

Experiential Learning in a Mindful Mosh Pit

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Abstract

A former punk rocker and mayor dives into his university classroom to explore how experiential learning can be as dynamic and expressive as a mosh pit. As a certified mindfulness teacher, he also demonstrates ways meditative practices can fruitfully support holistic pedagogical methods—even in a mosh pit!

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I know something about mosh pits. As a punk rocker, I dove into them and danced; as a mayor of a deeply divided town, I dove into them and deliberated.

Though you can take an elbow in the ribs if you're not careful, when you are alert to the everchanging action a mosh pit can be, it is a vitalizing improvisatory dance, free and expressive, filled with joy and surprise.

To be sure, a mosh pit can be precarious—not a comfortable place for a casual bystander. But it is also a place of intense focus and commitment, as well as a dynamic experience of interplay and discovery.

That's the kind of place I want my classroom to be. Having graduated from punk and politics, I am now a professor, but I still delight in that dance floor right in front of me. In this article I will

discuss two dynamic characteristics of a mosh pit that promote experiential learning:

1. A mosh pit is **centered and focused**. It is positively grounded—in place and in the moment. It's not spread out all over the arena but is right in front of the stage instead. It is here; it is now. Participants are committed. Their interest is high. They dive in. An educational mosh pit is similarly centered and focused.

2. A mosh pit is **interactively engaged**. Moshers express themselves with abandon. Dancers gyrate and arms fly. They entangle. In an educational mosh pit students consciously interact with each other, with their own internal thoughts and emotions, and with the subjects they are studying—generating real-time, present-moment engagement. Proceeding from their centered and focused mindfulness, their words and actions are open, aware, observant, and empathetic. They

entangle too—but, more often than not, they intertwine elegantly, consciously and courteously.

These qualities (focus and interactive engagement) are brought to the forefront throughout my university courses:

Composing a Community

A student-centered, community-cultivating course, where students engage and critically assess music as a socially reflective art. Music is the vehicle for a journey into multiple dimensions of human behavior with side trips through rhetoric, political theory, sociology, narrative, improvisation, ideology, and identity. Flowing from a wide variety of cultural texts and a pan-historic genre-busting playlist, students correlate musical forms, processes, and expressions with the societies from which they spring—including their own. Cross-cutting themes include music as dialogue, music as thought, music as identity, music as ideology, music as a mirror of government, music and social movements, and music's evolutionary role in human development.

Radical Quiet

As a counterbalance to the loud and fast modes so predominant in today's society, *Radical Quiet* explores and develops vital alternatives: quiet and slow ways of living, learning and appreciating our lives and the world around us. Students develop critical, creative and interpretive skills through deep listening (to sounds and music), slow looking (at art and film) and contemplative reading (of literature). Cross-cutting themes include: (a) the quiet power of introspection and contemplation; (b) the Japanese concept of Ma (respect for pauses in time and emptiness in space); (c) the capability of “being in uncertainties,

mysteries, doubts” (John Keats); (d) the environmental and social effects of noise; (e) the cultivation of quiet as a foundation for social activism and “as an act of political resistance to the attention economy” (How to Do Nothing, Jenny Odell); and (f) the skill and practice of listening (to ourselves and others).

Kindness

This holistic and highly integrative course looks at kindness through the focused lenses of psychology, social work, political science, economics, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, communications, literature, spirituality and—especially—personal practice.

At the heart of the course is a daily meditative practice which cultivates students' personal experience and intention of kindness. This nurtures their own compassion and happiness. Scientific studies have shown that such practices increase life satisfaction and reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms. Combining meditative gentleness with academic gravitas, students are expected to have thoughtful and informed discussions about values and ethical engagement.

Questions that students explore in this course include:

- What is kindness?
- How and when did it evolve?
- How is it different from empathy, compassion, altruism, generosity, forgiveness and love?
- What does it look like in public policy as well as in day-to-day interactions?
- What are its enemies—its opposing forces?
- What does its absence look like? What does it feel like?
- How do we feel and know it?

- Can it be cultivated and increased?

The plan of the course is that each student: (a) gains an enriched—and enriching—understanding of kindness; (b) learns how to access and cultivate their own personal resources and capacity for kindness, friendliness and care; and (c) develops their own meaningful projects to manifest kindness in themselves, their communities and the world at large.

The Artfully Extended Mind

Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?

This intriguing question, asked by philosopher Andy Clark and cognitive scientist David Chalmers, is central to *The Artfully Extended Mind*. This course explores how “thinking outside the brain” can enrich our lives and illuminate our imaginations. Based on recent research in psychology and cognitive science, we think with our bodies, our surroundings, and our relationships. Students extend their minds and develop their thinking facility in a series of experiential hands-on workshops (drawing, music, songwriting, performance poetry, improvisational acting, vocal improvisation and composition, dance, movement, mask-making, mindfulness practice, walking meditation and qigong). These dynamic participatory activities are designed to reawaken us to the wonder that is present all around us, to invite in creativity, expand our awareness, and to bring forth our inherent capacity for the joy of play.

The Artfully Extended Mind is a highly experiential and multidimensional course. While students indeed read deeply and comment substantively on its academic themes, the unique heart of this course—its most fertile learning ground—is the

opportunity for students to experience the arts in hands-on workshops led by very special guests. Students move, act, and improvise in ways that stimulate a more embodied understanding of the extended mind than simply reading about it could accomplish on its own.

To be open and available to such highly experiential learning, students must be focused and centered. Here are ways they become so:

FOCUSING AND CENTERING

Mindfulness and kindness practice

A central goal of these courses is for each student to develop, deepen and fine tune their awareness. Therefore, a key element is the daily practice of mindfulness meditation. As a certified mindfulness teacher, I guide them in this practice during brief periods of each class session. Students are also assigned audio links to guided meditations online. Options are available for modifying any of these instructions to suit their individual needs and preferences.

Students are expected to commit to a daily practice at home. Beyond the personal benefits they receive and develop, their practice experience is also highly relevant and applicable to class discussions of the assignments. Their practice provides context, dimension and personal observations and insights for their written commentaries and papers.

Therefore, daily meditative practice is integral to my courses. To help students maintain consistency, to memorialize their steps along the path, and to record their thoughts and experiences for potential use in their papers, they keep a daily practice journal at home.

I encourage questions about their practice and will answer them at any time. Whenever requested I also meet with students, individually or in small groups, to offer additional guidance, answer questions, or address any concerns they have about their practice.

We also embody our mindfulness in qigong (physical movement meditations similar to tai chi) and yoga nidra (a guided meditative procedure whose goal is to transform the mind and body). These practices are led by professional teachers who are certified in these disciplines.

And my own personal meditation practice is integrally embedded in my teaching. At home, in the morning of each class day, I sit for a formal loving-kindness practice, devoting wishes for their happiness and well-being to each and every student, one by one, breath by breath. Picturing each individual student's face as I cultivate and dedicate this good will enables me to feel a deep sense of connection when I see them in class later that morning.

The root meaning of education: to educate

These practices are integrally related to the root meaning of education: educate. To draw forth from within. To educate.

Education is not just about injecting facts, theories, ideas and other information into students' heads; it's about bringing out what is already there inside of them and finding their own treasures within. It's more than what's in the books they are assigned—it's what's in their hearts. That's why my courses include meditative practices: to get in touch with their hearts and their innate wisdom.

Observing the Ma

Another way I allow space for students' personal insights to arise is by observing the *Ma*:

“The Japanese concept of Ma has been described as a pause in time, an interval or emptiness in space. Ma is the time and space life needs to breathe, to feel and connect. If we have no time, if our space is restricted, we cannot grow. This universal principle applies to every aspect of life.” (Unique Japan, n.d.)

Therefore, students learn to be comfortable with silence. Rather than immediately filling the inevitable pauses which emerge in class discussions, we instead “observe the Ma.” This practice lets our minds process what was just heard and allows classmates to formulate their thoughts for the next idea they'd like to put on the table. Students learn to appreciate the space, with time and opportunity to do so, without pressure.

Slow Looking

To “turn the everyday flow of perception into an act of discovery” (*Slow Looking*, Shari Tishman) we look at one piece of art for several minutes before commenting. Students are encouraged to notice whatever captures their attention—including color, form, feeling and texture—and are then invited to share what they see. Departing from the usual habit of looking at a painting for only 10-15 seconds, students find deeper layers of meaning and insight, and greater facility in articulating what they see and feel.

Impacts of mindful practices on students

With these meditations and practices, students come to the most profound, valuable, sometimes poignant and often heartwarming realizations about

themselves—and their capacities to feel, to love, and most important, to accept themselves as they are.

Here are two examples from student papers.

From a chemistry major:

“I think I understood quiet a long time ago, but just did not realize it. Quiet is love. Quiet is peace. It is the space between what you think and what you say, and the shape of your breath as it leaves your body. It is the feeling of your soul expanding from your body as you simply let yourself be. It is as though the great soul of the world has taken my hand and kissed my brow, and with all the wisdom of an elder told me that things will be alright.”

From a communications major who found new ways to communicate:

“One incredibly sobering situation stands out to me as the focus point of what I’ve learned. A little over two weeks ago, one of my closest friends almost committed suicide. He had been struggling with depression for months, and an angry conversation with a loved one pushed him over the edge. I happened to call him at just the right time, breaking a nearly fatal silence. We were soon in each other’s arms, crying. The pain was so real ... So, at first I did what I’ve trained myself to do: I talked.

“I told him how much he was loved and appreciated, how it was ok, how I was there for him. These words were pebbles thrown at a mountain. The pain that he felt was far greater than what can be described, I could feel it too. So instead of trying to talk to it, to make it go away, I invited silence in. We sat together

quietly on the bedroom floor, with the suffering. The time to speak and console would come later. For that moment I let the quiet communicate my love and compassion. It was more powerful. ...

“I had prepared for this situation, practiced filling that same quiet with compassion and empathy and kindness.

“Moving forward, this friend has been very brave in seeking help. He talked to his parents about the thoughts he was having and reached out to counseling. His parents flew in and helped move him into my apartment. His struggles are far from over, but he continues to work on feeling better. I do know that I will be there for him, in silence and with words, every step of the way.”

And I can add, as a happy afterword: the very next year, his friend enrolled in the very same course, and brought his profound personal experience of quiet empathy with him.

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These practices open the mind and heart and set the stage for the learning activities and experiences that follow. As students become more centered and focused, they interact, play, imagine and discover.

INTERACTIVELY ENGAGING

My course’s experiential hands-on workshops include:

- embodied meditation practices
- movement, exploration of space and relationship (dance, acrobatics)
- drum circle (rhythm, space, acoustics, listening)

- drawing and other visual artwork
- performance poetry
- improvisational acting
- interpreting architecture
- songwriting

I am a composer who, in addition to punk, writes pop songs and alternative classical music. Here are some ways that I use music—and basic musical skills and dispositions shared by everyone—as pedagogical practices:

Toning the public sphere

Students have a bodily experience and hear for themselves differences between homogeneity and diversity through toning. They first sing a unison tone together, so that they can hear and feel what that's like in their bodies. Then they each spontaneously choose and sing a different random tone. They simultaneously listen to—and feel—the ensuing widespread spectrum of many various tones.

Unison is easy but bland. Dissonance is strange but interesting. Students' direct experience of this leaps them from a simple cognitive understanding to a richer, more embodied experience of conformity and difference.

Enjoying a musical swim in a river of ambiguity

Students experience the value and aesthetics of ambiguity by hearing—and most importantly, contemplating—unresolved chord progressions, deceptive cadences (which trick the listener by momentarily taking them to unexpected places), and other instances of musical openness or uncertainty.

What makes the music of rhetoric tick?

Students gain a richer and more immediate understanding of rhetoric from a guided listening to sonata form, such as Beethoven's *5th Symphony* or his *Waldstein Sonata*. Sonata form is a musical embodiment of the same process of thematic development that students can use in a paper or presentation.

“You've got to listen to the whole band before you say something”

This quote from Harvard jazz musicologist Ingrid Monson is the inspiration for developing students' awareness of the power of listening. Jam bands and jazz ensembles are dynamic examples. Theologian Nelle Morton suggested that we, “hear others into speech.” Mother Teresa said that when she prays, she doesn't say anything, she just listens. Students are similarly encouraged to actively listen to each other during class discussions.

Toss the monkey

To democratize class discussions and encourage more participation from reticent students who are uncomfortable raising their hands, we sometimes put into play a stuffed toy monkey. Students gently toss it to one another across the classroom. Whoever catches it has the option to speak or pass. This randomizes the speaking and increases participation from those students who are normally quiet, most of whom gladly rise to the opportunity to share their comments and insights.

A conversational concerto

As in a baroque concerto, a core ensemble of five students gets seated in the center of the room. The rest of the class sits in a circle around them and actively listens to the discussion. The surrounding

students are the supporting and responding orchestra. After allowing time for the core ensemble to sound their themes and motifs, the students in the wider orchestra then chime in, with affirmative thoughts or varying riffs on the already articulated themes as well as with new ideas and counterpoints.

Transposing student insights into song

I pluck poetic phrases and meaningful insights from student papers and transform them into song lyrics. I write one or two such songs each semester, demonstrating the poetry and inspiration of their own writing. The class joins me in singing them. Students also compose their own songs, in small collaborative groups, and perform them for the class.

In addition, each semester I write a song which expresses one of the course's core ideas. For example, in "Everything is Happening Now," students sing repeated echoes of "now" in the chorus, investing them with a felt sense of the present moment. And in the "Ballad of the Common Tone," students hear how the same note sounds completely different in various chordal contexts, similar to the way they as individuals feel completely different in the midst of varying groups of people.

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Diving into the mosh pit

At the beginning of the semester students step into my course's mindful mosh pit with varying degrees of apprehension. The mindfulness practices are new to most of them, and sitting in quiet with our own thoughts can be hard for any of us.

Then being thrown into the fray of interactive engagement—with the arts, with the active discussion formats, with each other, and with their own selves—can cause them some anxiety.

But that's the way it is with mosh pits. They can be challenging just like life. Education can be like that too. It's good to be on your toes: alert, attentive, aware of what's happening around and within you. But a mindful mosh pit can also be an exhilarating experience that offers vital opportunities for living and learning.

I tell my students that there are multiple potential pathways through the heart of our course. These pathways can intersect in felicitous ways. Three good ones are: (1) the path of the mind (reading our course texts); (2) the path of the arts (experiencing and being the art); and (3) the path of practice (mindful meditation, movement, awareness, presence and joy).

The journey is serendipitous and the final destination is unknown. Therefore, the most important, meaningful and impactful pathway for each student is the one they discover for themselves on their own, through their own study, and through their embodied experience, practice and insight.

And they dive in and dance!

References

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Author Bio

Described by *Parade Magazine* as “The Man Who Brought Civility Back to Town,” **Phillip Bimstein** has been a mayor, punk rocker, alternative classical composer, and is now a professor in the University of Utah’s Honors College. Also certified as a mindfulness teacher, he is fully devoted to experiential holistic education, inspired by the root word of education: educe—to draw forth from within. As a composer, his music has been performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, the Bang on a Can Festival, Aspen Music Festival, Spoleto Festival and London’s Royal Opera House. *The New York Times* acclaimed his music’s “irresistible charm” and “his uncanny knack for finding the music of everyday life.” In 2017 Bimstein gave a TEDx Talk about his musical approach to community: [How to Practice Politics with Music in Mind](#).