

# **SUSTAINING THE DIALOG: Building Core Expertise in Contemplative Pedagogy at Xavier University of Louisiana**

Submitted by Bart Everson

## **PROPOSAL**

St. Katherine Drexel was drawn to a cloistered contemplative life but felt compelled to dedicate herself to establishing schools for Native Americans and African Americans, eventually founding Xavier University of Louisiana. In some sense, then, contemplation has been a "dream deferred" for Xavier. Today we realize that the *vita activa* and *vita contempliva* are not mutually exclusive but in fact necessary correlates that support and inform one another. In pursuit of Xavier's mission to "contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society," the University community would do well to stay grounded in a thoughtful and considered approach to teaching, learning and life. In this spirit we respectfully submit this grant application, with the aim of developing a learning community of faculty through participation in the Summer Seminar in Contemplative Curriculum Development, who can share their expertise with colleagues on campus. As such this grant would allow for faculty to become faculty developers themselves, focusing on the theme of contemplative teaching.

## **Background**

The Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT) coordinates faculty development at Xavier University of Louisiana. We first began thinking about the role of contemplative practices in higher education when we interviewed Arthur Zajonc for our podcast, *Teaching, Learning & Everything Else*, in 2009. Sessions at the 2009 conference of the Professional and Organizational Developers (POD) Network gave us further encouragement to explore these ideas. Thus, since 2010 we have been actively programming events which invite faculty to consider the value of contemplative practices both in their own lives and in their teaching.

Our first program, "A Moment of Silence," conducted on August 25, 2010, was an invitation for faculty to share a moment of silent contemplation at the beginning of the semester, followed by a

discussion of the use of silence in teaching.

Since that time we have sustained a dialog on the topics of contemplative pedagogy and integrative learning. In a session titled "Who Are You? Your Vocation & Our Shared Mission" we invited faculty to discuss their deepest values and motivations, to get at the heart of what we're doing. As a part of our annual book club series, we read and discussed *The Heart of Higher Education* by Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. In a session titled "Cultivating a Reflective Classroom" one faculty member described how she has integrated various contemplative practices into her Advanced Research class in psychology. She shared student responses to these techniques. Participants discussed the utility of such techniques in their own courses and disciplines.

Most recently, in a session titled "Mindfulness for You & Your Students," CAT staff gave an overview of what "mindfulness" is, how it can be cultivated through a variety of formal practices, and how this can inform one's teaching. Faculty were invited to adopt a simple daily personal mindfulness meditation practice and try it for one month as an experiment.

According to our follow-up survey, which garnered 21 total responses, nine faculty never got started with the experiment; of the twelve who did, seven completed the month. Interestingly, all seven faculty who completed the experiment indicated that they are continuing with daily practice. With a third of participants making a permanent change to their behavior, we deemed this workshop to be a success. Of the remaining fourteen respondents, thirteen said they wanted to try the experiment again. Also of interest: Half of respondents indicated they were "very interested" in learning more about topics such as mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative pedagogy; a quarter said they were "moderately interested."

Additionally, we have integrated contemplative elements into much of our faculty development programming, no matter the topic. For example, for the last two years our annual institute, Faculty Communities of Teaching Scholars (funded by the Mellon Foundation), has included contemplative practices as an integral part of the program. In 2011 our theme was "Promoting Critical Thinking and Self-Authorship in the First Two Years," and faculty participated in a

*metta bhavana* meditation to foster feelings of goodwill toward their students. In 2012 our theme was "Teaching for Social Responsibility" and we included contemplative pedagogy as a thread, with practices integrated into each day's activities.

Although we have started a dialog on the topics of contemplative pedagogy and integrative learning, we are eager to take this to the next level and create a more continuous and sustained environment for our faculty.

## **Plan**

To create a faculty learning community around this topic, we would like to send three Xavier faculty to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's Summer Seminar in Contemplative Curriculum Development. Xavier faculty will be invited to participate in a competitive proposal process, reviewed by CAT staff. Selected faculty will participate in the Summer Seminar and implement what they've learned in the 2013-2014 school year. Each faculty member will also conduct a CAT workshop, sharing what they've learned in the process of integrating contemplative practices with their professional lives as teachers, with an eye toward helping others who are interested in similar work. The specific topics and activities for each workshops will be developed by the individual faculty members according to their interests, in collaboration with and supported by CAT staff. As a Learning Community, the faculty and CAT staff will meet at least twice a semester.

## **Rationale**

All our efforts so far, as outlined above, have sustained a dialog on the topics of contemplative pedagogy and integrative learning, to nurture and support faculty inquiry in this domain. To that end, we've hosted a series of workshops and seminars which have gotten faculty thinking about the subjects and even practicing. So far, most of our programming has been generated by one staff member, largely self-taught, who has attended a number of webinars and events such as the Contemplative Academy in 2010. This has been an effective approach, but seems to have reached its limit. To take the next step, it's essential to expand our core of expertise. With three faculty schooled in contemplative curriculum development we will have a

critical mass of in-house expertise which will help to sustain the dialog for years to come.

### **Expected outcomes and strategies for evaluation**

It is expected that this grant initiative will directly affect the teaching of at least three Xavier faculty members, potentially impacting hundreds of students in years to come. However, the impact will expand because of the faculty development component. Funded faculty, in collaboration with CAT staff, will present their work to their colleagues. We anticipate reaching 25-50 faculty through these presentations, a significant percentage of the 178 faculty members currently employed by Xavier. These faculty in turn will be encouraged to consider adopting a personal practice and letting this inform their teaching. Thus the potential overall impact is quite large.

#### *Outcome #1*

Three faculty will participate in the Contemplative Curriculum Development 2013 Summer Seminar.

#### *Evaluation Strategy*

- Post-seminar self-report surveys of effectiveness and impact

#### *Outcome #2*

Funded faculty will implement contemplative pedagogy into at least one class in AY 13-14.

#### *Evaluation Strategies*

- Content analysis of syllabi, assignments, or other course materials for evidence of contemplative pedagogy
- Student focus groups and self-report surveys of educational effectiveness and impact (e.g., attention, understanding) of the implemented pedagogy

#### *Outcome #3*

Funded faculty will each conduct at least one CAT workshop disseminating the information they learned from the Summer Seminar.

#### *Evaluation Strategies*

- Track number of workshop participants

- Formal workshop evaluations

#### *Outcome #4*

Contemplative pedagogical techniques will be adopted beyond the initial three faculty members by other Xavier faculty.

#### *Evaluation Strategies*

- Follow-up survey of workshop participants

#### *Sustaining the use of contemplative pedagogy*

This grant application does not exist in a vacuum but builds upon years of effort to sustain an ongoing dialog about contemplative pedagogy and integrative learning on Xavier campus. If funded, this initiative will receive external financial support for the first time. This will have a sustaining effect in and of itself: What is funded gets noticed. More substantively, this support will broaden the pool of expertise on campus, adding at least three faculty members to a core that currently consists of just one staff member, creating the critical mass and momentum necessary to keep the conversation going. Through our formal and informal program of faculty development, CAT is well positioned to support these efforts.