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## Teaching Queer Trauma: Applying Meditation as a Pedagogy of Compassion

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## Teaching Queer Trauma: Applying Meditation as a Pedagogy of Compassion

### Introduction

Queer communities are continually left out of courses related to trauma both within trauma studies and in related fields such as psychology, social work, and social policy. Trauma, due to challenges in both witnessing and recalling details of traumatic events (Caruth, 2016), is often brushed over in these fields as too complex for students. Often trauma studies is taught within a limited context relevant to the trauma that cisgender, heterosexual, white men experience in contexts such as the military. This results in an absence of queer issues within the curricula of trauma studies. Both queerness and trauma are important topics in feminist pedagogy that are seldom explored in the literature.

This teaching activity comes from my experience teaching a fourth-year gender studies course, *Queer Trauma and Resilience: Canadian Perspectives*, that seeks to bridge the public/private divide by complicating individual and structural approaches to trauma. The course examines structural issues—such as homelessness and foster care, suicide, intimate partner violence, and post-traumatic growth—that are often solely discussed in an individual context of psychopathology. It also considers the painful effects of large-scale, traumatizing historical events throughout Canadian queer history, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, racism, and homonationalism. The course looks at queer of colour critique in topics such as trans necropolitics, the development of ethno-specific AIDS service organizations, and queer diasporas.

If we are to create truly accessible, equitable, and inclusive spaces, we must equip students with skills to process traumatic material. In line with bell hooks's (2014) work, this course sought to act as a refuge from the oppression students face outside the classroom. Teaching to transgress in this context involves creating a space in which students can analyze structural issues and the traumatic impacts of them. Thompson (2017) explains that students bring trauma to the classroom and teaching with tenderness involves inviting emotion into the pedagogy, which can be done through grounding practices, such as meditation, to teach students how to identify and process their feelings. This original teaching activity explores how mindfulness meditation can aid students in learning traumatic material in a feminist classroom.

### Rationale

Mindfulness meditation has been increasingly used as a stress-reduction technique and to aid difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Several psychotherapeutic interventions that use meditation have been invented in recent years, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and compassion-focused therapy (Bean et al., 2017; Frostadottir & Dorjee, 2019; Muncaster et al., 2017; Muncaster & Dylan, 2021). This course not only involves traumatic material, but also takes an applied focus, equipping students to work in queer and trans organizations focused on traumatic issues. Thus, meditation as a feminist pedagogical technique is appropriate not only to aid students in viewing traumatic material but also to give them skills to work in individual and group settings at queer organizations. This original teaching activity details my use of mindfulness meditation with the students of this course as a pedagogy of compassion, explaining meditation's benefits and how to appropriately introduce it into the classroom in a secular manner, while avoiding culturally appropriative behaviour through acknowledgments of the roots of these practices recommended by Buddhist scholars (Bodhi, 2013).

## **Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives for this teaching activity are:

1. Understand the applicability of mindfulness meditation to learning about trauma.
2. Discern which meditations might be helpful depending upon the circumstance.
3. Learn to apply mindfulness meditation in contexts outside of the classroom (e.g., working with traumatized queer people at a queer health organization).

## **Explanation**

This approach involves a gradual build-up of skills by introducing students to a variety of meditations across different weeks. We start in the first class so that students learn grounding techniques for viewing subsequent material. In the last hour of the first class, students are introduced to mindfulness meditation through a presentation that discusses research on its benefits. Because meditation is often associated with the esoteric, it is important to highlight to students in Western classrooms the extensive research that explores its effectiveness in stress reduction. This presentation also includes a note on Buddhist modernism from Bodhi (2013), a monk-scholar who addresses notions of cultural appropriation by explaining how, while the mindfulness movement misses many important parts of Buddhism, such as its ethical framework, it ultimately contributes to the benefit of beings, which is in line with its original intent. After the presentation, students are guided through the first mindfulness exercise below. There are four mindfulness exercises detailed in this teaching activity, each are guided for 10 minutes, and one is taught per class, at the end of the class, to help students return to a calmer state, so they are ready to leave class less disturbed by the traumatic material. There is a linear progression from one meditation to the final one, taught in a later week, after students are more comfortable with meditation. Students are asked to practice these daily at home throughout the semester.

### ***Class 1 - Mindfulness of Breathing***

#### **Each Meditation Begins With:**

Please get into a comfortable position, it does not matter how you position your body, and if you feel comfortable, close your eyes. Alternatively, you can keep your eyes open and stare at the ground a few feet in front of you at a 45-degree angle.

#### **Mindful Breathing:**

Picking a part of the body where you feel the breath most strongly and observing the breath going in and out.

Each time you have a thought, gently labeling it ‘thinking’ and coming back to the breath. Not judging yourself, we are not eliminating thoughts, but rather, developing a metacognitive awareness of thoughts so we do not get stuck to them.

#### **Each Meditation Ends With:**

Coming back to the feeling of the body sitting in space right now, hearing any sounds in the room, and then gently opening your eyes.

### ***Class 2 - Mindful Body Scan***

We will be scanning through the body and focusing on each part one at a time. The point is not necessarily to relax each of these parts, but rather, we are simply observing them in space right now.

Starting with the feet, feeling them touching the ground.

Moving up to the legs and the knees.

Tapping into the feeling of your body sitting.

Moving up the back.

Feeling the belly and the chest.

Becoming aware of the hands, arms, and shoulders.

Finally, feeling the neck and the head in space.

### ***Class 3 - R.A.I.N. for Difficult Emotions***

Please bring to mind a difficult situation to work on. Think of today's technique as a practice run, so please do not use a trauma for today's purposes. You can work up to that after practicing the technique more. Perhaps someone cut you off in traffic and you felt anger, or you ran out of coffee at home. We will use the R.A.I.N. acronym for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nourish with Self-Compassion, from the work of Dr. Tara Brach (2020).

Beginning with the R of R.A.I.N., which stands for Recognize. Here we want you to recognize what feelings are coming up right now. There's likely more than one emotion. In English, we often take on emotions as an identity, saying, 'I am sad.' Instead, we just want to label the emotion, 'sadness is present,' and de-identify with it.

The A of R.A.I.N. is Allowing the emotion(s) to be here, not judging yourself, and not trying to push those feelings away.

The I of R.A.I.N. is Investigate, but this isn't a cognitive investigation of the facts around the situation. Rather, it is solely an investigation of where you feel these emotions in your body, for example, a tightness in the chest. What colour is the feeling, what shape?

Finally, the N of R.A.I.N. is Nourish with Self-Compassion. Here, a lot of people like to put a hand on the heart or somewhere else where they feel the emotion, and talking to yourself like you would a child. Telling yourself that it is okay to feel this way, that this feeling will not last forever, and that out of the eight billion people on Earth, there are probably a lot of people who feel the exact same way you do right now, perhaps just with different circumstances.

### ***Class 4 - Tonglen Compassion Meditation***

The word ‘tonglen’ is Tibetan for ‘sending and taking.’ Here we want you to first bring to mind a difficult situation, similar to what you did for R.A.I.N., and then imagine yourself in front of you.

Next, you’ll inhale a dark smoke of suffering from this image of yourself, trying to take on all the pain, and then exhaling a bright light of compassion, giving yourself anything you might need to feel better. Do this for a couple of minutes.

Imagine all the people around the world who are suffering in the same way you are. Inhale a dark smoke of all their suffering and exhale a bright light of compassion. You are not in danger of actually taking on their suffering, this is just a psychological exercise to open your heart, decrease isolation, and help you to stop running from pain.

Now imagining doing this for a friend and all the people who are suffering just like your friend. Inhaling their suffering, exhaling compassion. This is an opportunity for you to feel like you are doing something about their suffering when you might be feeling powerless. You are able to take this opportunity to open your heart.

If this becomes too difficult, you can imagine yourself taking the form of a being who represents limitless compassion to you and doing tonglen as that being.

As you progress at home, you can do this for strangers or people who you dislike. You can also do this on-the-spot, over a couple of breaths, outside of formal meditation.

### **Debriefing**

After each session, it is important to go around the room and ask students what came up for them during the meditation. Students are encouraged to share any difficulties they had during the practice either in class or from practicing at home. Students are not required to share and are not pressured to disclose if they do not feel comfortable doing so. It is important that the instructor validate and normalize any difficulties the student might be having and to have a list of mental health resources available in case students require a referral. Students are also encouraged to practice together outside of class time.

### **Assessment**

Students are assessed using an ‘Applied Care Skills and/or Reading Reflections’ assignment. They have the option of reflecting on these skills and/or the readings, so students who do not wish to meditate at home have an alternative option. They are provided with the following instructions and asked to hand in the assignment on the last day of class:

Six reflections of 1-2 paragraphs each, all together in one document. There are two options for these reflections: a) reflect on the applied skills we learned in class, such as mindful breathing, how you felt about it, and how you might incorporate it into your life or your work moving forward, or b) reflect on one of the readings assigned for that week. You can do a combination of reflections on both the applied skills and the readings if you want (for example, reflecting on three weeks’ worth of skill building and three weeks’ worth of readings). The strongest skill reflections will consider not only the skill that was

done in class, but how the student used the skill they learned outside of the classroom too. The strongest reading reflections will consider the relationship between the reading being reflected on and other assigned materials.

### **Conclusion**

There has long been an absence of queer issues within trauma studies. Often queer issues are not taught in trauma studies classes or are discussed solely within a single lecture. This course on queer trauma centralized the affective experiences of queer and trans people. Teaching such traumatic topics without also teaching coping mechanisms would have been irresponsible. Using meditation as a pedagogy of compassion allows students to develop self-compassion, enhances their emotional resilience, and invites emotion into the classroom. Meditation practices allow classes to be taught with tenderness, giving full consideration to how students may bring the painful effects of traumatic structural injustice with them to the classroom (Thompson, 2017).

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