

# **Exploring the Possibility for the Integration of Contemplation in Academic Environments to Enhance Collaboration**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **Introduction**

Throughout my years at the University of Virginia, contemplation and mental health have always been concepts that professors and mentors have either alluded to or attempted to incorporate; however, they are often superseded by the excessive amounts of work that are then placed upon students. While sitting in the all-encompassing dreary atmosphere of Alderman Library throughout the past couple of years, I read numerous articles explaining the academic benefits of leaving time for physical activity, contemplation, and sleep. However, as the primary function of a school is to encourage academic excellence, I have found that the mental health of students is often left for the individual to infer for his/herself. The stigmatized separation of mental health and academic work along with the pressure to be perfect, both socially and academically, have led to a distressing increase in cases of students burning-out. Byung-Chul Han (2015) describes us as a “‘burnout society’, with many of us in a constant state of doing and achieving, all the while feeling constantly unsatisfied and unfulfilled” (Pyati, 2019). If students are burning-out during their educational years, when they are supposed to be growing and establishing valuable habits of mind, what will happen when they enter the work force? We need to work on intentionally reshaping our academic environment towards one that encourages more awareness around how our interactions with others can realign us toward health and wellness. One potential reason that students are burning-out is because the current status quo of the academic environment does not link academics and mental health.

When students take time to be mentally well, they are better able to collaborate and more efficiently produce superior work. When addressing contemplation, I am considering “the enhancement of self-regulation as the ability to notice and effectively manage thoughts, emotional responses, and behavior” (Dorjee, 2016). Studies have shown that “contemplative

practices are being deployed to deal with some of these psychosocial concerns and can be quite effective at an individual level” (Pyati, 2019). However, contemplative spaces and practices are not widely offered in an affordable, inclusive, and accessible manner. Therefore, by incorporating a contemplative space into academic spaces, students will be able to integrate contemplative elements into their learning styles, which will consequently help students to collaborate better with others. Given the need of a space that will allow students with different backgrounds, interests, and goals to thrive, we face the challenge of creating a space that incorporates both contemplation and collaboration in an inclusive manner. Through my research on creating an environment that is best for human behavior, I have decided to focus on the effects of contemplation on mental health and consequentially, collaboration, as well as the controversies it provokes. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to consider the benefits and controversies around mindful practices and contemplative spaces in contemporary United States education, in order to determine if it inspires student successes and therefore should be incorporated into this space.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to conduct this study, I will use Winner’s Technopolitics framework to explore how we are able to repurpose academic buildings and environments to not only instill knowledge but also to form patterns of well-being. Winner’s Technopolitics framework presents the political aspect of space, whether digital or physical, and its ability to reshape behavior (Donnelly, 1990). The current status quo of academic environments is inconducive to long term relationships between knowledge and self-awareness. We want to use the ability to reformulate our built environment to create a space that encourages a connection between behavior and opportunity. My research explores who is incorporating mindfulness and self-awareness into

their studies in the United States and what motivates them. Specifically, I am exploring the role of space in higher education and who thinks contemplation and mindfulness are good or bad ideas for these spaces. Winner's Technopolitics framework will allow me to consider the interrelationship between the spaces that we operate in and the success and well-being of students.

### **Literature Review: The Benefits of Mindful Practices in an Academic Environment in the Information Era**

In recent years, there has been an increase in discussion on well-being and how better mental health leads to better work. Studies have shown that there are beneficial opportunities for the health, safety, educational progress, and moral development of students to coincide. Margaret Kern writes, "Peterson (2006) contended that schools are ideal institutions to provide these opportunities and he called for schools to expand their focus beyond academic learning to also include the promotion of character and well-being" (Kern, 2019). However, there is a current deficiency of affordable, inclusive, and available spaces that address the integration of contemplative practices in learning spaces for every student. As students become increasingly overwhelmed, partially due to the distractions and overload related to the information age, there is a subsequently growing need for a space that helps establish a shift toward the adaptation of a positive education approach.

Eastern methodologies, such as mindfulness, have been proven to benefit people in numerous fields including the reduction of stress, cognitive performance, and in improving mental health (Pyati, 2019). However, while mindfulness has become an established practice in Western societies, it is not yet holistically integrated into the academic environment, preventing students from realizing and utilizing these benefits to promote their overall success. As many

young adults begin to feel life's stresses in the school setting, an opportunity arises for students to not only learn about their desired subject area, but to additionally learn to incorporate self-awareness to enhance their studies. One of the reasons that the burnout rate is on the rise is because students feel unsatisfied by the work they are completing in school. This complies with schools' lack of attention to and focus on developing a passion (Kern, 2019). If schools were to incorporate a more holistic approach to intellectual growth, including the addition of contemplation and communication skills, students would be able to spend more time developing an interest in a particular study (Peterson, 2006). This would, in turn, reduce the burnout rate by allowing students to become more self-aware and communicate more efficiently with students who have similar passions to their own. Merging contemplation into the academic sphere will allow students to become emotionally strong and intelligent, which will allow them to be more confident and collaborate better with others. If people are able to develop better habits of mind, they will be able to resolve numerous anxieties regarding their relationship with their own self and others, which will sequentially allow them reduce stress levels and be more confident in collaboration (Hougaard, Carter, and Afton, 2018).

### **How Mindfulness Leads to Better Collaboration**

Meditation, mindfulness, and yoga are some of the practices that are proven to help with stress relief (Gurung, 2014). However, mindfulness is not only about mental health. By incorporating contemplation and mindfulness into an academic space, schools will find that their students will ultimately achieve greater awareness and therefore greater success. Not only will it further the development of the whole person, but will additionally promote awareness around group cohesion. This statement is made clear in Hougaard, Carter, and Afton's article, *Self-Awareness Can Help Leaders More than an MBA Can*. They argue that if a linear academic-

based logic is the only focus of a leader or group member, they relinquish the benefits of relationships with others and therefore collective ideas or solutions (Hougard, Carter, and Afton, 2018).

Hougard, Carter, and Afton quote Bill George, a leadership professor at Harvard Business School, when they say, “self-awareness is the starting point of leadership...Through self-awareness, we can lead ourselves with authenticity and integrity – and in turn better lead others and our organizations” (Hougard, Carter, and Afton, 2018). Once one is able to focus on his/herself and better understand their own behavior and emotions, they will then be able to better regulate those emotions around others. If provided in areas of academia, mindful practices will assist the development of the whole person in an environment where students feel the most pressure and stress. Mindful practices help one focus on the given moment which is a skill that is very important in collaboration. Hougard, Carter, and Afton say, “when we are busy, our brains default to pattern recognition. It wants simplicity. And when others talk to you, your brain will automatically look for what it has heard before and eliminate what is new” (Hougard, Carter, and Afton, 2018). Therefore, incorporating mindfulness will not only help students as a stress relief tool but will also allow them to better understand and accept the ideas of others.

### **Increasing Technology in Modern Day Furthers the Need for Contemplation**

As the desired space that focuses on collaboration and contemplation is an academic space, it will involve technology in order to best help students thrive in an academic sense. While technology is a tool that changes the nature of learning by allowing students access to information faster than ever before, we need to additionally consider the psychological consequences of technology. These consequences include stress or mental strain caused by social demands from the common presence of social media and ranges to fears of a loss of

private security of data. The University of Washington iSchool's Professor Levy (2016) speaks to how contemplative approaches can be used to bring awareness around technology use and anxiety. Pyati quotes Levy when he says, "If technology use and its associated social demands are major causes of stress for individuals, then it makes eminent sense to use contemplative methods to help us understand more clearly how we use technology and consequently how we can modify our behaviour to develop more personally meaningful and healthy technology use habits" (Pyati, 2019). Because academic spaces will most likely incorporate technology and information to further learning, we need to become more adaptive towards incorporating them in a productive fashion. Students should have the choice to disengage from the abundance of information as well.

As social media and email have become less of a mode of exchanging opinions and information and more of an obsession, having the opportunity to disengage and focus solely on oneself for a moment could lead to a more productive and less obsessive lifestyle. We need to recognize our habits in order to use technology to our advantage. Pyati goes on to quote Levy when he says, "If mindful awareness can lead to healthier and less reactive relationships with our technological tools (and by extension with other people), then perhaps we have made our own experience of the information age somewhat less dystopian" (Pyati, 2019). Contemplation about our use of technology can help us establish better relationships with technology and in return, better relationships with both our own mental state and other people. In communicating with others through technology, we need to make sure that we are communicating effectively. Incorporating contemplation is key to a study space as it will allow each stakeholder and user of the space to strengthen their self-awareness and focus in order to better work with and shape technology.

## **Controversies to Mindful Practices in an Academic Environment**

As mindfulness and yoga have been incorporated into academic environments, there has been opposition from multiple viewpoints. One argument is that yoga pushes religious aspects onto those who are only seeking the secular benefits. In the book *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools* (2019), Candy Gunther Brown examines the use of yoga in secondary level education and whether religion is actually left out of the practice of yoga in public schools. She says, “Participants who expect and want only secular benefits from yoga and mindfulness report what they describe as “religious” or “spiritual” experiences, and longer-term, more intense practice correlates with changes in self-identification and affiliation” (Brown, 2019). There have been arguments that the religion of Buddhism is silently taking over through the pathway that mindfulness practices are creating. This becomes an issue when people postulate that Buddhist beliefs are being forced onto them as they are required to partake in various practices in the academic setting.

An opposing argument comes from the standpoint that yoga and mindful practices have become too westernized and secular. The article, *Beyond McMindfulness* says, “the rush to secularize and commodify mindfulness into a marketable technique may be leading to an unfortunate denaturing of this ancient practice” (Loy, 2013). Yoga, meditation, and other mindful practices are said to reduce stress and effect one’s mental state in a positive manner. However, some believe that those trying to reap these benefits from without the Buddhist roots in mind, will not succeed in doing so. This may be true in cases where the participant does not want to partake in the practice or if the participant does not go in with the correct intentions or mindset. In his work, *Public Libraries as Contemplative Spaces: A Framework for Action and Research*, Ajit Pyati (2019) explores how mindful practices are most effective when they



incorporate the values from which they were created. He states, “mindfulness without wholesome intentions and positive mental qualities may not really be mindfulness at all (Purser & Loy, 2013)” (Pyati 2019). This statement alludes to the Eightfold Path of Buddhism which includes Right Mindfulness. The early intent of mindfulness was not to solely relieve stress or help one concentrate so that they could be more productive, but was instead rooted in religion and tradition. If one does not perform mindful practices with the correct intentions, whether that be religious or secular, they will not benefit from the practice in the ways they aspire (Moffitt, 2017).

### **Case Study on Contemplative Spaces at the University of Virginia**

Currently, the University of Virginia has taken the on mission of being both “A Great and Good University,” which includes efforts to create an “inclusive community of trust” (Ryan, 2020). Over the past couple of years, the University has opened resiliency spaces across grounds as a part of the development of the Contemplative Sciences Center. These spaces are open to students, faculty, and staff and many of them offer free drop-in programs. However, many students are unaware of these offerings as they are in isolated areas that are not made known to students. Additionally, the process around seeking help from CAPS, the University’s Counseling and Psychological Services, is made extremely difficult as the student demand surpasses the availability of mental health professionals. However, through listening to students and hearing concerns about the lack of integration between contemplation and academic studies, the new space, Contemplative Commons, was announced in order to help prevent academic isolation through the integration contemplation and collaboration and academic excellence. The space is to include “artistic performances, activities like dance and yoga, and networking opportunities [that] will exist alongside teaching and research in an environment that focuses on

experiential learning” (Coy, 2019). The University has realized that in order to be both “great and good,” they need to focus on values and skills in addition to academics. Self-awareness leads to better collaboration with others, and the University of Virginia has therefore created a space to inspire this union and promote the overall success of their students.

### **Discussion of Implementing Mindfulness Practices in Academic Spaces**

Currently, there is a need from students for an accessible space where they are able to take a step back from the social and academic standards to which they are being held. However, there is also push back and controversy related to mindful practices in an academic environment from multiple points of view. It is apparent that students are increasingly overwhelmed; however, mindful practices only seem to be readily available to those willing to pay large sums of money in non-academic environments. Instead of incorporating the wholesome intentions of mindfulness and contemplation into an inclusive environment, there has been a marriage of mindfulness and capitalism that has overruled the self-awareness and concentration benefits. In building an academic space and culture of mindfulness, we need to be careful that we are not just creating another vacuous, eastern appropriated practice. It will be up to the students to build this culture of acceptance and inclusivity.

I believe that if an academic space were created for students in which they were able to take time away from the information overload, it would be beneficial for students who want or need to utilize the space and would not concern those who are opposed. Some of the opposition to mindfulness as a secular practice would not be of concern if a contemplative space were to be in an academic environment. One instance of those who do not need to be concerned are those who are worried about Buddhism silently being forced upon students and in contrast, those who are worried about the secularization of Buddhism. This space would be open to students but

would never be a requirement. Therefore, those who do not want to partake in the practice, are not obliged. Conversely, because the students who choose to practice mindfulness will be doing so willingly, they will volunteer good intentions and respect for the spiritual aspect of the practice.

In college, students are surrounded by others and are continuously comparing themselves to those people both academically and socially. The abundance of information that surrounds us on a day to day basis does not help this case. Students always have access to more information and therefore always put pressure on themselves to work harder and be the best student. However, the information does not stop with academics as we hold information about ourselves and others on our phones, laptops, and other devices. We see the information that others put forward and compare ourselves to them in an almost obsessive manner. The information obtained on social media then becomes a distraction to school performance which then leads to students' anxiety over academic performance. Because of the pressure that is both put on students and that students put on themselves in academic and social settings, there is a need for a place that transforms and reestablishes one's relationship with technology and others, a place that allows students to create time for introspection and self-awareness. When a person allows themselves to take time for themselves, they are then able to better focus on the task that they desire to accomplish.

Mindful practices create an awareness for a person to focus his/her mind on nothing, to resist every distraction, and to only focus on breathing and the current task he/she is trying to accomplish. This can then translate into their lives as they will focus on specific tasks they desire to complete and less on the distractions and information surrounding them. Mindfulness practices, such as yoga, allow a person to free their mind of any expectations or standards and

encourage one to focus on their ability and how they can best complete each effort they put forward. Once a person is able to realize their limits and have a greater sense of self awareness, they are able to create a healthier relationship with their own self. Then, a person will be able to create better relationships with others. Contemplation will allow people to be okay with who they are; and consequently, they will need less validation from comparing themselves to those around them.

### **Conclusion**

The ability to incorporate mindfulness and yoga into a learning environment will have profound effects on each stakeholder as it will incorporate values that lead to inclusion and additionally, stress reduction for the myriad of students who desire to utilize the benefits of the space. I believe that this incorporation will be fruitful given the proven psychological impact of yoga on stress reduction. The Multicultural Approaches to Health and Wellness in America says, “by using inward focus, one is said to hold the power to redirect attention away from external triggers of stress and re-regulate them into a more peaceful state” (Gurung, 2019). Additionally, the side effects include “enhanced concentration and performance speed” (Gurung, 2019). I am hopeful that the incorporation of contemplation and mindfulness in study spaces will allow for more inclusive spaces that urge all students to thrive in an academic environment and collaborate better with others.

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