

2015

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Cultivating Awareness in Honors: First-Person Noting and Contemplative Practices

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In her compelling case for liberal education, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the nuances of the examined life and in particular how essential the narrative imagination is to “cultivating humanity” (9–11). While Nussbaum is advocating for liberal education in general terms, her call is particularly suited to the mission of honors education and its mandate for “broader, deeper, and more complex” learning experiences (NCHC Board of Directors). Nussbaum’s conceptual scheme encourages education in support of openness, intensity, and breadth, in particular urging approaches that require an ability to acknowledge and reconsider one’s own culture, traditions, and ways of thinking. At times, this task seems particularly challenging in the early adulthood of a traditional undergraduate. Most students—like most human beings—struggle with how to enact the educational processes of critical thinking and critical examination, even in the case of honors, which tends, as a cohort, to be particularly rich in students who think in questioning ways and which often includes a greater proportion of students and colleagues who have multiple heritages and broad ranges of experience. These composite heritages create

for the student a situation that is “peculiar rather than privileged” and, potentially, a special role “to act as bridges, go-betweens, mediators, between the various communities and cultures” (Maalouf 5). Honors is thus a particularly opportune educational site to cultivate the thinking and critical examination fundamental to this special role.

The conventional tools of academia—in particular those in Nussbaum’s area of emphasis, the humanities—work to foster such critical skills, as recent research by Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley, for instance, suggests. Literature, history, and philosophy encourage students to look outward to other sources as the essential method of uncovering themselves in the commonalities and diversity of humanity, building over time the scaffolding of liberal education.

While traditional practices of critical reading, writing, dialogue, and discussion are no doubt essential inputs and outputs of higher education and a means of achieving critical thinking in college students, recent science and pedagogical innovation can help us develop additional, unique methodologies that can have more immediate significance for learners. These tools are especially useful for honors students. One such device is First-Person Noting, a technique that not only furthers general educational goals but also may advance honors distinctiveness and learner-oriented experience that is cross- and multi-disciplinary. Through First-Person Noting, students observe and acknowledge the subjective elements of their academic experience, in particular the thoughts, sensations, and feelings that occur while they read, write, listen, discuss, and reflect. This focus on the subjective is a useful way to approach human limitations, the “failures of perception and recognition” that relate to our often overlooked internal processes or what Nussbaum calls our “insides”: the “desires, thoughts, and ways of looking at the world” that shape individual thought and experience (85–7). First-Person Noting is a fairly simple technique to learn and practice, but it has strong potential to enhance critical thinking, promote understanding of self and one’s own traditions, develop a stronger narrative imagination, and nurture the little-discussed educational virtue of intellectual humility.

CONTEXT: CONTEMPLATIVE STUDIES AND MINDFULNESS IN ACADEMIA

First-Person Noting draws on traditions in mindfulness meditation, a broad collection of practices that are attracting interest in American society. In the United States this movement is strongly associated with the work of

Jon Kabat-Zinn although it also appears commonly in yoga, retreat centers, medical treatments, and, most recently, loving-kindness meditation practices known as Metta. In something of a parallel movement, the interdisciplinary field of contemplative studies has begun to bring mindfulness into academia through what Arthur Zajonc has called a “quiet revolution in higher education” (83), institutionalized through the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society as well as the Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. Nationwide, colleges and universities offer courses in every discipline that use contemplative methods (Barbezat and Bush), and faculty development institutes in mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy take place every summer at universities across the United States, including Brown University and Smith College (Zajonc 83–94).

The term “mindfulness” is used in broad ways, and specific practices can vary quite a bit. Generally, however, these practices fall into one of two categories: open-monitoring (OM) and focused attention (FA). In OM, the individual practices openness to all thoughts and sensations while in FA one directs and, as necessary, redirects his or her attention to a particular thought or object (Lutz et al. 163–9). First-Person Noting draws explicitly on the tool of “noting” that is part of OM mindfulness practice. Those new to contemplative practice often develop their OM skills by verbally labeling their experiences either out loud with a partner or quietly in an individual meditation session that might last anywhere from five to forty minutes. This noting is a form of “nonreactive meta-cognitive monitoring” (164) that develops nonreactive awareness and, later, interpretation of otherwise automatic thoughts, emotions, and sensations. One does not direct one’s thoughts or feelings; the goal is to observe and create awareness. To develop the fundamental skills, a novice practitioner usually starts just by recognizing the presence of a thought or sensation or feeling. In future sessions, he or she adds dimension and depth—intensity of sensation, tone of emotion, and type of thought—that incrementally move toward “a clear reflexive awareness of the usually implicit features of one’s mental life” (Lutz et al. 164–5). Studies also suggest that this sort of verbal labeling of emotions—“affect labeling”—helps to manage negative emotions and emotional reactivity (Lieberman et al., 421–8).

First-Person Noting uses a pedagogically oriented, or applied, version of this formal technique to help students develop an awareness of their physiological, emotional, and cognitive responses to academic work, in particular to reading, writing, lectures, and discussion. For instance, students may feel stymied by a reading for any number of reasons: frustration, boredom,

fatigue. The process of First-Person Noting asks them to practice observing these emotional, cognitive, and physiological states without judgment and allows these states to be natural, even expected, parts of their intellectual work. In particular, First-Person Noting acknowledges the individual subjective experience—unique “first person” reactions—that one encounters along with intellectual material and ideas. These moments are essential to human thought, but the formal practices of Western higher education often overlook them, thanks in part to their Cartesian preference for reason over emotion. However, the compelling grounds for including awareness of the subjective include a rich history of philosophical arguments about the relationship between reason and emotion, arguments that acknowledge a central role of emotion in cognition. In the late fourth century BCE, Plato argued that the two are separate systems, always at odds with each other, and that reason was superior to emotion (524). Just over two thousand years later Descartes reenergized this tradition in his *Discourse on Method* and with his famous dictum “I think therefore I am” (24). Other philosophers, though, equated the two or raised emotion above reason. David Hume in the 1700s argued that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (415), and in the last few years social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has put a two-ton spin on emotion by comparing it to an elephant and reason to the rider. Through his own research and that of many other social scientists, he makes a convincing case that the elephant of emotions determines the course that the rider, reason, must follow (52–60).

In addition to these philosophical approaches, scientists and new imaging technology together show how crucial subjective experience is to thinking. Neurologist Antonio Damasio demonstrated the intimate relationship between emotion and reason in his 1994 book *Descartes' Error*, and neuroscientists now regularly use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to investigate this relationship. When subjects perform a variety of cognitive tasks, fMRI shows where blood flow in the brain is highest, suggesting that this is where the brain is hard at work. This tool is one among many, and while it is not foolproof, careful work in neuroimaging is leading to some fascinating evidence that intensifies our understanding of the deep relationship between feeling and thinking. For instance, doubt leads to higher blood flow through the anterior cingulate of the prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain also known to respond to pain (Harris, Sheth, and Cohen 145). Feelings of uncertainty, one might say, literally put us into an unpleasant state of mind, or, as blogger and psychologist Gerald Guild has noted, “[O]uch, critical thinking hurts”

(Guild). On the other hand, ease in processing is pleasant and further inclines us to a positive assessment. Awareness of comfort and ease in what we experience, therefore, can help us understand how likely we are to be critical when considering the ideas and experiences that are part of education.

FIRST-PERSON NOTING AND THE THINKING TOOLBOX

First-Person Noting provides a way to acknowledge subjective experience and bring unavoidable and necessary feelings, sensations, and thoughts out into the open in a disciplined way. As my students and I developed this technique, we have come to think of First-Person Noting as one of many tools in a sort of thinking toolbox. This scheme has four modes: subjective, interpersonal, objective, and conceptual. Subjective, or first-person, awareness helps create a foundation from which to move outward; that is, we can build on the subjective using our other intellectual tools, including the interpersonal, objective, and conceptual approaches to thinking. Interpersonal, or second-person, approaches acknowledge the difference between what I think and experience as opposed to what you think and experience. Objective, or third-person, approaches require learning more about the context of readings and ideas—when, why, where, and who—as well as doing more research, finding out what others have said, and asking questions about the material. Conceptual tools are a bit different in kind from the first three; they are structured ways of looking at ideas and systems that can be applied to multiple contexts; one can examine a text, for instance, through the concept of power or feminism or capitalism. Together these modes constitute a set of explicit tools that learners can use in critical examination and reasoning. These tools help us to figure out what we think and experience, what others might think and experience, and how to push thinking and experience further throughout not only our education but our day-to-day lives.

Scientific research indicates that meditation techniques can be useful as early as middle school (Britton et. al., “Randomized Controlled”). We tried them—in the form of First-Person Noting—in a first-semester honors seminar. Noting was especially useful in the readings and responses we prepared for class discussion and then in class discussion, with assignments that stressed the following activities:

- noting sensations as we read, wrote, thought, and discussed, feelings that might include tension or relaxation in arms or legs, a smile or furrowed brow, hunger, sleepiness, pursed lips, a smile, a turn in one’s stomach, or a tapping foot;

- paying attention to the sorts of thoughts we had, from “Wow, I can’t believe this” to “I never thought of that” or “This claim offends me”; and
- recognizing emotions such as interest, anger, frustration, happiness, and boredom.

The students and I acknowledged these subjective experiences in traditional annotations of texts as well as in reading reflections. We emphasized that no reaction was wrong, instead recognizing and intentionally not judging whatever we experienced. Since responses—sensory, emotional, and cognitive—are part of our experience, we tried to learn to observe our reactions with interest and without judgment. We also practiced noting while attending large campus lectures—an approach supported by scientific studies (Ramsburg and Youmans 431–41)—and, on occasion, at the beginning of class sessions so that we could see what it feels like to smile when listening or talking, to feel bored, or to be astounded by a new idea. For instance, when reading the unfamiliar eighteenth-century style of Wollstonecraft or studying Plato’s *Republic* or watching a more accessible TED talk, we paid attention to thoughts and physical sensations from interest to boredom, a smile to a clenched fist.

We assessed our progress informally throughout the semester and then in evaluations at the end of the class. I asked students to give feedback anonymously, but some chose to include their names (all are quoted by permission). Of the forty-two students, all were positive and endorsed the approach. Nikita was lukewarm and explained that “it just makes me lose my train of thought” but also discovered that First-Person Noting helped “to identify unconscious reactions to certain stimuli.” Other students also observed this effect and found it useful specifically to their coursework. Some focused on specific reactions and moods, such as anger: “If I felt angry after reading Wollstonecraft, for example, I could see this as the way readings like this or about that topic make me feel.” Others seemed surprised to realize in general that “mood and other subjective sensations can influence how I read and think about a particular reading.”

Another set of responses emphasized the way First-Person Noting provided a useful framing for ongoing analysis. For instance, Ali explained that “noting how I felt was very important—the challenge was separating emotion from the facts and actually being able to dig deeper, not relying on the initial response.” Caroline seemed to agree, writing that “Becoming aware of my reactions helped me examine why the readings prompted these reactions, which lead to a deeper analysis of the text,” as did an anonymous student who

“found it helpful to look/examine subjective responses during readings to think deeper about myself/my opinions and about the article and what point is being made.”

Many students also found that the First-Person Noting created a kind of freedom and expansiveness in their thinking. According to one anonymous comment, “Before this class when I would read I’d only focus on the information I was gathering, not how I was feeling. Now I can do both and I think I get much more out of the reading this way.” Another student experienced the transitory nature of thoughts, realizing that it was possible to “comment on these thoughts as they come and go.”

The relevance to day-to-day experience also proved important to many students. Alyssa was particularly grateful for the technique because, as she noted, “I am rarely asked about how I feel.” Allowing feelings to be part of the classroom “enhanced the discussion as well as helped me day to day.” Other students provided similar feedback. Kelly emphasized wrote, “I have found this useful in everyday life rather than just in [this class].” Kayla made a similar point in greater detail: “When I am faced with a situation or a question outside of this class I now ask myself what am I feeling? Why do I feel this way? I think it has helped me realize when I feel tension over a particular question and what I can do to help resolve that tension and provide an acceptable answer.” First-Person Noting also seems to have been helpful in terms of memory according to Kathryn: “Before coming to college I would quickly forget books after I read them (no matter how interesting they were). However, after pausing in the middle of a reading, and reflecting on how I feel, and annotating my thoughts/questions in the margin, I feel like I engage deeper w/ the author’s message. In turn, I remember the readings more.” Such responses, though informally gathered, seem in line with other research about how meditation can affect day-to-day areas such as emotion regulation (Britton et al., “Mindfulness-Based”) and sexual functioning (Silverstein et al.).

Overall, the evaluations indicated that First-Person Noting helped promote critical examination along with the honors values of openness and curiosity. Students also found themselves more present in the day-to-day experience of learning. As the students explained, this awareness created an important opportunity to experiment with ideas and ways of seeing—the narrative imagination—as well as a way to acknowledge, work with, and extend beyond the subjective. Our goal in education, especially in honors programs and colleges, is to create sophisticated and disciplined thinkers who are able to think beyond themselves. According to the substantial research in meditation, OM

in particular creates this kind of expansive experience, what brain researcher Antonietta Manna and her colleagues call “a more vivid conscious access to the rich features of each experience” (47) as well as “enhanced metacognitive and self-regulation skills” (Colzato et al.). Other studies led by Lorenza S. Colzato indicate the usefulness of OM techniques for creativity and problem-solving, in particular what the literature calls “divergent thinking,” or the generation of new ideas. According to this body of research, “OM practice restructures cognitive processing to a degree that is robust and general enough to affect performance in another, logically unrelated task” (Colzato, Ozturk, and Hommel 5).

Student responses, as well as classroom performance, seem to affirm these claims and to validate the usefulness of OM, particularly First-Person Noting, in formal and informal reading and writing assignments in ways that are important to the intellectual skillset we seek to create in honors students. In particular, the Quinnipiac University Honors Program seeks to promote “a rich, vibrant, and meaningful day-to-day college experience,” to nurture “curiosity and personality through a reflective, yet playful, exploration of what we know and what we do not know, critical thinking, and questions,” and finally to “develop and practice an open frame of mind that welcomes challenging ideas, embraces dialog, and seeks local, national, and global cultures and diversity of all kinds” (“Mission and Core Values”).

KNOWING, CERTAINTY, AND INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY IN HONORS

The awareness cultivated in First-Person Noting furthers educational goals not only by tapping into cultural trends of mindfulness and the growing interest in contemplative practices but also by responding in an active way to growing research in cognitive and social psychology. If we take this analysis a bit further, we can see how subjective awareness might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of higher education practices and how they relate to what it means to know: how it feels to know, what our thoughts are around the experiences of knowing, and how important the feeling of certainty is to learning and to human life. Increasingly, psychology shows that cognitive processing is affected by a wide variety of automatic shortcuts and distortions that are regular and clearly identifiable in practice. In addition to processing fluency, for instance, thinking is affected by pattern recognition, self-referential narratives, the illusion of truth, and the availability heuristic.

Other fields, such as statistics (Silver), mathematics (Mlodinow *Subliminal*; Mlodinow *Drunkard's Walk*), psychology (Kahneman), behavioral economics (Ariely), and linguistics (Everett), show that the human brain creates order out of randomness and that human beings also are predisposed to misunderstand large numbers, long expanses of time, and things that are very small. Humans are also led astray by phenomena such as inattentive blindness, primacy, recency, attentional bias, and hypofrontality. Studies even suggest that religious upbringing affects visual perception (Colzato, van den Wildenberg, and Hommel) and that being in a warm space or simply in the presence of a warm beverage enhances the ability to forge connections with another human being (IJzerman and Semin). Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes “a puzzling limitation to our mind: our excessive confidence in what we believe we know, and our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance and the uncertainty of the world we live in” (13).

Despite the growth of evidence about limitations and common pitfalls in the ways we think, educators often underestimate the ways these known processes can derail reasoning and learning. Given the evidence, honors might adopt First-Person Noting or other contemplative practice as a way to access another essential but little-discussed academic virtue: intellectual humility. Philosophers Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Woods argue that, when one sincerely opens up to subjective experience and the ways it influences cognitive processes, good things can happen because one is bypassing “epistemic liabilities.” As a result, the individual may find that “humility may also make for intellectual adventure,” a useful value in all of education but especially in honors (253). Roberts and Woods also point to a tendency to posture in such a way as to look intelligent to others and how this can derail intellectual activity; this is particularly relevant to honors students, who are accustomed to performing at a high level and might seek out the recognition that comes with academic talent. While this desire for recognition is an important part of the honors experience, tempering it with reflective pauses that counter automatic cognitive processes can lead to a better and more fruitful intellectual experience. When we explicitly recognize and acknowledge that feelings about which we are certain require their own critical examination, we are on the path to embracing the virtue of intellectual humility and, with it, a stronger disposition and skillset for critical thinking, critical examination, and narrative imagination.

Advocates of training in critical thinking also encourage “intellectual humility” but in a slightly different way. Richard Paul and Linda Elder

argue that “consciousness of the limits of one’s knowledge” and “sensitivity to circumstances in which one’s native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively” helps create “insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one’s beliefs;” subjective insights and awareness of limits also reveal the “sensitivity to bias, prejudice and limitations of one’s viewpoint” (22). OM can nurture such subjective awareness. Scholars in contemplative science argue that OM itself “leads one to a more acute, but less emotionally reactive, awareness of the autobiographical sense of identity that projects back into the past and forward into the future” (Lutz et al. 164). Through First-Person Noting, students and faculty have a structured way to start down the path of cultivating this sensitivity. They begin to pay attention to why they feel certain, how this feeling relates to other subjective and contextual needs, and how to develop their awareness and thinking accordingly.

As we engage in deeper awareness of our subjective experience, we can grow to recognize this feeling of knowing and examine it for the possible cognitive distortions that have influenced us. Despite the initial unpleasant feelings that arise in the anterior cingulate and that accompany the questioning of our feelings of knowing, experience as well as scientific studies show that raising our awareness does contribute to a better foundation for reliable knowledge and critical thinking. Better awareness also improves health, well-being, and emotional stability, goals that are equally worthy in the context of higher education and the development of the whole person. Through science we have growing awareness of how reflexive human thought is, how inclined we are to certainty, and how intertwined emotion and thinking can be. Even in the simplest recognition that mood affects our ability to concentrate and that we usually think less clearly when we are sad or excited, we see the value in practicing our awareness of subjective states, maintaining a stance of intellectual humility, and building from these to the more sophisticated processes of critical thinking and critical examination. First-Person Noting can develop one’s awareness of subjective reaction—sensory, emotional, or cognitive—to activities and ideas; it creates a foundation from which to engage in critical examination of oneself and to cultivate the narrative imagination, providing a new level of awareness than can be integrated into any classroom and that can further the goals of honors education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the students in my two sections of the first-semester seminar, who willingly took on this intellectual adventure and helped create an

outstanding course experience. I also want to thank colleagues who shared in the 2014 Brown University Summer Program in Contemplative Pedagogy as well as many colleagues and friends at Brown—in particular Willoughby Britton, Jared Lindahl, and Laura Reuter. The unique environment of the Britton Lab, the Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory, and the Contemplative Studies Program creates an extremely warm and supportive environment. I am especially indebted to Jared as well as David Valone and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions for this essay.

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