

Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research

Conference Proceedings

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12) Panel on Meditative Inquiry and Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this panel, Angie Kolen, Leigh-Ann Macfarlane, Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, & Gavan Watson—all of whom have contributed significantly to the Teaching and Learning Departments of their respective universities—work together to create a presentation unlike any of the others in the conference. Utilizing a meditative inquiry approach, they first developed their own questions. They then shaped their unified presentation as a live, spontaneous, dialogic response to these questions, inviting further questions and comments from the audience to enrich the discussion. Each presenter responds individually to the questions, while also using each other's comments as well as those of the other participants to further develop their own thinking on the topic.

Meditation: Angie Kolen began this session by guiding the participants through a conscious breathing exercise, clearing our minds of thoughts and tuning into the inner self. She gently brought us into a state of awareness and attention.

YouTube Link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgCsVI4-ivc&list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf&index=12

Keywords: *higher education, teaching, educational development*

Meditative Inquiry and Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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As members of an invited panel on the topic of meditative inquiry and teaching and learning in higher education, we took a meditative inquiry approach in planning and connecting our experiences as educators and educational developers in higher education with *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*, edited by Ashwani Kumar. We found diverse perspectives and connections and developed four questions to guide our panel. Unrehearsed, each panellist responded to a question, then seeded the discussion to other panellists and audience. In the spirit of meditative inquiry, we allowed these conversations to flow in depth and direction. The proceedings flowed with individual panellists summarizing the conversation related to their question. We reached our conclusions through collaborative conversation, recognizing diverse language and interpretations.

How does meditative inquiry connect to professional work and personal development in higher education?

In higher education, personal and professional growth are commonly connected and developed through critical analysis and reflection. Without grounded application of these skills, the effects on our development can be positive or negative. Meditative inquiry, a grounded approach using these academic skills with personal awareness and empathy in personal and professional development, fosters growth of the whole person. It focuses on the journey not the outcome, which may be in opposition to the outcome driven reality of higher education. Meditative inquiry encourages making time and space to engage at different levels, examining various perspectives and connections within one's experiences. For example, as educational developers, we facilitate

meditative inquiry when we host professional development opportunities and support the construction of teaching dossiers. It is important to create time, space, and guiding questions for these opportunities for thoughtful exploration of one's beliefs, values, and perspectives, and how these influence attitudes and behaviours. The focus remains on the journey and exploration and not the outcomes or actions as a result of engaging in meditative inquiry. Fostering personal connection and conversation engages and opens mindset and perspectives as we go through the process of meditative inquiry.

How does meditative inquiry inform our teaching practices?

When meditative inquiry informs classroom practice, it starts at the design stage, where we plan our topics, assessments, type of questions asked, and the teaching methods we will use. An overarching question may be, "how much control should we give our students?" or "how much power will we share in our classes?" When we are student-centric and passionate about helping students learn to engage in thoughtful conversations and ask deep questions, we design our courses to provide students opportunity to contribute to topic selection (within parameters) and allow them choice in assignments, including the format for delivery (i.e., paper, video, poem, artwork, etc.). We may even allow flexibility in due dates. We design our classes to be interactive, giving students time to think and directions for small and larger group discussions. We moderate these discussions, being open, inclusive, and accepting of students' ideas. We are receptive and encouraging to questions, especially when they challenge the status quo. Designated as pass/fail, we embrace the opportunity to let students in these courses drive their learning, a path that is

less stressful as it allows students to embrace topics of interest and share their learning in formats best suited to them.

How does meditative inquiry support teaching development?

Educational developers do more than share teaching “tips and tricks,”— we nurture teachers’ spirits. We encourage letting go of teaching how we were taught. We help teachers explore who they are, relationships to their discipline, and how to care for learners while sharing their love for their discipline. Too often, fear is a foundational aspect of learning: fear of being judged, fear of being wrong, fear of failure. Fear limits our learning and capacity to learn how to teach. Since our identities and fears are tightly interconnected, we work with teachers to recognize the potential for fluidity and change within. Working with others’ fears requires empathy. Our conversations and listening create awareness, support, and a way forward. This takes time and relationship building. Assessments also create fear. We’ve assessed students based on a lack of trust, and students’ evaluation of teachers personally attack rather than support and encourage their growth. These scenarios involve perspectives about learning and teaching through fear. A range of assessments for students that enables choice and creativity, and mid-term evaluations or frequent in-class evaluations for instructors involves trust, dissolves fear enhancing teaching and learning. Meditative inquiry facilitates exploring one's consciousness. Understanding oneself as a learner is key to educational change and working with students to change the world.

How do we balance the aspirations of meditative inquiry with the reality of Western higher education systems?

To balance aspirations of meditative inquiry within the Canadian context, two broad “realities” need to be addressed: massification of higher education and quality assurance. Increased enrollment relates directly with increased access for equity-deserving students. Student diversity leads to heterogeneity in ideas, perspectives, and life experiences in classrooms, benefitting the system. Tension exists with increased enrolment and class sizes limiting the teaching methodologies to uncover these life experiences. Practices implicit with meditative inquiry often occur at a smaller scale; collaborative, inquiry-based, reflective, and holistic methods that allow diversity to emerge in larger classes need to be adopted. Institutional quality assurance processes result in stark summative evaluations for many academic units. Educational developers engage with multiple units undergoing review and have a different perspective; program accreditation and quality enhancement can lead to new conversations. Asking instructors, staff, and students to reflect on the program, make clear assumptions about curriculum design, and whose perspectives are included (or excluded) align with meditative inquiry. Given these tensions, what should we do? When we explore tension inherent in our systems, challenges become opportunities. Institutions must yield power and re-balance research, service, and teaching. We must work to recognize and re-centre the transformative potential of the classroom for collaboration, discovery, conversation, and critical reflection.

Our panel conversation was a meditative inquiry journey, enabling us to explore together many

facets of learning, teaching, and development within higher education. Our focus transforming students, teachers, developers, and institutions is to ensure learning is positively impactful, empowering, and life altering. We encourage our readers to embrace meditative inquiry as an approach to deep and lasting change that facilitates consideration of the whole person, re-balancing of power, and rethinking of our ways of being and living within the culture of the academy.

Author Bios

Angie Kolen is a highly interactive Professor in Human Kinetics currently on sabbatical leave following three years as the inaugural Coordinator of St. Francis Xavier University's Teaching & Learning Centre. Angie's passion for teaching is obvious in her classes where she engages with her students in service learning, promoting physical activity to children. This passion for teaching was also evident in the direction she took with the Teaching & Learning Centre working with students and professors related to culturally relevant pedagogies and coordinating spring and fall week-long teaching retreats focused on decolonization, Black Students Matter, diversity, and inclusion.

Leigh-Ann MacFarlane is an Educational Developer in the Teaching and Learning Centre at Mount Saint Vincent University. She has a BSc in Biology, a PhD in Physiology and Biophysics, and a Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning. She brings to her work 15 years of university teaching experience at Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, and Mount Saint Vincent University. She sits on a number of

provincial and regional teaching and learning committees and is the past-chair of the Association of Atlantic Universities Faculty Development Committee. Leigh-Ann has a personal and professional interest in reflective practice and has offered faculty workshops and conference presentations on this topic.

Suzanne Le-May Sheffield is the Executive Director (Acting) of the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Dalhousie University. She has held a director role there since 2012 and has over 25 years of educational development and university teaching experience at York University and at Dalhousie. Dr. Sheffield has published in both her disciplinary field of history and in the scholarship of teaching and learning and scholarship of educational development fields and is currently an associate editor for the *International Journal for Academic Development*. She has long had an interest in mindfulness and contemplative practices in higher education and for some time ran a faculty discussion group exploring this approach to teaching and learning together.

Gavan Watson (he/him) is the Associate Vice President, Teaching and Learning, and Director of the Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning at Memorial University (St. John's, NL). Gavan's research blends scholarly practice to build expertise and has been published in peer-reviewed journals like *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* as well as in publications like *EDUCAUSE review*. With an academic background in environmental education, Dr. Watson has been invited to speak across Canada and the United States on topics ranging from Open Badges to Facilitating Student Assessment with Technology. Gavan is a father of two young children, and lives backing on prime Bakeapple habitat in St. John's.

13) Keynote Panel 2: Interdisciplinary Exploration of Meditative Inquiry

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Abstract

This panel brings together panellists from three very different disciplines and perspectives, sharing their stories with how they have engaged with meditative inquiry in their own unique ways. To begin, Balaganapathi Devarakonda offers a presentation, “Exploring the Focus of Human Action: A Space that Conflates Meditative Inquiry and Philosophical Counselling,” on the commonalities between meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling, highlighting the focus that connects all explorations of knowledge. In “Meditative Mind(ing) a Fearlessness Worldview Through Dialogue: It Won’t Be Easy,” R. Michael Fisher discusses the nature of dialogue in countering fear-conditioning, tracing a route to past theorists, through approaches such as meditative inquiry and into a hoped-for future of a revolution in consciousness. Lastly, Kelly Resmer shares her experiences with how she used meditative inquiry as a pathway for transforming her chemistry lab after the impacts of COVID-19 in a presentation entitled “Chemistry Laboratory Teaching and Learning Guided by Meditative Inquiry.”

Meditation: Michael Fisher started this panel by guiding participants in a meditation that focused on a visualisation of a “power place”. This meditation brought us to awareness of the senses, and an embrace of acceptance and unity.

YouTube Link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2H8yByGFYw&list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf&index=13

Keywords: *meditative inquiry, philosophical counselling, ekagrata, pause, self-knowledge / fear, fearlessness paradigm, without fear, ideology / teaching in a chemistry laboratory, un-grading, inquiry approach*

Exploring the Focus of Human Action: A Space that Conflates Meditative Inquiry and Philosophical Counselling

Balaganapathi Devarakonda

University of Delhi

Any action—whether oriented towards learning or knowing, exploring, understanding, or problem-solving—requires a particular kind of focus to be successful. The importance of this focus has been identified by humans since the early times of explorations into the knowledge of action. The nature of this focus is articulated and re-articulated throughout human history across cultures.

I perceive meditative inquiry, which is the focus of the work being discussed, and philosophical counselling, which is gaining prominence, as a helpful tool for resolving varied kinds of ambivalences concerning human actions—to be conflating in addressing the concerns of this focus. This focus is the space where binaries interact, the dialogue originates, and both the decision and performance of action get articulated. Indian tradition conceptualises this focus with the term *ekagrata*, which means giving prominence to unity. It is internally being attentive to the external object of learning or knowing. This recognises the existence of subject and object but argues for going beyond by unifying them. Focus involves two significant aspects that need to be noted. At one level, it is the focus of the mind on the object of knowledge through senses, and, at another level, focus of the mind on its own material to analyse and comprehend. This second aspect requires a state of pause, which temporarily halts input to the mind so that it can work on balancing itself in dealing with the earlier and future input. Meditation provides the possibility of this halt or pause. In this particular way, meditation, in fact,

ensures the health of the mind, as fasting ensures the health of a human cell. Human cells ensure their health by consuming their own damaged parts when an individual fasts. Similarly, when we pause our human activity, we not only contribute to our biological health but also to our epistemological well-being. Meditation is not just an act of pausing, but, going along with Ashwani Kumar, I would argue that it is an internal inquiry into the self and the potentiality and possibility of self-knowledge. In this particular sense, it can be considered to be self-reflection which is emphasised repeatedly in the ancient Indian Upanishadic tradition. I consider this self-reflection to be the common ground between meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling. Both emphasise the importance of inquiry into the self to understand how the self relates to itself, which is both rational and experiential.

Meditative Mind(ing) a Fearlessness Worldview Through Dialogue: It Won't Be Easy

R. Michael Fisher

Founder and Senior Editor, the International Journal of Fear Studies

The (post)modern revival of the dialogical relational ways of knowing are well documented from Buber to Bohm to Krishnamurti to meditative inquiry, as another movement to counter fear-conditioning and its deleterious impacts on love, peace, justice, freedom, and Life. The rainbow particularity of all the plethora of dialogical forms, methods, and/or non-methods, are also calling for us to consider some universalities. What wisdom-based solutions can arise to our troubled and unsustainable ways as a global capitalist technoculture? A new (ancient) worldview is being accessed in meditative inquiry (MI) and the best of the dialogical forms. Yet, this

offering of wisdom in MI is not without its problematics.

Engaging with Meditative Inquiry (edited book), central to this conference and my own critical review, is put under the lens of my Fearlessness Paradigm—in a critical counter hegemonic approach to knowledge, knowing, and education. Without directly defining fearlessness in this overarching context, I present a collage of quotes from the MI book, to show that there are good reasons to focus on “fear” and “without fear” as pivotal aspects and key principles (respectively)—and practices—in the execution of this recent notion of MI put forward by Ashwani Kumar and enthusiastic followers of this MI approach.

I argue that there is an ideological leaning towards fearlessness as a wise direction for education and MI, but this leaning has insufficiently examined its own premises in relation to questions such as “what is fear?”, “where is fear located?”, “how do we know we know what fear is?” etc. This epistemological questioning is fundamental to my presentation, and I contrast the arising academic attention and critique coming from an Indigenous-based (kincentric) worldview and its branches (and dialogues, e.g., Four Arrows and Darcia Narvaez). The re-making of foundations for a true “gift of fearlessness” paradigm, ought to be complementary to MI in higher education—whereby I suggest we study fear and fearlessness from interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, in order to be the most holistic-integral possible. “Without fear” also has to be put through this critical filter so that it actually has a substantive basis for MI in the future.

Caught in a culture of fear and the dominant worldview, we all are faced with reality of insidious, often hidden, fear-based resistances to a truly progressive educational and research agenda like MI. And it will take a good deal more than virtue-signalling and associations of MI with higher moral airs, to bring about an authentic realization of the gifts of MI. The primary problem is that MI is being coalesced into an existential movement and sign of hope, primarily constructed by those working within the professionalism and university institutional context of hidden curriculum and political agendas still based on fear. Thus, any “without fear” curricular and pedagogical directive led by MI, needs deeper critical evaluation because of this institutional enmeshment upon which it has grown in the last decade. The Fearlessness Paradigm is a good guide for MI; but, predictably, it won’t be easy to authentically actualize.

Chemistry Laboratory Teaching and Learning Guided by Meditative Inquiry

Kelly Resmer

Mount Saint Vincent University

As a chemistry laboratory instructor who taught exclusively hands-on labs, the COVID pandemic provided a significant shift to my teaching as labs were totally online. Upon the return to in-person learning, I was guided by meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2022). I thought deeply about what I valued as a person, a lab instructor, and the lab learning environment I wanted to foster. I un-graded the lab, focused on meaningful feedback, self-reflection, and making mistakes. I offered more student choice and used inquiry-based lab learning, allowing students to be more creative in their learning.

The chemistry laboratory is a unique teaching environment that lends itself naturally to dialogue, it's the place to "do science" (Seery, Agustian & Zhang, 2019). The lab has the potential to spark curiosity and creativity, but care must be taken to design activities to support this. For example, *cookbook labs* where students follow the recipe where there is an expected way to complete the lab and expected outcomes. While cookbook labs do have their place when learning new techniques, it can dampen the enthusiasm, creativity, and curiosity in the lab. Alternatively, inquiry-based labs are a way for students to research a topic or research question of their choice, allowing students to develop their own sense of being a scientist. Often, I take a guided inquiry approach (Buck, Bretz & Towns, 2008), where students first practice a technique then ask their own research question using that technique and design a procedure to test their hypothesis. This leads to students pursuing something they are interested in learning more about, motivating lab learning. At the end of the lab term, I incorporate a project I call "Choose your own experiment" where students get to choose the research question to study, valuing students' decisions to study what they are interested in. They are only limited by the equipment, chemicals we have, and of course, lab safety.

Finally, removing measurements and grades has always been something that interested me. This past winter I "un-graded" (Blum & Kohn, 2020) one of my labs. With less than 20 students enrolled, it was realistic to implement a portfolio-based system (Boyce & Singh, 2008; Talbert & Clark, 2008). Each week, as usual, students had to hand in their weekly lab reports. However, these reports were not graded; no marks assigned and only feedback was given.

Emphasis was placed on using the received feedback to improve and strengthen submissions for the final portfolio. There was a mid-term check in where students reflected on their lab learning progress either through an oral discussion to encourage dialog, or in writing. The final lab portfolio was submitted at the end of term. In the portfolio, students reflected on what they thought their lab grade would be and why they were assigned that grade, providing evidence such as a copy of their lab calculations, a video demonstrating a lab skill, or a scan of their lab notebook page. I tried not to limit the possibilities for this evidence, allowing students to choose how to demonstrate their learning process. Overall, it was an enjoyable experience that helped minimize grade anxiety, allowing for risk-taking and creativity.

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general chemistry to third-year intermediary metabolism. Prior to working at MSVU, she was a postdoctoral fellow at Colorado State University, where she also completed a teaching fellowship through the American Society for Microbiology. She has a PhD in Chemistry and Certificate in University Teaching and Learning from Dalhousie University and a BSc from the University of Waterloo.

Author Bios

Balaganpathi Devarakonda is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Delhi, Delhi, India. He is presently with the University of West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica as ICCR Chair for Indology. His research interests are in the areas of Indian Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Practice. In addition to teaching and research, Prof. Bala is a Certified Philosophical Counsellor by American Philosophy Practitioners Association, New York. The details of his publications and projects can be accessed at: www.balaganapathid.com

R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D. is an artist, independent scholar-educator and fearologist. He is director of the In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute and an author of many articles and books on transformation and liberation. He is founder and senior editor of the *International Journal of Fear Studies* and has written an intellectual biography of Four Arrows and the Indigenous worldview and its radical relevance to education and beyond. He currently lives on the W. coast of Canada with his partner Barbara A. Bickel.

Kelly Resmer is a chemistry lab instructor at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, NS. She teaches a variety of labs ranging from first-year

14) Practitioners' Panel on Meditative Inquiry

Laurie Cook, Lindsay Leighton, Stephanie McDonald, Neeraj Verma

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Abstract

This panel offers presentations by practitioners from four different fields—community development, psychology, mental health, and medical education—who share explorations of their own work in relation to ideas discussed in the meditative inquiry collection. In the first presentation, “We Know What We are Against, But What are We for? Meditative Inquiry in Practice in Community,” Laurie Cook shares her thoughts on how meditative inquiry informed her work in a local community development project as well as in her research and activities related to curriculum development. Lindsay Leighton offers a presentation, “Awareness, Inquiry, and Love through Science,” on her experiences with incorporating meditative inquiry in her research and practice as a psychologist, highlighting the alignment between meditative inquiry and evidence-based practices. In her talk, “How Might Dialogical Meditative Inquiry Inform the Practice of an Existentially Minded Community Mental Health Therapist?”, Stephanie McDonald shares her thoughts on the commonalities between meditative inquiry and mental health therapy, seeing them as dogma free avenues for the exploration of self and relationship. Lastly, Neeraj Verma offers a presentation entitled “My Association with Meditative Inquiry and its Relevance in Medical Education,” in which he uses the Upanishadic perspectives to discuss meditative inquiry and how deepened self-awareness can be used a tool for in-depth learning in the field of medical education.

Meditation: Lindsay Leighton began this session by leading conference attendees through a multi-modal meditation, using sound technology. She used Tibetan Singing bowls and sound vibration to bring us into a state of calm awareness.

YouTube Link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFtIFlpVkpM&list=PLfvjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf&index=14

Keywords: *meditative inquiry, community development, curriculum / evidence-based practices, alignment, school psychology, guided partnership / meditative inquiry, existentialism, therapy / awareness, self-realization, medical education, meditative enquiry, dialogue*

We Know What We are Against, But What Are We For? Meditative Inquiry in Practice in Community

Laurie Cook

Acadia University

In my presentation, I speak about how Kumar's work on meditative inquiry in general and the work and perspectives collected in Kumar's new book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research*, could inform community development work and practice. In particular, I look at how meditative inquiry might inform the curriculum development and research I am doing related to inclusive economic development for marginalized and racialized people and communities as part of a project with the community organization [In My Own Voice \(iMOVE\)](#) and funded by the [Mitacs Accelerate Fellowship](#) program.

iMOVE uses cultural production and the arts to help people of African descent who have been incarcerated to re-integrate into the community. This includes using a unique program developed by iMOVE founder Sobaz Benjamin called the Kintsugi Monologues—helping people learn cultural production and film/television skills to be able to make a living in these industries, and supporting leadership skill development and systems change in these communities.

One key point I look at in my presentation is the challenge UK community development practitioner and educator Margaret Ledwith talks about, which is the political nature of the work of community developments; that it is “either

perpetuating the status quo or creating the context to question” (2001, p. 171). I then connect this point by Ledwith with the nature of meditative inquiry, which is, according to Kumar “the art of understanding oneself [but also] one's relationship to people and the world... [and as] an existential process through which each one of us discovers our own truths [by] living wakefully, meditatively and creatively... with people... and the world around us” (Kumar, n.d.).

I then talk about how I feel iMOVE is already using meditative inquiry methods in its curriculum, and has been for many years, but there have not been the resources to document what they have been doing. The Mitacs project will help me to document what iMOVE has already been doing as well as to conduct research on how they can improve and expand on the work they are doing and how meditative inquiry could be used in a more intentional way to help them accomplish their goals.

Another part of the project I talk about—and another way of applying meditative inquiry in relationship to it—is helping iMOVE develop learning opportunities to teach others (in government, community, and academia) about iMOVE's unique approach, and why this is important as a means of helping people of African descent who have been incarcerated to re-integrate into community.

I wrap up my presentation by suggesting some articles and books such as Ledwith's work, *Community Work as Critical Pedagogy*, *Why David Sometimes Wins* by author Marshall

Ganz, *Putting the Active into Activism* by Braidotti, and *Social Movement Learning: A Canadian Tradition* by Hall.

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Awareness, Inquiry, and Love through Science

Lindsay Leighton
Mount Saint Vincent University

The panel presentation consisted of a discussion regarding how I have incorporated meditative inquiry (MI) into my practice as a psychologist experienced in working with diverse and vulnerable populations. I have come to recognize the importance of MI in understanding ourselves in relation to each other ethically and compassionately, having seen for myself how both self-awareness and cognition develop in the context of social interactions (Kumar, 2022). Cognitive science has helped me see an alignment between *meditative inquiry* and *evidence-based practices*, and clinical experiences have highlighted how one's knowledge and awareness can actually be enhanced through the promotion of these seemingly contradictory perspectives.

I am a scientist-practitioner, which means I am a researcher who also engages in clinical work. This dual role puts closing the research-to-practice gap

at the core of my work. My training has taught me that different types of clinical questions are best answered by different types of research studies. Additionally, certain questions are not more important than others; however, in order to engage in comprehensive inquiry, not only do you need to specifically define your question, you also need to match it to a research approach capable of providing specific answers. For scientist-practitioners, the most important place to start is with your question. MI has encouraged me to be purposefully attentive, fostering the emergence of deeper questions about how people think, feel, and act. This awareness helps me be mindful of rigid psychological structures that can block creative, compassionate, and organic solutions to real life problems (Kumar, 2022). Utilizing Kumar's knowledge has helped my curiosity inform my inquiry.

Ackley et al. (2008, p. 7) summarize methodological approaches corresponding to traditional levels of research evidence. However, presenting this information using a visual hierarchy perpetuates the erroneous idea that some research methods and designs are inherently better than others. Ackley et al. 's reconstruction of this traditional presentation exemplifies study designs that are best suited to answer various *types* of clinical questions. By framing the information this way, the hierarchy is eliminated, and the focus is placed on addressing the inquiry appropriately. For clinicians with fiduciary responsibility, it is essential that we act honestly and in good faith regarding the best interests of our clients. Furthermore, because of the profound brain-body connection, we cannot deny the need to recognize the wellness of the whole person. In this sense, MI helps me develop helpful and holistic treatment plans supported by evidence of promising outcomes. I believe that as

professionals, we have a duty to help others regardless of our personal beliefs and (un)conscious biases. The intimate and vulnerable relationships that evolve through clinical practice, have resulted in a respect and appreciation for evidence-based practices, as they help fulfil this fiduciary duty. As a clinical practitioner, I describe my role as a *guided partnership*, wherein the application of science informed by meditative inquiry has been instrumental in how I go about transferring love, respect, and compassion for my clients.

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How Might Dialogical Meditative Inquiry Inform the Practice of an Existentially Minded Community Mental Health Therapist?

Stephanie McDonald

St. Francis Xavier University

The international conference *Engaging in Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research* provided a venue for interdisciplinary dialogue around meditative inquiry between the chapter contributors of *Engaging in Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Learning in Diverse Contexts* (the collection that inspired the conference, Ashwani Kumar, Ed.) as well as scholars, teachers, practitioners, and the

public who presented at and or attended this conference. The large number of interdisciplinary presenters at the conference suggests that Ashwani Kumar's thinking has drawn interest far beyond education (medicine, law, social work, therapy, neuroscience, philosophy, to name a few). If ever human beings needed an interdisciplinary and existential approach to understanding the origins of our individual and collective suffering, it is now.

Our world is in a humanitarian, ecological, and spiritual crisis. In response, Ashwani Kumar offers meditative inquiry as an opportunity to explore our psychological conflicts (the roots of our individual and collective suffering), which can lead to individual transformation and in turn, lasting collective change(s). In true existential fashion, meditative inquiry does not prescribe, it invites. It invites each of us to observe the person we are (through meditative awareness) and the person we may choose to become. In meditative awareness we listen holistically (for what is said, and what is *sensed*). When we listen to simply understand, not to prepare our response, or to be convinced of another's viewpoint, we are afforded the privilege of just maybe, and for just a fleeting moment, sensing the lived experience of another. Listening in attentive silence offers the other person (and ourselves) the simple, yet incredibly rare, gift of being fully present. When we are fully present with ourselves, or when we are offering our meditative awareness to another, a door to existential awareness opens. In other words, we are accepting the vulnerability that comes with opening doors to our fears, insecurities, uncertainties, and (sometimes unanswerable) questions—all the purvey of mental health therapy.

Mental health therapy involves many of the elements also found in meditative inquiry such as reflection, self-inquiry, curiosity, questioning the status-quo/authority, and the courage to be vulnerable in self-exploration. Meditative inquiry emphasizes responsibility, meaning-making, and human connection through an existential lens, and as such, offers another avenue for therapists to assist clients in their ongoing existential becoming. It does not ascribe to dogmatic ways of knowing and doing, it simply asks that we approach our relationship with self, other, and the natural world with an existential awareness that celebrates our individuality, and yet at the same time, reminds us that we exist in relation with others and nature. In fewer words, it asks us to engage with our holistic Being. Meditative inquiry, like therapy, does not guarantee answers to our existential questions, but it does offer a hopeful attitude, a way of being with our fears, insecurities, uncertainties, and unanswerable questions. And a hopeful attitude is foundational to any change.

My Association with Meditative Inquiry and its Relevance in Medical Education

Neeraj Verma

Dalhousie University

The meditative inquiry approach is like water; water does not have a shape but takes the vessel's shape. Here vessels represent the human mind. If adopted authentically and genuinely, this approach has the potential to bring transformation in a human being. This transformation is permanent as it occurs as a result of the direct experience.

From the perspective of Taittiriya Upanishad, an ancient Vedantic text, the Panchkosha model (the five-sheath model) provides a holistic description

of a human being. According to this model, the first sheath in a human is the physical sheath (Annamayakosha) which consists of the physical body, including organs and cells; the second layer is energy or vital force (Pranmayakosha), which corresponds to intelligence through which each cell functions. The third layer is the mental sheath (Manomayakosha) that represents one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions; the fourth layer is the intellectual sheath (Vijnayanmaya kosha) corresponding to wisdom (Viveka); and the final sheath is the layer of bliss (Anandmaya Kosha). Our awareness fluctuates between these sheaths. In day-to-day life, our awareness is superficial, generally limited to the first three sheaths and mostly reflexive. Moreover, in this superficial state of awareness, we tend to identify ourselves with our bodies, thoughts, and emotions. This superficial and limited identification of ours is the cause of restlessness and suffering. Per the Vedantic view, our true nature is more than just physical and mental existence. In reality, our true nature transcends these five sheaths and is of truth, existence, and bliss (*Sat, Chit, and Ananda*).

Meditative inquiry takes our awareness to a deeper level and helps us know our true nature. As our awareness deepens, our understanding evolves. Our understanding of ourselves as "I am only the body, the thoughts, or the emotions" transforms into "I am aware of this body, these thoughts, and these emotions". This kind of understanding places one's awareness beyond the body, mind, and intellect realm. Thus, through meditative inquiry, one realizes oneself.

Awareness is paramount not only for self-realization but also for any learning. On close examination, one will realize that learning can only lead to acquiring knowledge and skills when the learner appreciates it. This appreciation

requires awareness. Learning without appreciation by the learner will remain superficial, so awareness becomes central for authentic, in-depth learning to take place. Meditative inquiry cultivates awareness in an individual. This approach can be helpful to deepen learning in medical education for both the subject of medicine and for acquiring humanistic attributes essential for a practising doctor. Freedom of choice, critical dialogue, and self-reflection—the three essential features of meditative inquiry—can be utilized in medical education to cultivate awareness in medical learners. This approach can potentially deepen the learner's subject matter learning, and their self-growth and well-being.

Author Bios

Laurie Cook, MAEd has been a community development practitioner for over 20 years. She is now exploring how meditative inquiry could enhance her work in this field as part of her PhD in Educational Studies at Acadia University. As a community-based educator and researcher, Cook is currently working on several research projects designed to enhance inclusive economic development for people who have been and continue to be marginalized and racialized. She also lives with a mental illness called bipolar disorder, and her lived experience in this context informs much of her work.

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Lindsay Leighton has mixed Indigenous-settler ancestry and currently lives in Pesikik/Windsor, Nova Scotia. She describes herself as an Indigenous scientist and teaches in the School Psychology program in the Faculty of Education at MSVU. Her background is in cognitive science, and her scholarly work is centred around the healthy

development of marginalized students in community and at school. Many of her current research and teaching interests evolved from clinical experiences, and are related to the relationship between biological and cultural bases of behaviour and learning, and using evidence-based practices and educational neuroscience to inform inclusive and culturally responsive policy.

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Stephanie McDonald has a Bachelor of Nursing from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and a Master of Adult Education from St. Francis Xavier University (Nova Scotia, Canada). Currently, she is in her second year of the Nova Scotia Interuniversity Doctoral Program in Educational Studies lifelong learning stream, and St. Francis Xavier University is her home institution. Her research interests include, the nexus of dual role paramedic-firefighter's mental well-being and lifelong learning choices, Franklian existentialism, meditative inquiry, transformative learning, spirituality and psychedelic-assisted therapies.

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Neeraj Verma is an assistant professor at Dalhousie university and working as a paediatric critical care specialist at the IWK children's hospital. On the education front, he is the education supervisor for medical learners in the paediatric ICU. His educational interest is the relevance of self-knowledge and *awareness* in medical education. Learning to be beneficial needs to be appreciated by the learner; this appreciation requires awareness which needs to be cultivated. Verma believes the meditative inquiry approach can deepen learners' awareness and help medical learners become critical thinkers and self-directed, life-long learners.

15) Closing Remarks

Antony Card, Scott MacMillan, Bonnie Petersen, Iain McLeod, Alexandra (Ali) Barclay, Ashwani Kumar

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Abstract

Closing remarks for the conference begin with Dr. Anthony Card, Dean of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). After sharing a few points from the conference that were highlights for him, he offers words of thanks to everyone involved, particularly Ashwani Kumar. Dr. Card is followed by Scott MacMillan, Co-ordinator of the Teaching and Learning Centre at MSVU who gives an overview of his favourite moments and memories from the conference, thoughts regarding his own hopes for the future of meditative inquiry, and thanks Ashwani for organizing this conference. These remarks were followed by Bonnie Petersen, Iain McLeod, and Ali Barclay, PhD students from MSVU who made up the conference committee. They each offered points of interest and learning from the conference as well as their thanks. Dr. Ashwani Kumar rounded off the closing remarks with words of thanks for everyone involved in the book and conference, and for all the people and institutions that have supported him in his work.

YouTube Link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKAtE3wk4q8&list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf&index=15

Keywords: *meditative inquiry, community development, curriculum / evidence-based practices, alignment, school psychology, guided partnership / meditative inquiry, existentialism, therapy / awareness, self-realization, medical education, meditative enquiry, dialogue*

Closing Remarks by Antony Card

Dean of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University

It is just a pleasure to be able to offer some closing remarks at the end of this wonderful conference. I think there are three things I would

like to do in this short amount of time—to offer some quick reflections from the conference; to talk about a couple of things that have surprised me, but surprised me in a very good way; and then to offer thanks to the participants, the presenters, and, of course, the organizers.

In terms of reflections, I could go on for hours, I think, but I will just cherry pick a few things. I think one of the things I have been impressed with is the quality of all of the presentations. They have just been absolutely wonderful. I particularly enjoyed the book contributors' panels. I found hearing their thoughts from those chapters, but also, having submitted those chapters a while ago, where their thoughts are now—I found that quite invigorating and inspiring. I enjoyed the journal editors panel, and that is probably because I have done that in a previous role, but I felt it was a great opportunity for those that wanted to publish from this conference to engage in further conversations. I think the connections here and the possibilities are really quite exciting. I also enjoyed hearing from those involved in teaching, either from curriculum development in the university perspective, or from the K to 12 system. And Carolyn Prest's 21 Pillars, I enjoyed that, and of course the discussion about the student who, after hearing about meditative inquiry, went on to become a monk, which is really quite interesting.

The other thing that I think has impressed me is the number of participants we have had in each of these sessions. It made me think that if we were to do this on campus, our classrooms would not have been large enough. We would have had to have taken the auditorium for each of the sessions. Really great, great participation, and the presenters coming from all over the world. I thought about our presenter in the middle of the night in Melbourne, those late in the evening from the west coast, the United States, and Dr. Lees, who came in from Italy—I think it was Florence—and she had the bright morning sunshine coming in through her window. And of course, this is the beauty of an online international conference—we can get these

people from all over the world. It was really quite exciting. Some things that surprised me: the conversation around fear and meditative inquiry, or fearlessness. I think that is interesting, and something I would be interested in following up on. I was not expecting to be ordering a book called, *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, and Nayha Acharya's "cross-nostril" breathing exercise that she did as part of her panel, I am trying to experiment with that now, and carry on with that as well. So, all wonderful things.

And so, finally some thanks—obviously, to all our presenters, wonderful presentations. To our participants, for your active engagement in the chats, and so on. And then to our organizers—to Iain, to Bonnie, to Ali with a French twist—I enjoyed your presentation as well on that. You all have made it run so smoothly. It has just been great. So, thank you so much for that. And then of course, the last word of thanks has to go to Dr. Ashwani Kumar.

Ashwani, I am going to talk to you directly and say, I think all of our presenters have commented on how much you have opened up to connecting with others and allowing them to bring their scholarship to this, and creating so many opportunities for so many people, which is deeply appreciated. The Mount is proud of all of our professors and their academic accomplishments, but right here right now, particularly proud and grateful for this conference—and I mean that most sincerely. Thank you, Ashwani. So, with that, I'm looking forward to the In-Person Cultural Evening tonight, I really am. Thanks very much for everything.

Closing Remarks by Scott MacMillan

*Co-ordinator of the Teaching and Learning Centre
Mount Saint Vincent University*

In my closing remarks, I will mention three things. Firstly, a big thank you to Ashwani and everyone involved for organizing such a great conference. The conference was informative, thought-provoking, and inclusive. I was exposed to a mindful approach many years ago at Saint Mary's University through one of our conference presenters, David Sable. I loved hearing the thought-provoking concepts such as transformation, holistic education, community, a new paradigm for education, opening hearts to new ways of being, and authenticity. What a joy it was to listen to such a deep discussion which was respectful, positive, and all encompassing.

Secondly, we are a world in crisis and at a crossroads in higher education. A different approach is needed. People are struggling with a variety of challenges in the quest to live a meaningful life. Higher education is also struggling and in need of a revolution and a new direction. Meditative inquiry provides a way forward as it promotes transformation for the individual, higher education, and the world.

And lastly, all of us here at MSVU are extremely proud of Ashwani. We know how fortunate we are to have him. He is this year's Mount recipient of *The President and Vice President's Advanced Career Teaching Award*. He is a visionary, role model, and leader. We are fortunate to have his expertise and wisdom as we work to move forward as a university and foster a better world for all. These are exciting times for us as we look to the future.

Thank you again to all involved in a great conference.

Closing Remarks by Conference Committee Members

Bonnie Petersen

Committee Lead, Mount Saint Vincent University

As a member of the conference committee, I would like to start off by saying how much I have appreciated being present throughout the conference, to hear so many varying perspectives, united by the commonality of considering meditative inquiry as an approach, and illustrating the ongoing nature of inquiry as an active verb. As the panellists have been sharing their thoughts, I made notes of many things that are of particular interest to me but will just share one with you now. This is regarding a feeling I was experiencing: how it feels to hear someone speak from a place of vulnerability, learning, and openness—from a place of inquiry—rather than a place of certainty. That really struck me, and it struck me many times throughout the conference as it is very unusual. I really appreciated that as a point of learning and as an inspiration. I want to thank everyone that was involved, all of the presenters and attendees, my fellow conference team members, and of course, Ashwani. Thank you.

Iain McLeod

Mount Saint Vincent University

I am a doctoral student in the Inter-university program in Educational Studies, and Dr. Ashwani Kumar is my supervisor. So, when he asked me to be involved in the conference committee I happily said yes. And we have been busy for several months now, planning what has happened over the last three days. I was not sure quite what to expect—this is my first academic conference—and it was far less scary and far more interesting than I had anticipated, so thank you all for that. I am going to keep my comments fairly short. The main thing, I will just echo everybody who has spoken,

especially what Bonnie just said, that I have been really impressed by the openness, not only of the presenters, but of the participants as well. Some of the questions have been wonderful, and it has been a real treat to share these few days with you all and to really see a lot of people being very open, being very vulnerable, and just being very honest. I really appreciate that. I want to thank Bonnie and Ali, who have been on the conference committee with me, and especially Dr. Ashwani Kumar for what I think I will call “your gentle leadership.” It has really been a pleasure to spend this time with you, thank you.

Ali Barclay

Mount Saint Vincent University

That is so lovely, I do not know how to follow you two because that was so well said. Again, thank you also for including me in this conference. I am a teacher—I have been for a number of years with the South Shore Regional Centre for Education—and a new doctoral student with MSVU. I have enjoyed this conference on so many levels. Just being included in the team and getting to be able to participate as a co-host was a really lovely experience because being able to listen to so many scholars, teachers, healthcare practitioners speak around these topics has been really enlightening. And as a teacher, just being able to share in a space like this has been very interesting, and has sparked so many things for me in my mind. Thinking about things so many speakers spoke on, like pushing back on curriculum and how do you do that in creative ways, that was really something that was resonating with me. And certain scholars, I just found particularly interesting; listening, for example, to David Sable, and the fellow from Melbourne, Chris McCaw, and listening to Diane Obed and about embodied experience—there

were so many touching moments there for me. And Yelena Smith, yesterday, speaking about the difficulties in teaching, and what a difficult couple of years it has been due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And I know as scholars you also are teachers as well, so you probably share those feelings that we have all been feeling. But on a positive note, it has been really wonderful to immerse myself in this kind of environment. It has been very fruitful, and I feel like it has been very inspiring. So, thank you so much to all of you. Thank you so much Dr. Kumar, and I look forward to seeing you all tonight.

Closing Remarks by Conference Chair

Ashwani Kumar

Mount Saint Vincent University

Thank you, everyone, for your kind and thoughtful words. I also need to share a few thoughts with all of you. First of all, thank you Bonnie, Iain, and Ali for your reflections on your experiences at the conference. I am going to thank you once more. I think we are just adopting the tradition of thanking everybody twice, so I will come back to you in a little bit.

I just want to share a couple of quick thoughts. You know, when I was thinking about this book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research*—I talk about this in the Epilogue of the book—I was quite concerned and even nervous to some extent about whether thinking of this book was a good idea or not, because books and conferences like this happen when somebody is at the very late end of their career, or posthumously. To invite people to engage with your work, then to invite them, again, to engage with a wider audience, while both preparing the meditative inquiry collection as well as doing this conference, those thoughts were

always on my mind. And I think it was good to have those thoughts so one is critically self-aware. That is the whole point of meditative inquiry. But I must say I am so grateful for all the generosity, for all the collegiality, and collaboration that has happened in the book and in the conference. It has really quite touched me, and, at the same time, quite blown my mind away about how, when people come together and explore together, many new insights can be generated. And I feel that in academia, we should adopt this model of putting the ego aside, of actually engaging with the diverse perspectives of our colleagues. So that we can see not only how we work, but how our work is connected to other people. And that is what I have noticed over the past 15 years I have been in Canada and working on this idea of meditative inquiry, how I learned about different perspectives—like Africentricity and Indigenous perspectives—and I saw there were so many connections. And so it was a way for me to bring those connections together by means of the Meditative Inquiry edited collection and this conference. I am so very grateful to all the chapter contributors to this book, and also to the conference presenters.

I have a few more folks to thank, so please bear with me just for a moment. First of all, I would like to sincerely thank the SSHRC Exchange Grant that made this event possible. Second, I also want to thank Routledge, especially the Editor, Alice Salt, for supporting this conference. And, very importantly, I would like to recognise support from various units within Mount Saint Vincent University, including the Faculty of Education, IT&S, Conference Services, Research Office, and Accounts among others. Third, a big thank you to all of our wonderful presenters, who have together explored meditative inquiry from their unique perspectives. We know you are all busy,

and there has been such screentime for all of you, so we appreciate your willingness to share your insights. This conference would not have been possible without you. In addition to chapter authors, there were a large number of other scholars and practitioners who agreed to contribute to this conference. I am really grateful to all of you. Fourth, I would like to thank all of our attendees, who enthusiastically participated in all the sessions. Almost 400 people registered, and all the sessions were so very well attended. We thank you for your participation and active interest in the topic of meditative inquiry. Finally, I would like to once again recognise the work of the doctoral students who were on the conference organizing committee and ran this conference confidently and successfully. Bonnie Petersen, who led this team of RAs, Ali Barclay, and Iain MacLeod. Their help was invaluable and working with them was a lot of fun. From the preparation of the grant proposal, through planning each and every aspect of the conference diligently, to finally successfully completing this wonderful conference, these students have shown their enormous dedication and commitment. I definitely could not have done it without them. A couple of other students also contributed to this conference in the beginning but could not continue later due to their other commitments, namely, James Caron and Lubaba Sanjana, who are also doctoral students. Thanks Jamie and Lubaba. And last but not least, heartfelt thanks to my wife, Nayha Acharya for helping me out in many small and big ways with this conference. She is quite responsible for the success of this conference in many ways.

I would like to conclude my closing remarks with the three statements with which I concluded my Epilogue for the Meditative Inquiry edited collection:

*May our meditative inquiries transform ourselves, our relationships, and the world!
May our pursuits bring about and spread creativity, beauty, and awareness!
May our work promote peace, harmony, and compassion!*

Thank you so much again everybody, for all your contributions. The videos of all the presentations are available on YouTube for you to watch freely at your own convenience. For those of you who have registered for the In-Person Cultural Evening, we look forward to seeing you in a few hours.

Author Bios

Antony Card joined the Mount Saint Vincent University community as the Dean of Education in September 2018. He came to the Mount from Memorial University of Newfoundland, where he served as Associate Vice-President Research at the Grenfell campus, and Director and Dean of the School of Human Kinetics and Recreation at the St. John's campus. As well, he has taught both Teacher Education students and graduate students at Memorial. Antony's areas of teaching and research interests include pre-service and teacher education focused on health and physical education, and health promoting schools. His research projects have focused on children and youth in Newfoundland and Labrador, and engaging policy makers, practitioners, and researchers in jointly setting priorities for youth health in schools across Canada, such as with the development of Core Indicators and Measures of Physical Activity.

Scott MacMillan is originally from Fredericton, N.B. where he completed a Bachelor of Physical Education degree at UNB. He then worked for the YMCA for twenty years in various management,

research, and consulting positions (Fredericton, Regina, Halifax, Toronto, and Jerusalem). After deciding it was time for a career change he returned to school for his Master of Business Administration and Ph.D. in Management at Saint Mary's University. He also completed a Certificate in Adult Education and is a certified career counselor. He began teaching management courses in 2001 and has taught at a variety of universities including Saint Mary's, Dalhousie, Acadia, and Cape Breton before coming to MSVU. He has also taught in China (Zuhai in 2008, Suzhou in 2012, and Fuzhou in 2014). He conducts research on meaning in work, career development, leadership, and management education. His Ph.D. thesis was entitled, *Towards an Existential Approach to the Meaning of Work*. He is the author of *The Big Game: 10 Strategies for Winning at Life* (Llewellyn, 2003).

Bonnie Petersen is a PhD candidate (ABD) at Mount Saint Vincent University, currently working on completing her dissertation, *Experiences of Inclusion and Alienation in Face-to-Face and Online Classrooms*. Her work as a research assistant for various professors and projects at the university have offered many opportunities to learn and explore new ideas, including in her role as Conference Committee Lead with this conference.

Iain MacLeod is an adult educator and award-winning filmmaker who has written and directed both short and feature films as well as writing Canadian television. A Gaelic learner and active member of the Nova Scotia Gaelic community, Iain has made several Gaelic-language films and his area of research is adult Gaelic learners in the province.

Alexandra (Ali) Barclay is a doctoral student at Mount Saint Vincent University as well as a public-school teacher. Originally from Montreal, she teaches French Immersion, IB French and Yoga for South Shore Regional Centre for Education. She lives on the beautiful south shore of Nova Scotia with her partner, two children and fur babies. A nature lover and philosophy admirer, she has always found inspiration in yogic and Buddhist philosophies and practices. In fact, her first volunteer teaching experience was in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1995 which allowed her to adventure into the wilderness of the Himalayas and fall in love with yoga. Intrigued by the interplay of meditation and curriculum design, she tries to incorporate inquiry and dialogue in her classes as well as eco-literacy to engage students in exploring the emerging challenges facing the planet.

Ashwani Kumar is an Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Canada). His teaching and research focus on meditative inquiry, which is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. He has conceptualized several key curricular and pedagogical concepts, namely, curriculum as meditative inquiry, teaching as meditative inquiry, and music as meditative inquiry. He has also developed a contemplative research methodology called dialogical meditative inquiry to conduct subjective and intersubjective qualitative research. He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding Colonial, Ideological, and Neoliberal Influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He is also the editor of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (Routledge, 2022). He has served as the

President of the Arts Researchers and Teachers Society, Canada. His book *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* was chosen as an Outstanding Academic Title by Choice Reviews in 2015. His co-authored paper, "Teaching as Meditative Inquiry: A Dialogical Exploration," which describes his pedagogical philosophy and practice, received the Outstanding Publication in Curriculum Studies Award from The Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies in 2019. He is also the recipient of the Mount Saint Vincent University President and Vice President's Advanced Career Teaching Award 2022 and the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education's Alumni Educator of the Year Award 2022.