

2019 Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) Conference

Amherst, MA

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Our poster presentation at the ACMHE conference focused on our experiences and involvement in *SCI 1199 - Contemplating Science: Educational Context and Ethics* (follow this link to the [conference program](#)). We have been involved in the course through combined roles of NINJAs and student researchers. *Contemplating Science* is a new, experimental course that fulfills students' Physics Foundation. We used the opportunity of presenting this poster with the ACMHE community to share our experiences of inviting students into contemplative practices amidst broader STEM and educational cultures. In conversations at our presentation, fellow conference-goers shared curiosities about how it was possible for this course to exist at an engineering school, both from the perspective of administrative barriers as well as engineering students' willingness to engage. There was also interest in the large (seven-person) teaching team, which gave us the opportunity to share stories about the Sketch Model Summer Studio and the process of the four course designers coming together from their different perspectives.

Over the course of the conference, we had the opportunity to attend a variety of interactive workshops. This exposure to different methods and application of contemplative practices gave us many new ideas for the future of *Contemplating Science* at Olin as well as many other aspects of the Olin curriculum. Many workshops addressed how institutions could be instructing students to deal with the pressures of higher education. In particular, presenters from Virginia Military Institute (VMI) led a presentation/conversation about how contemplative practices are aiding VMI students to cope with a rigorous and rigid schedule. At VMI, there is a large emphasis on leadership and personal strength so the instructors there framed well-being practices in terms of "being a better leader" and "building resilience." The modification of language around contemplative practice felt like it could be useful at Olin to guide more skeptical students/administrators to seeing the value in contemplative practices.

Additionally, a number of workshops were offered about how instructors can care for students in the classroom. These sessions were interesting to think about from the perspective of both a co-creator of a course and as a student. As a student, the workshops were a useful lens through which to view faculty interactions. As a course assistant, thinking intentionally about how you and the course create space for students' struggle was difficult. But the conference was also a valuable reminder that emphasizing caring for students in the classroom should be a priority for every instructor.

The conference provided an opportunity for us to frame both our teaching and our Olin education through a unique, powerful lens of contemplative practices. As tends to be the case with conference trips, a big element of our experience was grounded in our interactions with each other. We were able to be there for each other to debrief and process through the workshops and presentations.



David Reflection

I can't wait until the ACMHE conference rolls around again next year, it was just a really great space to be present in. My favorite overarching aspect of it was how it was grounding radical, challenging topics and frameworks within the context of higher education. Usually, when I stretch out and explore radical theories, those explorations feel inherently separate from the change that is possible at Olin. I feel like I can learn and grow and that my actions can change, but when it comes to the growth of this broader community and system there doesn't feel like much can be done. Going to the ACMHE conference reminded me that that isn't the case, because all of these conversations about radical, liberatory topics were in the context of making that change in the environment of higher education. Below I have listed the workshops/sessions that I attended, in addition to the keynote speaker's presentation:

- "Holding space for students' pain while addressing our own healing in an oppressive system"
 - *facilitated by Gabrielle Cuesta*
- "Using Contemplative practices to Assist Educators in Creating Spaces of Healing, Compassion, and Academic Inquiry for Black Men"

- *facilitated by Marlon Blake, Steven Thurston Oliver, and Lenwood Hayman (not in attendance)*
- “Contemplative pedagogies Integrating personal and Societal Transformations to Sustainability”
 - *facilitated by Zack Walsh, Brooke D. Lavelle*
- Keynote: “Disarming ourselves, Decolonizing Care: radical Dharma Approaches for Courageous Transformation”
 - *presented by Dr. Jasmine Syedullah*
- “The Mandala of Social Change: An embodied practice for collective contemplative resistance”
 - *facilitated by Holly Roach Knight*
- “Embodied Learning: Connected Interiority in the Classroom”
 - *facilitated by Melissa Hammerle*
- “Resonating Whiteness: revealing Its power and Denial Through Contemplative practice”
 - *facilitated by CL Dukes and Raeann G. LeBlanc*

Through these sessions I was exposed to new frameworks to think about oppressive systems of education and the role I play in those systems. I learned about books and schools of thought that can continue my learning and growth beyond this conference and into the rest of my life. During her keynote presentation, Dr. Jasmine Syedullah spoke about the ways in which students, when asked a question, are encouraged to reach for the *right* answer rather than reaching inside for the answer that is true to themselves. This framework helps me articulate the ways that I hope to engage honestly and constructively with my education; as I try to learn and grow, the only way to move forward is to have a genuine awareness of where I am currently. The act of *reaching in for the “true” answer* rather than *reaching out for the “right” answer* lets me address where I currently am rather than where I want to be.

Throughout the course of the conference I had multiple moments of insight like this insight at the keynote presentation. In addition, I was able to process through these insights with a wonderfully caring group that was composed of two fellow Olin students, our faculty advisor, one of the co-designers of *Contemplating Science*, and one of our advisor’s colleagues from a different institution. Without the support of these folks I wouldn’t have been able to stretch and grow in the ways that I did.

Abby Reflection:

Having the opportunity to attend the ACHME annual conference was an amazing experience. It gave me the chance to engage in an environment not centered around engineering and deeply engage with how contemplative practice can and should be playing a role in higher education. For me, one of the biggest takeaways was how contemplative practices can be used as a starting point for pushing against systematic injustice. In Contemplative Science, students engage in a variety of contemplative practice and build skills in listening to themselves and others. However, I hadn't viewed this deeper understanding of self as an avenue for radical change. The keynote speaker, Jasmine Syedullah, gave a lecture about how higher education and society at large had been shaped by colonizing forces. She talked about how even the notion of time has been alternative by colonization. She then tied these ideas to contemplative practices and presented the idea that being in-touch with the part of your own value system have been colonized is a first step in pushing back against colonial structures. In other workshops, presenters spoke about contemplative practices as the jumping off point for anti-racist movements.

Having exposure to these ideas has broadened my understanding and value of contemplative practices. The conversations happening in workshops and between attendees were very different from the engineering-centric dialogue that so often dominates life at Olin. It was refreshing to think about my role in the world detached from my engineering identity. The conference has given me new tools to interrogate my value system with and I believe that this critical reflection will help me to more holistically develop my engineering persona. The workshops I attended include:

- Engaging With Our Feelings About Climate Disruption: Loss, Anger, Injustice (Led by David Glassberg and Vaishali Mamgain)
- Emotional Intelligence as Radical Well-Being: Yes! for Student & Staff Alike (Led by Ife Lenard and Ericka Echavarria)
- Self-Care as a Temporary Fix for Institutional Problems (Led by Mel Lafferty)
- Dwelling Together Between Queasy Worlds: Toward Sacred Citizenship (Led by Kristen Mundt)
- Leading with Compassion: Bringing Radical Wellness to the Virginia Military Institute (Led by Holly Richardson and Tinni Sen)
- Resonating Whiteness: Revealing Its Power and Denial Through Contemplative Practice (Led by CL Dukes and Raeann G. LeBlanc)

As Olin focuses more and more on important conversations around "doing good in the world," it will become necessary for students to have frameworks and practice to reflection on their role in society. The experience I had at the conference was an amazing chance to engage with new ideologies and process them with other members of the Olin community. Being able to debrief after workshops and lectures with other Oliners helped me to ask deeper questions and ponder more experiences. The ACHME conference has aided me in my understanding of

new frameworks and tools and I am excited to continue to engage with them as my personal and engineering identity develop.

Contemplating Science, Engaging Bodies: A Physics Foundation Experience for Engineers

Abigail Fry, Alex Hindelang, David Freeman, Madhvi Venkatesh, Jimena Bermejo, Elly Berke, and Yevgeniya V. Zastavker



Student Quote on project ideation:

"Since many of the things I'm interested in studying are things that can't be seen, I think that contemplative practices will be a good way to think about them. I think it's possible to think about concepts like light spectrum in a meditative context, possibly with a final product/one of a set of final products being a guided meditation that helps develop an intuitive understanding of the concept."



Student Quote on deep listening

"This exercise made me feel relaxed and present. I was like an observer, I was not an actor in the systems around me. I felt less like a human, and more like a microphone (a sensor) taking in the sounds (information) around me. I was expecting to feel relaxed from meditating. However, I was struck by the feeling of presentness, especially with how that intersected with a lack of personhood. This lack of personhood was not a bad thing. I was just existing in a way I have never existed before."



PARADIGM SHIFT

- Content
- Efficiency
- Objective Truth



- Wonderment
- Presence
- Personal Truth

Student Quote on technical/human dichotomy:

"I hope my weekly reflections, and more importantly, my actions over the semester, show a story of an engineer approaching a state of balance between the technical and human parts of his life."



Student Quote on empathy in engineering:

"This class has helped to challenge the "engineer savior model" we so often see...[and] has encouraged practicing empathy and understanding people instead of just making something based off assumptions."



Student Quote on sitting with thoughts and feelings:

"Contemplative practice means ... allowing things to sit while not dwelling on them and exploring anything that comes up. I think that this can be depth but is typically breath—expanding your ideas and thoughts. It is understanding and observing something—your emotions, another's words, art, etc."

