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“A Word for Nature”: A Reflection on a Contemplative Teacher Training Course in the Desert

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Abstract

Keywords

Contemplative;
Holistic;
Literature;
Mindfulness;
Ecohumanism;
Environmental

This paper reflects on an interdisciplinary, environmental, and contemplative course the authors taught at Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv. Entitled “I am in Nature,” the course was co-taught by an ecologist and a literary scholar. It included a two-day base camping and hiking experience in the Negev Desert and three on-campus meetings. The students read Nature Writing and Eco-poetry, practiced guided mindfulness meditations in the field, and kept contemplative-writing journals. In this community voices piece, we offer an innovative pedagogy for higher education that centers on the integration of the learner’s mind, body, and heart through interdisciplinary, contemplative, and holistic approaches and ways of being.

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“I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness” – these are the opening words of Henry David Thoreau’s renowned essay, “Walking” (1851). Readings from this classic book, as well as reading and writing from contemporary Hebrew pieces of Ecopoetry, formed the pillars of an interdisciplinary experiential environmental and contemplative course we taught at Kibbutzim College of Education, which we will describe and unpack in this short paper. Entitled “I am in Nature,” the course was exceptionally co-taught by an ecologist and a literary scholar, and was part of a teacher training program for students. We based the course’s aims and curriculum on two educational approaches – contemplative pedagogy and Ecohumanism. It included two-day base camping and hiking experiences in the Negev Desert and three on-campus meetings. The students read Ecopoetry and nature writing, practiced guided mindfulness meditations in the field, and kept contemplative-writing journals.

In this essay, we aspire to perform a double act of reflection. In other words, as educators applying contemplative pedagogy, when we are writing this essay we are reflecting on the entire process of teaching and learning a contemplative course. We share our endeavor to incorporate practices of contemplative and outdoor pedagogy in teacher training in order to generate holistic meaningful learning and an all-encompassing personal and relevant experience, which then breeds richer professionalism for the trainees. Our approach to higher education presents an innovative pedagogy that prioritizes the seamless integration of the learner’s mind, body, and heart. Through interdisciplinary, contemplative, and holistic methods, we foster a comprehensive learning experience that engages all aspects of the individual.

We first explain the theoretical framework for the course. Afterward, we describe the setting and context of the course, discussing the opportunities and challenges we faced. Consequently, we detail the course’s special features in the teacher-training program, the teaching strategies we employed, as well as their effectiveness in modeling pedagogy as we function as future educators’ role models. Student learning is the focus of the next part of the article, concentrating on the unique learning opportunities and assignments in the course. Finally, we reflect on how teaching this course affected our personal and professional development and our growth as educators.

We are drawing on two main educational approaches – contemplative pedagogy and Ecohumanism. **Contemplative pedagogy** according to Oren Ergas’s seminal work (2016, 2017) involves active learning, which incorporates slowing down, pausing, and a deliberate turning of the attention to the inner space. The focus of learning shifts from acquiring knowledge to nourishing the learners’ attentive awareness of their body, mind, thoughts, emotions, and sensations—i.e., their inner curriculum (Ergas, 2017)—as well as to their peers and the surrounding Nature. Thus, learners cultivate emotional availability, mental well-being, an alert mind, imagination, empathy, spiritual growth, and harmonious conduct with the human and natural environment (Assaf-Reizel, 2022). Contemplative pedagogy has spread in higher education and contributed to learning various disciplines, such as poetry, ecology, writing, and sociology (Naishtat-Bornstein & Baryosef-Paz, 2022). Even more so, educators in K-12 schools successfully apply contemplative methods (Ergas, 2021; Avisar and Ergas, 2022).

Ecohumanism is an educational approach we developed with a group of researchers from various disciplines at Kibbutzim College. At its core, Ecohumanism is built upon an ethical position that combines the humanist principles of valuing human dignity, social justice, and democracy with the ecological principles of climate stability, biodiversity, and the sustainable

use of natural resources. Taking responsibility for holistic and integrative moral education, educators are committed to protecting and enhancing environmental and social systems to endorse the quality of living for both Humanity and Nature. Ecohumanism applies "the language of sustainability" – originating in the discourse regarding the well-being of the natural environment – when addressing diverse predicaments and challenges of contemporary human civilization (Aloni et al., 2020). We applied the Ecohumanist perception in our course, co-teaching, holistically viewing the learners, and promoting the well-being of both humans and more-than-human beings around us. The contemplative pedagogy is the infrastructure for our teaching and thus it was the model for our students as well. Both approaches are apparent in all of the course's parts, as we describe below.

Starting at the edge of the Ramon Crater in the Negev Desert, on a rock overlooking the entire wild and geologically varied crater, the main part of the course was a two-day stay in the desert – camping and hiking. The schedule included short individual and group hikes; mindfulness meditations; reading of contemporary Hebrew Eco-poetry and American nature writing; and writing contemplative journals. The students cooked their dinner outdoors and socially interacted around the bonfire, and then slept in tents outdoors. In addition, the course had an on-campus outdoor part. During these full-day meetings, the students explored pollination in the campus garden, practiced close-up contemplation of trees, bushes, and flowers, practiced barefoot walking meditation and mindfulness sitting meditation, and read additional literary texts, accompanied by the theoretical framework of Eco-poetry, nature writing, and Ecohumanism. Significantly, the course's final product was to create and lead workshops for other students to be held during "Sustainability Week," celebrated annually on campus.

Based on Ecohumanism, the course is holistic in various aspects (Miseliunaite et al., 2022). First and foremost, our underlying approach is to see each student as a whole – a complex person who has come to the course with his/her entirety to have a total experience, which includes his/her inner and outside world, as well as learning literature and ecology. The learners experience and express each of these components in a harmonious and indiscrete manner. Furthermore, the actual presence in the desert -- merely being there -- allows for the spontaneous awakening of curiosity in each student. In what follows, we unfold the course's highlights.

On the first day, at the crater edge, we sat for a meditation, a sharing conversation, and poetry reading. The activity ended when each student was asked to sit by herself and write in a journal, thus marking the framework of the course; in a non-directive way, we as lecturers conveyed the message that the students are from now on welcome to **be** at the place and the moment, to **contemplate**, and personally, and even intimately, to **reflect**. Unprompted, each student chose what to concentrate on, whether it would be external or internal; they contemplated the sky, picked a rock, wrote in their journal, explored a leaf, or studied their inner curriculum. Indeed, this constant movement between watching the natural surroundings and contemplating the inner self is a fundamental component of the course.

Reading Eco-poetry while being within nature encapsulates the interconnectedness of the body and mental experience; the students sense, see, hear, and smell what is portrayed and represented in the poem, very much like the poem's speaker. For example, on our way to climb Charut Hill, the students were requested to walk silently as a group without speaking and concentrate on their hearing and visual senses, listening to the underfoot crunch of their steps and the sounds of the desert and looking around them. On a different occasion, each student

was instructed to depart by her/himself and choose a pathway, contemplate, and take photos. Each of these instances — be it in a group or individually — led to a different and varied contemplative experience. As a group, one got the opportunity to look at each other and oneself within the crowd. However, by oneself, the student could choose where to walk, what to look at, which sounds to listen to, and what (if anything) to pick up and touch. Consequently, each one was required to engage with his/her inner self in the activity, simultaneously acting and reflecting upon it.

These inner curricula were expressed on various occasions during the course. For instance, after having had the time to write in their journals, the closing exercise in most activities was a sharing circle revolving around a reading of a poem. For example, having successfully climbed Charut Hill, and rested for a while, inspired by the breathtaking desert panorama, the students were guided to a mountain-pose meditation, imagining themselves—physically and mentally—as a mountain. Then, we read Maya Weinberg’s poem “Mountain Pose” (2018).

The mountain does not ask for anything.
 It defines the landscape with its shoulders, and its remaining body parts spread.
 Nothing raises the stakes for the mountain, nothing lowers them
 (Other than Time and even that in mountains scale).
 When they carved, when they burned
 When they planted, when they deserted
 It always stood so.
 And not because of its indifference – for it is not indifferent.
 But rather since its very mountain-ness
 The first in standing positions
 Positioning all other things in proportion.

Each student was asked to choose one line he/she coveted (liked, was moved by, was annoyed by, or was inspired by) and share it with the group. What is achieved by this seemingly fragmented reading of a phrase or a line rather than the entire text is, first and foremost, a personal and unmediated reading. This combination of the chosen text and each student’s response to the text expresses a reflection of a certain moment in this student’s inner world. Additionally, the line is taken, so to speak, into the individual world and processed in order to create a personal view and response rather than a structuralistic, theoretically based literary analysis, or hermeneutic reading, often practiced in literature courses. In other words, the students are taught contemporary Hebrew Eco-poetry using contemplative pedagogy. Finally, in these activities, there are no right or wrong answers, and the participants are thanked for their sharing; neither the lecturers nor the participants respond judgmentally.

The students were instructed to create a drawing of the course and to write a description. One student wrote:

I’ve chosen to draw the time when we read Maya Weinberg’s poem ‘Mountain Pose.’ We were asked to imagine ourselves on top of the mountain while sensing our sitting bones, in an upright position, slowly feeling our inner stability.

I think that was when I felt at ease when I succeeded in connecting to the situation and at the same time being inside the poem, and also for a moment imagining that I am flying up, achieving my goals, and being present at the top of the mountain, in a high and good place. This made me feel very nice for a few moments. (Kabiri, 2021).

The process of choosing, as a feature of contemplative pedagogy, does not only work for the

poetry reading, but it is a central pedagogical principle in the course as well. Despite careful planning, a lot was left undecided and open for changes. It is an intentional liberty – planning not to plan. For example, within the framework of outdoor exercises, options like the following were presented to the students: Where am I walking to? Where do I sit down? How long will I stay by myself and when will I return to the group? What do I look at? What do I choose to photograph and share with my peers? This freedom was expressed also by our lack of judgmental responses to the students' selections. Thus, the syllabus is created ad hoc by the entire group according to their inner syllabi.

Free choice as a central pedagogical practice supports yet another major overarching fundamental in the course – the students' well-being. It is mainly achieved thanks to the following practices: stopping, non-judgmental presence, meditation practice, and, above all, the actual immersion in Nature (Provenzo, 2009) – the fresh air, the powerful desert landscapes, and the disconnection from the city and daily life. Furthermore, the social aspect contributed greatly; the students, who had not met each other face to face the entire school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, had the chance to interact in the open air. They slept in neighboring tents, cooked over an open fire, and sat together to have their meals. Hence, with students' happiness and wellness being one of its goals, the course is holistic because of the way it is directed to the entirety of the students as human beings, namely – Ecohumanism.

Indeed, the course actively practices Ecohumanism by combining nature with human beings, as demonstrated through its experiential journey to the desert. This approach goes beyond mere rhetoric, as the course truly embodies its underlying perceptions. The co-teaching of an ecologist and a literary scholar provides an interdisciplinary model for instruction, learning, and teacher training that is fluid and unbounded. By immersing students in the natural environment, surrounded by rocks, sand, sky, flowers, and birds, while also engaging in literary analysis and meditative writing, the course promotes a holistic and non-dichotomous view of ecological systems.

The following example of a learning unit presents the above-mentioned principles. Inspired by a haibun by Dror Burstein, in which the narrator contemplates a flourishing springtime garden, the unit included observing the campus garden in the spring, followed by creative guided writing and reading (Burstein, 2020). A haibun is a prosimetric literary form originating in Japan, combining prose and haiku (Ross, 2002).

The students were guided to observe, using magnifying glasses, the flowers and their pollinators (bees and cabbage butterflies), the names of which (sage, chrysanthemum, lupine, and mallow) they had not known before. The observation raised genuine wonder, then myriad biological and ecological questions; the questions were answered by Nirit, a biologist. Indeed, as Rachel Carson claimed, wonder is a vital component of learning (1956).

Inspired by Carson, following this activity, we asked the students to create texts entitled, “I am contemplating the garden.” Only after the students shared what they had written, did we read Burstein’s text which had been the model text for their writing. What followed was a theoretical conceptualization of Nature Writing and its history.¹

The course’s underlying principles were applied in its final product: inspired by their own experience, student teams led contemplative workshops to other classes in the college. For

¹ We read Scheese, 2002 and discussed the beginning of both landscape painting and Nature Writing, paralleling R.W. Emerson's renowned *Nature* (1836) with Thomas Cole's painting “The Oxbow” from the same year.

example, such a unit included watching a nest of Messor ants, following their trails, and reading a literary prose text representing ants. Another unit was held on Zoom and consisted of a guided meditation, and reading of Hebrew haikus, followed by a mandala creation out of items found in the participants' domestic or outside surroundings. The mandalas were photographed and uploaded to a shared digital platform accompanied by explanations and some original haikus. For each team of "teachers," the process was entirely independent, from planning, through choosing the theme and the location, finding appropriate literary texts, and finally, creating lesson plans. Significantly, the students in the workshops were from various departments in the college: Literature, Science, English and Special Education. These processes are holistic because they incorporate the inner curricula of the group members, the co-teaching, and the implementation of the course's interdisciplinary syllabi – ecology, literature, and contemplative pedagogy.

Along with its advantages, the course posed some challenges for both participants and lecturers. It was held in between times of social distancing, on and off quarantine periods, and distance learning. For the students, meeting as a group for the first time after long isolation and being asked to share their own thoughts and sensations was met, naturally, with difficulty and, sometimes, resistance. Furthermore, as Literature majors, they were first surprised to learn ecological themes, though later they grew curious and intrigued, asking us many relevant questions. At the same time, being offered a unique contemplative outdoor learning experience broke off the students' almost intolerable routine of loneliness, self-estrangement, and often, a lack of opportunity for social encounters. Being outside amidst the natural environment of the Negev desert, meditating, reading and writing, discussing and sharing, enabled the students to reconnect with themselves as well as with their peers, thus contributing to their well-being.

We lecturers faced challenges as well. Mainly, it was co-teaching the two remote subject matters while maintaining the flow of the course, despite our personal and professional dissimilarities. Yet, this very new and pioneering endeavor generated our curiosity and enthusiasm for the project. Thus, despite the fears of challenge, we walked this new path while accepting the difficulties and resistance and containing them successfully. Moreover, our experience teaching this course has influenced both our personal and professional development, contributing to our growth as educators. Looking back on the preparations for the course and its planning, we had to get to know each other and combine our very different worlds. Yet, throughout the course, we learned to communicate merely by eye contact and to either coordinate our work silently or leave room for a colleague to teach. Today, after having taught the course several times, planning the course, preparing for it and teaching become natural and we act as one. Teaching the course has trained us to contemplate constantly — the organization, the actual work, and the students' responses — and reflect. This was only possible thanks to both the co-teaching and contemplative approach. Consequently, we offered a successful similar workshop for our colleagues, lecturers from various departments in our college, and we had the opportunity to present our reflections on the course at several international conferences.

Conclusion

The innovation for teacher training and higher education lies in our interdisciplinary approach to fuse ecology and literature, through active learning in remote, natural learning spaces, the reading of nature-focused literary texts, and the use of contemplative pedagogy, including mindfulness meditation. The course we have presented offers a practical approach to somatic, cognitive, and emotional aspects of learning using contemplative inquiry as an

educational approach and methodology, leading the students to a greater understanding of humanity's oneness with each other and with Nature. As the students' products of peer teaching have shown, this course has had a significant impact on the participants as future teachers. In other words, the power of this course is its uniqueness and singularity. Its focus is not, necessarily, the knowledge acquired, but rather in suggesting and cultivating new environmental-literary learning experiences. We did not spend time within a classroom or assign readings; we did not test the students nor ask them to submit any papers. Nevertheless, an extremely meaningful learning and teaching experience took place: holistic, outdoor, experiential, and interconnected.

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