Room for Breathing: Mindfulness, Currere, and Contemplative Practices in Teacher Education

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Room for Breathing: Mindfulness, Currere, and Contemplative Practices in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of using autobiographical (currere) writing and mindful meditations as two forms of contemplative practices in teacher education, from the perspectives of both a secondary classroom teacher and a teacher educator. An experientially-based conceptual inquiry, it is contextualized through first-person autobiographical narrations reconstructed from the authors’ currere writings and mindfulness practices, in order to draw connections between both through the theme of making room for breathing. The pedagogical contexts surrounding how students practice mindfulness and currere in teacher education are discussed, and the body, emotions, temporality, space, and relationality are analyzed as intersecting and complementary dimensions of these contemplative practices. When currere and mindfulness practices are combined they are mutually enhancing, and this paper explores the relationships between the two to formulate a theory and practice of self-understanding and self-transcendence for renewing integrative pedagogy in teacher education.

Keywords
Autobiographical inquiry; Teacher education; Currere; Mindfulness; Contemplative practices
Today is an intense time for U.S. educators, full of anxiety, stress, and difficulty. The combination of standardization, accountability, devaluation of teachers’ work and inhibition of their creativity, and censorship of critical teaching related to critical race theory and LGBTQ+ issues, along with coping with the results of the pandemic (to mention a few) have made educators feel suffocated, with little room to breathe. However, teachers have persevered and sustained their efforts to build individual and communal resilience. It has been recognized that practicing contemplation helps to address intensity in teaching and higher education (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014; Owen-Smith, 2018; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, as Ernest Solar’s study (2019) indicates, stress and burnout had already long been an issue for teachers. The study provided a modified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course and showed promising results for reducing preservice teachers’ stress and increasing their self-efficacy. Contemplative practices in education have become a movement in the West in recent decades for improving teachers’ and students’ lives in the classroom, enhancing teaching and learning, and promoting well-being (Jennings, 2015; Lin, Culham, & Edwards, 2019; Miller, 2014).

In this paper, we discuss two contemplative practices in teacher education and their relationships: formal mindfulness practices and contemplative writing in the form of currere as autobiographical inquiry. Both approaches in teacher education can deepen students’ self-understanding, mindful awareness, and relational commitment. While there is literature to support each practice respectively, their combination has not been discussed in the field of either education or contemplative inquiry (for currere, see Doll, 2017; Martin, 2009; Pinar, 1994; Wang, 2010; for mindfulness, see Jennings, 2015; Ergas, 2017 Solar, 2019; Wang, 2019b). Written from the perspectives of both Hongyu Wang, a teacher educator, and Jo Flory, a K-12 classroom teacher, this co-authored paper draws upon their lived experience to explore the intersections and complementary contributions of these two approaches to teacher education. Through our collaborative work, seeking room to breathe has emerged as an important theme. Both mindful breathing and free-associative writings in currere reveal the importance of creating a lived space for meaningful learning and teaching to happen.

We start with first-person autobiographical narrations that are reconstructed from our currere writings and mindfulness practices to make the connections between the two practices. Since first-person inquiry is considered a form of contemplative practice, we use this format to demonstrate our embodied understanding (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Roth, 2014). Second, we explain the two practices and the pedagogical contexts in which students practice both forms of teacher education. Third, we explore five intersecting and complementary dimensions of these two practices regarding the role of the body, emotions, temporality, space, and relationality, which are important aspects of researching lived experience (van Manen, 2018). Lastly, we summarize how the combination of these two approaches informs contemplative practices in teacher education and its implications for higher education in general.

The First-Person Narrations

Hongyu Wang’s Narration

I am writing together with students who are writing currere. This semester I am trying something new. Instead of working first on regressive writing about the past, I have directed students to imagine the future first, before remembering the past. I did the same. The end of my progressive writing says: “Anger subsides to peace.” So I decided to focus on anger in my
memory work: “As a child, when did I feel angry?” I paused, closed my eyes, took a deep
breath in and out, and began to remember……Wow, I could not remember any events when I
was angry with anything or anybody before my college years! I did not recognize, let alone
express, anger when I was young. I remembered other feelings such as sadness, shame, guilt, or
fear, but not anger. However, now I do get angry, more often or more intensely than I want.
Where did my anger hide during those years? Perhaps the absence of recognizing anger was
associated with what was allowed and not allowed. No room to process anger in my girlhood?
After finishing the writing process, I still don’t have answers to these questions, although the
revelation has brought my full attention to the role of anger.

I have also been practicing mindfulness and body scans while writing. These practices have
helped me to realize that when I am angry, I tend to hold my breath in my chest and my whole
body becomes tightened. If I remember to introduce a pause for mindful breathing and do not
react immediately, I can collect my emotions and make appropriate responses in teaching
situations. Seeking room for breathing helps in holding anger. Students often perceive me as
being calm in mediating class discussions (even when I experience anger internally when biased
comments are made). However, outside of the classroom, particularly with people to whom I
am close, working through anger through mindful breathing is still an ongoing learning
process.

Body scans have also helped me realize how much stress I often accumulate on my
shoulders and in my eyes, which shrinks my psychic space and capacity to deal with frustration
and anger. Now I intentionally drop my shoulders and calm my eyes periodically throughout
the day. When I lie down to sink into the gravity of the earth, the sensations from my inner
body become alive, and as I breathe in and out to soften the tensions I feel physically, qi
(central to Daoist meditation as vital energy) goes through me to connect the inner and the
outer world. Expanding the room for breathing (both literally and metaphorically) is a holistic
process of body, mind, and spirit coming together.

Without writing currere, I would not have realized my relationship with anger in my
childhood. Hiding anger is not necessarily helpful. Mary Doll (1995) described how her anger
was provoked by a male student who consistently challenged her teaching authority in a college
classroom. She tried to hide her anger first, but eventually released it in a manner that was out
of control. Channeling anger and transforming it into sustainable life energy is important for an
educator. Creating a lived space for breathing not only means clearing the cluttered mind but it
also means tapping into the hidden thoughts and emotions to connect the fragmented self for
an expansive personhood.

This is one example of how mindfulness and currere come together and enhance each other
in my own lived experience. I adopt both practices in my pedagogy in teacher education and
often use them as semester-long experiential projects to give students time and space to dive
into the process. Some students who experienced both found them complementary in clearing
the ground, integrating the self, and having better relations with others. The next narration is
written by a teacher, Jo Flory, who intentionally blended mindfulness practice within a currere
writing project.

Jo Flory’s Narration

In a white tiled bathroom off the corner of a kindergarten classroom, the same child who
was so content at the library is now sitting on the floor with arms and legs crossed, elbows on
knees. Although I have a mild stomachache, I really pretend to feel sick so the principal will
call someone to pick me up from school. My red eyes and tear-stained cheeks are both indications I have been crying. I hate kindergarten. Feeling no connection to this place or these people, the idea of staying at school feels suffocating, like a weight on my chest. I want to run home, as I have several times, most recently two days prior. The memory of it enters my mind as I wait impatiently for the nurse to call my mother to come get me. I think of walking past the large glass pane that encloses the main office and seeing secretaries and administrators busily talking to each other and greeting visitors; I quickly walk in step with the adult I am using as a cover so the adults in the office cannot see my small frame. I make a beeline straight ahead and out the double doors of the school building, racing quickly over the concrete drive-through and quickly following the path home. It does not make any sense to just leave, as it is not as if it means I will not have to go back and that there will not be consequences for ditching kindergarten. Later, I overhear my mother’s intense conversations with the principal about my discontent at school. But at that moment, my white-hot brain is thinking, I have to get away—there’s no reason to be here, I can’t learn here, and I need to get back to a comfortable space. So, there will be no dwelling in the tension of remaining in an uncomfortable space today, as I head the two blocks home, put a record on the turntable, curl up on my bed, and breathe deeply for the first time all day.

As an adult practicing mindfulness in tandem with writing currere, I became more attuned to the physical and sensorial aspects of the process and began to think more deeply about how my mind connects to my body. For example, the writing above emerged during the regressive stage, connecting the tensions I felt as a child in school with a need to breathe and have space gave me insight into why I still have a yearning for those needs. I was so happy with learning outside of school, but in what I felt was a restrictive educational environment, I was miserable. I also realized I have slowly learned to dwell in tense spaces and no longer automatically want to run away. Tension surfaced in the progressive stage of currere when I visualized being completely outside of a classroom with students, and I realized I may still want to keep the regular classroom experience in my life as a teacher in some way, even in the future. Acknowledging, dwelling in, and slowly letting go of difficult emotions that emerge in classroom life, home life, and the life of study, in the past, present, and future, through currere and mindfulness, brings interconnected lessons in hope. In thinking about uncomfortable experiences, I dwell in the discomfort for a moment, breathe, and redirect my thoughts by acknowledging and then letting them go, creating a more expansive space to breathe, much like taking a break from what could potentially be unpleasant to feel, but then going back to it—acknowledging the emotion and letting it pass—developing an inner calmness through acknowledging feelings, letting them go and come and go again, in tandem with the rhythms of currere.

Mindfulness, Currere, and Pedagogical Context

Mindfulness and Teaching Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be a formal practice, a state of mind, or an orientation, and in this paper, we refer to mindfulness as formal practices that involve mindful breathing, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of emotions, and mindful interactions. Mindfulness is a well-recognized form of contemplation that “involves attention and awareness” with “a radical openness where the individual does not try to control what is happening” (Miller, 2014, pp. 4-5). It directly attends to bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts moment by moment and cultivates one’s whole-being awareness. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) definition of mindfulness is influential:
“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). While mindful attention is important to contemplative practices, the ethical and spiritual relationships one establishes with oneself and others with openness are also significant. As Owen-Smith (2018) points out, contemplative pedagogy fosters “compassion and connection to others that lead to the moral and spiritual characteristics of education” (p. 26).

Since the mindfulness used in contemporary Western practices in education draws upon neuroscience and uses scientific studies to support the secular version of mindful education, mindfulness is sometimes introduced as a tool for learning, rather than as existential non-instrumental cultivation. Scholars question this instrumental tendency, oriented by an outcome-based approach, and advocate for not losing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of mindful practices (O’Donnell, 2015; Hyland, 2016; Wang 2019b). Wang’s teaching of mindfulness is oriented by the philosophy of nonviolence education with the ethical orientations of cultivating inner peace and forming compassionate relationships with others (Wang, 2019b, 2023; Nagler, 2004). In Wang’s classes, students learn the fundamental philosophical concepts of Buddhism that are essential to mindfulness practices (such as impermanence, emptiness, and nonduality) and nonviolence theory rooted in the interconnectedness of life supported by body/mind, self/other, and humanity/cosmos nonduality.

Teaching mindfulness either in an independent course or incorporated as part of a regular course, Wang makes an intentional effort to create pedagogical conditions for students’ experiential learning. Students are required to practice formal mindfulness outside of the class multiple times a week and keep a journal in which they reflect on the experience. They are also encouraged to share their experiences in pairs and make connections with readings during the class through mindful communication. To support students’ mindfulness practices, Wang introduces the major components of guided mindfulness practices during the regular class—practices related to breathing, the body, emotions, thoughts, and compassion—and students practice them on their own outside of the class. Students can also choose their own practices according to their current level and interests. As beginning practitioners, most students have found that focusing on specific elements of mindfulness in their practices is helpful.

**Currere in Teacher Education**

The term currere is the Latin root of curriculum, referring to the process of running the course. It emerged in the 1970s in curriculum studies, and as William F. Pinar (1975, 1994) formulates it, currere is an approach to making a connection between students’ life histories and their educational experience for subjective and social reconstruction. It includes four major steps: regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetical steps. The first two steps use free association and meditative breathing to bracket the present moment so that students can enter the past to re-experience events and emotions, and then contemplatively imagine into the future to reveal their aspirations. The third step is about the analysis of the first two steps concerning one’s present biographical situation, and the fourth step is the synthesis of the first three steps for reconstructing what it means to educate. Currere has been theorized and practiced for almost half a century and has become a recognized tradition in curriculum studies (Martin, 2009; Ng-A-Fook, 2012; Snowber, 2017; Wang, 2010).

Currere has an affinity with first-person inquiry in contemplative practices (Owen-Smith, 2018; Sarath, 2010), although it also includes analysis and synthesis. The first two steps of currere are designed to invite students’ free writings so that they can discover new psychosocial
materials and uncover hidden passages. It is through this re-experiencing and connecting in a non-judgmental orientation that letting go of the past becomes possible and new meanings can emerge. Forming such a relationship with the self is ethical, as self-transformation is embedded in relating to others and to the world in a new way (Pinar, 2011). Currere draws upon phenomenology, analytical psychology, and Zen Buddhism as theoretical foundations, and offers multi-dimensional insights into students’ lived experiences.

For two decades, Wang has regularly used currere as a whole-semester writing project in teacher education so that students can take time, suspend judgment, and write freely and associatively to contemplate where they are and what they can become. In her guidelines for the currere project, she emphasizes the nature of descriptive, non-judgmental, and stream-of-consciousness writing with a free-flowing time sequence. Students can write one step of currere, for roughly one month, to “allow time to pass” in order to reconceive their lived experiences (Pinar, 1994, p. 21). Wang provides periodic feedback when needed, and students are encouraged to practice mindful listening and share in class in pairs. But students are free to contemplate their educational life without her direct intervention. She focuses on creating pedagogical conditions of time, space, and relationality, but students’ own exploration is primary.

Mindfulness and Currere: Pedagogical Contexts

There are clear intersections between mindfulness and currere: incorporating mindful breathing to expand a lived space; bracketing habitual perspectives and seeking fresh lenses; nurturing inner awareness and insights in an ongoing process of working through and letting go; and the transformation of the self as intimately related to the transformation of ethical relationships with others. In the next section, we will discuss more in detail how these two practices intersect and mutually enhance each other.

Certain differences make the two complementary. First, mindfulness is based on a worldview of interconnectedness in its origin in Buddhism through individual experiencing of attending to thoughts and emotions and letting them go, while currere focuses on individual subjectivity situated in cultural and social contexts (Wang, 2010, 2023). The foregrounding of individuality and relationality highlights different aspects of reality, but together they can form a dynamic whole. Second, while mindfulness practices focus on the present moment, the temporality of currere includes the past, the present, and the future (Wang, 2019a, 2019b). But the temporal orientation of currere is contemplative since the writer enters into the past to re-experience events and emotions as they were and observe their happening without judgment (Wang, 2010). In addition, we should notice that currere is a balanced combination of contemplation (the first two steps) and reasoning (the latter two steps) while formal mindfulness practice is primarily contemplation, with the support of reflective analysis as needed.

These differences can become bridges rather than obstacles, as contemplative pedagogy has diverse forms of practices, including mindfulness, free writing, and reflective journaling that are related to these two approaches (Miller, 2014; Kahane, 2014; Edwards, 2019). Wang and Flory have practiced both, and Wang has taught both for years in teacher education and found their combination beneficial for herself and her students to reach new insights and cultivate new awareness.

Wang has regularly used currere and mindfulness projects, mostly sequentially. She has designed each of them for the whole semester as experiential learning, so students might have
done the projects in different semesters, either currere first or mindfulness practices first, followed by the other. These classes are at the graduate level, and students are mostly in-service teachers, with a few pre-service students who are pursuing alternative certificates. These two practices naturally come together without the instructor’s intentional combination. Jo Flory’s practice is a bit different, as she intentionally incorporates the mindfulness she learned in a previous semester into the currere steps.

**Intersections and Complementarity**

Here we draw from our experiences and theoretical explorations to analyze the relationship between currere and mindfulness as intersecting and complementary contemplative practices in teacher education. We discuss five important aspects: the body, emotions, temporality, space, and relationality.

**The Body**

Both currere and mindfulness bring the body into attention and awareness, although their specific modes are somewhat different. Mindfulness practices encourage direct and specific attention to bodily sensations, which is often neglected in formal education. When students become aware of their bodies and inner bodies and practice mindful breathing to relax and center themselves, their learning transcends the prevalent privileging of the intellect and the mind over the body in education. Mindfulness and meditation cultivate non-judgmental awareness of the body to reach a sense of interconnectedness among self, others, and the universe (Solar, 2019).

Currere is also embodied, although its embodiment is through free writing about the past and the future. In the free-associative mode, students can get in touch with their sensory experiences more easily than they can in the linear, academic mode. Some students have commented that even though they might not remember all the details of past events, their sensual memories of smell, taste, touch, or voices are deeper and have stayed longer (Wang, 2010). Flory’s currere writing vividly demonstrates this aspect. Memories imprinted on the body may reveal hidden elements in the psyche or dissociated aspects of the inner life, so sensual memories may lead to the integration of the subconscious into consciousness (Jung, 1953).

The flow of free writing in the regressive and progressive steps can free students from judgments and rigid thoughts and bring out poetic, imaginative, and integrative aspects of lived experience (Doll, 2017). In the synthetical step, some students have used poetry, images, and creative collages of words or portrayals—embodied expressions—to demonstrate their deepened self-understanding and relational attunement to the world. Thus, currere and mindfulness intersect, albeit in different ways, with mindfulness indicating explicit attention to the body and currere revealing the experience of the body in students’ inner work.

Flory found that mindful breathing helped her slow down and facilitated access to more connections within the recursive writing process. Focusing on breathing and bodily awareness increased her attentiveness and allowed more unconscious memories to emerge. In other words, mindfulness of the body can center memory work in currere. This sense of bodily awareness can contribute to fostering self-compassion, which is an important component of contemplative practice (Krikorian & Busse, 2019). In her earlier mindfulness practice project, Flory worked on forming a nonviolent relationship with the self through practicing mindfulness and dealing with emotional difficulties. She learned how mindfulness allowed her to experience thoughts, dwell in them, and then let them go, instilling a sense of self-
forgiveness facilitated by the process of slowing down and connecting the mind and body.

Similarly, in the process of *currere* writing, Flory revisited the tense, claustrophobic sensations described in her vignette. In writing about her distress in school as a young child, she re-experienced a lack of space to breathe and developed an awareness of how those early experiences affect her thoughts and feelings in the present. In getting in touch with those bodily experiences through writing, Flory was able to loosen the inner attachment to them and dwell in the tension of the present moment in a way she had not been able to in the past. Combining *currere* writing and mindfulness fosters self-care through the explicit and implicit mind-body connection, ultimately opening a path for a personal and professional transformation, as “the more teachers know about themselves—the private curriculum within—the more their personal decisions are apt to be about how to pave the way for better teaching” (Ergas, 2017, p. 219).

**Emotions**

Both *currere* and mindfulness practices involve emotional work to cultivate awareness and reduce the intensity of emotions, though in different ways. Regressive and progressive work in *currere* is often laden with a variety of emotions and feelings, as the writing guidelines specifically ask for a description of emotions along with events. Attending to emotions and affects using words, students can make connections between the experience of feelings and the understanding that comes from the process, situating thoughts and emotions in one’s life history, family, community, and society. In this way, the strong emotions that surface in the process can be transformed into self-knowledge. However, as Yang (2009) explained, after she completed the writing process, initially the pain of buried memories seemed to be reinforced rather than loosened up, and she had to keep working on letting go of the pain.

Yang’s (2009) experience is the basis for one of the pedagogical questions that Wang asks as she works with students on the *currere* project: After hidden and difficult emotions emerge, how do we work through them? Although articulating emotions through understanding or creative formulations can support working through them intellectually or aesthetically and thus reduce their intensity, it does not always happen for all students (Jung, 1953). Here is where mindfulness of emotions can be helpful. Wang has learned that mindfulness can be particularly helpful in working through emotions by directing one’s attention to bodily sensations and using mindful breathing to grow the capacity for letting go of emotions moment by moment. Emotions connect the body and the mind non-dualistically, and letting go of strong emotions requires both loosening up the tense body and releasing the excessively thinking mind. The combination of understanding the released emotions in *currere* and dissolving strong emotions in mindfulness can lead to a more advanced level of integration.

This complementary emotional work of *currere* and mindfulness is reflected in Flory’s practices of attending to specific emotions through mindfulness and reaching an emotional understanding in general through *currere*. Experiencing body-mind connections while writing *currere* allowed Flory to make sense of past experiences, attend to particular emotions, and release difficult feelings. *Currere* writing also brought back joyful emotions. In the regressive stage, she re-experienced the joy of early memories of the influence of diversity in different forms of popular culture, particularly music:

As I sit and write, even now, music accompanies me. The mode of transmission is iTunes, and not the needle gently placed on a turntable in a standing oak case, but the Pointer Sisters uplift and transport all the same, and in my mind, I am once
again jumping up and down on the bed to the steady, soulful backbeat of “Yes We Can, Can” until dizziness overcomes me and I collapse onto the soft mattress, as if I’m six again. I lie on my back and listen intently to the rest of the album, singing along and memorizing the lyrics as a kind of early educational exercise in remembering lines, motivated by the desire to hold them close for future use – for inspiration, for comfort, for instruction, for companionship, or for connection (Flory, currere writing, 2022).

Through more reflections in the analytic and synthetical stages, Flory came to make connections between the joyful feelings experienced in her early years and the current joy she and her students experience incorporating popular culture texts into the curriculum.

At the same time, Flory has found the mindfulness practice of RAIN (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture with kindness) beneficial for engaging in the process of acknowledging, dwelling in, and slowly letting go of specific difficult emotions that emerge in classroom life, home life, and the life of study (The Rain Formula, 2017). Uncertainty is an integral part of teaching, and mindfulness can help teachers embrace the uncomfortable emotions that accompany that uncertainty and maintain humane relationships with students (Ergas, 2017). The combination of these processes of connecting and releasing specific emotions through mindfulness practice and making sense of joy, fear, and anxiety through currere writing can bring together personal and professional understanding and transformation.

**Temporality**

Both currere and mindfulness practices are marked by a temporal dimension that is different from the school clock sense of time (Owen-Smith, 2018; Wang, 2010). Certainly, slowing down to sustain attention is present in both practices, so the internal time can be experienced fully in a nonlinear and fluid way to increase awareness. For students who are carried away by their cluttered schedules, simply finding time to write currere or practice mindfulness can present a challenge. However, the temporal movement of these two practices is different. Currere brackets the present moment and focuses on the past and the future in order to renew the present, in contrast with mindfulness, which attends to the present moment and lets go of the past and the future. Although they seem to go in opposite directions, they share the purpose of transforming the present.

As Pinar (1994) pointed out, the intention in designing currere is to “release from the past, release from arrest, release into movement” (p. 45) to loosen “identification with fear of the future” and allow “increased freedom” (p. 59) to open new possibilities. Formal mindfulness practices, instead, focus on the present moment to let go of repetitive or excessive thoughts about the past and the future. However, the mindfulness of emotions in sitting practices can often be accompanied by reflections on the triggers of a particular emotion. Mindful awareness, which brings a moment of freedom to choose how to respond in the immediate situation, unb Burdened by past patterns, intersects with the function of currere in increasing students’ ability to make their own choices rather than follow existing thought patterns and societal norms.

Students’ currere writings have led to both gestalt and gradual changes (Wang, 2010), and students have responded to its temporal dimension in different ways: Most achieved revelations in the regressive step, some reached new insights in the progressive step, and others increased their self-understanding in the analytic step. Such differences suggest that the temporal dimensions of currere and mindfulness do not need to be the same, as students
experience time in different ways, and the combination, of their different focuses on time, might strengthen their effect on students.

In Wang’s teaching experiences, some students commented that doing the regressive writing contributed to their ability to write about the future. More often than not, however, students found that the progressive step was more difficult, as it required envisioning a future that did not yet exist. Carl Jung (1969) suggested that when one encounters difficulty with psychic progression, it is often because one is stuck in the past. In this sense, progressive work might give hints about the focus of regressive work. Exploring the temporal dynamics, Wang has modified the steps in currere to start with progressive work as an added step in recent years in her teaching and her own practice. Her vignette reflects such a modification in her own practice. She started with the progressive work and realized that anger was an emotion that needed to be worked through. She then focused on anger in her regressive work and uncovered the absence of conscious anger when she was young. Re-entering progressive work, she imagined, with the addition of mindfulness practice, how she would deal with anger. She was not sure if she would have made the same discovery about anger if she had not followed the modified steps.

Flory’s currere project followed the same modified sequence, allowing the interconnections between those memories of pain and joy to emerge for her, while they had previously been compartmentalized. In her reflection, she writes:

I have grown into my life as a high school English teacher little by little, through the synthesis of these seemingly disparate moments wherein the rhythms and intersections of popular culture, literacy, and tension that arise from moments of discomfort and encounters with (in)justice, are omnipresent (Flory, currere writing, 2022).

Flory has found that the iterative cycles of currere make it easier to work on the past tensions, as the tensions experienced in regressive work tend to be addressed in the progressive work and synthesized to inform understanding and transformation in the present. Mindfulness practices allowed Flory to hold those ideas and feelings in the present, and currere facilitated envisioning and thinking more deeply about their place in her future. Practicing mindfulness before writing was particularly beneficial to her in releasing possibilities and breathing mindful awareness into the process. Engaging the dark sides of the experience, or its “shadowed aspects,” is essential to the progressive step, as “an idealistic flight into the future without moving through difficulty is not the same as embracing the future with all its possibilities” (Wang, 2010, p. 279). In addition, doing mindfulness meditations before writing increased her focus, enriched her imagination, and helped her capture more details in writing.

Space

Both currere and mindfulness practices are characterized by a spatial dimension, which involves the creation of expansive space for breathing, in terms of both engaging with curriculum and pedagogy in difficult educational environments and enabling compassion for self and others. In the progressive stage of her currere writing, Flory wrote (2022) about being able to breathe in open spaces despite the repressive physical feelings associated with a restrictive educational environment:

I envision myself exploring a more expansive space where both students and teachers can experience possibilities for joy and playfulness in learning. At the same
time, the educational climate surrounding curricular restrictions and other difficulties within public education can stifle breathing and hasten the impulse to run from tension and difficult emotions that emerge as we rise to meet (in)justice and facilitate a space that can build hope for the future. A space where we can experience and work with tensions and differences that emerge within and among our classroom experiences.

In the last step, Flory synthesized the ways music and other forms of popular culture create breathing room for learning, creativity, and insight in both her teaching and personal life, as the personal and professional dimensions merge. Her currere project has thereby created an inner space for changing the world.

Similarly, mindfulness practices, through the interconnectedness of the mind and body, facilitate the creation of inner space for connecting with the self and with the world. Ergas (2017) reflected on ways mindfulness can facilitate educators’ reclamation of a sense of self in education, in the face of restrictive educational systems and orientations in which “we fail to deeply question social rituals” (p. 232). Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2006) also discuss that meditative sensitivity can create space in curriculum and pedagogy in the midst of standardization and a sense of scarcity.

In cultivating stillness within, Hongyu Wang has found that meditative breathing can bring clarity to her mind and help her perceive teaching situations as the way they are in both specific and holistic ways, and in doing so, she has developed more capacity to connect with students through relational attunement. Both mindfulness and the process of currere writing facilitate working through difficulties and creating spaces for transformative learning and teaching. The subjective integration of currere and the embodiment of mindfulness are complementary to creative lived space. The specific ways in which different students benefit might be different, but the combination helps.

Relationality

It is important to note that the relational orientation is embedded in the exploration of the interior space in both currere and mindfulness, as “the attempt at self-transformation initiates profound appreciation of the problematic of social and political transformation” (Pinar, 1994, p. 59). Engaging the “shadow within the self”—for example Wang’s hidden anger—to get in touch with the subconscious through the process of currere writing can open a “social space” enabling connections with diverse others (Wang, 2019a, p. 377). Miller (2014) refers to mindfulness as “spacious awareness,” characterized by an awareness of connection to one’s interior life and the surrounding world (p. 28).

For Flory, experiencing the combination of currere and mindfulness has made her more mindful of those places where she can activate spaces for joy in teaching and learning for herself and her colleagues. In coming to appreciate the complexities of her own experience, she is better able to remain open to the experiences of others who may hold differing perspectives. Wang’s own practices and teaching experiences indicate that both approaches are important ways of transforming the inner landscape and relating to the outer world. The scope of this article limits a further exploration into how mindfulness or currere can be combined with social justice or eco-justice orientations, but both approaches can contribute to engaging cultural and ecological differences in mindful and integrative ways.
Room for Breathing: Contemplative Practices in Teacher Education

The first-person narrations at the beginning of this article share the theme of seeking “room for breathing.” Here breathing is both literal and metaphorical. Mindful breathing is a daily practice of attending to the breath with awareness of the body, the mind, and the spirit, and such sustained attention is transformative. *Currere* offers time, provides conditions, and creates space for exploring the depths of the individual psyche and integrating the fragmented self. Both provide ways to deal with external pressure, not through complying with regulations of standardization and accountability that suffocate the human spirit in the context of public education, but through seeking room to infuse the vital breath of life.

In the current social, ecological, and educational crises, creating room for breathing has become urgent for sustaining a meaningful life. Higher education, specifically teacher education, faces the challenges of commercialization, uniformity promoted by globalization, polarization from social media, privatization of public education, and dramatic inequality and inequity in the distribution of materials and resources. Meeting these challenges takes nothing less than going back to the source of life. Mindful breathing helps us experience the interconnectedness that is the condition for human and cosmic life by going beyond individualism and contemplating interdependence. The COVID-19 pandemic teaches us that we are literally breathing the same air globally and no one can escape from its impact (although with a big gap between those who do and those who do not have access to health care and treatment). Contemplative writing and mindful breathing can make meaningful connections within the self and with others, including between humanity and nature.

We caution that this article does not intend to prove the effectiveness of practicing mindfulness or engaging in *currere* in teacher education. We intend to draw upon lived experiences and theoretical explorations to discuss what the use of two contemplative practices, particularly in combination, can contribute to an in-depth understanding of contemplative learning and teaching in teacher education. We have explored five dimensions of contemplative practices at the intersecting and complementary sites of mindfulness and *currere*: the body, emotions, time, space, and relationality. First, both practices are embodied, although the specific modes are not the same, as mindfulness directly attends to bodily sensations while *currere* is an embodied practice through free writing. Second, both practices attend to emotional work, but mindfulness dissolves difficult emotions by associating them with the body, while *currere* bridges emotions and words for new meanings. Third, the flow of time is different in the two practices since formal mindfulness attends to the present while *currere* brackets the present, but they share a similar purpose: the transformation of the present to open up new possibilities. Fourth, they both expand the internal space for cultivating personhood that is capable of renewing oneself and social relations. In addition, both have a relational orientation that springs from integrating the inner life. These dimensions go beyond the mainstream teacher education practices that focus on methods, standards, and outcomes, and hold promise for re-imagining teacher education to incorporate subjective and integrative orientations.

The combination of mindfulness and *currere* also has broad implications for higher education. Writing as a mode of contemplative practice can be used in many different disciplines: for example, letter writing in sociology, nature diaries in ecology, diversity memoir writing in cultural studies, free associative writing in psychology, journaling in philosophy or environmental science, to list a few (Beauregard, 2020). As the central thread of *currere* is the connection between one’s life history and one’s educational experiences, instructors in different disciplines in higher education can modify its focus according to the nature of their
discipline to build bridges between students’ subjectivity or personhood and their learning of the subject matter. Students’ whole-being experiences in learning open opportunities to integrate the often-fragmented academic studies, release their imagination and creativity, and seek room for new explorations that meet the challenges of our time.

Formal mindfulness practices cultivate an integrated mind, sustain attention, and increase awareness, all of which can be incorporated into many different disciplines to enhance contemplative learning and pedagogy. The nature of free writing in building bridges between words and affects to incorporate the subconscious adds a dimension to formal mindfulness practices, so they support each other. Using both approaches to transform the inner landscape of students and cultivate their relational attunement can counteract the overemphasis on the intellect and the separate nature of disciplines in higher education, address the lack of meaning and self-actualization, and restore the humane and compassionate dimensions of teaching and learning.
References


