

Does Compassion have a place among Higher Education Leaders?

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We have often heard the re-quoting of Harvard political scientist Richard Neustadt as he stated, "Academic politics is much more vicious than real politics. We think it's because the stakes are so small." (extracted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayre's_law on July 30, 2012). While it is a quote that is often spoken, we have never fully understood that quote or the many para-phrases of it. Perhaps it is because we believe that there is nothing more valuable to a society than its education. The value we place on education, the access to it for all people, as well as the manner in which responsibly educating ourselves can assist us in discovering the solutions to problems we face as a society, means that we can co-creatively construct that which will advance humanity. So, while we don't think the stakes are small in academia, I will agree that its politics appear to be quite vicious. Furthermore, there is nothing like a struggle over scarce resources to bring the viciousness out in even the most endearing person. This quote and the ever growing attention on scarcity has led us to question whether compassion has a role in higher education. We believe it does and would like to share with you why.

What exactly is compassion?

Merriam Webster defines compassion as "sympathetic [consciousness](#) of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it" (extracted from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compassion> on February 8, 2013). Other scholars have been

exploring what compassion might consist of for centuries. Thupten Jinpa, the principal English translator to the Dalai Lama, offers that compassion is actually a mental state that is endowed with a sense of concern focusing on the well being and wishes for that being to be relieved from suffering. Additionally, he suggests that compassion may not even be an emotion rather a complex, multi-faceted process that houses many other emotions such as empathy (Jinpa, 2012). Steven Porges suggests that compassion may be a manifestation of our biological need to engage and to bond with others and that it is a component of our biological quest for “safety” in proximity of another (Porges, 2012). While there currently is no complete consensus as to what compassion is, there is consistency to the portions of the definition where one a) acknowledges another’s emotional pain, joy and/or suffering, b) seeks to alleviate the pain and or suffering or genuinely share in the other’s joy, and c) expresses a sincere desire and/or action to alleviate the other’s pain, suffering or join in the expression of joy. Within this consensus definition alone, one can see that the notion of compassion expressed within higher education may reduce the occurrences of vicious politicism while still welcoming disagreement. If we could buy into this argument, how would we prepare our leaders for such expression of compassion?

An Approach to Cultivating Compassion

Current data suggest that by engaging in compassionate behavior, individuals are likely to see neurological, physiological, and potentially behavioral changes in their daily life that enhance overall well-being (Bush, Luu, & Posner, 2000; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Goldin, & Gross, 2010; Hutcherson, Goldin, Ramel, McRae, & Gross, 2008; Kozasa, Sato, Lacerda, Barreiros, Radvany, Russel, Sanches, & Mello, 2012; Lazar, Kerr, Wasserman, Gray, Greve, Treadway, McGarvey, & Quinn, 2005; Todd, Cunningham,

Anderson, & Thompson, 2012). Thus, one approach is to literally engage in training that mirrors the neurological, physiological, and potentially behavioral changes seen when one practices compassion; that training consists of emotion, attention, and cognitive regulation training (Bush, Luu, & Posner, 2000; Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Goldin, & Gross, 2010; Hutcherson, Goldin, Ramel, McRae, & Gross, 2008; Kozasa, Sato, Lacerda, Barreiros, Radvany, Russel, Sanches, & Mello, 2012; Lazar, Kerr, Wasserman, Gray, Greve, Treadway, McGarvey, & Quinn, 2005; Todd, Cunningham, Anderson, & Thompson, 2012). Attention, emotion, and cognitive training is simple and inexpensive to implement, however, it is not easy. Before offering a simple explanation of the training techniques, we will define attention, emotion and cognitive regulation.

Attention regulation as defined by Lutz (2008) is “the ability to focus and sustain attention on an intended object. It requires monitoring the focus of attention and detecting distraction, disengaging attention from the source of distraction, and (re)directing and engaging attention to the intended object”. With attention regulation, we are literally training the participant to notice when one’s focus is on the intended object of focus *and* to notice when the focus has drifted away from the intended object. We provide tools for the participants to literally coach themselves into re-directing their focus back on the intended object once they notice that their focus has drifted away from the intended object.

Emotion regulation, as defined by Grolnick *et al* (1996) is “the set of processes involved in initiating, maintaining and modulating emotional responsiveness, both positive and negative.” In emotion regulation, we go through a series of training exercises that allows the participant to choose a response to their emotions, rather than reacting from a place of emotion. The training exercises invite the participant to notice where and how

emotions are located in one's body and to simply pause and observe the emotion, without judgment, before choosing a response. The response to the emotion can be verbal or non-verbal.

Cognitive regulation as defined by Goldin (personal communication, 2011) "uses language-based reasoning strategies to re-construe the meaning of a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in order to up- or down-modulate specific features of emotion." In essence, in cognitive regulation training, we use inquiry into the situation that may have elicited the emotion to coach the participant in determining fact from interpretation and to acknowledge what is true for the participant may not be true to the situation that elicited the emotion.

For purposes of this paper and ease of conversation, we will infer that emotion regulation and attention regulation are sub-sets of cognitive regulation since cognitive regulation can not occur until attention and emotion regulation are realized. As such, cognitive regulation is recognizable by increased focus, decreased stress, and increased overall well-being and since cognitive regulation use language –based reasoning strategies (where attention and emotion regulation do not require the use of language-based reasoning), it can translate into relationships with others. Based on the previously cited research, we understand that compassion can be trained through cognitive regulation.

Cognitive regulation seeks to increase the space between an action and reaction. This space is invaluable as we can then assess the situation and align ourselves with an appropriate chosen response rather than a non-chosen reaction. Viktor Frankl & Sharon Parks have written extensively about this "space" between action and reaction. We believe that this is where such executive functions like creative problem solving, critical thinking,

and ethical decision-making could be operationalized, but we really don't know that yet. What seems apparent however are the benefits of capitalizing on creating such space and then using that space to choose rather than react. Take for example a situation where someone in your office received a promotion for which you applied. At first, you might be upset at that person and/or the person responsible for filling that position. However, if you have been engaged in cognitive regulation training, you might have increased the space between action and reaction. Now, having created more space, you can engage in inquiry and move toward compassionate behavior. Perhaps the other individual was more qualified. Perhaps you can now see the benefits of not having received the promotion. Perhaps you can now genuinely join your colleague in his/her joy for having received the promotion.

As mentioned previously, compassion can have profound effects, both physically and mentally, including increased focus, decreased stress, and overall improvement in our well-being. Dr. Lutz published a longitudinal study linking cognitive regulation to focused breathing and the data suggest that individuals can further regulate their attention and emotion if they simply engage in a daily focused breathing practice (Lutz, A., Slagter., H.A., Dunne., J.D., Davidson, R.J., 2008). Daniel Siegel, author of "The Mindful Brain" (2007) goes further and states individuals who engage in daily mindfulness-based focused breathing actually see an increase in their overall well-being. Siegel emphasizes that these practices are open to all human beings when he states, "mindfulness has never met a cognition it didn't like." Siegel assures us that compassion via mindfulness-based focused breathing is something in which we can all engage and from which we can all benefit.

Jon Kabat-Zinn created the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in 1979 and it was considered by many to be a revolutionary idea in western medicine

(<http://www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=41254>). The MBSR looked to increase individuals' attention regulation and emotion regulation. It has been acclaimed, empirically, to have many health benefits including, but not limited to an increased immunity system, happiness, and overall well-being as well as decreased stress, pain, anxiety, and depression. Some universities across the country including the University of California-San Diego have their own Mindfulness Center with MBSR training programs. Stanford University has one as well, as do many others. The extent that these program leaders are engaging their colleagues in the medical profession in voluntary attention and emotion regulation training is evident and the results are noteworthy.

Recently, Chade Meng-Tan, the creator of Google University's emotional intelligence and stress reduction program has made his training modules available to all in his book entitled, *Search Inside Yourself*. It is Meng's desire that all leaders, whether they be in private corporations or in higher education, investigate the training and the apparent benefits of cognitive regulation training. Encouraged by these endeavors, we designed and piloted a modified version of Google University's curriculum this past summer at San Diego State University. Adding self-authorship training techniques to already proven researched cognitive regulation training techniques, we launched a refined face-to-face and on-line version of this course in spring 2013; the training program is referred to as Integrative Inquiry or the Integrated Education training Model (IETM). The anecdotal comments stemming from the participants of the eight 2-hour summer modules noted it as "life-changing." The participants commented on how their ability to listen attentively to ideas that contradicted theirs while regulating their own emotions encouraged creative thinking and problem solving for not only themselves at work but among their interaction

with their family members and friends as well. They self-reported increased engagement in a practice of compassion toward themselves and toward others.

IETM is currently being taught in a face-to-face setting and online through individuals trained through the Rushing to Yoga Foundation, the organization responsible for its creation. The curriculum contains a wide-array of exercises to help cultivate attention, emotion, and cognitive regulation. Some activities include intention setting, focused movement, focused breathing, journaling, selected readings, self-referral, and authenticity exercises. Students are coached to practice non-judgment through intense inquiry exercises when they may see, feel, and think certain things that are in conflict with others. This practice is key to cultivating cognitive regulation which will invite in the ability to practice compassion.

Cultivating compassion does not have to wait until you can enroll in the Integrative Inquiry course (IETM). You can start right now in this very moment. Just literally focus on your breath. Focused breathing has been around for thousands and thousands of years and can be done anywhere, anytime, for any situation. Take a deep breath in, focus your attention on the feeling in your nose, throat, lungs, and stomach; feel the air move in and throughout you. As you breathe in to reach the top of your breath, hold the air in your lungs for a few seconds if possible. Now breathe out, exhaling all of the air out of your body. Repeat.

Through attention, emotion, and cognitive regulation training for higher education faculty, administrators, and students, we believe we could enjoy conversations that are less vicious, and more compassionate and focused. As such, we may experience increased energy to turn our attention toward designing creative solutions to today's problems while

also contributing to innovative expressions for the future. Wouldn't it be interesting to generate an environment within higher education that demonstrates how Harvard political scientist Richard Neustadt's quote is just no longer accurate?