

## **Mindfulness and presence in teaching and learning**

*David Kahane*

I was miserably anxious starting out as a teacher. There was an exhilaration in sitting or standing at the front of a classroom, but also deep insecurity about my knowledge and competence. I teetered between a sense of inadequacy and (when convinced that I'd given a seamless lecture or facilitated a great discussion) the surging exhilaration of accomplishment.

I embodied, in other words, a vacillation between senses of worthlessness and worth that constituted my normative world as an undergraduate and graduate student. In this world, education is a hierarchy: you begin as a fundamentally inadequate novice and set about stacking up knowledge, skill, and accomplishment in order to deserve the esteem of those who survey and evaluate your performance. And we can become the harshest observers of our own performance, reading this harshness into the reactions of our students, peers, and teachers.

My teaching, especially starting out, tended to be about covering up what I didn't know, about coming across as accomplished, about performing seamless knowledge in order to stave off the ever-present specter of humiliation. I taught from a deep-seated sense of lack, and inadvertently modeled for my students that they could overcome their own lack by learning to perform expertise.

The alternative that I experience more often now is a pedagogy of plenty. My anxiety as a teacher is not gone – this jittery pulse is often with me in the classroom. But I am more able to work with it: to embrace groundlessness and uncertainty as the heart of learning. Instead of modeling academic (and teaching) mastery as an escape from lack, I hope that I invite students to recognize that they are already good enough, that their learning can be a way of more fully experiencing themselves and their fundamental adequacy.

My graduate education started with an MA in Political Theory at McGill University and work as a teaching assistant (TA) in ancient political theory. I read voraciously in primary and secondary texts so as to present material skillfully in my TA-led discussion sections, and I

was good at it: highly organized, smart, and willing to put in tens of hours preparation for each meeting. (The fifty or so pages of notes I took on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* supported me through several years of graduate work on that text.) In retrospect, though, this reduction of skilled teaching to content mastery was both subtly unhappy and subtly unskillful. Subtly unhappy because while part of me enjoyed the stressed frenzy of preparation, the sense of accomplishment in presenting a crisp overview of tough material, and the authority with which I could handle student questions, there was always a panic to this, a sense of papering over gaps in my knowledge, gaps that pointed (some visceral part of me believed) to my fundamental inadequacy at the job. And unskillful because it inducted my students into these psychological dynamics in ways that – I suspect, at least – made learning less engaging and nourishing to them. My approach to teaching focused me on the material, and so turned my appreciation away from the mutuality and intersubjectivity that also were part of the scene of teaching. I offered students useful tools and knowledge, but in forms that may have kept them from fully inhabiting and appreciating their learning.

I went off to the University of Cambridge for my PhD then spent a year as a sessional instructor at McGill before doing a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard, with my paltry Canadian-dollar fellowship supplemented by a Lectureship in Social Studies. By this time my research (on citizen engagement and deliberation in multicultural societies) and my interest in progressive pedagogy (Paolo Freire, bell hooks) had me interested in the classroom as a potentially democratic and emancipatory space. I also was increasingly aware of my own anxiety and stress as a teacher, and wanted to be able to facilitate learning more effectively. So I worked at being 'present' as a teacher, and at pedagogies to empower diversely situated students. Harvard was a strange place to be exploring these aspirations. More than anywhere else that I have studied or taught, it feeds the hierarchical mentality of lack and accomplishment. Students are fixated on performing well, and those teaching them also scramble to impress, to cover over weakness and ignorance. Not only is 'presence' as a teacher difficult in this setting – one is always reviewing one's performance, scurrying toward the next thing, riddled with uncertainty – but the aspiration to presence can become one more axis of success or failure. I taught well, I think, and pushed students to take responsibility for their learning. But I modeled a relationship to scholarship and learning that treats knowledge as a place of security, and unknowing as dangerous.

In 1997 I moved from Harvard to my current teaching home, the University of Alberta. The UofA is one of the largest universities in Canada; like virtually all Canadian universities, it is publicly funded. The move to UofA helped me come into my own as a teacher. For one thing, it was a tenure-track job, and job security is itself helpful for relaxing into this vocation. For another, Canadian undergraduate programs draw their students regionally, without the acute hierarchies built into the United States' university system; perhaps as a result, undergraduates tend to be more open to variety and experimentation in teaching, so long as instructors attend perceptibly to students' learning and enjoyment.

My central teaching assignment during the decade I spent in the Department of Philosophy at UofA was a large, co-taught, first-year course, 'Introduction to Philosophy: Values and Society.' When I arrived in the Department, the course was going poorly, delivered to passive and often disengaged students, by a loose sequence of ten faculty members and sessional instructors, with weekly discussion groups led by under-supported teaching assistants. I took charge of this 250-student course (given its large size, it was known as the 'Supersection') and remade the course, focusing on building a truly collaborative team of faculty and TAs genuinely curious about the work of teaching.

Core to this work was breaking down hierarchies of expertise between our TAs (graduate students new to teaching) and more experienced faculty. Too often, teaching is presented to novices in ways that perpetuate the dynamics that I experienced in starting out: many new teachers are desperate for the protective mantle of content expertise, and exhilarated when they can perform this. But even when the performance can be pulled off (remarkably hard for a novice), fixation on content cuts teacher off from students, and models for students that uncertainty and unknowing are dangerous, while security lies in command of content.

A key to disrupting this 'pedagogy of lack' in the Supersection was for experienced faculty in the course to model for TAs genuine curiosity about the nuances of teaching. The course had two fifty-minute lectures a week and a third period each week when students broke into ten assigned groups, each led by a TA. TAs were paid to come to lectures, and faculty made use of these eyes on their teaching, sharing uncertainties about pedagogical choices, using regular mini-evaluations to explore undergraduate perspectives on their learning, and seeking feedback from TAs in weekly team meetings; while modeling this inquisitiveness about our

own teaching came more easily to some faculty than others, it became easier as a culture of collaboration and trust developed within the teaching team. This inquiry into our teaching and learning as faculty licensed TAs to admit their own uncertainties, and to treat these not as tokens of inexperience but as bases for collective learning. Team meetings became proving grounds for pedagogical experiments undertaken in the lecture hall and in TA-led sections, and TAs brought in their failures as well as successes for discussion. We had, from the beginning, encouraged active learning methods in both the large lecture hall and the TA-led sections; but it was the authenticity of learning about our own teaching that built a culture of inquiry able to animate active learning in these other contexts.

Another effect of the team culture of the Supersection was our ability, as instructors and TAs, to learn to be ourselves in our classrooms. Part of the pedagogy of lack, for teachers and students alike, is a sense that we need to cover over fundamental inadequacy. This is certainly true for many new teachers, who seek safety in a brittle emulation of authoritative knowledge of material. Our team meetings, though, and the honesty they allowed about what we didn't know about our teaching, helped us to gain courage to bring more of our own styles and values into our teaching. We could offer a more authentic curiosity in the classroom, and carve out space for our distinctive ways of being. Whereas clinging to competence can make us boring (a cardboard cutout of the 'good instructor'), facilitating learning processes from a place of curiosity and unknowing is more likely to be engaging and charismatic. My own lecturing to the Supersection became more enjoyable and more genuinely mine as I let go of the need to make it seamless, and was willing to be more honestly, goofily myself.

There is of course a social and political context to this: my experience of teaching is inextricably connected to social authority granted me by virtue of gender, race, and career stage. Nor is content mastery irrelevant to good pedagogy, which requires knowledge of course material and is enhanced by scholarly depth. I am stressing presence and downplaying content mastery because the culture of the academy so often skews things in the opposite direction. Each teacher needs to navigate this balance for themselves, including in light of the risks and rewards of particular teaching contexts and power relations. And indeed, part of collective learning within the Supersection was about how our authority and comfort as teachers was inflected by race, gender, age, accent, and more.

After four years in its revamped form, the Supersection won both a university and a national award.<sup>1</sup> And at about this time I began mindfulness practices that helped me to clarify the meaning of ‘presence’ in teaching. I stumbled into a week-long retreat at the Zen Monastery Practice Center in California and started learning basic mindfulness meditation. I connected deeply with this challenging practice of staying with the present-moment experience of my breath, gently releasing the thoughts and sensations and emotions that relentlessly drew me away. There was a connection between this mindfulness practice and many of the things I had been seeking in my teaching: an ability to be present to the nuances of the classroom in each moment, a sense of fundamental adequacy rather than lack, an open, non-judgmental curiosity about my own experience, and skilled ways of supporting others in this kind of learning. At Harvard, my desire to be more present in my teaching was one more frustrated performance; in the Supersection, we somehow created a space for greater presence without aiming at it; and in meditation, I found a rigorous practice for cultivating presence.

I was so struck by the connection between my experience of Zen and my aspirations in teaching that (in addition to taking up meditation through daily practice and a rhythm of retreats) I looked for literatures and communities that explored links between mindfulness, meditation, and teaching. A number of Google searches later, I found the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society,<sup>2</sup> a US-based organization that ran a summer session for post-secondary educators using meditation in courses ranging from philosophy to physics. I attended three summer sessions, sustained by the values of this community and inspired by its diverse experiments in teaching. These summer sessions gave me the confidence and skills to bring meditation overtly into my own classrooms. Let me provide just a glimpse of the form that this has taken.

I taught three iterations of a third-year course on ‘Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice,’ where we studied texts from ethics and political philosophy on obligations to strangers while also undertaking contemplative inquiry into our relationship to our own and

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Alberta’s *Teaching Unit Award* and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education’s *Alan Blizzard Award for Collaborative Projects that Improve Student Learning*.

<sup>2</sup> Details of this Center are available at [www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)

others' suffering and how this shapes our motivation to help.<sup>3</sup> Each class began with about eight minutes of mindfulness or 'shamatha' meditation: sitting straight in our chairs and training ourselves to stay with our breath, compassionately noticing when our minds got caught up in thoughts and gently coming back. This meditation had a number of effects. First, it brought all of us into the room together: we could calm down, drop the preoccupations we carried in, and focus on the conversations to follow. Second, meditation honed our abilities to actually notice our own experience: it laid the groundwork for articulating our own experience as part of our subject matter. Third, it attached a rigour to how first person experience entered the course: rather than simply rehashing habitual stories of who we were, we could look and see in new ways. And fourth, it showed how each of us had a plenitude of experience and knowledge relevant to the course: while there were difficult materials and skills to learn over the term, none of us was operating from a place of lack.

I am now piloting another contemplative course, on 'Mindfulness, Activism, and Citizenship for Democracy.' This course, too, stages a dialectic between 'third person' texts (on deliberative democracy and mindful social activism) and 'first person' inquiry based on meditative and contemplative practices. There also is a community service learning (CSL) component: each student spends twenty hours working with a dialogue convening or frontline service organization as a counterpoint to classroom dialogues, contemplative techniques, reading, and journal writing. A key role of these CSL placements is to provide a context for students to explore their ability to remain present in the face of complexity and difficulty, and to notice what shifts when they can sustain this mindfulness.

Students are energized and inspired by these highly participatory, contemplative courses. The methods and subject matters of the courses speak to students' search for meaning in their lives and educations: they explore themes that matter in an unusually deep way, and share this exploration with fellow students in a context of calm and trust. I have learned several things in teaching these courses. First, while students gain a lot through regularly practising meditation in class, my ability to model and embody mindfulness and compassion is nearly as important. The classroom 'presence' that has preoccupied me through my teaching career is

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<sup>3</sup> For more detail see Kahane, D. (2009) Learning about Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice: the Place of Contemplative Pedagogy. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning: Special Issue on Internationalizing the Curriculum in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

crucial. Second, my ability and that of my students to cultivate presence are mutually reinforcing: practicing as a class dramatically increases our individual capacities for mindfulness. Third, meditation encourages acceptance of whatever thoughts, emotions, and mental states arise: we notice them and return to the breath. This meditative orientation provides a grounded basis for dealing with strong emotions and energies that arise for each of us in the classroom, including my own anxiety as a teacher. Rather than experiencing this as debilitating, a meditative orientation allows me to recognize the powerful energies underlying ‘anxiety’, and to channel these into my teaching.

As I have found new ways to bring mindfulness and presence into my teaching, I have deepened my understanding and love for this vocation. I have started to glimpse, with my students, how increasing our ease with not knowing provides a foundation for our most authentic and joyful learning.

### **About the author**

David Kahane ([david.kahane@ualberta.ca](mailto:david.kahane@ualberta.ca), [www.davidkahane.com](http://www.davidkahane.com)) is Vargo Distinguished Teaching Chair in the Department of Political Science at the University of Alberta. His teaching awards include the 3M Fellowship (Canada’s highest award for undergraduate teaching), the Alan Blizzard Award (a yearly national prize for collaborative teaching projects), and the University of Alberta’s Award for Excellence in Graduate Supervision, Rutherford Award for Undergraduate Teaching, and Teaching Unit Award. His research focuses on citizen participation, democratic deliberation, and social change, and he is especially interested on how models of inclusive, collaborative citizen action can inform what we do in university classrooms and university governance.