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**Consciousness-Centered Education:
An Innovative Approach to Art and Design Curriculum**

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Abstract

This paper introduces and discusses a consciousness-centered, integrated education model, implemented at the College for Creative Studies. Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity, a liberal-arts course offering, is designed to offer students a greater understanding of human connectivity and empowerment through empathy for themselves and others. This result is achieved in part through the inclusion of meditation training as a core component of the course. By integrating the skills of introspection, silence, and reflection with intellectual engagement, consciousness-centered education initiatives encourage the relationship between compassion, connectivity, inclusion, and wellness as key pedagogic themes in art and design curriculum. This paper offers evidence that this curriculum encourages art and design students to understand the ways compassionate action in creative practice advances social justice and develops a sense of global citizenship.

Keywords: Transcendental Meditation, primordial sound meditation, consciousness, art and design education

Consciousness-Centered Education:

An Innovative Approach to Art and Design Curriculum

Consciousness-centered educational initiatives are intended to connect and integrate subjects so students can see how knowledge is interconnected and not merely limited to separate subjects. As Ralph Waldo Emerson (2008) wrote, “relations and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always” (p. 184). Art and design education that nurtures these connections helps students recognize that nothing exists by itself alone. This knowledge, in turn, encourages a sense of belonging, which is the basis of theories of inclusion (Scorgie & Forlin, 2019). Preparing a new generation of leaders to address the existential challenges and practical crises we face in the world today demands a new kind of education. Consciousness-centered educational initiatives may offer an adaptive solution to teaching and learning in our increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Using this consciousness-centered model, students are professionally trained in the practice of Vedic meditation alongside a traditional and rigorous academic curriculum. The professor and students meditate together as a class throughout the semester, and students are encouraged to maintain and reflect on their meditation practice outside of the classroom. The integration of meditation in this way provides a space for students to engage with their coursework more effectively. Proper meditation practice fosters greater mental clarity and emotional regulation among participating students (Cranson et al., 1991; Eppley et al., 1989; Nidich et al., 2009), resulting in an improved ability to perform well academically (So & Orme-Johnson, 2001) and an increase in community connections (Condon et al., 2013; Lim et al., 2015). Ultimately, students participating in consciousness-centered courses will be healthier, more connected, and better prepared to graduate college.

Current research on meditation among college students is focused primarily on a meditation practice that is offered in the form of a specific intervention or extracurricular course (Bamber & Schneider, 2016). Courses such as Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity at the College for Creative Studies thus present an innovative opportunity for art and design students by utilizing the evidence-based practice of meditation as part of the structure of a college level course.

This paper outlines findings from an analysis of 12 years of quality improvement data as well as lessons learned from my 13 years of engaged teaching (Beauregard, 2020). As a pioneering consciousness-centered course, Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity offers art and design schools a viable template for increasing student well-being and encouraging compassionate action in creative practice.

The State of Education

Current educational models function using mechanistic mandates that emphasize skill building, whereby students' learning and progress is measured by results on tests and papers, class participation, and attendance (Ritzer, 1993); however, these outcome-oriented educational models may cause a profound loss of meaning for students. Learning for the sake of learning is invoked as an abstract concept, but it is not a goal that institutions are practically able to pursue. By emphasizing results and performance, educators may often deny the validity of process. As a result, current educational modalities risk eroding any sense of meaning and purpose that should drive all inquiry and investigation—and art-making.

Some Theories of Education

Alternative educational approaches have long been proposed: humanistic education, for example, “moves beyond cognitive and intellectual education to let in the education of the whole

person” (Khatib et al., 2013, p. 45). Philosopher Paulo Freire (1968/2000) suggests that analyzing the teacher-student relationship

reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening Objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. (p. 71)

Furthermore, theologian and social activist Thomas Merton (1969), in his essay, “Learning to Live,” advocates for an education that shows a person how to reject the prefabricated definitions that the world offers. He believes in education that functions to help students to find themselves in order to save society. Finally, the development-of-consciousness paradigm (Llewellen & Pearson, 2011) focuses on students’ ability to learn from within their own consciousness, which is a field of infinite correlations in which everything is connected to everything else (Nader, 2015). Consciousness-centered education builds on this theory by employing the classroom as a place that provides “exercises and time for students to reflect on how the material in their courses affects and challenges their own sense of meaning” (Barbezat & Bush, 2013, p. 200).

Students today need access to these humanistic approaches. In the United States, an acute mental health crisis currently afflicts the youth population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Though this crisis existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2019), rates of stress and anxiety in this age group have significantly increased over the last 2 years (CDC, 2022). Innovative and strategic interventions aimed at improving health and well-being are necessary to prepare students to succeed in school while establishing deeper emotional

connections within their communities. One practical, adaptive, and effective approach to achieving these goals is consciousness-centered education.

Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity as an Integrative Framework

Given these existing challenges, the sociology course *Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity* was developed for art and design students at the College for Creative Studies as a tool to help alleviate their stress and anxiety by providing them the opportunity to experience meditation. Alongside academic, objective information and knowledge-sharing with regard to identity studies, creativity, and the concept of consciousness, students receive training in a Vedic meditation technique: to sit in silence together so that that silence can then become the underpinning of the experience of learning together. In this course, meditation is not the focus but rather an integral tool shared with students that deepens their learning practices as well as their personal and peer relationships. Research supports the benefits of Vedic meditation and other mindfulness practices, particularly among college students (Bamber & Schneider, 2016); these include enhanced creativity, stress reduction, and health benefits (Astin, 1997; Chang et al. 2004; Hölzel et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1985). This practice, combined with a course syllabus that contains traditional readings common in a midlevel sociology course, generated the integrated curriculum of *Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity*.

The course curriculum calls for students to ask this question: Who am I, not only within my own self, but against the backdrop of the culture at large, and where does my personal story intersect with the cultural moment or the historical landscape? And further: Why do I think I believe what I believe to be true about myself? Why do I believe what I believe? Are things the way they are because they must be? Or, is it possible that a different cultural pattern might take hold in a society that interacted in a different way?

The course begins with academic information about the social construction of reality, and the idea that being human is a learned experience. Next, professionally trained meditation instructors teach the students to meditate. Follow-up, in the form of additional readings, discussion, and a group-guided meditation check, is conducted to ensure that students truly understand the intellectual underpinnings of how meditation works. The class continues to meditate together throughout the semester, and students are encouraged to develop their own personal meditation practice.

As the semester continues, more questions are posed: What types of knowledge do I value? How is my sense of self influenced by where I grew up or the kinds of landscapes in which I interact? Who is responsible for the world around us? These questions lead to one that reflects the ultimate purpose of the course: How might we create a more compassionate world, a world in which we all truly want to live?

At the heart of the course is the goal of teaching students to see beyond their individual perspectives and engage with the world from a participating or unified consciousness. This course seeks to awaken students from the hypnosis of perceived reality to change their fundamental assumptions (Gablik, 1991). This is the root of consciousness-centered education and a medium that holds potential for substantial improvement of society's approach to complex issues such as the climate crisis.

The Impact of a Consciousness-Centered Education Model

To improve the quality of the course Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity, taught at the College for Creative Studies using a consciousness-centered education model, students are asked to evaluate their experience through self-reported surveys. A mixed-methods approach is utilized for comprehensively capturing student experiences and opinions of the meditation practice.

Methods

A longitudinal assessment of the course for presentation here was based on three sets of different surveys and subsequent data, defined as Phase I (Fall 2012 – Winter 2014), Phase II (Winter 2016 – Fall 2017), and Phase III (Winter 2018 and Fall 2022). Presurveys were distributed on the day of the meditation training, and post-surveys were distributed on the last day of the course. In all cases, students were verbally informed of the survey purpose, assured of anonymity, and provided the option to participate. Data were analyzed and the results compiled by a data analyst at the Wayne State University College of Nursing with assistance from a consultant.

Phase I.

- Fall 2012 – Winter 2014
- Class sizes of 20-21 students (83 sets of data)
- Students learned Transcendental Meditation

In a 23-item survey, students responded to a series of quantitative and qualitative questions. The primary quantitative question was “Please tell us how you have felt since starting the Transcendental Meditation program,” with answer statements such as “Happy,” “Depressed,” and “Hopeful.” Answer statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with these response options: “Much More,” “A Little More,” “No Change,” “A Little Less,” and “Much Less.” Qualitative questions included: “Please describe in some detail any benefits you have experienced from Transcendental Meditation practice.” Quantitative data were analyzed by transcribing the numerical correlations of each student’s response (e.g., Much More = 5); responses were then combined to assess an overall average change in attitude or emotion of the entire group.

Phase II.

- Winter 2016 – Fall 2017
- 98 sets of data
- Students learned Primordial Sound Meditation

In a four-part quantitative survey with 49 total items, students responded to questions regarding their emotions and personality. Fourteen of the items asked about how often the student had felt a particular emotion in the past 4 weeks, including questions such as “How often have you felt nervous and ‘stressed’?” These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never to Very Often. Twenty-one of the items asked students to make assessments about themselves, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Not like me at all” to “Very much like me.” The remaining 14 items asked students to respond to statements detailing how they had felt in the past 7 days, including statements like “I feel peaceful.” These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all” to “Very much.” Data were analyzed using a Varimax component factor analysis. Variables that did not fall under a factor due to lack of sufficient correlation were removed from analysis. Missing data was excluded.

Phase III.

- Winter 2018 – 26 sets of data
- Fall 2022 – 24 sets of data
- Students learned Primordial Sound Meditation

In a 19-item survey, students responded to a series of quantitative and qualitative questions. Seven items were demographic questions, and the remainder assessed their emotions, ability to connect with their coursework, and experience with meditation. Students were asked,

“Please circle the response that most accurately describes your feelings toward the following statements,” and the list included items such as “Meditating makes me feel less stressed” and “Meditating helps me to be more tolerant.” Responses were rated on 4- or 5-point Likert scales, depending on the item. Finally, students were asked to respond to qualitative questions including: “Do you find it easier to meditate as a group or by yourself?” Data were analyzed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank and Kendall’s Tau-b Tests.

Results

Phase I. With 79% average boost in frequency of self-reported TM practice among participants, all of the self-reported changes in emotions and feeling indicated that students were experiencing positive benefits from the class (see Table 1).

Table 1

Overall Average Change in Self-Reported Emotions/Feelings, n = 83

Emotions/feelings	Percentage of change
Happy	1.87
Down in the dumps	3.94
Faith in the future	1.86
Goal Directed	1.96
Tired	3.27
Purposeful	2.13
Anxious	3.73
Energetic	2.35
Annoyed	3.62
Hopeful	2.11
Nervous	3.62
Exhausted	3.64
Trouble sleeping	3.81
Bad tempered	3.84
Fatigued	3.59

Emotions/feelings	Percentage of change
Depressed	4.03
Sad	4.01
Optimistic	1.97
Weary	3.53
Angry	3.97

Note. 1 = much more, 2 = A little more, 3 = no change, 4 = a little less, 5 = much less

At the end of the course, students reported feeling happier and more goal-directed than they had previously. Though these changes were not as large, they also reported feeling a little less depressed and sad. Finally, students reported that they felt more positive in temperament and were a little more purposeful and energetic.

Qualitative responses were positive overall in their evaluation of how meditation practice and the course had impacted their general health. One student reported, “I have definitely noticed how much more focused/calm/aware I am when I do meditate and how drastically that changes when I don’t. I make better choices, am more aware, kinder, more focused when I do.”

Phase II. The Cronbach Alpha Reliability test revealed moderate-to-strong reliability for all sections of the survey, indicating acceptable reliability of the tool. The Varimax component factor analysis revealed six factors that correlated most highly with one another: peace, difficulties, meaning and purpose, diligence, goals, and comfort and harmony (see Table 2).

Table 2

Change in Student Feelings/Emotions, n = 98

Statement	Percentage of students reporting a change from presurvey to postsurvey	Direction of change
Peace		
I feel peaceful.	51*	Increase

Statement	Percentage of students reporting a change from presurvey to postsurvey	Direction of change
I have trouble feeling peace of mind.	50*	Decrease
Difficulties		
How often have you felt that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	36	Decrease
Meaning and purpose		
I have a reason for living.	21	Increase
I feel a sense of purpose in my life.	31	Increase
I feel hopeful.	34	Increase
My life lacks meaning and purpose.	29	Decrease
Diligence		
I am diligent.	22	Increase
I am a hard worker.	20	Increase
I am lazy.	27	Decrease
I wish I had more self-discipline.	34	Decrease
Goals		
I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.	31	Increase
New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.	33	Decrease
I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.	43	Decrease
I have trouble concentrating.	34	Decrease

Statement	Percentage of students reporting a change from presurvey to postsurvey	Direction of change
Comfort and Harmony		
I am able to reach down into myself for comfort.	49	Increase
I feel a sense of harmony within myself.	51	Increase
I find comfort in my faith or spiritual beliefs.	33	Increase
I feel connected to a higher power (or God).	25	Increase

*Significant at $p < .001$

Regarding the results for Phase II, students were significantly more likely to report positive changes in feelings of peace: 51% of the students reported an increase in feeling peaceful, with 50% of students reporting a decrease in having trouble feeling peace of mind. Thirty-one percent of the students reported an increase in feeling that they had a sense of purpose in life; 34% reported an increase in feeling hopeful, and 21% reported an increase in feeling that they had a reason for living. Just over half (51%) of students reported an increase in feeling a sense of harmony within. There was a smaller increase (33%) for those who found comfort in their faith or spiritual beliefs (with 47% staying the same).

Phase III. With regard to the impact of meditation, in the Phase III evaluation, students who reported a higher frequency of meditation were significantly more likely than other students to report a decrease in feeling disconnected as well as their inability to tolerate people around them (see Table 3). This finding indicates that the more a student meditated, the more likely they were to feel connected to and tolerant of students and other peers.

Table 3*Association Between Frequency of Meditation and Student Feelings/Emotions in Past 4 Weeks*

Questions regarding feelings/emotions	No. of valid cases	Association value	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Have you felt stressed?	25	-.123	-.695	.487
Have you felt anxious?	25	-.040	-.199	.842
Have you felt overwhelmed?	24	-.147	-.782	.434
Have you felt depressed?	25	-.017	-.014	.917
Have you been unable to think clearly?	25	-.030	-.241	.810
Have you felt disinterested in your school work?	25	-.093	-.603	.546
Have you felt disconnected from other students?	25	-.342	-3.028	.002*
Have you felt disconnected from friends and peers?	25	-.157	-1.562	.118
Have you felt disconnected from your family?	25	-.175	-1.068	.285
Have you felt unable to tolerate people around you?	25	-.377	-2.621	.009*
Have you been unable to sleep like you normally do?	25	-.184	-1.096	.273
Have you felt unable to control your anger?	25	-.294	-1.568	.117

*P<.05

Though stress levels and coursework incompleteness were high among students at the end of the course, the vast majority of students (over 75% for each statement) reported that they felt benefits of meditation; specifically, meditation helped students to feel less stressed, more in control, more creative, and more connected to their schoolwork (see Table 4).

Table 4

Self-Perceived Reactions to Meditation Post Learning (n=24), Fall 2022

Outcomes from learning to meditate	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Meditating makes me feel less stressed.	0%	4%	38%	58%
Meditating helps me feel more in control.	0%	21%	38%	42%
Meditating helps me to be more flexible.	0%	17%	54%	29%
Meditating helps me to be more tolerant.	0%	8%	50%	42%
Meditating helps connect me to my schoolwork.	0%	25%	50%	21%
Meditating helps me to succeed in school.	0%	29%	71%	0%
Meditating helps me connect to other people.	0%	25%	54%	21%
Meditating helps me to be more creative.	0%	0%	50%	50%

The majority of students (77%, n=20) responded that they preferred group meditation to solo meditation. Students elaborated on their preferences with such statements as “I feel more motivated to meditate in a group than alone,” “When I’m alone, I get distracted and don’t seem to stay with the meditation as long,” and “When I am with the group, it feels like a shared experience—it’s powerful.”

Discussion

Results of the analysis of data from all phases of survey evaluations indicate that students in the sociology course Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity are experiencing positive benefits

from engaging in meditation practice, suggesting that consciousness-centered education programming may have the ability to help students improve their mental health and personal goals. Overall, at the end of the semester, students reported being happier, more at peace, and better able to connect with others. Changes in various emotional states from pre to post learning to use meditation are indicated in Figures 1 to 5.

Figure 1

Change in Stress Pre to Post Learning Meditation (n=24), Fall 2022

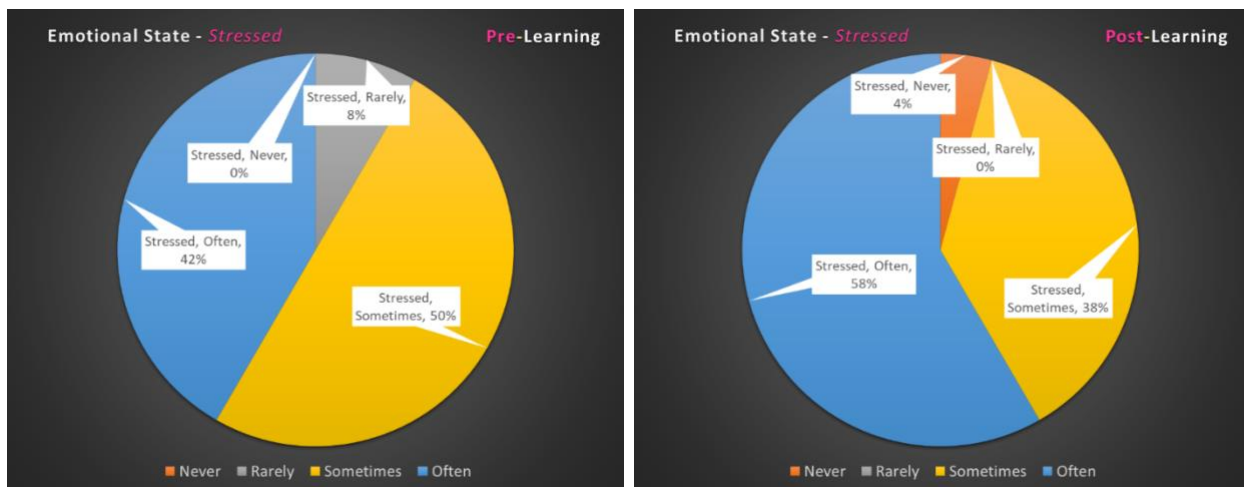


Figure 2

Change in Anxiety Pre to Post Learning Meditation (n=24), Fall 2022

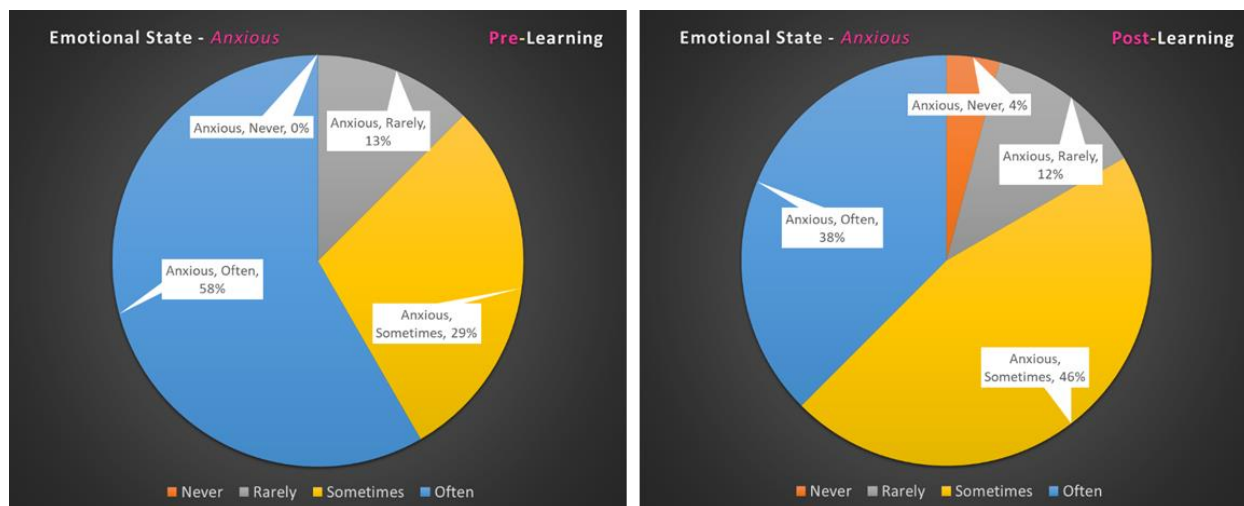


Figure 3

Change in Overwhelm Pre to Post Learning Meditation (n=24), Fall 2022

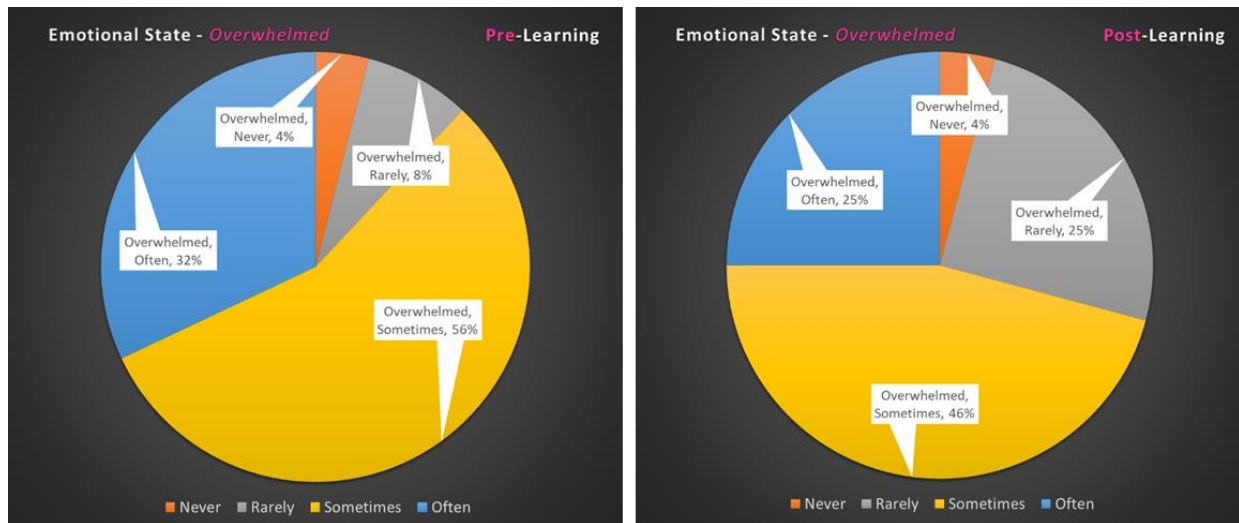


Figure 4

Change in Depression Pre to Post Learning Meditation (n=24), Fall 2022

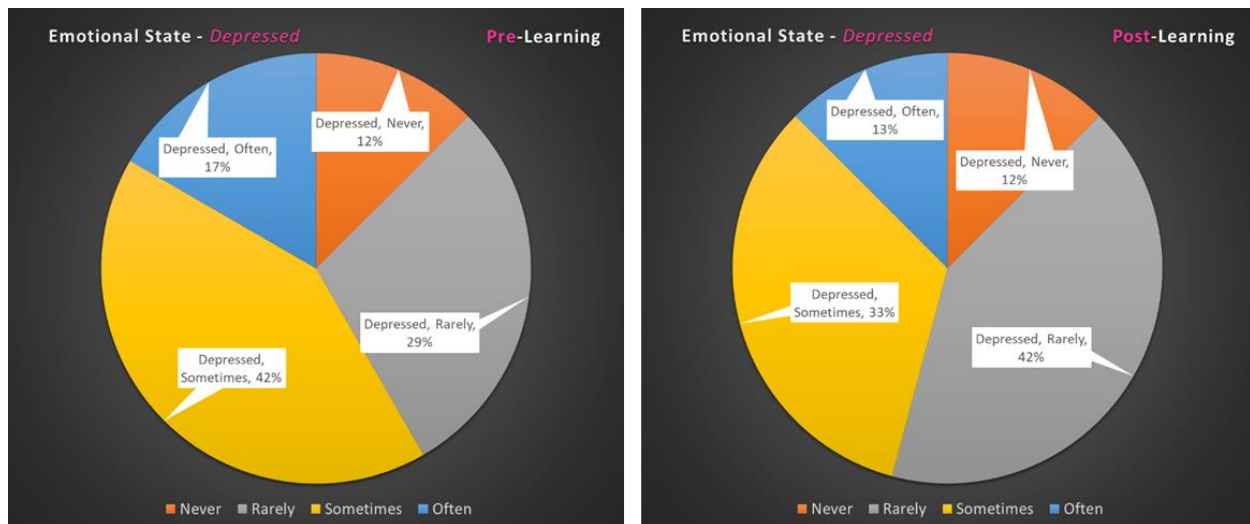
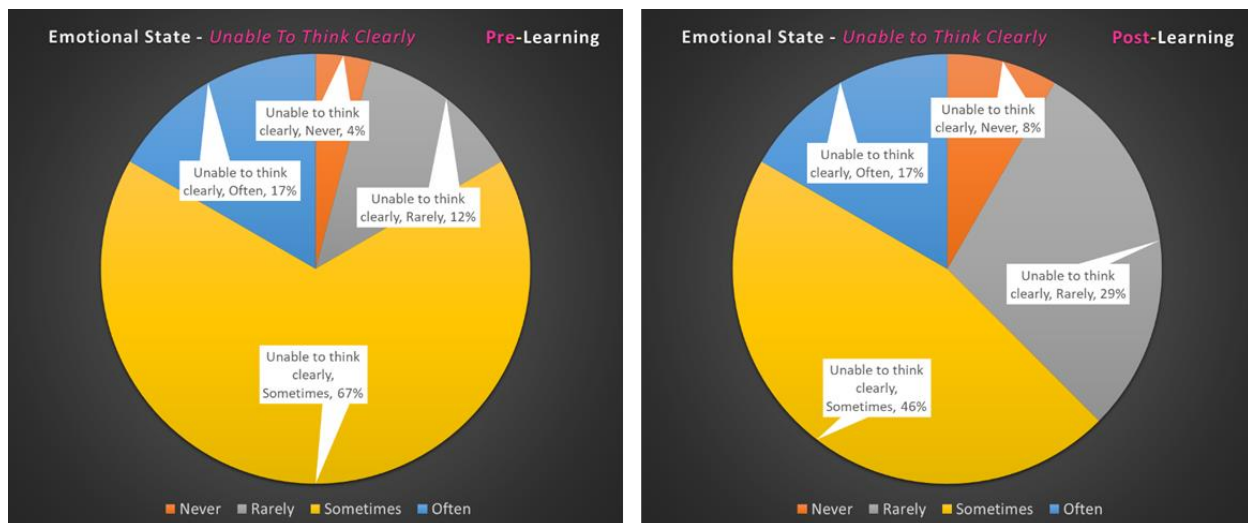


Figure 5

Change in Ability to Think Clearly Pre to Post Learning Meditation (n=24), Fall 2022



Data also show that greater levels of self-reported meditation practice positively influenced students' levels of tolerance and their ability to connect with other students. This suggests that consciousness-centered education programming can play a role in unifying students and promoting greater ties to community and could manifest in the development of a sense of global citizenship. Significantly, students also showed a meaningful preference for meditating together as a group in the classroom as obstacles to a successful meditation practice felt easier to overcome when in a group setting.

Limitations

As the surveys were intended to gauge students' responses to the course, these results cannot be generalized to other populations; they have also not been peer reviewed. Finally, the population size for Phase III was small (two classes), and given the close relationship between the professor and many of the students, there is the possibility of social desirability bias skewing the results.

Consciousness-Centered Education as an Innovative Approach to Design Education

Meditation helped me to understand that the world around us has a profound effect on our individual identities and relationships with our own consciousness. Through carefree and intentional consideration of how we engage with the world outside of our subjective experience, whether it be through art or otherwise, we can better ground ourselves in our connection to all that is around us.

—Nik Liguori, Fall 2021 Student

The primary intent of this paper is to present an account of how to share consciousness as a pedagogic strategy and to outline a foundation for a heart-opening curriculum that would make no claims against existing educational templates but would seek to coexist with them. This curriculum is based on the idea of consciousness as fundamental and is dedicated to the process of enlivening, transmuting, engaging, and encouraging active participation with said consciousness as an undercurrent to the educational process.

This paper demonstrates that regular in-class Vedic meditation practice, in conjunction with a mindfulness-oriented curriculum, can alleviate stress, thus allowing students to tap into flow experiences more freely. In transcending the thinking mind, they can begin to see, feel, and understand the more subtle and finer aspects of creativity and the self. Qualities such as empathy, self-awareness, and relationship skills are important measures of intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Individuals who have emotional empathy and awareness are better able to understand different perspectives through tolerance of other people and management of their own emotions. These are skills that students report developing after taking this course.

Current research on meditation among college students is focused primarily on a meditation practice that is offered in the form of a specific intervention or extracurricular course

(Bamber & Schneider, 2016). Consciousness-centered education programming presents an innovative opportunity by utilizing the evidence-based practice of meditation as part of the structure of a college-level course. Integrating contemplative methodologies into the core curriculum holds valuable potential for improving the ability of college students to foster relationships and engage in activism in their communities.

Specific to the course in which this study was located, design education is at a crossroads. To remain relevant, it needs to address different questions that move beyond the inanimate object and rationalized utility and into the realm of lived experience (Walker, 2017). Alain Findeli, (2001), French design theorist and a founder of design research, advocates that “some kind of moral education must be included in the design curriculum, so that the moral consciousness of every student is increased” (p. 14). Preparing a new generation of leaders to address today’s global existential challenges and practical crises such as climate change demands a new kind of education that goes beyond syllabi and trains students to think holistically as well as critically.

Consciousness-centered educational initiatives offer a solution to teaching and learning in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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