Chng Huang Hoon, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, pvochh@nus.edu.sg

Sitting at the Edge of (Most) Disciplines: Contemplating the Contemplative in Classroom Practice

A review of *The Contemplative Mind in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,* by Patricia Owen-Smith, Indiana University Press, 2018.

KEYWORDS

contemplative pedagogy, SoTL, reflective practices, margins of discourse, institutional cultural change

[A] way of knowing…an inner technology of knowing.

—Patricia Owen-Smith (2018, pp. 2, 5)

Teaching can change the fabric of the world. Never has the call to assume this agency been more immediate and crucial than now. We are standing on the hallowed ground of the academy at a privileged moment in time. We are called to assume this power and authority in the service of our students, one another, and the planet. Of course, we must summon a radical bravery, a willingness to step beyond the comfortable boundaries of traditions that no longer sustain us, and embrace the traditions of wisdom that have been so marginalized by an academy of the past.

—Patricia Owen-Smith (2018, p. 121)

Doing the scholarship of teaching and learning sits . . . at the edge of most disciplines, calling on but also going beyond the normal knowledge of practice of most fields.

—Mary Taylor Huber (2006, p. 72)

I heard recently that Japan annually identifies one character—that is, a word or concept—that describes how the nation's collective feeling about the state of the world. The word choice for 2018 was *wazawai* (disaster, misfortune). Given the series of natural disasters that the Japanese people suffered in 2018, not to mention the political uncertainties within Japan and in the world experienced throughout the year, this choice did not come as a surprise to me.

I do not know what other *TLI* readers might choose, but the word I have chosen for 2018 is *rush.* *Rush is* how I have felt about my daily life for some years now. *Rushed* and distracted seem to be the way many of my own colleagues and the students I have observed also feel about their lives in urban fast-developing Singapore. The rate and frequency of changes we experience in our society and in higher education; the competition for our attention in today's information and gadget-filled, consumption-driven lives; the intensity with which we go about our daily routines at work and at home; the amount of multitasking we feel the need to engage in (even if studies have said multitasking is far from productive) constitute that feeling of rush and distractedness. The situation that Patricia Owen-Smith describes in *The*

Contemplative Mind in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is that she works with at least *four* devices simultaneously ("The Conundrum of Technology," pp.109-115) will sound uncomfortably familiar to many of us. Just reflecting on how fast time rushes by as we move from point to point and how much fills each waking hour, the call by Owen-Smith for a return to the contemplative, to take a moment to slow down, is an attractive proposition, indeed. Or as Berg and Seeber put it, "Distractedness and fragmentation characterize contemporary academic life; we believe that Slow ideals restore a sense of community and conviviality" (2016, p. 90). I think so, too.

Owen-Smith argues for "the return to and understanding of the contemplative in higher education…about the place of contemplative knowing and contemplative practices within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) framework" (p. 1). A relatively slim work of just 121 pages (excluding references), she reviews the literature on the histories of both contemplative education and SoTL (chapter 1) and calls for an integration of these approaches in classroom practice, as both have a shared mission, in advancing student learning and well-being. There is now quite a lot of research on contemplative practices and how these practices have productively intersected with teaching and learning practices (chapter 4). There are also many success stories that have been shared about adopting the contemplative in classrooms (such as the practices adopted in Naropa University detailed by Owen-Smith). In spite of these, there still exist much reluctance and resistance to accept contemplative pedagogies as legitimate (chapter 3), in the same way that SoTL faces similar challenges in many universities. In closing (chapter 5), Owen-Smith invites readers to reimagine higher education that admits contemplative pedagogy as part and parcel of everyday teaching practice, to allow students (and perhaps also faculty members) a space and time to mitigate the rush and pressures of daily living, ensure well-being so as to prepare students better for learning, for scholarship.

As someone who advocates for SoTL in pedagogical practice—and, I will admit, as someone who has *not* thought deeply about how to allow for the contemplative in my own classroom even as at the personal level, I appreciate the value of the contemplative as a counterpoint to the rush—I focus my discussion on Owen-Smith's attempt at connecting contemplative pedagogy and SoTL. While I agree with her view that contemplative pedagogy *does share* similarities with SoTL, I am, however, not yet fully persuaded that the two are as naturally connected as she claims. And, more importantly, given the general reluctance to integrate contemplative pedagogy in teaching practice *and* the challenges of introducing SoTL in institutions of higher learning, I think it a risky move to connect the two at this time.

COMMON GROUND AND CHALLENGES
What they share
Indeed, SoTL shares many similarities with contemplative pedagogy, as outlined by Owen-Smith, particularly in chapters 3 and 4. Owen-Smith begins with the statement that "The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) and SoTL share a commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning, and both seek to transform higher education" (p. 1). She goes on to delineate the similarities between both contemplative and SoTL practices. In her view, both practices share the focus on student learning and on community; both place an emphasis on lifelong impact of learning and the reflective (that is, the connection between "interior qualities" and the exterior, or the "inner-outer union," p. 5). Both deploy a range of (mixed) methods in their undertaking for the same reason that no one prescribed method will serve these complex endeavors. In addition, both emphasize the dialogic and collaborative, namely the learning community; and both aim for "the transformation of habits of the mind"

(p. 1). Owen-Smith also attempts an amalgamation of the contemplative with SoTL when she invokes the position, which she attributes to Richard Gale (2009), that SoTL should inquire into how students learn the affective (Owen-Smith, p. 6).

The challenges

Both contemplative pedagogy and SoTL, unfortunately, also share a common set of challenges. I have heard students say that mindfulness practices do not belong to a university curriculum, much less as something that they will take seriously in their classroom. The trepidation (Owen-Smith, p. 66) that teachers themselves have experienced in considering contemplative practices is not uncommon among colleagues, even those who like me, accept the need for introspective or reflective methods. Owen-Smith correctly points out that "[i]n spite of the need for practices that will ground and deepen learning, there is a reluctance to implement them and a struggle to assess them" (p. 59). This reluctance and struggle in measuring outcomes and impact are central basis for the institutional resistance against both contemplative pedagogy and SoTL. Currently, both approaches face significant resistance in most institutions, marginalized as not fully legitimate methods of practice, and dismissed as possessing "ambiguous language" (Owen-Smith, p. 63) that lay claims to scholarship that is deemed "unscientific" research. Both have required immense effort from their respective advocates to argue for their relevance and the legitimacy of the outcomes they can offer towards teaching and learning. To be accepted in institutions, both practices will require nothing short of a mindset shift and an institutional culture change. In short, both contemplative pedagogy and SoTL lie at the margin of the margins of institutional discourse and practice—doubly blocked by their marginalized status within teaching and learning practice itself, and further marginalized in the way education takes second place in most research-intensive university cultures.

How can one benefit the other?

The similarities that are shared by contemplative pedagogies and SoTL do suggest that the two can come together effectively. In spite of their own challenges, there are important lessons one can take from the other, which is why Owen-Smith's suggestion to integrate them is a good idea, though not necessarily as straightforwardly realized as she seems to suggest it might be. In an article that evaluates and frames contemplative pedagogies within SoTL practices, Franzese and Felten (2017) note that "[t]he practice of SoTL itself can be something of a contemplative practice. Doing SoTL is one way of mindfully focusing attention of a faculty member on the learning of her students. SoTL approaches that carefully inquire into learning, like some contemplative practices, help the faculty member to take a curious and open view of what is happening in the classroom" (p. 4). The reflective teacher who seeks to inquire into student learning in a systematic, evidence-based way does well to look to contemplative pedagogies for classroom strategies directed at promoting such mindful attention to enhance learning. Moreover, as Franzese and Felten also observe, "SoTL... often focus [es] on snapshots or slices of learning, rather than on whole experiences" (2017, p. 4). Putting a holistic frame on one's SoTL-based inquiry, from a contemplative pedagogical perspective, is a possibility that is well-worth entertaining.

WHY WOULD IT BE RISKY TO CONNECT CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY WITH SOTL?

Since Boyer's 1990 publication *Scholarship Reconsidered,* SoTL has taken off, first setting roots in the United States, then spreading to the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. SoTL has also made inroads in Europe, Africa, particularly South Africa, and most recently, in Asia, and to a small extent, some

countries in the Middle East. The only regions where the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) has not claimed a membership base are India and South America. But even as this growth of SoTL is encouraging for scholars, SoTL remains a "hard sell" (Boshier 2009), especially in research-intensive universities, where institutional value and scholarship are equated with disciplinary research, with education and teaching coming a not-so-close second in most places. Suffice it to say that promoting SoTL in institutions requires a multipronged approach to changing the institutional mindset among academics and needs the strong backing of academic leaders and decision makers in universities (see Schroeder 2007; Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011; Marcketti, VanDerZanden, & Leptien, 2015).

At this time when SoTL is only starting to develop in many institutions of higher learning, and given that resistance to SoTL remains very real for many practitioners, I am of the opinion that we bear a risk if we try to connect and integrate contemplative pedagogy within a SoTL practice. As it stands, many educators remain skeptical about introducing contemplative elements into their teaching practice, as Owen-Smith's own review of the current state of this "dangerous pedagogy" (citing Gardner, Calderwood, & Torosyan, 2007, at p. 60) attests. Making the connection between contemplative methods and SoTL just because they share some common features will add to the burdens of both almost equally marginalized practices. As much as I recognize the need to place emphasis on the connection between the interior and the exterior and to give space amidst all the rush, distraction, and fragmentation to reflection (in the contemplative sense, that is; I think that being reflective within a SoTL frame is not quite the same thing) and an overt focus on being present and attentive, placing SoTL within this vision of the contemplative mind and connecting the two as Owen-Smith does in this work, is not something I recommend. Not at this time. I do not think we are ready for this integration even if there are good reasons to embrace this "inner technology of knowing,"—not when both contemplative pedagogy and SoTL are still sitting only "at the edge of most disciplines" (Huber, 2006, p. 72, cited in Owen-Smith, p. 75).

CONCLUSION

I feel encouraged reading Owen-Smith's account of the many classrooms in institutions such as Brown, Michigan, and Naropa (p. 118) where contemplative methods are evident in teaching practice. I am cheered by the good progress made so far. I therefore recommend this book to anyone who wishes to introduce contemplative methods in their classrooms but has not yet found competent guidance on the subject, for we can emulate the work that has already been done by some scholars in these institutions. This book is also recommended to readers who have found themselves worrying about the legitimacy of contemplative pedagogy as it provides research findings and success stories that may go some ways to help to ground and demonstrate this practice. I also enjoyed finding out about the possible connections between contemplative pedagogy and SoTL, possibly providing SoTL with a more holistic frame, though their integration remains with a select few SoTL practitioners (p. 117). Owen-Smith has produced an accessible book that could, in fact, get more of us to think carefully and systematically about this issue of integration between contemplative pedagogy and SoTL practice, and to conduct more holistic SoTL investigations.

Among Owen-Smith's wise words that I most appreciated was her recommendation to resolve "the conundrum of technology": "One answer to the technology conundrum is not to do away with the use of these technologies in the classroom or reject online education but to assume a judicious, contemplative manner that offers [a suitable] counterbalance" (p. 114).

The rush, and distraction I have described at the start of this review needs just such a counterpoint. But I do not in my heart think we are ready to move toward a connection with SoTL. To accept contemplative pedagogy requires that "radical bravery, a willingness to step beyond the comfortable boundaries of traditions" (p. 121); to allow SoTL to cease being marginalized in institutions requires more than a few "SoTL champions" (Marcketti et al., 2015) and persistent advocates. There is so much more that we still need to do to gain (stronger) footholds for contemplative pedagogy and for SoTL, separately, before we could begin to integrate them. Otherwise, I worry that we may intensify the challenges currently faced by both approaches.

Chng Huang Hoon is an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature and an associate provost (undergraduate education) at the National University of Singapore (SGP). She leads the SoTL network called SoTL-Asia as part of an overall effort in fostering SoTL in her institution and the Asia region.

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