

Holistic Ways of Leading Academic Life

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Abstract:

With an engagement in meditative inquiry, three graduate students and their instructor, autobiographically reflect on a doctoral seminar and their experiences of participating in creativity and relaxation activities. They highlight the importance of a holistic awareness on the mind-body-heart-being connection and physically, emotionally, creatively, and spiritually nurturing the self. The authors emphasize the value and benefits of approaching intellectual work from an integrated being and present creative ideas as an antidote to neoliberal educational curricula and other issues such as fears of many kinds that impede our work and life. This paper shows that to balance the demands of academic work one must actively seek out and participate in holistic, meditative, and creative activities, experiences, and engagements that one enjoys and finds nourishing.

Introduction and Context

This paper explores, conceptually and pragmatically, how meditative inquiry can improve the lives of faculty and students in higher education. Through an autobiographical approach (Brookfield, 1995; Leather, 2020; Pinar, 2019) and an engagement with meditative inquiry

(Kumar, 2013, 2022), we highlight the importance of nurturing ourselves physically, emotionally, creatively, psychologically, and spiritually, and we underscore the value of academicians and graduate students approaching intellectual work from an integrated being. We believe that to balance the demands of academic work one must actively seek out and participate in activities, experiences, and engagements that one enjoys and finds nourishing.

The culmination of neoliberal educational notions of competition, comparison, measurement (Naidoo, 2018), and standardization as well as the fear-driven ethos intensified by the COVID-19 crisis have created an even greater demand for holistic educational practices to be developed and widely shared. In recognition that intellectual and academic work can be cognitively, emotionally, and physically draining – no less during the COVID-19 pandemic – this paper considers the benefits of incorporating meditative inquiry, a holistic approach, into everyday academic life as a way to balance the demanding nature of academic work. The goals of the paper are: (1) to discuss the factors that negatively influence our well-being and wellness in academia, (2) to outline how holistic ways of being can support intellectual work, and (3) to learn about the activities and experiences that promote relaxation, awareness, and creativity in order to become healthy and integrated academics and practitioners.

Using an autobiographical approach, this paper offers the perspectives and experiences of one faculty member and three doctoral students (enrolled in Nova Scotia's Inter-University Doctoral Program in Educational Studies) from Canada who have integrated relaxation activities into their academic and personal lives. The authors' contributions incorporate reflections on their past and present experiences, "threaded through [their] subjectivity" (Pinar, 2019, p. xiv). Personal stories are used in education research as an instrument for reflecting and interpreting one's the experiences that "influenced one's education, development, and career choices"

(Charissi, 2020, p.75). Not only are these narratives important for the personal growth of the contributors but also for the enrichment of the field of holistic education. Autobiographies are reflexive and they contribute to personal development and learning (Merrill & González Monteagudo, 2010) and the narrative accounts shared in this paper are relatable and hopefully beneficial for those working in academia or studying at the graduate and doctoral levels.

First, Ashwani Kumar, who is an Associate Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (Canada), will offer his critique of the existing academic culture and will present tangible, realistic strategies to manage issues brought on by perpetual demand increases in research productivity, the commodification of education, isolation, and the disregard for academics' health and well-being in the neoliberal ethos. Then, through sharing autobiographical reflections, he will discuss how a meditative inquiry approach has transformed his teaching, research, and life in a substantial way. Ashwani's section will be followed by autobiographical reflections from three second-year doctoral students – James Caron, Dudett Kumar, and Laurie Cook – who incorporated holistic approaches into their studies as they prepare for their academic careers. These students were registered in Ashwani's doctoral seminar called Contemporary Educational Theory. As part of this seminar, they completed an assignment called "Creativity and Relaxation Activity." The key purpose behind this assignment was to encourage doctoral students to participate in activities that promote relaxation, awareness, and creativity in order to become healthy and contented academics and practitioners. Part of this assignment encouraged students to pick an activity or a set of activities (silent walks in nature, meditation, arts and crafts, yoga, playing a musical instrument, singing, wood-work etc.) that they would like to participate in or practice throughout the term. It could be something that they were already doing or something new, and it was suggested to them to pay attention to how they felt about this

activity and in what ways (if any) it helped them balance their academic work and life in general. In their respective sections, James, Dudett, and Laurie reflect on their experiences of participating in this activity. James, a secondary teacher and adult educator, focuses on exercise as a relaxation activity; Dudett, a registered nurse and nurse educator, experiments with meditation and silent nature walks; and Laurie, a community educator and activist who lives with a mental illness, practices meditation, walks in nature, and spends time with family. All three students' express gratitude for having had an opportunity to work on improving their personal well-being, they each articulate an appreciation for slowing down, clearing their minds and being in nature, and they discuss how their activities' benefit teaching and research, and their overall health and happiness.

What Factors Undermine Holistic Ways of Being in Academia and How Can We Challenge Them?

Ashwani Kumar

Capitalist culture with its focus on constant productivity and proclivity for profit-making is one of the greatest calamities to have affected humankind. The world of academia is as much influenced by the capitalistic thinking as any other field of human endeavour. There are two central problems of the capitalist culture: the problem of "more" and the problem of selling. The core function of capitalism is to continually produce more, create demands through marketing and advertisements, and then to sell the products or services. In a capitalistic paradigm, human beings' well-being and happiness are measured by the number of materials we possess and the level of our access to services that are offered in the marketplace. This capitalist view of happiness omits important attention to the quality and depth of a person's inner being and their

relationships with one another and with nature. Similarly in academia – and despite the fact that capitalism has been seriously critiqued by scholars (e.g., see Jessop, 2017; Kumar, 2019; Ross & Gibson, 2007) – success is measured in terms of productivity. It is certainly true with reference to publications; more than the quality, originality, and depth of thinking, it is the number and frequency that carries the most value (Rakowska, 2020). This quantity-driven view forces academicians to produce more and more writing which inevitably compromises quality and depth (see also Berg and Seeber, 2018). Early in their careers, many an academic are confronted with the idea that publishing is a “game” (Acker & Webber, 2017; Caretta et al., 2018) which itself may lower expectations of quality. The commitment to measuring success based on numbers of publications is a barrier to entry into academic spaces, particularly for those early in their academic pursuits, especially women and racialized individuals (Henry et al., 2017) working from non-Eurocentric perspectives, and for those who question the publish or perish mentality that plague academic world.

A desire for more and an underlying expectation for more is exploited by for-profit publishing industry. The economic field has pervaded the academic field. Most of the universities in North America, unfortunately, are running on a capitalist model, and this model is becoming rampant in other parts of the world (Ross et al., 2020).

Another impact that capitalism has on the academic culture is an expectation that academics will brazenly self-sell (see Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Morahan, 2004). It reflects a self-centered system that is primarily about advancing one’s own career. Even while a scholar engages in scholarship aiming at bringing about transformation to our capitalistic society, selling and advertising oneself remains inescapable. For instance, when we write our reappointment and tenure and promotion applications in North America, we must glorify ourselves, laying claim to

all our work as professional accomplishments which set us apart. Unless we present an image of being “accomplished,” one cannot escape feeling inadequate in the profession.

Recently, I attended a session held at the Canadian conference on how to be “happy” academics that was offered by two well-known experts. Knowing that I was going to give a talk on this subject to doctoral students, I wanted to know how others consider and describe aspects of a happy and healthy academic life. The two speakers are known as experts on helping academics become effective, successful, and happy in their careers; however, I was quite concerned with their session. This whole workshop was a sales pitch. The presenters told the audience that success in the academic world means producing many publications and grants which would lead to becoming well-known and celebrated in the field. They then equated achieving these metrics of success with attaining happiness. They made no mention of academia as a place for true learning about oneself and the world and as a way of giving back to society – it was exclusively focused on individual accomplishments.

Their approach was rooted in a neoliberal capitalistic ideology (Azevedo et al., 2019) and their presentation inferred that first one must be effective, then successful, and only then can one be happy. I found their talk very problematic because it had the potential to create significant fear in the audience especially doctoral students and young academics. Their premise was that if one follows their guidelines one can fit into corporate academia seamlessly. The speakers never questioned how the neoliberal capitalist economic system forces people to produce more and how that system has the potential to undermine one’s health and well-being. In their approach, “effective and successful” comes first and “happy” comes later, and being effective and successful implies earning more grant money and continuing to produce more publications. What these researchers presented was an outward oriented and reward and punishment-driven

mentality that drives this notion of happiness which, I argue, is very problematic. This view of “happy” academic life is also connected to notions of comparison and competition. If “more” is most important and selling yourself is essential for achieving success in the system, then we inevitably begin to compare ourselves with each other, and we begin to compete with one another. When we feel envious, when we compare, and when we compete, we are discouraged from feeling peaceful, happy, and satisfied within ourselves and the contributions we are making in our academic life.

For a new academic aspiring to join the world of academia, these neoliberal ideas of effectiveness and success could create fear, anxiety, and insecurity and an uncritical acceptance of the system as it is. In this presentation, there was not even a single critique offered of the current academic culture, instead the presenters indoctrinated the audience and portrayed the current system as widely-accepted and good. Their message to new academics was to just trawl through and fit into the system, to ultimately become happy by meeting the standards set for them.

Commodification of education is another problem that undermines holistic well-being in academia. Being from India, I had a different experience of the relationship between the teacher and the student. For instance, I still do not call my teachers in India by their first names and I have a deep respect for them. My relationship with them was not transactional insofar as I did not view my education as a commodity. In North America, students must pay huge fees for their education, so the relationship between teachers and students is not generally one of love, gratitude, and respect. Students in this system often believe that since they are paying for their education, the professor should cater to them (del Cerro Santamaria, 2020). When you have to pay for something, you become a client, you become a customer and demand that the provider

gives you what you want. Similarly, students do not like to be challenged, and in teacher education they often expect to receive a bag of tricks that they can use in their classrooms rather than a deeper understanding of educational problems. Although the tricks and the techniques can be helpful when adopted and contextualized intelligently with sensitivity to students and their context, to be overly focused on them is a very superficial way of looking at education. I have been fortunate that I have met a lot of students over the years who have taken an interest in deeply exploring teaching, however, there are also students who think that they are paying for something and should get what they think is the “right education”. In this way, education becomes commodified where the sacredness of the relationship that can exist between teachers and students unfortunately is not that common. A sure sign of this is that many universities have an increasing focus on programs that are professionally oriented. It is rooted in the economic view of education whereby we are turning education into a profitable commodity. It surely undermines respectful and deep relationships between teachers and students which are necessary to foster their well-being (see also Busch, 2017; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Scott, 2016).

Relationships are important and many academics experience isolation which further undermines a sense of well-being. It is very common in academic culture to work in isolation, and it is easy to become secluded, especially in North America. In India, when I was studying in higher educational institutions, teachers and students used to come to the campus for the whole day, whether they had a class or not. This promoted a sense of community between teachers and students. Students and professors would spend a lot of time with each other discussing academic, personal, and political matters.¹ In North America, higher education is structured differently

¹ I am not at all implying that India’s higher education system is perfect. It can be heavily teacher-centred and hierarchical, and given an intensifying trend to copy the West in every way possible including neoliberal education

where students primarily come to university to attend classes as many of them work part-time, and not many of them stay on campus to engage in informal dialogues; professors also generally remain focused on their own research and writing projects after their teaching. This kind of environment does not promote a sense of community where free and open interaction takes place without any instrumental reasons. Such an environment can lead to isolation. The pandemic has highlighted the rate of anxiety, depression, and the feelings of disconnectedness in academia and beyond (see Leal Filho et al., 2021). The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has introduced a new grant to understand why isolation is so rampant in society (SSHRC, 2021).

Given how seriously isolation can impact one's well-being, it is very important to find a community of friends with whom we can share our thoughts, experiences, and work. Sharing my work and ideas with a close group of people was especially helpful to me during my doctoral studies. I always sought feedback from my teachers, friends, and colleagues who were studying with me which created a sense of community and positively contributed to my well-being. As a professor, it has been very valuable to me to have close friends and colleagues in academia who have supported me through thick and thin.

Another factor that undermines holistic ways of being is the great extent to which higher education tends to be Eurocentric and colonial. There is a division between "us" and "them" that implies a sense of superiority and inferiority of races, cultures, and nations. Since this hierarchy is based on racial division, it noticeably impacts visible minorities and undermines the way we

reforms, the Indian higher education system is becoming more and more productivity oriented and economic in its outlook. I am also not implying that North American higher education system does not have strengths. I find that North American system is rigorous, disciplined, and thorough; however, the fact that it is part and parcel of the capitalistic, neoliberal, and Eurocentric fabric, it carries a lot of these baggage which needs to be engaged critically and holistically.

do our work (see Davis, et al., 2022; Henry, 2004). This of course also has consequences on our health and well-being. I have suffered through that early on in my career. I had to work hard to convince some of my colleagues of the significance of what I bring to the table through my research and teaching that challenges capitalistic, Eurocentric, and colonial thinking. I am fortunate that my work has been recognized nationally and internationally² but still there is a kind of skepticism about my research and the courses that I teach. When there is a lack of respect and trust in diverse worldviews, it is easy to feel underappreciated and undervalued, thereby undermining one's sense of worth.

It should not come as a surprise that this Eurocentric system creates spaces for bullies to thrive in academic culture (Beaumont, 2019). Those who have gone through the peer review process may have experienced that – academics can be very harsh and ideologically driven behind the “blind review wall” which affords the opportunity to bully anonymously and prevent spread and expression of non-Eurocentric and unconventional ideas, projects, and methodologies. There are many other types of bullies as well. People who are in positions of power can exert their hegemony which can negatively impact those in lower ranks, and marginalized academics are likely to bear the greatest burden of this problem. This is also something that I have encountered in my own academic career. In order to be committed to the

² My book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry*, was selected as an Outstanding Academic Title by *Choice Reviews* (American Library Association) in 2014. My co-authored paper “Teaching as Meditative Inquiry” paper (co-authored with Adrian Downey) received the Outstanding Publication Award from the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies in 2019. Another of my co-authored papers “Critiquing Instrumentalism in Higher Education” received Outstanding Publication Award Honourable Mention at the award ceremony of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies. I am also the recipient of the Mount Saint Vincent University President and Vice President’s Advanced Career Teaching Award 2022 and University of British Columbia Faculty of Education’s Alumni Educator of the Year Award 2022.

well-being of those in academia, we need to recognize the propensity for bullying behaviours and Eurocentric domination, and to collectively stand against it.

Having pointed out some of the key problems of academic life that can undermine our well-being, I now discuss the significance of a meditative inquiry approach (Kumar, 2013, 2022; Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fischer, 2021; Kumar & Sable, 2021) in leading a healthy and integrated academic life. My research and teaching have been critical of the capitalistic influences in academia, and it has been guided by a deep interest in understanding how to live wholly, healthily, and sanely. I have spent a lot of time and given a lot of space in my life to engage with holistic educational thinkers and perspectives. For instance, I have been drawn to thinkers and educators like J. Krishnamurti (1953, 1954), David Bohm (1983), Ted Aoki (2005), Dwayne Huebner (1999), James Maconald (1995), William Pinar (2019), Maxine Greene (1995), and Paulo Freire (1973), among others. These thinkers view education as a creative and transformative process rather than merely as an instrument to gain employment and be economically successful – a tendency central to neoliberal education reforms and capitalistic schooling. I believe the purpose of education is much more than memorizing disconnected information, passing an exam and earning credentials, and finally getting a high paying job. The true purpose of education is to help us grow holistically, learn about ourselves and our relationship to the world, and find meaning, connection, peace, and happiness in our daily living.

A holistic education helps us grow as sensitive beings who have a deep connection with nature, existence, life, and other people. This worldview questions the isolated and individualized nature of capitalist societies where people constantly fight within themselves and with each other for their place. A holistic view encourages us to adopt elements of spirituality,

since it is impossible to look at life in a holistic, integral, and organic way unless we have a spiritual and reverent feeling for existence and life as a whole. When we primarily live a materialistic life, it takes us away from deeply considering the significance of beauty, love, and compassion. When we look at existence from a spiritual perspective, holism needs to be considered. For instance, rather than seeing trees, the stars, the sun and the moon, and the river as being separate from humans, viewing the world holistically includes an interdependence of all lifeforms (see Bohm, 1983; Krishnamurti & Andersen, 2000). Thus, holism in and of itself evokes a sense of spirituality and allows one to recognize that the colonial, capitalist systems are detrimental to the health of the planet and all forms of life that exist in it including human beings. These are the three central points of understanding holistic ways of leading academic life: (1) spirituality is central and vital, (2) life is holistic rather than separative and fragmented, and (3) we need to recognize and examine the factors that undermine our wholeness, health, and well-being.

Through my studies, my pedagogical experimentations, and my creative pursuits, I have developed a *meditative inquiry* perspective, which guides all aspects of my life. Elsewhere, I have discussed,

Meditative inquiry is an exploration within oneself and of how one is connected to life relationally, ecologically, economically, politically, and culturally. It is this existential and social exploration – inside and outside the classroom and in one's own self and in one's social interactions – that forms the core of a meditative inquiry approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. (Kumar, 2022, p. xxix)

Meditative inquiry implies a sense of freedom to think, to be critical, to have space in our mind, so that we can see that there is a possibility of silence, there is a possibility of spaciousness.

Freedom does not mean that we have a licence to do “whatever I want to do”. That is a very limited notion of freedom. Freedom here means feeling free inside myself, rather than being in the psychological prison of the society. Meditative inquiry is also a way for us to connect to our creative side. The notion of creativity has become important for the capitalistic culture and is praised and rewarded for it can be utilized in increasing productivity. From a meditative inquiry perspective, any activity that we do with our whole being, that we love doing, is a creative act. Connecting with our creative force allows us to connect with the creative well of life and supports our beings to tap into a deeper source of strength (see Kumar & Downey, 2019). I try to cultivate an appreciation for creativity with my students by giving a lot of choices and options in the way they structure their assignments, choose their topics and themes, and how they present their work. While students find such freedom and openness challenging in the beginning, they really appreciate it as time goes by, and they begin to gain confidence in their thinking and feeling and present original, creative, and innovative work.

Meditative inquiry also emphasizes relaxation and movement inside and outside of the classroom so that we are not just working and learning mechanically all the time. I begin my classes with some form of relaxation activity such as free writing, colouring, stretches, sitting silently, etc. so that I can bring the students and myself to a place of learning and engaging deeply (see Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Gunnlaugson et al., 2014). At a deeper level, through engaging with relaxation exercises, my students and I break the mechanical patterns that are so deeply rooted in our society. By engaging in these exercises, we challenge the head-centred and productivity-oriented mindset. These exercises allow us to bring our whole self to learning and promote deeper engagement. They help us prioritize our well-being rather than merely as tools for managing the stresses of constant productivity. In my life, I have discovered two holistic

forms of exercises that engage the whole body: Yoga and Qi Gong (see Leung, 2015). These practices view the body as a whole rather than a collection of parts. If you are having a problem in your neck and shoulders, exercising them in an isolated manner is one approach, which undergirds the thinking behind physiotherapy in my experience. But when we see the neck and shoulders as part of the whole body and exercise the whole body with reverence and awareness, we not only heal the neck and shoulders but the entire body. This holistic view is central to exercises that originated in wisdom traditions and can promote a deeper sense of well-being, and so I include them in my classes along with other reflective and introspective activities (see Saad, 2015).

Meditative inquiry recognizes the value of incorporating herbs in living a healthy life. It questions pill culture and the overdependence on drugs (Whiteman, 2015). We have become quite dependent on pills, and in my own life I have experienced that it was easier for an expert to prescribe me a pill for the rest of my life, rather than helping me understand the root of my medical problem and eliminating it. I eventually sought help in herbal systems, and I would say that I benefited from that quite a bit. Herbal systems like Ayurveda focus on changing your lifestyle and allowing your body to heal with herbal support, rather than becoming completely dependent on a pill for the rest of your life (see Desai, 2019). Pharmaceutical companies are part of the capitalist culture who are primarily focused on producing and selling more, which is why most of the herbs which have been reported to be useful for thousands of years are not tested actively – pharmaceutical companies are not interested in it (see Jones, 2015; Buhner, 2012). My criticism of the pill culture is not a criticism of the medication or medical sciences per se. We all require medication at some point in our life and for many of us it is lifesaving to regularly take our medications. However, what is problematic is when we denigrate traditional medicine

systems and do not focus on healing the body, rather, the body is made to be it dependent on drugs even in situations, like mine, where it was possible to eliminate the problem rather than take a pill every day.

Connecting with ancient cultures is central to the meditative inquiry approach and can help us lead more integrated and holistic lives. Cultures have developed over thousands of years; they are rooted in the soil of the earth, in the air, in everything existential and natural. The more we distance ourselves from ancient holistic cultures, and the less we experience them, the more we are going to suffer in this unhealthy environment that emphasizes and includes virtual, lifeless spaces, that we now constantly find ourselves in. Learning from the ancient cultures and learning about life-affirmative cultural practices can really support our well-being (see Adekson, 2017). Some examples of these cultural practices include spiritual music, dance, and other artforms that have been used not just as entertainment but as meditative practices to connect with life and its subtle and healing qualities. I have felt a great sense of well-being since I have started learning and composing and now teaching Indian classical music (see Desai; Kumar & Downey, 2019).

Being in nature can never be overemphasized if we are interested in leading holistic lives. I feel that when we stay in the house all day long, we cut ourselves off from the life energies of the earth and its spheres that rejuvenates us. As soon as we go outside of our houses and allow ourselves to be in the natural world, which is shrinking rapidly with urban and industrial expansion, the rejuvenation and the healing process begins. At least that is how I have experienced it in myself. In my view, an important element of living our lives holistically is to allow ourselves to be healed by nature. Nature is ready to heal our depressions and anxieties if we allow ourselves to be in nature with full presence (see Williams, 2018).

Engaging in contemplation, taking time to think about things deeply and just being with oneself, can deeply support our well-being rather than being reactive and in a state of fight or flight. I believe that the pandemic has given to many of us, whose livelihoods were not threatened by it, ample opportunities to be with oneself, investigate what is happening within us, and contemplate the external and the inner worlds. Being completely inactive at least once a day for some time has really helped me over the years. Often, we do not give our minds and brains and the body some space to be completely inactive so that we are just being with ourselves and not moving from one activity to another. From personal experience, this inactivity, even if only for a brief period, has a tremendous impact. In the beginning, being inactive may make one anxious and uncertain about its effectiveness, but if we allow ourselves to be completely inactive, even for a few moments, our energies begin to gather and heal us.

As holistic living is central to my life and to my teaching and research, I share various perspectives and practices with my students to support their well-being. I have also developed the aforementioned assignment “Creativity and Relaxation Activity,” and I incorporate it into most of my courses. Students choose an activity that promotes their well-being and most of them appreciate this assignment where they are afforded the opportunity to experiment with activities such as painting, star gazing, tap dancing, walking, nature photography, among others. I am fascinated by how deeply they explore their creativity. In the rest of this paper, three doctoral students – James Caron, Dudett Kumar, and Laurie Cook – share their experiences with this assignment and how it supported their well-being and happiness during the doctoral seminar and thereafter.

Exercise as a relaxation and meditative inquiry activity

James Caron

Prior to my doctoral studies I worked in various business fields as I have an undergraduate degree in business administration. When I decided to return to study, I became a licenced secondary business and social studies teacher before moving on to a master's program in adult education. Through this combination of employment and academic experiences I am drawn to vocational and workplace learning and more specifically how people are prepared for different skills-requirements at work. In the summer of 2020, I began my doctoral educational studies at Mount Saint Vincent University. During the fall term, seven colleagues and I were enrolled in Dr. Kumar's doctoral seminar that focused on contemporary educational theory. A part of the learning environment that he created for us was centered around practicing and understanding holistic ways of being to support the intellectual work that we do. He incorporated different holistic approaches to teaching and learning in this course, with an emphasis on meditative inquiry. Additionally, he assigned a relaxation activity as a part of the course's learning outcomes that were intended to promote our well-being with the goal of making us "*healthy and happy academics and practitioners*" (Doctoral Seminar Syllabus – Kumar, 2020, p.17). Coming into this course with a business background, holistic approaches to learning caught my attention, since focusing on one's own health was not a typical topic of conversation in competitive business environments that I had grown accustomed to.

Having rarely felt as though instructors sincerely cared about my well-being, I chose to take this assignment and these activities seriously and experiment with creative ways to center myself and diminish the stresses of daily academic work (and life in general). I felt it was important to choose an activity that would be engaging, beneficial, and enjoyable. From my

youth to my early twenties, I was a competitive ice hockey player and participated in other competitive team sports as well. I have always enjoyed spending time outdoors and in nature, thus, I chose to engage in exercise as a relaxation activity. Admittedly though, I have always used exercise as an outlet for reducing stress, therefore, I wanted to repurpose a familiar activity. Consequently, I thought attempting to relearn an instrument—an acoustic guitar that has been sitting in my closet for years—would create excitement and be engaging. However, after committing to practicing two to three times a week for a semester, I did not feel the advantages of relaxation in the same way as exercising, even though the benefits of engaging with music have elsewhere been described as “spiritual” and “meditative” (Kuman & Downey, 2019). Perhaps, my lack of skill created a barrier for me, nevertheless, for the purposes of my reflection, I will focus on my experiences with exercise as a relaxation activity hereafter.

Understanding that “exercise” is a broad, generic term that can encompass a multitude of activities, the focus of my assignment was running. Living in a cool climate though, I also had to get creative for the routine weather patterns that include rain and snow in Nova Scotia, Canada. As an alternative to running, I would use different weight and resistance training exercises to increase my heart rate in place of running on days that we experienced harsh weather. Normally, I would have access to a local fitness center for stormy days, but we were living through the COVID-19 global pandemic, which had all indoor activities closed indefinitely in our jurisdiction. I decided to use my creative imagination and I built my own adjustable workout bench so that I could continue to exercise on days that did not allow me to be outside.

Prior to participating in the creativity and relaxation activity, I would run for exercise as a distraction from my busy day-to-day activities, but not with a goal of relaxation. I was internally competitive in the sense that I timed my runs and tracked the distance travelled to ensure that I

was always improving (i.e., continually striving to go further and faster). During these more competitive runs, I would usually listen to music or a podcast to entertain or distract myself from the laborious task of running. I discovered quickly that running as a method of relaxation required that I discontinue using headphones and a timer and pay attention to my surroundings. In other words, I realized how important it was to observe, listen and smell my natural environment. Furthermore, I am fortunate to live in an area where I have access to a lakeside trail that takes me through a wooded area. Before participating in this relaxation activity, my goal was



to run approximately five kilometers (on average) each time. My goal in this activity, however, was to connect with nature, to slow down from the fast-paced structures of doctoral studies, paid work, and my personal life. For these reasons I did not track my distance travelled nor the length of time, it took me. In addition, I began to pay attention to what I was thinking about during the exercise so that I could journal some of my thoughts. As a result, I discovered how much cognitive activity goes on in my mind while I am exercising which eventually led me to creating a “to do” list prior to going for a run.

This strategy helped me avoid thinking about the tasks I knew I would return to, and it helped



Lake Banook, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada

slow down the cognitive activity. I also stopped listening to music so that I was able to focus on the sights, sounds, and smells of my surroundings. Exercising became less about the physical act of running and more about clearing my head of thoughts and using movement as meditation (Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019).

The activity in which I am describing was used as a sort of “outlet” for me during the semester, since doctoral work is taxing. As mentioned above, living through a global pandemic required everyone in my city to maintain a physical distance from one another, and therefore eliminated in-person social interactions. The expected stresses of graduate studies were proliferated by the pandemic and made an isolating academic experience even more so. This combination of decreased socialization and increased stress related to doctoral work was affecting me, and this relaxation activity has positively impacted me for three reasons: (1) an instructor showed compassion towards me and my well-being, (2) I was shown how to rethink my approach to an activity I was already doing to increase the mental and spiritual benefits, and (3) I learned a new skill in relaxation and as an educator an important lesson in holistic teaching and learning approaches.

In reflecting upon this activity, the impacts it has had on my life and my scholarship are profound. It is rare to see a course outline in higher education that asks students to focus on their own health and happiness. In fact, I only remember seeing this one time in four university degrees. Participating in these activities made me realize what is most important in my life – my well-being. After all, I am more than a student and future researcher and educator; I am a father, a husband, a brother, and a son (among other aspects of my identity). Thus, my health and happiness affect each of the above-mentioned relationships and taking care of my physical and mental health should be a priority. Furthermore, my academic work benefited from slowing down and “resetting” daily.

Recently, my partner and I had our first child and I still consistently break up my workday to go for a walk (and the occasional run) with my daughter. Therefore, I run less often now; however, I continue to incorporate relaxation walks into my daily routine. Often, I am working to meet deadlines, and to read, write and analyze texts deeply. Having these breaks enables me to experience a sort of reset during the day and return to my desk fresh and prepared to be more productive. Moreover, having this ability to connect with nature while walking or running was an important realization for me. I am rewarded with the mental and physical benefits of exercising and with the connection between mind, body, and spirit and movement. Furthermore, my daughter profits from being outdoors and is much happier when she spends time in nature. Early in her life, our walks were one of the ways we bonded. As time has gone on, we still take walks and runs together and she lights up when she has the opportunity to breath fresh air and observe all of the plants, animals, sight and sounds that nature has to offer.

Identifying this mind-body link while being present in nature has taught me how to care for my whole being. In other words, I feel that getting out into nature allows my brain to catch up

with all its cognitive activity, and my muscles have had an opportunity to move, resulting in relaxation. After a walk or a run, my mind is clear, and I feel that I am able to focus more deeply when I return. Overall, these holistic approaches are important to the lives of students since higher education contexts can reproduce neoliberal ideas such as over-emphasizing research production and grant writing (Giroux, 2014). Building these relaxation tools into my daily routine has helped center me in times of stress, has made me happier, and I would argue more focused. I think that taking care of one's overall being is of fundamental importance and as I prepare to become a post-secondary educator, I feel that it will be important to consider some of these philosophies in my pedagogy.

Finally, in thinking about current and future doctoral students in similar learning environments, finding an activity that holds significance to oneself, that allows the tensions of mind and body to decompress and relax is essential. Speaking from experience, the first several times engaging in these activities brought on stress because my mind was racing with thoughts of "more important" activities I "should" be doing. After all, I have been socialized and trained to prioritize productive activities. Once I truly slowed down and took in my surroundings, I was able to appreciate the benefits of a relaxation activity for my own well-being as well as my daughter's and consequently it has strengthened our relationship. Now, I often achieve a state of *flow* (Jackson & Csikszentmihályi, 1999) where a forty-five-minute walk feels like five minutes since I am totally and holistically immersed in the sensory activity. In these moments I am completely relaxed and when I return to work, I feel reenergized. Thus, my advice to current and future students would be to build relaxation activities into daily routines and find ways to care for one's own health and happiness.

Finding Peace Within: A Creative Relaxation Activity

Dudett Kumar

I am a Ph.D. student in the Nova Scotia Inter-University doctoral program in educational studies, and my background is in nursing. As part of the program, I completed a required course entitled *Doctoral Seminar: Contemporary Education Theory* with Dr. Ashwani Kumar, the course instructor. This course enhanced my knowledge of educational philosophies, research paradigms, and theorists from various paradigms and perspectives in education. For example, we discussed positivism, behaviourism, capitalism and neoliberalism and their relationship to discourse in educational studies.

For this course, I had many assignments and readings to complete, and at first, I felt a bit overwhelmed with the coursework deadlines. There were many long journal articles and books to read, weekly reflections to be submitted online and four major assignments to complete by the end of the course. One of the assignments was called “Creative Relaxation Activity” where we were asked to practice and to reflect on an activity of our choice. The goal of the activity was to promote relaxation and a deeper awareness of the self. At first, I was skeptical about doing this assignment because I wondered if it could help me to relax when I already had so many assignments to complete and deadlines to meet. I had mixed feelings: on the one hand, I wanted to reduce my anxiety level, on the other, I was unsure about the activity’s effectiveness considering the additional time commitment it created. Notwithstanding, I wanted to experience the benefits of relaxation to help complete my other assignments with ease.

One of the first articles I had to read for the course was entitled, “Teaching as a meditative inquiry: A dialogical exploration” (Kumar & Downey, 2018). I was curious to learn how to use meditation to reduce my stress while understanding the concept of teaching as a

meditative inquiry. I read the article with enthusiasm as I wanted to understand its meaning. In this conversational paper, Dr. Kumar encourages teachers and students to ask questions in the classroom for constructive conversation and transformative learning, and this quote from the article resonated with me:

DMI is not a deterministic methodology intending to find answers to predetermined questions. On the contrary, it is a possibilistic, open-ended, and emergent process. It is a holistic and spontaneous engagement where questions and answers emerge in the moment, guided by the meditative inquiry and understanding of the participants (p.55).

This concept of learning is meaningful to me, since it draws out authentic dialogue through in-depth conversations and where reflection and analysis can occur, and deeper insights can be gained. Dr. Kumar explains that this form of learning is about listening in silence with your mind, body, and soul for authentic dialogue to proceed without predetermined concepts.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973) also discussed the importance of dialogue in his book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his book, Freire (1973) explained how dialogue and praxis could awaken our critical consciousness. Connecting Freire's text to meditative inquiry motivated me to participate in constructive dialogue in class and inspired me to complete my assignments, read my articles, and begin my relaxation activity assignment. I found this to awaken my critical consciousness, as it reduced my anxiety levels and enhanced my academic performance in class.

During the fall term the creative and relaxation activity I participated in was twofold, (1) I practiced meditation and (2) I partook in silent nature walks. To begin a meditation routine, I first wanted to know how meditation was defined in the literature, and Dr. Kumar (2013) says:

Awareness or meditative inquiry is an existential process of being attentive to the way one thinks, feels, and acts inwardly as well as in one's relationship with people and nature. Awareness implies a meditative state of mind wherein one listens to and observes people and nature without any interference from the constant movement of thought. Such meditative listening and observation allows for deeper perception, communication, and learning, which are transformative in nature (p.9).

This quote profoundly resonated with me, and so for my relaxation activity, I began to take ten to fifteen minutes every day to connect with my inner being. I did this by listening to my mind and observing my body and feelings. This helped me learn about and pay attention to the state of my mind and body in the present moment. Practicing my daily relaxation activity soon awakened my existential self, which enlightened my authentic listening, thinking, and feeling. Kumar (2013) asserts that reflective listening is "meditative listening" (p.8). I wanted to gain control to manage my anxiety, so I continued practicing meditation for my creative relaxation activity, and to my surprised, I began to feel a reduction in my anxiety-level, and I gained better clarity of my schoolwork. I soon added silent walking to enjoy the environment's aesthetic beauty to complement my relaxation activity.

A guided meditation YouTube video called Calm helped me learn how to meditate and I kept a daily journal of my feelings. Journaling allowed me to express exactly how I was feeling by writing freely about my thoughts and feelings. I documented how I felt, for instance, there were times I felt overwhelmed and there were times I felt overjoyed, however, in either case I wrote about my feelings and reactions to meditating. I have included two excerpts from my journal as examples. First, I tried my best to do my meditation practice ten days consecutively

because I was excited to see and feel a reduction in my anxiety levels. Here is what I documented on the first day of my practice:

This afternoon I started my first meditation practice to learn the skill to improve my well-being spiritually, mentally, and physically. I downloaded a meditation app on my iPhone called Oak. I feel good about my decision to meditate since I have always tried to learn how to meditate but never followed through. The first lesson introduced me to choose a meditation mantra to repeat daily to keep my mind at ease. I chose the word Rama and was asked to say it aloud a few times to feel the vibration of the words in my body. I practiced saying it aloud a few times until I was asked to gradually lower my voice to a whisper as I repeated my mantra. As I repeated the mantra, my body's tension reduced, and I felt more at ease as I focused on my breathing. Fleeting thoughts about life came up a few times as I repeated the mantra, trying to let them pass each time. I was able to concentrate on my breathing and finished the practice that lasted for fifteen minutes. In the end, I felt a bit more relaxed than when I started. I am planning to continue again tomorrow and observe the response in my meditation practice.

On the fourth day of my practice, I documented this in my journal:

I began meditating at 4 am when I woke up in the night and could not fall back to sleep, and on day three, I learned about not having anything interrupting my meditation. It is all about me getting in touch with my body, mind, and spirit. Practicing my mediation made me think about it as essential as breathing and that I must practice it daily to connect with my thoughts and Practicing my mediation made me think about it as essential as breathing and that I must practice it daily to connect with my thoughts and feelings in a quiet moment. To do this, Practicing my mediation made me think about it as

essential as breathing and that I must practice it daily to connect with my thoughts and feelings in a quiet moment. To do this, I listened to the guided meditation for 15 minutes and breathed, repeated my mantra Ra-ma until it faded away, and felt deep relaxation. I felt very refreshed when the process was over. I plan to continue this again tomorrow.

These two excerpts are brief quotations from my journal about of how I felt during my meditation practice. As is evident, I even meditated at nights when I could not sleep and felt better after meditating.

During my silent walks, I reflected on the beauty of nature walking in the rain and the noise of insects in the bushes during my late evening walks. The creative relaxation activity helped me connect my senses with nature, and I am more conscious of the beauty of my surroundings and appreciate the warm feeling and peaceful thoughts I get from that experience. These two pictures below express my views and feelings about my silent walks in nature.



Walking in the late evening and listening to the noises of insects makes me aware of the living creatures in the ecosystem enjoying the same space with me.



While walking, I also observe the beauty of nature in blooming flowers and enjoy a breath of fresh air as I inhale the sweet fragrance from the blossoms that hang in the atmosphere in my surroundings.

In conclusion, I am grateful I had the opportunity to complete this relaxation activity assignment. I believe it was my professor's sincere intent to help students manage their lives while completing academic work that can be demanding at times on the body, mind, and spirit. This activity encouraged me to care for my mind, body, and soul during the process. Today, I have continued practicing daily meditation to manage my stress levels; I no longer feel overwhelmed. I have learned to embrace myself more, connect with my inner self through meditative inquiry, and take time to breathe because I realize how one's state of mind can impact their body. Based on my personal experience, I would encourage scholars like me to take time out of the day for their mental health. When you get preoccupied with life's daily grind, relaxation techniques can help calm your mind and body and prepare you for the next tasks. Take time out to breathe and remind yourself of who you really are to raise your consciousness. You will feel satisfied that you have cared for yourself and motivated to continue caring for yourself when you see and feel the rewarding results of relaxation in your body and mind. You will

experience better concentration, and a sense of satisfaction knowing that you are caring for your well-being on a daily basis.

Sacred Saturdays, Deep Work & Other Ideas to Foster Creativity and Relaxation

Laurie Cook

Learning to live in a healthy way that embraces different levels of energy, moods and various emotions has been a lifelong journey for me. I am a mother, daughter, sister, wife, activist, community developer and educator, a person who lives with a mental illness, and a student doing a Ph.D. in Educational Studies. As part of a course called *Contemporary Educational Theory*, Dr. Ashwani Kumar asked us to find an activity to help us relax, practice using it on a regular basis, and journal about what we experienced while doing this. At the same time, I happened upon a book called *Deep Work*, written by Cal Newport (2016). This book also encouraged me to re-think my usual ways of working, and my thinking around the value of self-care. I knew if I was going to do a Ph.D., work and have some sort of life, I needed to ‘work smarter, not harder.’ What I learned during this time helped me find a new ‘rhythm’ to my life that has made a significant difference in my approach to life, professional work, and schoolwork.

The book, *Deep Work (2016)*, suggests a variety of ways to think differently about work. Two methods I found particularly helpful were creating a work schedule that included chunking ‘shallow’ administrative tasks together that don’t need as much deep thinking, and then allowing for larger ‘chunks’ of time for work that enables the brain to go very deep on a particular idea. Newport (2016) also advocates for developing a routine that gives the brain time to ‘recover’ and change from one type of work to another to address the challenge of ‘attention residue.’ Newport (2016) says this happens when we change focus from one topic to another. He says our brains

need time to adjust to new topics; especially when working on a variety of tasks that include ‘shallow work’ such as emails, social media, organizational tasks, and ‘deeper work’ involving reading and writing. Newport (2016) says we can be more creative, innovative, and effective with deep work if we allow for longer periods of time to focus on that work.

My schedule for school during this time meant I had classes twice a week in the afternoons, so my goal was to stop my regular professional work early and go for a walk to get rid of any ‘attention residue’ before attending classes or doing schoolwork. I also intended to group various ‘shallow’ administrative tasks together, related to my work as a community development consultant, more frequently during the week. I thought this would help me gain control of my schedule, however this initial strategy was unsuccessful. I felt that I still did not have enough time for deep work, and my weekdays were too chaotic to properly focus on my schoolwork or deal with ‘attention residue’ resulting from the range of tasks and projects I worked on during the week. Thus, I decided to reorganize so that I could focus on my professional work during the week. This way I could take a complete break from any cognitive work on Saturdays, allow for more of a transition to deal with ‘attention residue’ that had built up during the week, and completely focus on my doctoral studies on Sundays.

Saturdays, therefore, became ‘sacred’ time for me to spend with family and friends, and be in nature. It was amazing how much fresher I felt on Sundays when I could focus specifically on schoolwork. These were long days, however, implementing this strategy was beneficial. I felt that I was engaged and producing the highest quality of work to this point in my scholastic career, and I felt less stressed during the week while I was consulting. Spending time with family became a key part of ‘sacred’ Saturdays. I used this as an opportunity to get outside, and away



from my home office which I used for both my professional and doctoral work due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One memorable day trip that I took on a Saturday early in the Fall was with my husband. We travelled to the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia and spent time at a winery. We sampled wine. We walked in the vineyard. It was beautiful, and it was times like these that I tried to allow my mind to be in the moment and focus on absorbing the feelings of being in nature and being with my husband. This lessened my anxiety related to starting a Ph.D. later in life and gave me confidence to deal with, rather than wonder, how I was going to juggle all my commitments. Early in the program, I felt very anxious about any free time I spent not working, reading, or writing. After I was given this creativity and relaxation assignment, I noticed that I was fresher, more energized, and able to focus better on the tasks I was assigned each week when I took more opportunities to reset.

Another activity I included to help alleviate stress was committing to spending more time in nature. I began to join my sister for regular walks on the 'rail trail' in our area. One of the fun aspects of this was to see various rocks that people in our neighbourhood had painted and distributed along the trail. Everyday there were different ones with cute images or epigraphs such as 'mind over matter.' These walks occurred during physical-distancing mandates due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, therefore, these little connections with people in my community were appreciated and valued. Another example of spending time in nature were the beach-walks I engaged in with my mother and daughter, or my daughter and her new husband. Sometimes the weather was grey. Sometimes it created the most beautiful golden light. Spending time with family in nature helped me break patterns of anxiety, worry, and obsession with various pieces of professional work or schoolwork. Through these activities I noticed a congruency of improvement; the more time I set aside for relaxation, the more I felt my spirit lift.

I was also very grateful for time with my children during this period and tried to spend as much time as possible with them. Both had recently finished their post-secondary education and started their work lives. Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, my children decided to live with my husband and I to save money. We are fortunate to have enough space for them to stay with us while still having their own space. My daughter and her husband stayed in our basement apartment, and my son stayed in a tiny house on our property that had been



recently renovated. We all had our own spaces, yet we could see each other often as we would go through our daily routines. In choosing to focus on the positives that came with the restrictions related to the pandemic, this living arrangement was a lovely opportunity for us to see one another and hear about what is going on in each of our lives.





I am also very grateful we live in a rural area with such easy access to nature. During this time, our son, daughter, and her husband built lovely trails in the woods just behind our house. On weekdays in the Fall months, I would try to take breaks near the end of a workday to get outside for a quick walk. Even if I only had half an hour I could get out and be fully immersed in nature very quickly. As the sunlight faded earlier each day, I was able to be a world away from work and school in my backyard within minutes.



Having access to nature, my family, and a better sense of how I can structure my time more effectively so that it includes time for deep work has improved my life significantly. I feel much more at peace, and I do not stress about ‘being productive’ in the way I used to. I often take pictures to help me remember the sights, smells, and feel of the air. As I move through these moments, I find my mind quiets more quickly now. I don’t try to control my thoughts, I just let them go where they like. I focus instead on ‘being present’ in the world, and more mindful of it.

I have learned that making time for being in nature, prioritizing myself, family and friends, and developing a 'rhythm' to my days that allows for periods of no work and times for deeper work, has really made a difference in my ability to have new ideas, make connections, be creative and be healthy. In the past, I have not been as deliberate in making time to enjoy the easy access I have to nature and enable it to help 'heal' me when I need that. I have learned the time I spend not working is just as crucial, even more so, than the time I spend doing anything else. Without this time, in nature and with my family, I could not do the many other things I do. I can honestly say this is one of the happiest, most fulfilled, and productive times of my life and yet, I do not try to 'be happy' every day either. Instead, if my mood is melancholic or sad, I note it and I focus on creating more space for relaxation and self-care rather than fighting such things the way I used to. It is as if I now have 'permission' to not be busy all the time.

With this learning, I find myself enjoying the little moments of life more. Each day is a treasure, and I try to be 'more mindful' of this. I have a stronger awareness of being in the later years of my life and wondering what I have really accomplished with my life, but I am much less bothered by this now. I feel more at peace with whatever each day brings. Stressful moments and days still happen, but I can recognize them better and I have learned how to be more proactive in how I deal with them.

Conclusion

In this paper we underscore, through a meditative inquiry approach, the importance of paying attention to and nurturing ourselves holistically which includes our physical, emotional, creative, psychological, and spiritual well-being with a focus on the mind-body-heart-being connection. Finding and striking a balance in the daily rigors of academic work and professional life through participating in activities, experiences, and engagements that one enjoys and finds

nourishing is crucial for the well-being of academics and practitioners as the autobiographical narratives describe. Meditative inquiry, an approach to teaching, researching, and living that Ashwani developed and that James, Dudett, and Laurie have engaged in, has positively impacted their experiences in the doctoral program.

This paper highlights the importance of being critical of the capitalistic, neoliberal, and Eurocentric thinking prevalent in academic settings so that we are not simply succumbing to the external pressures for more and more productivity. We emphasize integrating breaks into the mechanical cycle of academic work and allowing space to heal our mind, body, and heart. Incorporating these types of meditative activities allows for creativity, deep thinking, spiritual engagement, physical movement, and community building into our daily lives in and beyond our classrooms. These are all pillars of the meditative inquiry approach, and they promote our overall well-being. In the student's reflective narratives of their experimentation with creativity and relaxation activities, James's integration of exercise as relaxation and meditative inquiry allowed for a more calming and refocused workday along with a deepened relationship with his natural surroundings and his daughter. Dudett felt the benefits of meditation and silent nature walks during her Ph.D. studies. She notes that she has achieved a lowered level of stress through these activities and has continued a daily meditation routine after the completion of her doctoral seminar. Laurie's "sacred time" helped her to recentre and refocus each week as she allowed for one day cognitive rest and for engagement with nature and her family.

These students share three different approaches to incorporating relaxation into their lives and work. They all discuss their gratitude for Ashwani as their instructor who has shown compassion for them and has an interest in their studies and their personal well-being. As Ashwani has pointed out in this paper and elsewhere, Eurocentric, capitalist structures, such as

higher education contexts, challenge our ability to engage in non-competitive and non-productive activities (in the neoliberal sense) that are aimed at improving our physical, mental, and overall health. Incorporating these types of creative/relaxation activities into curricula or into the daily lives of academics and students are beneficial and perhaps crucial as the three students have shown through their narratives. Meditative and holistic engagement, we believe, can be helpful to the those working in higher education institutions and beyond.

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