 1997; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).

The contemplative mind is opened and activated through a wide range of approaches—from pondering poetry or listening to music to various forms of meditation—that are designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind and encourage a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight. Such practices encourage the development of an inner technology that promotes greater consciousness (Hart 2004), in contrast to the more technological outer devices with which we are often more familiar.

### **Contemplative Pedagogy in a First Year University Class**

As students entered the room, each was given a small box of raisins. Once seated, and initial greetings and chatter calmed down, students were asked to take three raisins from the box and gently place them in the palm of one of their hands. They then heard me state that we were going to take the next five minutes to eat our three raisins with full awareness of their taste and texture, putting the next one in our mouths only when no trace of the previous one remained. Somewhat confused and wide-eyed looks accompanied my repetition that for the next five minutes each of us were going to give our full attention to the three small raisins in the palm of our hand. Our time would begin as I rang the Tibetan bowl sitting on the table next to me and end once I rang it again to signal that time was up. (Faculty Reflective Journal entry, September 2013)

Students in this class were surprised again and again by the uncommon experiences presented to them, such as the contemplative mindful eating activity recounted above. Central to our department's pedagogy is working in small groups, bringing together theoretical foundations and practical applications to build skills in problem solving, and working for positive social change.

The faculty serve as resources and facilitators rather than dispensers of information. As such, it was a conducive environment in which to introduce contemplative practices.

I began at least one class a week with some form of contemplative exercise. I used a range of simple, secular methods that generally took a few minutes and were intended to provide opportunities to activate, integrate, and normalize contemplative knowing in our classroom and set a baseline openness to learning. Integrating contemplative pedagogy into the curriculum was intended to offer students skills and the opportunity to practice them—learning how to momentarily still their minds and open up to deeper and more consistent modes of reflection and concentration. In doing so, I hoped to briefly slow down the demanding pace of students' lives while helping to increase focus and attention.

Contemplative activities used at the beginning of class might include several minutes of silence, or the sharing of an evocative or relevant quote, visualization, or short piece of music, followed by silence or free writing and sharing with a partner. Occasionally, photographs were also used. An illustration of this is when we viewed a series of photographic interpretations of community and community issues I had compiled from media and other sources. We first watched the four-minute digital representation in silence, followed by individual free writes about what arose for each of us; then we watched the series again and discussed our thoughts. Various mindful eating activities, similar to the one briefly described earlier in this article, often led to active discussion about how the fast pace of our lives interferes with our fully experiencing who and what we are encountering. These, and other, contemplative exercises provided students with the chance to reengage with themselves and their interior lives, even if only for a few moments. Having curricular attention set aside for these activities emphasized their significance

as educational as well as life tools. Of course, students' responses to the different approaches were unique; one shoe didn't fit comfortably for all.

When surveyed towards the end of the semester, the majority of students noted that these contemplative exercises had encouraged the following:

- Feelings of relaxation
- Concentration/ability to focus
- Patience
- Deeper listening
- Self awareness
- Reduced stress & anxiety
- Productivity
- Overall sense of wellbeing

Students spoke to a general appreciation for the exercises in terms of slowing things down, helping them relax and be fully present in class, rather than feeling pulled in a million different directions at once. The mindful eating and sitting in silence practices stood out in particular for them, perhaps due to how unfamiliar and awkward many initially felt during these activities. Yet, they recognized that over time, as their familiarity with the practices grew, they realized they had an increased awareness of the speed and fragmentation in general, and the role of technology, in particular, in their lives. As noted in the following quoted excerpts, there was also a general acknowledgment that these kinds of short exercises might be helpful to them outside of this class:

“I’ve really started to actually stop and start thinking about the present moment. It helps me concentrate a lot better.”

“Mindfulness helps me look at life differently.”

“We sometimes overlook things in life as simple as the taste of a raisin because we don’t just take the time to collect ourselves.”

“I now watch myself and if I am studying or writing a paper I turn my phone off so that I stay concentrated to what I have to get done to be successful.”

“The relaxation/clearing your mind...could benefit if it’s done on a regular basis when feeling overwhelmed.”

In our culture, infused with near constant noise and activity and a plethora of electronic stimulation, it is challenging to access the contemplative and to realize our potential for presence and attention. The use of these activities offer faculty the chance to “remind students that with a deep breath they can draw on the nourishment and clarity of the contemplative mind as a touchstone throughout the day” (Hart, 2004, p. 43).

### **Exploring the Use of Mobile Devices in Education**

The potential for mobile devices to be a distracting force for students within educational environments has led to many teachers banning them from their classrooms. Institution-wide policies have been written to this effect. Yet the risk inherent in this simple practice is well expressed by Porath (2011):

With cell phones and text messaging quickly becoming an integral part of a young adult's identity formation, educators also need to carefully consider the pros and cons of banning

these activities, thereby disregarding and possibly alienating an already disenfranchised generation of learners. (p. 95)

As Sharples (2003) suggested, it might better serve teachers to explore how to best use these ubiquitous devices rather than merely claiming them as distracting. Williams et al. (2011) affirmed these thoughts in enquiring, “Should we ignore cell phone use in our classes? Or should we accept the fact that students will use cell phones in our classes and recognize the possibilities of using this technology to enhance instruction?” (p. 55).

One of the appealing aspects to exploring these questions is, of course, the pervasiveness of mobile hand-held devices and the *perception* that the current generation is facile in their use (Bullen, Morgan, & Qayyum, 2011; Romero, Guitert, Bullen, & Morgan, 2011). “However, most studies suggest that although today’s students come to university with some digital skills, the use of digital media for studying might be quite different and the transfer of these skills is not automatic” (Gros, Garcia, & Escofet, 2012, p. 192). Evidence would seem to indicate that the facility with handheld devices comes more within the personal and social realms than in educational ones. Kvakik (2005) asserts this when stating, “it appears they [university students] do not recognize the enhanced functionality of the applications they own and use” (p. 7.7).

Furthermore, the capacities of mobile devices and their potential for diverse uses contribute to their tendency to foster collaboration. Communication through mobile devices enables learners to readily stay in touch with one another in order to share ideas and data. They are also easily used in group settings, “so interactions and collaboration will tend to take place not just through the devices but also at and around them as well” (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2004, p. 15). In fact, “Handheld devices are emerging as one of the most promising

technologies for supporting learning and particularly collaborative learning scenarios” (Hoppe, Joiner, Milrad, & Sharples, 2003, p. 255)

### **Integrating Mobile Devices into the Classroom**

Mobile device activities introduced into a first year Community Studies class were intended to help students gain skill and experience with these technologies as learning tools and community builders, as well as to communicate my own engagement with such devices that many young people see solely as their own purview. A few examples of how they were integrated include

- as cameras to capture images for visual-based assignments;
- to establish baseline understandings of concepts used in class by accessing definitions online;
- to collaboratively explore interactive websites;
- to create digital representations of community issues students cared deeply about.

I was committed to investigate what Williams et. al. (2011) affirm, that “It is worth our time and effort to explore the possibilities of using this ubiquitous form of technology to positively influence learning” (p. 95).

As a result of this integration student feedback, along with faculty observations and reflections, demonstrated that they did learn to respectfully use (and not use) their mobile devices in this class and to employ them as educational tools. Students also claimed to have experienced higher levels of communication and sharing of ideas with their classmates via mobile devices. Several observed, as one student responded in the final survey, “I found these [mobile devices] were beneficial because it brought us closer by allowing us to communicate

outside of the classroom.” And many highlighted, in particular, the benefits of the student-created Facebook page for this purpose:

“I found that Facebook helped us get a lot of work done.”

“Facebook rocked! Worked so well for our group! We Facebook chatted a lot, shared photos/videos and learned how to use it for school!”

“I really loved the group Facebook page. I thought that it was great, and showed that Facebook can be used appropriately.”

While students have used Facebook in this class in the past, they did not appear to have made the leap to seeing and using it as a strong educational component. It seems possible that the inclusion of the use of mobile devices throughout the curriculum added to their comfort with this as a learning and community building tool.

### **Bringing it All Together: Exploring the tension between the use of mobile devices and contemplation**

The design work to incorporate both these pedagogical elements into this class was intended to act as scaffolding for learning both in the realms of deep thinking, concentration, and mindfulness skills as well as in the robust potential for mobile devices as engaging educational tools. As I was also interested in the tension, or relationship, between mobile devices, reflection, and contemplation, part way through the course I offered an assignment bringing these inner and outer technologies together.

The handout offered was titled “Contemplative Applied Inquiry in Social Networking” and began with a reminder:

As we've discussed in class, today's mobile devices (iPad, cell phones, and so forth) and social networks offer tremendous potential to both stay connected and become distracted. We've also spent time briefly considering appropriate etiquette around these devices (i.e. when to use and when not to use them!). As with any human created technology, we need to be sure that we are using them consciously.

The assignment carried the intention for them to mindfully and honestly observe their patterns of engaging with mobile devices and social networking over a two day period. Could they completely stop using their mobile devices and any form of social networking for two full days? What feelings arose in them as they even contemplated this idea? If it felt too challenging to disconnect for two days, what level of experimentation might they be able to explore? Could they try stepping away from mobile devices and social networking for more limited periods of time? For example, if they lived in residence perhaps they could leave their mobile device in their room as they went down to the cafeteria for dinner. Or, if their typical routine was to come home from basketball practice, spend time on Facebook, and then shower could they just skip the time on Facebook?

Students were encouraged to observe their responses in the moment, such as:

- What happens within as you decide not to text someone or post a comment on Facebook or Twitter?
- What would it be like to be in the middle of texting someone and to stop without sending it?
- How would it feel to open your Facebook page and to close it again without reading or commenting?

- Does engaging with social media satisfy or stimulate a craving?
- Does the need actually disappear or would you continually engage with this form of connection? (e.g. After being on Facebook were you then drawn to responding to emails or sending texts?)

I emphasized that there were no right or wrong choices or answers to these questions. The assignment was meant to help students gain a deeper understanding of the role of social networking in their lives by approaching habitual actions consciously and mindfully. As they reflected on the experiment, they were asked to go deeply into their own experiences, and not simply rattle off all the positive and negative effects of engaging with social media that they had read or heard about. They were also to consider the fact that we were without these devices until about a dozen years ago, thus contemplating the perception of their use as a need.

The day the assignment was due, students were asked to describe their experiences and discuss their results in their small groups. The discussions were compelling, fertile, and even a bit frightening. Students expressed experiencing increased feelings of anxiety, isolation, anger, boredom, and even panic when they tried to leave their devices behind for the day (or part of a day). In the words of one student:

When I first began this assignment I was enthusiastic about it. I felt confident in myself, thinking that this project would be a breeze. Boy has that changed. From the moment I woke up and I went for my cell phone...that moment made me realize I hated the idea of not using my phone for the next 48 hours.

It didn't take long for students to recognize how deeply embedded their devices were into the daily routine of their lives: "Would I leave the house without brushing my teeth? No. Would I leave the house without checking Facebook? Definitely not."

Another student described having phantom feelings of her cell phone vibrating in her pocket when it wasn't there! Several expressed worries about emergencies that might happen that they wouldn't hear about in a timely manner without their mobile devices. And yet, conversely, these same students were often athletes who felt fine about leaving their devices in their lockers during many hours of practice without any similar rise in anxiety. This led to discussion about how deep immersion, such as is accomplished in sport or other activities in nature, may help to counteract the shallow, but subtly addictive, aspect of social networking through mobile devices.

Most students were actually able to identify that many of their responses could be seen as signs and symptoms of an addiction. As one expressed, "After two days without social media, I was going through a form of withdrawal from an addiction that I was completely unaware I had." This did lead to meaningful discussions about the difference between using the technology and allowing the technology to use them. One student appropriately questioned, "Are we using Facebook, or is Facebook using us?" Students also realized that they used their mobile devices whenever they felt bored, where boredom was defined as any empty space: while walking from one class to another, waiting for a friend to arrive, or even between bites of food. All empty spaces were filled.

Mobile devices tended to be used whenever students felt uncomfortable in a public situation (e.g. sitting in a doctor's office). "I found it hardest not to look at my cell phone when I

was in public places alone. I was glued to my phone because I didn't know anyone around me so I texted my friends." The role of peer pressure also rose to the surface as students realized they often pulled out their mobile devices simply because everyone else around them was doing so. They were generally shocked at how much they felt controlled by their mobile devices and were also surprised at, yet comforted by, the extent to which their experiences were common to those of their peers.

Positives aspects of the devices identified were principally focussed around remaining connected to friends and family, or for daily matters of convenience like telling time or waking up in the morning. Conversely, it was also observed that using mobile devices to stay connected with absent others meant that they were less engaged and involved with the people in their immediate physical environment. This was an imbalance which some began to question: "I want to be more involved with the people I am physically spending my time with at the moment instead of having my hands and eyes glued to a device."

Clearly this assignment raised both awareness and anxiety for many students and offered them the opportunity to at least begin to support one another in the realms of social networking that were identified as problematic. It was an impactful educational experience that made real, and revealed, aspects of their social network patterning in ways that no reading or lecture could have.

## **Conclusion**

Intentional integration of these two pedagogical elements into this university class throughout the year provided skills and scaffolding for the Contemplative Inquiry Assignment. It also fostered greater awareness of the potential for different life choices, by encouraging the students'

exploration of their patterns with mobile devices and social networking. The possibility for unconscious motivations to emerge into consciousness was set in motion. The introduction of contemplative pedagogy, used for quieting the mind and fostering concentration, was offered as an antidote to the fragmented and inattentive mind states that digital technologies—and the speed of modern life in general—seem to promote. The results suggest that the considered inclusion of mobile devices and contemplative practices benefited students in their awareness of how they choose to use (or not use) these devices to enhance learning, as well as in other aspects of their lives.

In alignment with other research that proposes that the use of the internet is impacting our ability to concentrate, the Contemplative Inquiry Assignment, in particular, uncovered evidence of distracting and disquieting effects of mobile devices in these students' lives and encouraged greater thoughtfulness with respect to their interactions with technology. Further investigation is needed to determine what type of scaffolding best serves university students in becoming proficient with mobile devices in educational settings, as well as how to maintain a mindful approach to their use, rather than an unexamined and uncontrolled one. It is conceivable that combining the use of mobile devices and contemplative pedagogy in educational environments may assist in better preparing students for the complex and demanding world which they face, providing access to an “inner technology” (Hart, 2004) to help balance the ubiquity of the outer ones.

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