



University of Essex

Telling students to be kind isn't enough: exploring the role of mindfulness, contemplation and compassion in higher education

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The compassion imperative in education...

- Technological knowhow does not mean that that we have the wisdom to appropriately apply what we develop
- Dominant objectivist epistemology has increased our disconnection from the world and each other
- Discourses of competition, performance and success in schools and higher education dominate those of connection and compassion
- The mind is often taught to the exclusion of the heart



...and health professional education

- Growing concern about care quality in the NHS and the fundamental challenge of ‘teaching compassion’.
- High rates of burn-out, mental illness, addiction and suicide amongst health professionals
- Is current medical and nursing education emotionally preparing students for practice? Some suggest that training may actually be harmful to students, or at least maladaptive for compassionate care (Coulehan and Williams, 2001; Youngson 2012)



Compassion and Contemplative pedagogy

‘Contemplative pedagogy shifts the focus of teaching and learning to incorporate ‘first person’ approaches which connect students to their lived, embodied experience of their own learning. Students are encouraged to become more aware of their internal world and connect their learning to their own values and sense of meaning which in turn enables them to form richer deeper, relationships with their peers, their communities and the world around them.’

(Contemplative Pedagogy Network 2014)

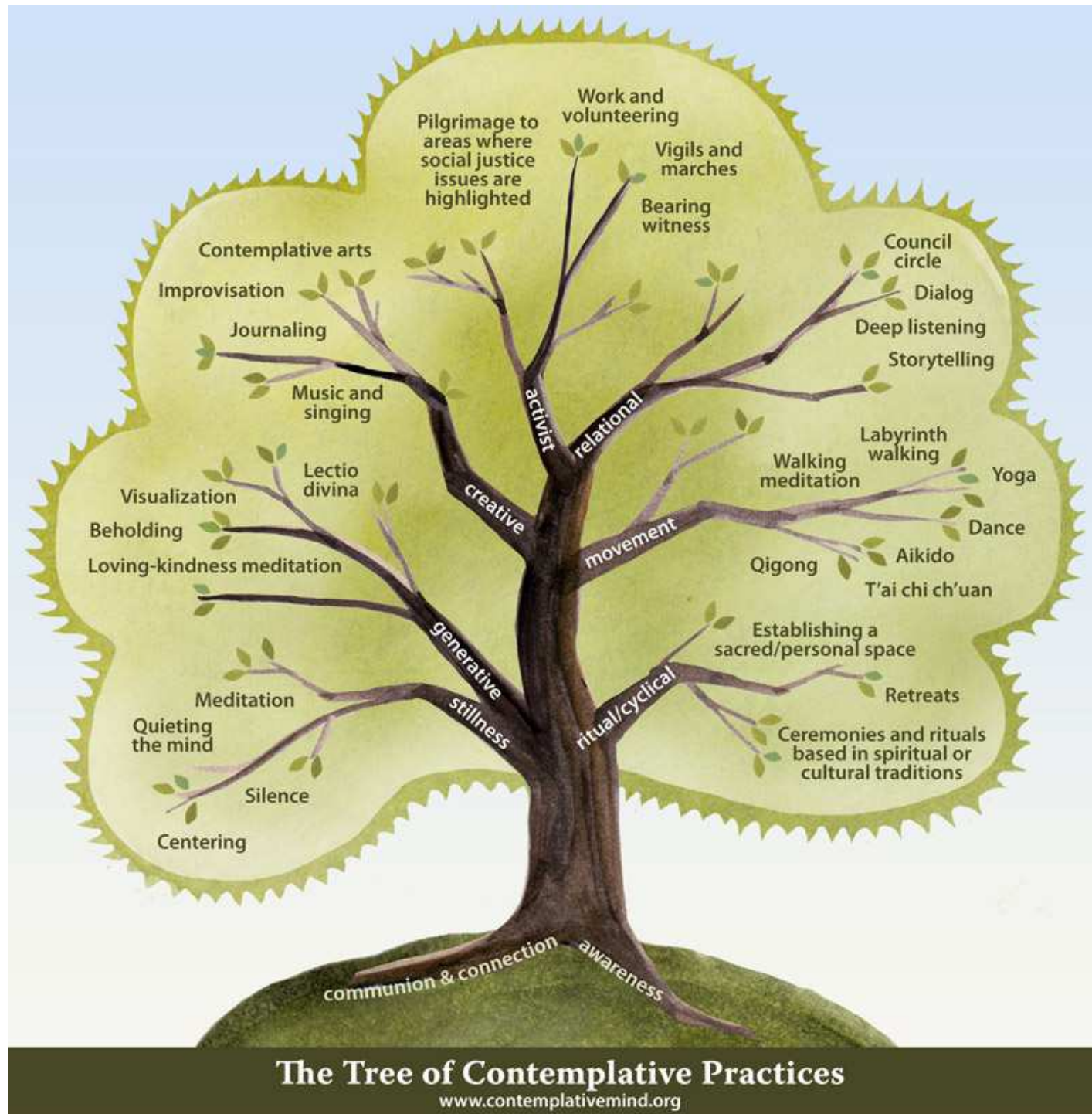


Seeing differently, teaching differently...

Zajonc remarks (Cited in Boyce, 2007):

'Knowledge, from the point of view of any contemplative tradition, is not primarily object-oriented. It is epiphany - or insight-oriented. It's not good enough to know about reality; you need to change how you see reality. Real education is transformation.'

- Students need to be introduced to ideas and information but also to themselves and each other
- The teachers role is not to 'fill up' or 'stuff in' information but draw out their experience (Latin: Educere)
- Teachers must model the awareness and compassion they want to see in their students



The Tree of Contemplative Practices

www.contemplativemind.org



Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner

Structured around two concepts - *mindfulness* and *compassion*

- Teaching takes place over 3 full days to allow for meaningful experiential learning
- Support is offered between sessions in online forums
- The module will be assessed through a short essay and reflective account.
- The way in which the course is taught is underpinned by **contemplative pedagogy – not just talking about compassion, experiencing and cultivating it.**



Defining compassion...

‘Compassion may be defined as the capacity to be attentive to the experience of others, to wish the best for others, and to sense what will truly serve others’

Halifax (2012)



Course structure

Day One

Introduction to the course

Reflection: what are the challenges of delivering compassionate care?

What is mindfulness?

Various mindfulness practices



Course structure

Day Two

Introduction to self-compassion

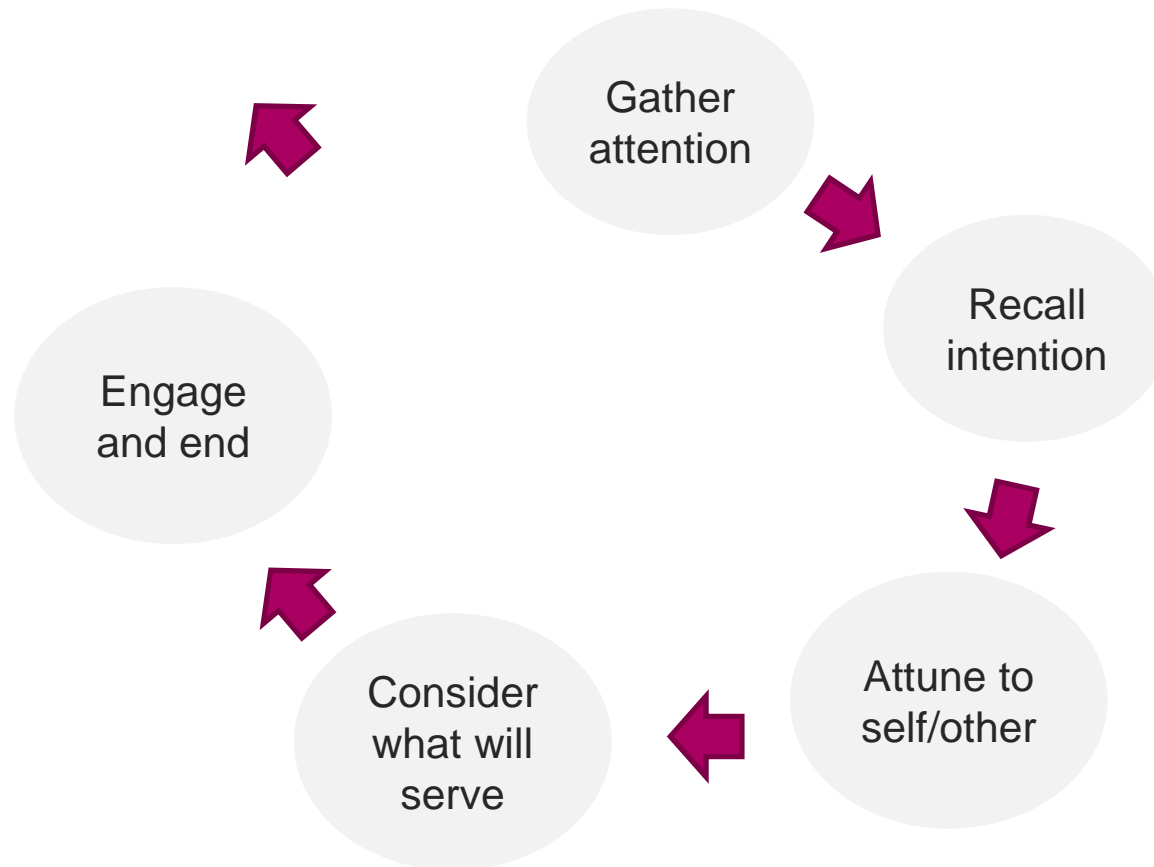
What self-compassion is NOT

Loving kindness meditation

GRACE model of interaction with patients



GRACE



(Halifax 2012)



Course structure

Day Three

Coping in the moment

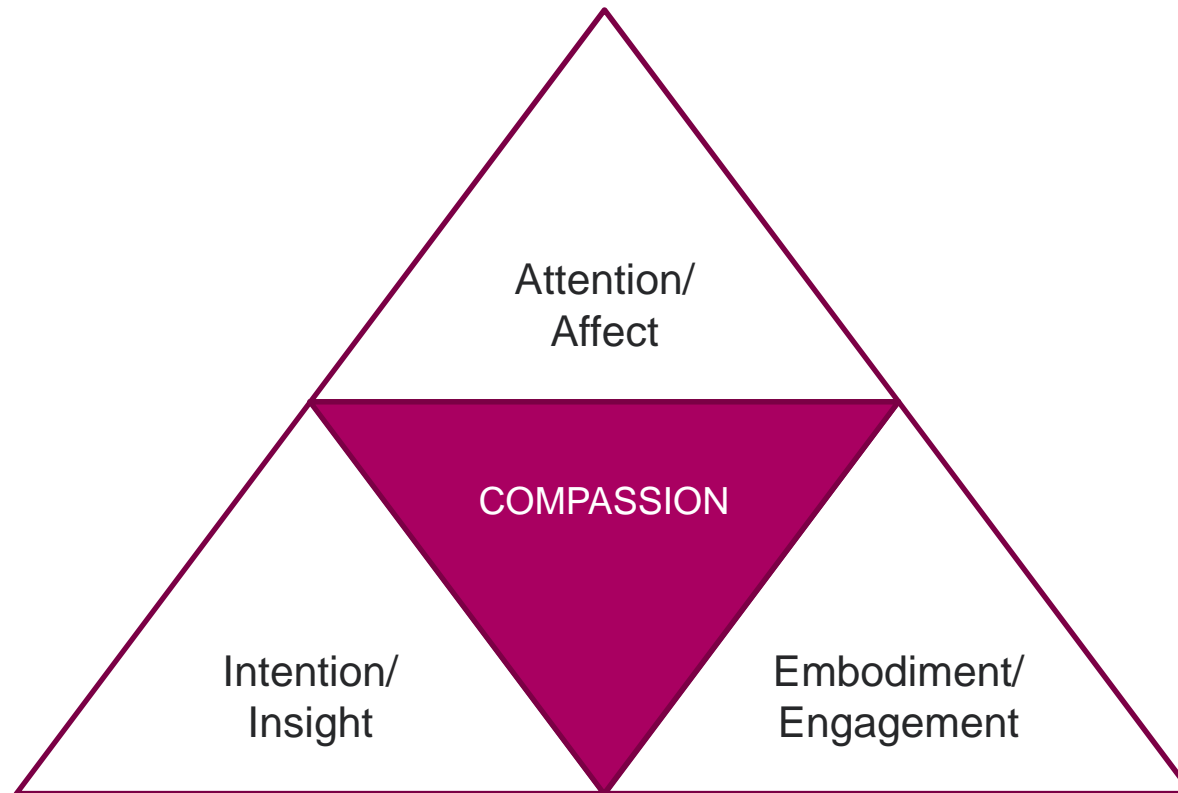
ABIDE model of compassion

Discovering intention: reflective practice

Taking things forward – individual and group reflection on learning



The ABIDE model of compassion



(Halifax 2013)



Compassion and studying

'Most students prefer the idea of changing others and changing the world to actually changing themselves. But the compassion practices teach from within what the wisdom traditions all teach: you cannot give to another what you do not have. And once students are guided to look within, they see what needs to be changed.'

(Barbezat and Bush 2014: 176)



Compassion and studying

Why is the development of compassion important when we are studying?

- By developing awareness and self-compassion students can study more effectively and engage with the world wholeheartedly and not be overwhelmed by the suffering they come into contact with or experience themselves.
- We come to know ourselves as learners (and teachers) and respond gently and kindly in the face of our failures and shortcomings
- We recognise our individuality and respect that of others whilst experiencing our interdependence and the importance of relationships
- Compassion starts to be understood as something that can be actively developed – it is not a fixed personality trait or weak emotion.
- Recognising compassion during teaching inevitably requires appropriate opportunity to recognise the difficulties and pain that we *all* experience, overcoming isolation, facilitating dialogue and providing opportunity to compassion to arise.



Common humanity compassion exercise

- Work in pairs (but can be done with an ‘imaginary’ other)
- Get in touch with a sense of positive emotion, friendliness, well wishing. You may find it helpful to place your hand on your heart.
- Reflect on your common humanity: they suffering as you do, they experience joy as you do, they become ill as you do, they feel vulnerable as you do. You are not alone in your suffering.
- Then on the in breath bring to mind a positive word to breath in – peace, love, ease, or just imagine breathing in light.
- Then on the out-breath breath out something positive to your partner.
- Spend sometime in this flow breathing positive emotion in and then breathing it out to your partner.



Self-compassion

Amending Halifax's compassion definition:

Self-compassion may be defined as our capacity to be attentive to our own experience, to wish the best for ourselves and sense what will truly serve us.



Loving Kindness meditation

- Active cultivation of positive emotion towards ourselves and others. Helpful phases include:

May I/you be happy

May I/you be well

May I/you be free from suffering

May I/you live with ease

- Some people also find it useful to develop a sense of loving-kindness in the body often around their heart
- Some people like to use a visualisation, perhaps of light in their heart
- Be very gentle, do not force anything
- The five traditional stages are: 1) Self 2) Good friend 3) Neutral person 4) Difficult person 5) Equalising and expanding to all. We will be using variations of this.



Awareness, compassion and action

Zajonc (2009: 68) remarks:

'if we are to serve with the best of who we are, then we cannot evade the shyness and fear we naturally feel when we confront the open interior space of stillness.'



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[Developing as a Compassionate Practitioner](#)

[Contemplative Pedagogy Network](#)



References

Barbezat, D.P. and Bush, M. 2013. *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. 1 edition. Jossey-Bass.

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Youngson, D. R. (2012). *Time to Care: How to love your patients and your job*. Raglan, N.Z.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform

Zajonc, A. 2009. *Meditation As Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*. Massachusetts: Lindisfarne Books.



Further reading and relevant websites

In addition to those on the reference list:

Books and papers

- Lin, J., R. L. Oxford, and E. J. Brantmeier, eds. 2013. *Re-Envisioning Higher Education: Embodied Pathways to Wisdom and Social Transformation*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Palmer, P. J., and A. Zajonc. 2010. *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons

Websites and institutions

Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe>

Association for Mindfulness in Education

<http://www.mindfuleducation.org/>

Videos

Barbezat, D. 2014. *Contemplative Pedagogy*.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5iARQfWRZQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

Bush, M. 2010. *Practice: The Core of Contemplative Education*.

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/archives/1925>.

Zajonc, A. 2013. The Heart of Education (<http://vimeo.com/62676465>). Keynote speech at the Mindfulness In Education conference. Cambridge, MA.



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