

# Finding equanimity teaching & learning online

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Equanimity is defined as mental calmness, composure, especially in the face of difficult situations. Who wouldn't want more of that?

In the flurry of change that descended upon us in March 2020, most university faculty found themselves moving quickly to change the way they taught. As campuses closed to support physical distancing measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty found a way to finish off the semester in emergency remote mode from home, teaching virtually. Uncertainty set in as we all pondered how will it be next semester, and the one after that?

As we entered summer it became clear that online instruction would be continued and now as fall arrives and classes begin, it remains the predominant mode of teaching and learning. Much effort has been put into teaching & learning resources to assist faculty to develop courses to meet the needs of students in this new norm.

I have heard from a number of faculty that they are worried about the health and wellbeing of students who will be increasingly connected to technology where they previously would have been engaged in face-to-face classroom instruction. I have also had faculty share they are anxious about the impact it will have on them personally and professionally. What will it feel like to be online for every class? What will it be like to focus on a screen for many more hours each week? What impact will it have physically, emotionally, and to our collective mental health and wellbeing?

The experience shared by one faculty member in particular, inspired me to consider what we could do to teach mindfully, engage in participatory health practices, and maintain wellness for ourselves during these challenging times. This is what was related to me...

***“When I think of the things that students most often say about me, they include that my classes are fun, I am authentic, and they learn a lot by doing/experiencing. I have found the switch to online to be very challenging to work from my strengths and the ways that I feel most confident. I have also discovered that I become quickly exhausted in the online platforms and at times somewhat panicky (in meetings specifically, as I haven't experienced much other than "emergency remote" with classes). It is just such a sense of not being who I am. I know I am not alone in this. I am sure some students will also experience similar “zoom anxiety” so perhaps I will be able to help myself and them to work through this as we move forward.”***

In response to these powerful thoughts and feelings, I have curated a few resources and recommendations to address the potential overwhelming reactions to the online environment.

First, I want to commend my colleague for acknowledging the thoughts and feelings being experienced. This is, in and of itself, mindful awareness. Paying attention is an important step towards discovering what it is we need. Being with our thoughts and feelings non-judgmentally and with compassion is the starting point for choosing to respond skillfully rather than the reactive, habituated cascade of stress that typically follows. It is also worth noting that taking care of oneself in order to be able to assist others is a significant insight as well. Stress is contagious. Observing another person in a stressful situation can be enough to make our own bodies release the stress hormone cortisol (Engert, 2014). In finding a way to be at ease with teaching online we can model appropriate ways to manage the degree of intensity focusing on a screen brings to our bodies. And speaking of our bodies, Rick Hanson (2020) asks us, “Where do you live?” and encourages us to “be the body”. In a recent post he explains the benefits of being body aware:

***“Coming down into it, inhabiting it – most fundamentally, being it.***

***For starters, being the body is simply telling a truth. What we experience being – thoughts and feelings, memories and desires, and consciousness itself – is constrained, conditioned, and constructed by the body via its nervous system. The fabric of your mind is woven by your body.***

***Further, being aware of your body and its signals gives you useful information about your deeper feelings and needs. Tracking your body's subtle reactions to others also tells you a lot about them.***

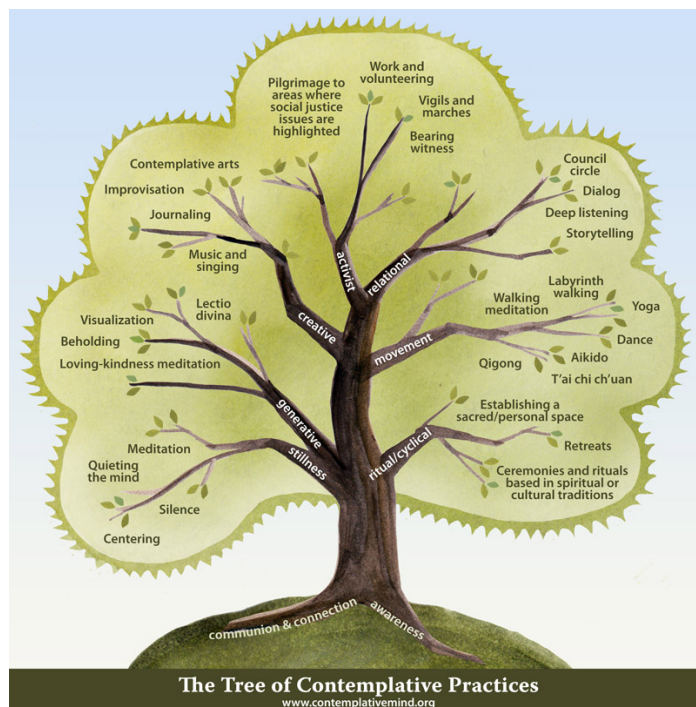
***Coming home to your body helps you feel grounded, and it gives you reassuring feedback that you're alive and basically alright. It's exhilarating to feel the vitality of the body, even sitting quietly, and to experience the pleasures of the senses.”***

There seems to be a tendency when we are working online to forget about our body. We get very much into our head. For me when I spend too much time with the screen my brain actually begins to feel irritated and tired. Eye strain, headaches and overall fatigue are not uncommon with overuse of technology. That is our body wisdom, telling us something is going on. In a recent webinar sponsored by the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, an initiative of CMind, one of the presenters referred to our body's response to stress and trauma as an act of grace and intelligence on behalf of our nervous system. The session was titled “Embodying Your Curriculum” with Anita Chari and Angelica Singh, and it really resonated with me. What if when our body is telling us something, we stopped and paid attention? It is my belief that we will absolutely need to consider this as we begin our amped up online experience this fall. We will need to regulate and resource ourselves and our students to be able to learn, demonstrate resiliency and increase communication and connection in the online environment.

We will need to ground ourselves first and create social connection online. We need to “see” our students, beyond the little boxes on the screen. To become empowered rather than exhausted means we will have to be intentional with our approach. To build a safe and durable container to teach online, where we can feel good about being there, we will need to reside more in the being rather than the doing. Be authentic, take your time, be vulnerable and be mindful. Consider how the use of contemplative pedagogy can support you to be the energized and authentic person you are in a F2F learning environment. Contemplative pedagogy is a philosophy of higher education that infuses learning with the experience of awareness, insight, and compassion for oneself and others via the practice of meditation and contemplative disciplines. Contemplative pedagogy uses forms of introspection and reflection allowing students the opportunity to focus internally and find more of themselves in their courses.

Contemplative Pedagogy employs the use of practices that actively engage a learning environment in an experiential and contextualized manner allowing for the emergence of authentic change agency. It offers an educator or student a lens with which to begin to understand, reflect, and critically inquire with mindful awareness, deeply into one’s own nature and relationship to life. Deep introspection and mindfulness are the foundation of contemplative pedagogy.

There are many resources available to assist you in developing ideas and activities that encompass contemplative pedagogy. You don’t necessarily have to be a meditator to incorporate this into your teaching & learning practice. The Tree of Contemplative Practices from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society presents many ways to engage mindfully.



Restoring integration of the heart, mind and body is of vital importance. Finding moments to be mindful and still, will result in resiliency and *equanimity* that can be with the comings and goings of daily stressors and the added pressure of online teaching and learning.

Feeling grounded and with an intention to pay attention, what knowledge do you want to prioritize? The content will only be shared if the connection is made first. Nurture empathic relationships with students. “Emotions drive learning” (Posey, 2019). Start classes with simple activities to get to know your students. Create an online environment where they feel safe, valued, and respected just as you would in person in a classroom. Only then will you all have the cognitive energy to learn together.

Limit the amount of time in direct instruction. Discard activities that are not crucial to the course’s overall learning goals and objectives. Think about teaching through the four R’s of Indigenous Education: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001). The context of decolonizing curriculum and utilizing Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing in our teaching and learning benefits all students and contributes to the kind of relational online environment we aspire to.

Utilize opportunities to have students break out together in small groups, much as you would in a physical classroom. Design some activities and tasks where working together learning goals can be achieved. Promote relational vibrancy by encouraging everyone to take moments at the beginning of each breakout to connect before getting to task. Open up the conversations to include time to chat informally. There is a balance to be found between relationship building and task completion. “Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. We want to experience real connection with others” (Brown, 2019). True belonging is about sharing authentically, and stronger connections are built through curiosity and deep listening. To build rapport remotely we all need to smile, pay attention, be genuine, connect to communicate, be empathetic, supportive, give feedback and feed our online connections.

What about our relationship to technology itself? How might we bring direct awareness to this electronic device that may seemingly take away the warmth that our in-class connections offered, but is currently allowing us to connect and learn together? It might be useful to explore how we feel about this “relationship”. How do you feel when you are looking at and listening to a screen? In a recent talk on Dharmaseed (August 21,2020) Jill Shepherd invites her online retreat participants to consider how they might orient in a skilful way toward technology and to the people together in a “zoom room.” If we are all going to be immersed in online environments it might be useful to see if we can start that relationship with technology well. I have listed a link to the guided meditation by Jill below in the references and resources section, as it may spark an idea to do something similar at the beginning of your online courses.

No doubt there will be times when our minds and our bodies are telling us we need to stop and take a break from the online environment. Infusing those moments with mindful movement, nature, sipping a cup of tea, or a simple grounding practice will be important as a way to restore mental health and wellbeing. We do not want to be staring at a screen all the time! To help with staying present and mindful as we teach and learn online, I have developed the acronym PAUSE as a reminder to down regulate, settle, and resource from time-to-time when needed.

**P** Pay attention

**A** Accept thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise

**U** Unplug. Understand this opportunity to discover what you need. Untangle judgment

**S** Slow down, soften, stay with what is arising rather than expending energy fighting

**E** Ease your way forward with intention, what do you need?

By using the PAUSE from time-to-time you are engaging in the process of self-inquiry. Exploring thoughts, feelings and sensations and acknowledging them rather than trying to escape, you will discover through awareness how online or screen overload, fatigue, exhaustion or anxiety feels in your body and can then take appropriate steps to balance and stabilize yourself. By accepting what is happening rather than fighting or turning away from it, you generate the opportunity to gain insight into your concerns.

We can offer steadiness as a contribution to each other in the online teaching and learning environment. Acknowledging that a screen has a degree of intensity we can balance it with relational capacity. We can find equanimity teaching and learning online.



## References & Resources

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