

Brief report on the Chancellor's Chair for Teaching Excellence Research Program (2005 – 2008)



Mindfulness Practice, Embodiment and Critical Theory in Post- Secondary Education.

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While many of the other projects conducted under the auspices of the Chancellor's Chair for Teaching Excellence focused on the development and implementation of pedagogical tools or methods and involved empirical classroom studies, our joint project was principally a theoretical response to questions that had arisen with increasing insistence in the context of our respective teaching experiences. We sought to explore the connections between the challenges we were each facing in the classroom and the shifting historical and institutional parameters and constraints within which Humanities scholarship and pedagogy is conducted; to address questions and problems arising from our respective research programs to date in relation to their introduction and examination in various courses; and to more fully elaborate the ways and means of dealing with the other-than-cognitive and other-than-conceptual dimensions of our respective classroom encounters with the materials we teach, including the affective, embodied and ethical dimensions of student responses to both artistic and theoretical texts.

Over the course of the three years in which we jointly held the Chancellor's Chair for

Excellence in Teaching, David Fancy and Susan Spearey worked to articulate how the integration of mindfulness-oriented awareness practices in the Humanities classroom might further enhance the ability of students and professors to more profoundly experience and explore the intensities, subtleties, and multifarious realities emanating from the types of crises that litter the terrain of the current late-capitalist, neo-imperial geopolitical climate. We have argued that the quality and efficacy of these involvements are heightened in the context of the kind of intersubjective pedagogical relationships marked by ever-increasing qualities of transversal sharing of power that mindfulness awareness practices often encourage—as opposed to more hierarchical or “trickle-down” models. Our project is ongoing, and the Chancellor’s Chair has enabled us both to build what we hope is a strong theoretical scaffolding for more recent, current and future publications and presentations, to attend workshops, talks and courses with a mindfulness or bodymind focus, and to present work-in-progress in a range of venues and formats. Moreover, this work both informs and is informed by our more discipline-specific projects: in David’s case a SSHRC-funded project entitled “Theatre and the ‘Minoritarian’: Immanence and Radical Democratic Performance” and Sue’s case, a SSHRC-funded project entitled “Talking Liberties/Talking Cure/Talking Terror: narratives of emergence and states of emergency in South African Literatures of Transition” (2004-2007) and more recent work on the pedagogy of witnessing contemporary historical trauma through the mediation of artistic texts.

We have given a number of presentations, most notably a 3-hour workshop entitled ‘Ideology, Compulsion and Embodied Critical Intervention,’ for a Cultural Studies and Critical Theory graduate course on Globalization and Time at McMaster University, combining dao yin movement, meditation and yoga with a discussion of our theoretical framework and its implications for the experience of time. We also delivered one of three plenary presentations at a day-long symposium, “Cosmopolitanism and Beyond,” at University of Western Ontario. We have presented work in progress at CTLET events each spring (2006, 2007 and 2008) as well as presenting at the Tribute to Teaching event in December of 2007. We have published two articles jointly; David has published a third individually, and Sue has submitted a commissioned article for an edited critical book on South African writer Antjie Krog about the Pedagogy of Perplexity, which details the ethical and affective challenges of teaching *Country of My Skull*, a memoir about South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in a non-South African setting.

Individually, David was able to draw on this work, and on the funding afforded by the Chair, in his teaching of acting intensives in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and in his annual teaching visits to the acting program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He has also been incorporating this work into both the pedagogy of critical theory and performance analysis, as well as into the teaching of acting in the university context. In that the discipline of theatre and performance studies regularly involves a back and forth between cognitive and embodied engagements, mindfulness practices have proven to be a particularly useful way of negotiating these different approaches to teaching and learning. It has been especially beneficial for students to be able to understand and experience the way in which pedagogical approaches in the classroom are equally as useful in the performance studio.

Sue was able to attend a range of workshops with a body-mind focus, which fortuitously included an invaluable 10-day mindfulness meditation retreat at the Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo, South Africa during her 2006-7 sabbatical year. This retreat was led by Stephen and Martine Batchelor—Stephen Batchelor being one of the thinkers on whom

our research has extensively drawn—and the talks given were taken from his at-the-time “in-progress” book, and enabled her to deepen an understanding of his arguments about the value of states of perplexity as generative mindfulness—and by extension, pedagogical—tools. She was also able to attend a two-day intensive certificate program led by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the founder of the Body-Mind Centering Movement, in Toronto in March of 2008. Her work on this project has been particularly beneficial in the teaching of literary theory courses, as well as courses on South African literatures of transition and Post-Conflict literatures. These courses, which focus on literature that addresses contemporary and traumatic histories, have confronted her with the necessity of grappling in increasingly urgent ways with the recognition that her encounters with these texts, and with the students whom she has asked to read and discuss them, are not simply intellectual exchanges. Introducing this material in a classroom setting has required her to engage not only with the conceptual complexities of the issues the texts examine, but also with the affective and ethical dimensions of the crises that they both stage in their content, and in turn, produce in the classroom. Because the texts raise important questions about how to approach highly charged and fraught experiences—often involving extreme violence and degradation— with respect and integrity, they mobilize— as perhaps the most serious intellectual work should— our ethical sensibilities and affective capacities as well as our cognitive faculties and ideological predispositions. To a lesser degree, our project has informed her teaching of the first year course, Literature of Trauma and Recovery, although in the large lecture section of 260 students, there is far less flexibility with modes of delivery, and virtually no possibility for one-on-one work with students.

Broader Institutional, Cultural and Geopolitical Challenges:

The following considerations were some of the realities that we felt informed the need to investigate mindfulness as a pedagogical strategy and response to these same circumstances: the corporatization of time within the academy; the acceleration of “compulsive becoming” in the broader popular and educational cultures, the instrumentalization—or eradication—of Humanities curricula; the teleological and positivist imperatives that index learning towards eventual moments of revelation, discovery or mastery; the affectivization of capital and the capitalization of affect; the atomization of students; and the erosion of students’ understanding and practices of agency; and the normativization of stability (or the exceptionalization of crisis).

Specific Teaching Challenge:

We understand these to arise in some significant fashion from within the contexts and broader challenges described above: some students variously experiencing anxiety, frustration, short attention spans, inflexibility, disengagement, anger, sadness, and other responses to course materials and the process of learning altogether. The reality that there is always more possibility for deeper engagement with material regardless of a student’s particular challenges.

Why Mindfulness?

Witnessing. Mindfulness and awareness practices, contrary to certain reigning assumptions about meditation, are not predicated on notions of disengagement, solipsism, passivity or the pursuit of transcendent states; rather, they invite practitioners to begin to address the plenitude and complexity of their present circumstances by engaging in acts of witnessing

What are my habitual responses to learning? On a very basic level, being mindful of one's own experience of learning, an experience often engaged with by the learner with a lack of awareness in at least some aspects of the enterprise, provides individuals the opportunity to have renewed flexibility of response.

There's always more, and that's okay. The point of mindfulness practices is not to attempt a totalizing understanding of our experience in any given moment, but to register in increasingly subtle ways the vicissitudes and potentialities of what we already understand, and to acknowledge the inevitability of what remains beyond our grasp.

Including the entire learner in the learning process. Eliciting this awareness and evoking multiple qualities of affective response (which perhaps begins by frustrating the ones on which we are customarily most heavily reliant) gives us the opportunity to shift or depart from ingrained patterns of reaction, thereby potentially opening connections between subjects that have previously not been considered or explored in a sustained way, reopening discussion around terms, definitions, concepts and ethical stances that may potentially have become sclerotized, as well as leading to the creation of entirely new concepts and expressions.

Developing open-minded students. It is precisely this gesture of "holding together and (or) in tension" of both what we know and what we do not—a gesture facilitated by mindfulness awareness practices—that can significantly re-orient temporality, agency, authority, and even subjectivity away from capture into teleological and instrumentalist paradigms and projects.

Equitable power relationships in the classroom. The quality and efficacy of these involvements are heightened in the context of the kind of intersubjective pedagogical relationships marked by ever-increasing qualities of transversal sharing of power that mindfulness awareness practices often encourage.

Our engagement with our own materials. How do we, as teachers, come to each encounter with the materials we are teaching or engaging with as researchers 'as if for the first time'? How do we maintain open-minded attitudes and be present for our students?

Case Study:

This brief case study provides an example of the ways in which we engaged a specific instance of student concern and learning challenge with our ongoing theoretical considerations.

...if hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of a rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting — because it places it in the *present*. [...]

The question of which next step to take is a lot less intimidating than how to reach a far-off goal in a distant future where all our problems will

finally be solved. It's utopian thinking, for me, that's 'hopeless'. (Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements")

And now, a return to a now: a specific, discernable moment in time; one that despite its having passed can draw us—by means of traces of affect precipitated into thought, language, and text—through the stormy moment of an unsettling anticipation of personal crisis and towards a threshold of destabilization threatening to harden into anguish. Sitting with and alongside the thoughts of a theatre studies student, an undergraduate wrestling with the fresh awareness of complexities inherent in his relationship with labour, critical analysis, and creative practice provides an opportunity to demonstrate how our theoretical explorations emanate from and inform pedagogical practice. Feeling trapped by a troubling state of perplexity as he attempts to write of his experience for an undergraduate thesis project, the student sends the following email to his instructor:

I'm having a bit of an ideological crisis with the paper theory work at the moment, I don't know if you have any suggestions but it's causing me a bit of distress. I go to work [at the scenography building shop] and assimilate into the culture and begin to think (and believe) that my thesis is bullshit, that it is impractical, that the existent structure [of society and the workplace] is necessary; in fact why am I even at school? In fact, I really hate actors, and all those silly creative impractical people. In fact, I should just find a good place to work, and ... well work. Then I see something like [a compelling theatre production] or read an article that blows my mind and I flip into another naturalized position of realizing I'm working in a factory that has nothing to do with the theatre. Which I think is something that I think I like sometimes, maybe. Do I like it? In opposition to this through my encounters with [cultural materialist] theory, I begin to question my values, my enjoyment of work. The respect I earn at work is directly related to my ability as a worker, therefore my place in production and my own oppression, right? If values of hard work, and quality work serve my employer and not me, if a large part of what I identify as self is a construction that places me at the bottom of a power structure why do I hold [these values]? Why is working hard good? Why is laziness bad? Which of these thoughts are authentic? Are any? If both thought processes are impressed upon me how do I navigate between them? I'm getting really confused. Because I agree with these theorists: Eagleton, Althusser, Barthes, etc., but I'm having a hard time with all the questions this brings up. And specifically this paper [about the materiality of theatre practices] and what I find interesting about it, and what is at the same time difficult, is that I'm not an astronaut or a deep sea diver bringing his/her world with him/her in exploration of another. I'm part of it, and fish don't write papers. Plus poststructuralism is making me second-guess, it's really hard not to be paralyzed by the stuff.

Struggling with being objective and distanced from the life that he is living even as he is becoming even more involved with it through the increased sociopolitical awareness that an engagement with certain texts has brought him—grappling with being “in or out of the water” as it were—the student oscillates between letting himself follow further lines of questioning and then gesturing towards the stabilizing act of separating the unknown from the known (“the existent structure [of society and the workplace] is necessary”). The testimony that ensues from his witnessing over time is an affirmation of shifts from

one ingrained framework of patterns of reaction to the another, with the juxtaposition of both sets of assumptions serving to defamiliarize and denaturalize the authenticating underpinnings of each of the two foundational codes (“Which of these thoughts are authentic? Are any?”). As he writes through this painful awareness of implication, interconnection and interdependence, as he experiences the vertigo—most likely experienced affectively throughout his entire being—of the heightened realization of a seemingly fractured coherence of self, a practice of mindfulness emerges as a potential pathway forward (“how do I navigate between them?”). A moment of arrest and pause that does not attempt an immediate reconciliation of apparent opposites nor promotes the suppression of the most anxiety provoking of the terms is a moment in which the full potential of affective connection can remain available. The rich affective excess of the testimony can this way become less of a threat, a threat that may risk traumatizing the beholder (“I’m having a hard time with all the questions this brings up”), when the student sits—literally and metaphorically—with the discomfort rather than fleeing to one secure yet potentially reductive position or another. In such a moment, the tentative asking of further questions can follow, which can in turn give rise to subtler and more profound lines of questioning. By continuing to break the cycle of compulsive becoming, a rupture initiated by the texts he has read and the discussion he has entertained in and out of class, the student can further recognize and critique the terms of the hegemonic mode that attempts, discursively and affectively, to entrain him into mastering and repeating it. This encounter with the limits of the known can precipitate into an ongoing exploration of uncomfortable states of perplexity all while mobilizing rather than shutting down the affective excess that clearly overflows in such moments of cumulative realization (“it’s really hard not to be paralyzed by the stuff”). By engaging in this exploration and exchange in the public/private space between the student and professor in a moment of simultaneous containment, release, and pause, all parties reconfigure understandings and practices of subjectivity and authority in a dialogically and dynamically enacted moment of public time. This temporality of generosity—in which bound affective flows are released rather than captured/commodified—is the ethical mode in which the deferral of teleologies, in which the affirmation of irresolution, of working principles, and of temporary theses, all have increased potential for actualization. It is in such a time and place, this now, every now, that small but confident steps can be taken in the interstices between stultifying authoritative stances and the denial of any solid ground whatsoever, small but confident steps towards...

Publications

Fancy, David and Susan Spearey. “Mindfulness and Embodiment Practices as Teaching Pathways in the Humanities.” *Power, Pedagogy, and Praxis: Social Justice in the Globalized Classroom*. Ed. Shannon A. Moore and Richard C. Mitchell. Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2008, 179-198. [print]

Fancy, David and Susan Spearey. “Mindfulness and Pedagogy in the Humanities.” Ed. Ananta Kumar Giri. *Pathways of Creative Research: Towards a Festival of Dialogues*. Primus Press: Madras, 2012. (In press) [print]

Fancy, David and Susan Spearey. “Witnessing States of Complexity.” *Silences*. Ed. Betsy Warland. Gatineau: Gauvin Press, 2008. 75-78. [print]

Fancy, David. "Testimonial." *Making a Difference: Toute la différence*. Ed. Lerch, Marilyn. Hamilton: Centre for Leadership in Learning, 2005. 7. [print]

Spearey, Susan. "Reconstituting Community, Identity and Belonging: Classroom Encounters with 'Post'-conflict Texts," submitted to Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schulties, eds, *Teaching Literature and Human Rights* (MLA press, final round of review December 2012)

Spearey, Susan. "*Country of My Skull*, the Transmission of Testimony, and the Democratisation of Pedagogy," *Critical Perspectives on Antjie Krog*, ed. Judith Lutge Coullie. (Forthcoming) Durban: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press.

Presentations

"Cosmopolitanism and Mindfulness in Humanities Pedagogy," *Cosmopolitanism and Beyond*, University of Western Ontario, 27 September, 2008.

"Ideology, Compulsion and Embodied Critical Intervention," (invited talk). McMaster University, 25 November, 2005.

Workshops Attended

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, School for Body-Mind Centring, 2-day course at Yoga Spirit, Toronto, March 2008

Retreat, Stephen and Martine Batchelor, Buddhist Retreat Centre, Ixopo, South Africa 28 December 2006- 6 January, 2007.