

Professor David Levy

**LIS 598A: Information and Contemplation
University of Washington Information School
Spring Quarter, 2006**

Course Description

Today's information technologies provide instantaneous access to vast amounts of information, opening up wondrous new possibilities in education, commerce, and entertainment. But these opportunities are not without cost: the easy availability of information can turn into information overload; the presence of multiple communication sources and devices may lead to the fragmentation of attention; and the ease of acting and communicating quickly seems to encourage a pace of interaction that is unsustainable and counterproductive. In this course, we will examine the causes and effects of such trends, and will explore possible counter-measures, including contemplative practice. For thousands of years in a wide range of cultures, people have developed techniques (meditation, yoga, contemplative reading) for stilling the mind and cultivating attention. We will study and practice a variety of these techniques, and will apply the understanding gained from them to critique the speedy, fragmented, and inattentive mind states that digital technologies seem to encourage.

Course Objectives

1. To explore various contemplative practices, including sitting (breath) meditation, free writing, and contemplative reading;
2. To use contemplative practice, which stills the mind and sharpens awareness, to explore and gain insight into our own (first-person) information practices;
3. To use contemplative practice to explore and gain insight into broader cultural (third-person) practices;
4. To focus these techniques and understandings specifically on problems of information overload, fragmented attention, busyness and the speedup of everyday life.

Class Participation

Class participation is vital to the success of this course. Students speaking out in class, or participating in other ways, increases the learning experience for everyone. The student

speaking out gets to test his or her understanding; and the rest of the class learns from the points made or questions asked. There should be plenty of opportunities for students to participate orally in this course – by addressing the whole class or by speaking in smaller, break-out groups. Email provides another possible form of participation. I want to encourage people (especially those who may be less comfortable addressing the class in person) to use the class listserv as another way to contribute. For example, if you come across an interesting article on a topic of relevance to the course, you might send it to the list with a brief description of its content and what you find interesting about it.

Grades

The final grade will be a product of the grades on the three assignments combined with an assessment of class participation:

Classroom participation	10%
Assignment 1: Ongoing reflection	30%
Assignment 2: Information practice	30%
Assignment 3: Final project	30%

Topics and Readings for LIS598A Information and Contemplation Spring, 2006

Prior to course

Pre-reading:

1. Hart, T. (2004). Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2, 1, 28-46
2. Haynes, D. (2005). Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person. *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, 16, 2.

Class 1a, March 28: Introduction

Overview of course, syllabus, assignments, etc.

Introduction to sitting practice (sitting practice plus discussion)

Readings:

1. Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full Catastrophe Living*. New York: Dell Publishing. [Read chapter 3 & 4]
2. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*. New York: Hyperion. [Read pp. 108-113]

Class 1b, March 20: Attention

Readings

1. James, W. (1950). *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications. [Read chapter 11 -- just those passages indicated in the pdf version on e-reserve.]
2. Thorngate, W. (1988). On Paying Attention. In W. J. Baker, L. P. Mos, H. V. Rappard & H. J. Stam (Eds.), *Recent Trends in Theoretical Psychology* (pp. 247-263). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Class 2a, April 4: Information, Attention, and Experience

Readings

1. Hobart, M. E., & Schiffman, Z. S. (1998). *Information Ages: Literacy, Numeracy, and the Computer Revolution*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. [Read introduction]
2. Lanham, R. (1994) The Economics of Attention. [<http://www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/124/ps2econ.html>]

Class 2b, April 6: Problems with information, attention, and experience -- and contemplative

Readings

1. Eriksen, T. H. (2001). *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press. [Read pp. 1-6, 16-22, 147-150, 164]
2. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*. New York: Hyperion. [Read pp. 115-126, 139-161]
3. Whybrow, *American Mania*. [Read chapter 1 -- recommended]

Class 3a & 3b, April 11 & 13: Email exercise

No class meetings. Students work on email exercise (assignment 2).

Class 4a, April 18: Email exercise

Discussion of findings from assignment 2.

Class 4b, April 20: Consolidation

Review of readings to date.

Introduction of two additional contemplative exercises:

1. Free writing
2. Lektion divina

Class 5a, April 25: Work & Leisure

Readings

1. Pieper, J. (1998). *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (G. Malsbary, Trans.). South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press. [Read chapters 1-3]

Class 5b, April 27: Sabbath

Readings

1. Muller, W. (1999). *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. New York: Bantam Books. [Read pp. 1-61]

Hand out Maidenform ad.

Class 6a, May 2: The Politics of Leisure

Readings

1. Hunnicutt, B. K. (1988). *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. [Read chapter 2, "The New Economic Gospel of Consumption (pp. 37-48 required, pp. 49-65 optional)]
2. Hunnicutt, B. K. (1979). The Jewish Sabbath Movement in the Early Twentieth Century. *American Jewish History*, 69(2), 196-225. [Optional]

Hand out pp. 227-229 from chapter 12 of James W. Carey's *Communication as Culture* on the telegraph and the Sabbath.

Hand out and read from Heschel, *What is Man?*, pp. 82-83. ("A life of manipulation is the death of transcendence. . . . Mankind will not die for lack of information; it may perish for lack of appreciation.")

Class 6b, May 4: Contemplative Scholarship

Readings

1. Levy, D. M. (2005). Contemplating Scholarship in the Digital Age. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 6(2), 69-81.
2. Keller, E. F. (1984). *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*. New York: Times Books. [Read chapter 12, pp. 197-207.]
3. Armstrong, K. (2004). *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. [Read pp. 283-287.]

Hand out pp. 278-279 from Armstrong (2004), *The Spiral Staircase*.

Hand out pp. 26-37 from Anne Bancroft's book, "Weavers of Wisdom" about Marion Milner.

Class 7a, May 9: Contemplative Listening

Janice Giteck, composer and professor at Cornish College of the Arts, to lead several exercises in contemplative listening.

Class 7b, May 11: Doing and Being

Readings

1. Rosch, E. (1997). Transformation of the Wolf Man. In J. Pickering (Ed.), *The Authority of Experience: Essays on Buddhism and Psychology*. Surrey: Curzon Press. [http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Abstracts/Rosch_97.html]
2. Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., & Teasdale, J. D. (2002). *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. New York: The Guilford Press. [Read pp. 69-75.]

Class 8a, May 16: Calm Technologies

Readings

1. Thompson, C. (2005, October 16, 2005). Meet the Life Hackers. *New York Times*.
2. Weiser, M., & Brown, J. S. (1995). *Designing Calm Technology*.
[<http://www.ubiq.com/weiser/calmtech/calmtech.htm>]

Exercise in contemplative writing (drawing with a soft pencil).

Class 8b, May 18: Mindful Sitting

Jim Albaugh, a Rolpher and Aikidoist, to take students through a series of exercises in mindful sitting and walking.

Class 9a, May 23: Getting Things Done

Readings

1. Allen, D. (2001). *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. New York: Penguin Group.

Class 9b, May 25: Lack

Readings

1. Becker, E. (1973). *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press. [Read introduction]
2. Loy, D. Excerpt from "The Religion of the Market." [www.bpf.org/tsangha/loy-market.html]

Class 10a, May 30: Wrapup

Written Assignments for LIS598A Information and Contemplation Spring, 2006

Each student will be expected to complete three written assignments.

Assignment #1: Ongoing Reflection

You will be expected to keep a journal where you keep track of thoughts and experiences during the quarter. In the journal you should note what happened during meditation, what you've observed about your own information practices, and perhaps reactions to

particular readings. The material in your journal will be considered private, and parts of it will only be shown to others (to students or to the instructor) if you so desire. We will further discuss the nature of the journal in class.

Although you won't be showing the journal to others, it should be useful to you in completing assignment 1, which is a written reflection on the previous week's learnings. In no more than 500 words, you should write about some combination of: (a) what you read (what was most salient or useful, what was confusing, unresolved questions); (b) contemplative exercises you practiced in or outside class; (c) investigations of your own information practices.

The assignment should be written in Microsoft Word and sent to the instructor as an email attachment. It is due each Monday at 5pm, and is a reflection on the previous week's learning.

Assignment #2: Exploration of an Information Practice

For this assignment you will do a *first-person exploration* of one of your central information practices: email. Over the course of the week, you should pay close attention to your email habits and practices:

- When do you read email? How many times a day? At what times of day? For how long?
- Notice how you feel (your breathing, your bodily state, your emotions, your attentiveness) just before you start reading email, and just after you finish. Do you feel a pull (positive or negative) before you begin reading email? Do you find it difficult to stop, and if so, why?
- Notice how you feel when you read or write different email messages, or simply when you see them in your inbox. What kind and quality of attention do different email messages ask of you, and what kind and quality do you actually give them? How do your bodily, emotional, and attentional states change over the course of each email session? Do you become more energized or enervated? More or less alert? Etc.
- Notice in particular the bottlenecks in your practice. When do you feel overwhelmed (if ever)? What does it feel like (your actual experience) when you feel overwhelmed? What do you do about it? When do you feel bored, or angry, or frustrated, and what do you do about it?
- As an experiment, at least once during the week, try handling at least one email message *very slowly*, paying attention to the movement of your fingers, hands,

and arms as you read and write, as well as to your breathing and emotions. Now do the same exercise very quickly, with the feeling that you're behind schedule and are late for a meeting. What differences do you notice between the two?

The assignment has two parts.

Part 1: Keep a log or journal for your email sessions, noting start and stop times, number of messages dealt with, and making comments, as appropriate, in response to the above questions.

Part 2: After five days, examine your log for regularities. (You may also choose to write notes and hypotheses in your journal as they come to you during the first five days.) What patterns do you notice around your email habits. What is working well for you and what isn't? What could you imagine changing, how, and why? Write 2-3 pages describing your findings, relating what you found, wherever appropriate, to the readings and class discussion.

Assignment #3: Final Project

Part 1: For the final assignment, you should choose one of your own information practices that you want to explore in greater depth. This should be a different practice than the one you explored in Assignment #2 (i.e. not email), such as how you use the Web, or the telephone, or your cell phone. As with Assignment #2, you should observe your own behaviors, body sensations, emotions, and attentional states in order to become more intimate with your own motivations and usage patterns. Write 10 pages describing what you learned (including any changes to your behavior you imagined or tried). Compare what you learned in this exercise with what you learned in Assignment #2.

Part 2: Your final submission will be a portfolio demonstrating and illustrating what you have explored and learned during the quarter. At minimum the portfolio should include:

- Your writeup from Assignment #2 (part 2)
- Your writeup described immediately above (part 1).

But the portfolio should also include other materials that further illustrate the process you've been through and its fruits. For example, you might include selections from your journal, quotes from the readings or from classroom discussion, advertisements, etc. (Be creative!)

The portfolio may be in whatever media you find most suitable: all digital, or mounted on poster board, or bound as an 8.5x11" document, etc.