



Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education

An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute
InformingScience.org

JSPTE.org

Volume 3, 2018

BETH BERILA'S *INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS INTO ANTI-OPPRESSION PEDAGOGY: SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION*. A REVIEW

Amy M Anderson

Randolph Community College,
Asheboro, NC, USA

amanderson@randolph.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I review Beth Berila's recently published book, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education*. The review gives a summary of how the book is organized, details the benefits of mindfulness practice as presented in the book, and offers suggestions for further expansion. This review is useful for practitioners researching anti-oppressive pedagogy who are interested in integrating mindfulness practices in the classroom and who are looking for techniques to aid students in developing skills in self-reflexivity and compassion.

Keywords: pedagogy, mindfulness, contemplative, integrated, social justice, anti-oppression, higher education

REVIEW

In *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education* (Berila, 2016), St. Cloud State University Director of Women's Studies Program Beth Berila has created a tool directed specifically towards social justice instructors, but which can be used by any instructors interested in incorporating mindfulness practices in their classrooms. Berila writes with an experiential perspective that includes teaching over 15 years in Women's Studies (p. 119) as well as specialized instruction in Ayurvedic Yoga.

Although this is her first published book, the contents in Chapters 1 and 6 were presented in an article published in the *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* in 2014 (Berila, 2014). In the first chapter of this book, Berila defines feminism, feminist pedagogy, oppression, anti-oppression, and mindfulness to help orient the reader. This chapter presents theories from anti-oppression pedagogies. Berila mentions recent discoveries in neuroscience related to meditation. It would be beneficial to expand this section to include more details on this scientific research. In the next chapter, Berila presents mindfulness practices as a tool for students to fully embody knowledge. Using the metaphor of a dandelion, she explains that theories may pull out the weed, but full embodiment of knowledge is needed to completely uproot the structure of oppression. Berila presents a strong case for the embodiment

Accepted as a book review by Editor Crystal Chambers. | Received: December 21, 2017 | Revised: February 1, 2018 | Accepted: February 21, 2018.

Cite as: Anderson, A. M. (2018). Beth Berila's *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education*. A review. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 3, 21-23.

<https://doi.org/10.28945/3967>

(CC BY-NC 4.0) This article is licensed to you under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). When you copy and redistribute this paper in full or in part, you need to provide proper attribution to it to ensure that others can later locate this work (and to ensure that others do not accuse you of plagiarism). You may (and we encourage you to) adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any non-commercial purposes. This license does not permit you to use this material for commercial purposes.

of knowledge as an integral component to learning by differentiating between conceptual and embodied self-awareness (p. 44).

The next two chapters are about recognizing, confronting, and unlearning oppression and privilege. Although Berila is hopeful, she never ceases to remind the reader of the unpredictable nature of student reactions when presented with the difficult topics in social justice classrooms. Her advice to instructors is to be transparent and inform students in advance of the content, purpose, and typical defense mechanisms to prepare students for how they might feel and/or react.

Chapter 5 is not to be missed. It poses a reframing of the temptation to label students' reactions as "resistance" (p. 118 – 147). Berila urges instructors to adjust their perspectives to be more open in considering these "undesirable" reactions as truly a side effect of "mindful dissonance". Rather than assuming the student's reactions are of intentional resistance, Berila reminds us that students are at different stages in identity development. In the same chapter, Berila proposes the notion of "safe space" be replaced with "something more akin to the circle of trust that Parker Palmer describes" in which participants "stay present to each other without wavering" as part of a supportive community (p. 139). I agree with Berila's points that a safe space "can turn unsafe in a second, often unpredictably" (p. 139), but I would like to read more about what the "circle of trust" model would look like in an academic setting.

Each chapter concludes with a mindfulness practice. I encourage readers to take part in each practice, because as Berila warns in her critiques and challenges in Chapter 6, "...we cannot effectively teach about mindfulness if we do not practice it ourselves" (p. 159). Most examples provided are designed to make space for individual students to look inward, but I am most excited about a mindfulness practice assignment that teaches students to understand partial perspectives. In my particular case, assignments are more applicable than beginning a course with a yoga practice (for instance), simply because I am not a yoga instructor. Berila offers a great solution to this scenario by suggesting instructors invite guest experts to come lead a mindfulness session in class.

I was pleased to see a chapter dedicated to critiques of mindfulness practice in curriculum as it is still on the fringe of what is considered acceptable in the classroom. This is a systemic issue in power constructs surrounding knowledge production (addressed in Chapter 1), but I was interested to read how Berila directly confronts the issues. Berila confronts the critiques of cultural appropriation (p. 150 – 152), whether the practices are religious or secular (p. 152 – 155), whether or not they are accessible to all or if they're exclusionary (p. 156 – 157), and whether or not it helps students confront the real issues in life (p. 157 – 159). In the first three critiques, Berila defends yoga, specifically. I am curious to know whether or not the same solutions apply to other mindfulness practices, like Deep Listening, for instance. Berila uses the critique of cultural appropriation and oversimplification as a teaching moment, saying all the questions that arise about "cultural hybridity, globalization, [and] colonization" are the exact conversations we should have in social justice courses. She recognizes practicing yoga in the West removes it from its original context, but goes on to say these complexities do not necessarily mean we shouldn't practice yoga, but that we should acknowledge the issues and decide where we stand (p. 152). Berila uses the former critique of uprooted cultural context to show how yoga is secularized in the West. One critique against the use of yoga in academia is that it carries a religious or spiritual context. However, as seen in the previous critique, yoga is removed from its deep religious context when practiced in the West, therefore is acceptable in the classroom. Berila expands on the benefits of yoga regardless of one's spiritual beliefs saying, "One does not have to embrace any particular religion to practice turning inward..." (p. 153). Berila could delve in deeper here to show how mindfulness practices enhance one's beliefs, but would also need to address the critique that one's beliefs or goals are not always inherently *good*.

Berila confronts the critique of inaccessibility and suggests offering alternatives for students in which a particular mindfulness practice might be difficult. As an advocate for participatory methods, I think it would also be reasonable to ask students directly. For example, an overview of a mindfulness

practice could be presented followed by small group discussions that address possible issues with the practice and individuals in the group can decide where they stand. The case presented in Chapter 2 for the embodiment of knowledge addresses the last critique concerning the fear that mindfulness practices “coddle” students (p. 158). Berila says, “...the deep inquiry, ability to remain in the present, and techniques for learning more compassionate and authentic ways of relating to one another are critical ways to work toward social transformation” (p. 158). Mindfulness is presented as a tool for students to use when confronting issues that are largely ignored in mainstream curricula. It is the tool given to them to deal with the upcoming conversation that is anything but coddling.

The last chapter reads as a concise conclusion and charge to action. As all previous chapters, it ends with a mindfulness practice. This particular prompt engages students with movement, self, each other, and thought processes. It is a great example of a practice that will help students be present while embodying the moment and move back and forth between self and community. It is a compassion-building exercise.

This book is about planting the seeds in students for mindfulness practices that will help them to develop into healthy compassionate community members. If the reader is beginning research on anti-oppressive, contemplative, or mindfulness pedagogy, this book is good to read straight through, and is a treasure trove of resources as the author draws from many forerunners in social justice fields, holistic education, and yogic traditions.

A reader that is well-researched in social justice theories can flip to any of the desired chapters to gain perspective from the mindfulness approach. When reading straight through, the chapters tend to get a bit repetitive as certain lines and ideas are repeated in the introduction and conclusion of every chapter. The book would benefit from a detail-oriented copy editor that would catch small typos and eliminate repetitive statements. This would make room for further expansion in other areas mentioned above. As a reader, I gravitate towards the narrative scenarios that offer practical solutions and would like to see these appear earlier in the book and more often.

Berila presents mindfulness as the necessary tool needed to take a conceptual anti-oppression conversation to a full embodiment of knowledge. Mindfulness is presented as a solution to the cognitive dissonance created by the dualistic Cartesian worldview under which we are currently living. After reading this book, I am convinced that adding mindfulness techniques to courses alongside contemplative and anti-oppressive pedagogical strategies will aid each student's progress in identity development – whatever that identity may be.

REFERENCES

- Berila, B. (2014). Contemplating the effects of oppression: Integrating mindfulness into diversity classrooms. *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 1(1), 55-68. Retrieved from <https://journal.contemplativeinquiry.org/index.php/joci/article/view/5>
- Berila, B. (2016). *Integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy: Social justice in higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

BIOGRAPHY



Amy M Anderson, from Greensboro, NC, is a visual artist and instructor at Randolph Community College in Asheboro, NC, as well as, the Graduate Liberal Studies program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She received her Master of Fine Arts from Western Carolina University, her Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and is currently pursuing her PhD in Transformative Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies with a focus on higher education curriculum.