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In-class Micro Experiential Activities for Buddhism Courses

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In-class Micro Experiential Activities for Buddhism Courses

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Abstract

In this article, I share my personal approach to experiential learning and some related in-class activities that I employ in my Buddhism courses. These activities are “micro” in the sense that they can be done in 15 to 20 minutes, require no extra resources or logistics, and are flexible enough to be incorporated into and transferable across course content. These include acting out primary texts, gamified simulation of historical accounts, designing and embodying a meditation script, and creative engagement with difficult concepts. Experientially oriented, such activities transform course content into more engaging and accessible formats, encouraging students to explore new ways of seeing, interacting with and experiencing the world around them.

Introduction

A popular buzzword highlighted in university strategic plans and faculty teacher trainings alike, “Experiential Learning” is commonly understood as “learning through direct experience”, or simply “learning by doing”. Building on the legacy of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, and Carl Jung, David A. Kolb developed the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) in the 1970s: a pedagogical approach centered around the core belief that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”¹ It differs from traditional education theories based upon “a rational, idealist epistemology” in that it recognizes the role of subjective experience in the learning process and emphasizes the generation of “proper relationships among learning, work, and other life activities.”²

In practice, experiential learning can have diverse forms. I have seen or read about many colleagues, both from Humanities in general and Buddhist Studies specifically, adopting experiential learning in their own ways. There are full-blown programs such as job-oriented internships with industries, placement programs with community partners, and study abroad programs, all of which require resources and logistical support beyond a standard curriculum. There are also site visits and field trips that many instructors add to their syllabi, which usually take one or two classes. Some instructors experiment with gamifying their courses, where students assume different roles and complete tasks over the course, and others design specific experiential assignments for students to complete outside the classroom.

¹ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. (Pearson Education, 2015), 49.

² Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 31.

Compared with these approaches, the experiential activities I will share and discuss here are much more micro in scale: they are in-class activities that can be done in 15 to 20 minutes. As such, they address different needs than those of more extensive or intensive activities: namely, diversifying and transforming some lecture-based course content in class without entirely redesigning already established syllabi. I am interested in devising and trying out these micro experiential activities in class as they are easy to implement, require no extra resources or logistical support, and have the flexibility to be incorporated into and transferred across courses.

Such micro activities also fit the heterogeneity of the content of introductory Buddhism courses. Experiential learning can mean different things for instructors from different disciplines, such as multisensory religious and ritualistic experience for religious studies, historical simulation for history, or creative projects for visual and material culture studies. However, a Buddhism survey course is diverse by nature and necessitates the combining of different perspectives, as its subject matter can span across doctrines, practices, philosophies, visual and material expressions, as well as their varied historical and regional characteristics. Presenting these different—and sometimes even contradictory—aspects of what we call “Buddhism” requires different disciplinary perspectives, such as religious studies, history, philosophy, anthropology, and visual and material cultural studies. I tend to be comprehensive in designing my Buddhism course because it is likely the only course on the topic that most students will take at my university, and they may have very different expectations of it. For instance, when asked about what they want to gain from the course, students’ answers reveal that, besides the typical need to obtain the elective course credit, their interest range from the ambiguous “Buddhist culture” to “history of Buddhist traditions,” “Buddhist philosophy,” “Buddhist art,” and the more specific “Buddhist mindfulness meditation.”

In this situation, I find that what I need are a variety of micro experiential activities that can be incorporated into individual class sessions with different points of focus, instead of an overall or extra program of experiential learning. In this way, experiential learning is adopted not as a special add-on to a course that requires additional funding or planning, but in the form of individual activities that can be smoothly integrated into in-class lectures and discussions, with direct relation to the specific course content covered in individual class sessions. In the following section, I will introduce some of the micro experiential activities I have adopted and how they work in my classroom.

In-class Micro Experiential Activities

1. Experiencing Texts

Teaching Buddhism involves close reading of primary texts, both religious and historical. However, Instructors often encounter challenges in this respect, particularly in entry-level survey courses. The primary texts are usually written in a style that feels strange, repetitive and confusing to students. In particular, many of the students are not in the humanities, and this may be their first time encountering translated primary sources from remote periods and contexts, which are difficult for them to process and relate to. One way I find helpful in this regard is to have students experience a text to enhance their reading and understanding, either by acting or gamification.

a. Acting out a Religious Text

When doing a close reading of a primary Buddhist text in class, I sometimes ask students to act out scenes from it. Texts fitting for dramatization are usually short excerpts which involve several characters and their

interactions. For example, for the story of the dragon girl in the *Lotus Sutra*, a few students can play the roles of the dragon girl, the monk Śāriputra, the Bodhisattvas and the Buddha, with the remainder of the class acting as the members of the assembly or just observing as the audience. Parables and some short scriptures, such as *The Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images*, can also work.

These act-outs are short and improvisatory, requiring no preparation before class. Usually, after going through an excerpt with the whole class together, I ask a few volunteers to come up to the front of the classroom, and they can take their print-out of the text as a cheat sheet for their lines. I serve as the narrator, reading the non-dialogue part that guides their action, to make sure that they follow the text. Usually, students would burst out in laughter a few times during the process as the class watched the actors on-stage trying to recreate the scenes with their voices, facial expressions and body gestures. Because there are no props, and the space in front of a classroom is usually quite limited, the actors need to make it work using creative and exaggerated body language.

Unsurprisingly, the acting is always far from perfect. Students skip lines, read others' lines, confuse dialogue with non-dialogue elements, or even forget who they are. These are not problems though, and I just gently remind them, guiding them back with my narration, amidst some friendly chuckles from the class. The purpose here is to help students, both those acting and the audience, to better comprehend a text. I can find out how students really understand a text through their acting: they may nod when you verbally ask them if they understand, but the acting really shows what is misunderstood or confused. Such acting out activities also get students more engaged. The acting students employ their whole body to creatively present the content of a text, while the audience also

deepens their understanding by watching the unfolding of the scenes that enliven the text.³

Another type of text that can be acted out in class is religious manuals, such as manuals for monastic life or ceremonies. To make them more accessible, secondary scholarship that summarizes the ritual procedures can also work. Take the Japanese tea ceremony as an example, students can play the roles of the host, the main guest, the second guest and other guests while I read aloud the ceremonial procedures. This is a crude imitation as there is no real tea, pottery, incense, hanging calligraphy, garden, teahouse, etc., which would require more planning and logistical support. Nonetheless, students use their imagination and creativity on their feet to experience how such rituals work on their bodies.

b. Gamified Simulation of Historical Accounts

Gamified simulation as experiential learning is currently gaining momentum in the humanities. In recent years, instructors have been trying to find ways of creating games for students to learn by assuming specific roles in order to experience historical events. There are now organizations specialized in developing games for Humanities courses, which can be played over a term.⁴ Individual instructors also start designing their own games, such as course-long role playing games,⁵ as well as video

³ I want to thank Chris Jensen for aptly pointing out that such activities can be seen as paralleling some Buddhist practices where the devotees participated in Buddhist texts through art as a creative medium, as discussed in Eugene Y. Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (University of Washington Press, 2005).

⁴ Such as Reacting Consortium, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://reactingconsortium.org/games>.

⁵ For example, see Frances Garrett, "Engaged Pedagogy through Role-Play in a Buddhist Studies Classroom," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 21, no. 4 (2018): 336–44.

games that can be played in and outside the classroom.⁶ I have been intrigued by the idea of gamifying course content, but as mentioned earlier about the diverse content that I hope to cover in my Buddhism course over a 12-week term, I find it difficult to design a whole or half-course centered around a game, or to spend too much class time playing video games.

Thus, my own approach to gamification is at a micro level, where I transform some specific course content, mostly historical accounts, into a quick “game” of 15 to 20 minutes that can be easily incorporated into a lecture.⁷ One example is the great translator Kumārajīva (344-413 CE), who is invariably mentioned in teaching about the spread of Buddhism into China. Instead of just introducing his biographical records and lecturing on his life, translation career, legends and significance in Central Asian and Chinese Buddhism, I tell my students that they are born as Kumārajīva, and they will experience his life and collectively make decisions for important life events. To set up the game, I reframed Kumārajīva’s biography in my slides by using second-person narration to address the students who are now Kumārajīva:

“You were born in Kucha, an oasis city state and established center for Buddhist studies on the silk roads.

⁶ Tyler Kynn at Central Connecticut State University created an online simulation game to be played by students in his course, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://www.hajitrail.com/>. Kynn also discussed his use of video games for teaching on the website of the Digital Orientalist, accessed July 31, 2024, <https://digitalorientalist.com/2023/05/26/video-games-in-the-classroom-and-the-non-western-world/>.

⁷ I find the underlying idea of my approach is very similar with that of James Harry Morris, who uses an interactive storytelling software *Twine* to generate small-scale games and shares his experience online <https://digitalorientalist.com/2019/05/27/historical-storytelling-with-twine/> (accessed Jul 31, 2024). I find the use of PowerPoint slides are even simpler and adequate for my own micro games though, and it does not require any coding.

Your father is Kumārāyana, an Indian prince, son of a high minister from Gandhara, who left Gandhara to pursue his studies of Buddhism in Kucha.

Your mother is Jīva, a princess of Kucha and a devout Buddhist woman...”

Maps and succinct historical accounts are also inserted into slides to set up the context of Central Asia and China at the time. As the life of Kumārajīva unfolds, students need to make choices facing important events based upon Kumārajīva’s biography, with the slides presenting questions such as, “Your mother now decides to join a nunnery while you are still a small child, what are you going to do after learning about her decision?” “The Chinese warlord Lü Guang wants to force you to break your vow of celibacy by getting you married. What’s your response?” “Your fellow monks and disciples see that you are living with women now; they start imitating you by sleeping with women and breaking their vows. What are you going to say and do to these monks?”, etc. For each question, I give students a few options to choose from and we will go with the one that gets the most raised hands. However, this is meant to be a simple game, and I do not develop multiple full-blown storylines: the “wrong” option will end up with a slide asking students to “TRY AGAIN”, bringing them back to the main storyline, which follows the narrative in the transmitted biography of Kumārajīva.

I find such 15-minute mini simulation games beneficial on several fronts. It helps me recapture students’ attention. I usually do it in the middle of a class when students start to lose their concentration. The reframing of historical accounts into a mini game usually grabs their attention immediately, enlivens the classroom, and directs them to actively process the information as they participate in decision-making. It renders historical accounts interactive and engages students on a deeper level as they

imagine themselves to be a historical figure, inevitably comparing their own decisions with those of the person in question. It also sparks more curiosity and brings meaningful discussions as the game segues into the points I want to bring up. This one about Kumārajīva, for example, naturally leads to discussions on the interaction between religion and war, translations as politically significant projects, the role of women in the transmission of Buddhism, and more.

2. Embodying Religious Practices

Experiential learning often emphasizes students' sensory engagement, instead of relying entirely on rational and cognitive transmission of conceptual and abstract information. Scholarship in the field of religious studies in the past few decades has generally recognized the significance of embodied experiences in religious traditions. Religious lives of people past and present have been largely practice-based instead of text-based, with rituals themselves serving as examples of multi-sensory practices. In this sense, to teach about religions only textually and conceptually might be like teaching music only through the reading and analyzing of notated scores, without having students actually listen to the music. However, as noted by Katherine C. Zubko in her article advocating the engagement of senses in religious studies courses, there is still "a huge dissonance" between the development of disciplinary scholarship and the actual teaching that happens in entry-level classrooms, where "written and verbal discursive analysis" is still emphasized.⁸ Thinking about how to incorporate

⁸ Katherine C. Zubko, "Bringing the Introduction to Religious Studies Course to Its Senses," in *Teaching Critical Religious Studies: Pedagogy and Critique in the Classroom*, ed. Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, Beverley McGuire, and Hussein Rashid (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 18–21.

embodied practices into Buddhism courses is thus important for effectively translating scholarship into classroom learning.

One form of embodied practice that instructors of Buddhism inevitably discuss in their classes is meditation, but deciding how to teach it can be a tricky matter. University instructors vary in their approaches to meditation in Buddhism courses, from those who give extensive sessions of meditation to those who prefer a critical examination of related texts without offering any experience of meditation. The concern here is obvious: how to draw a line between academic study and religious proselytizing in teaching such practices?⁹

Instructors have proposed ways of dealing with such concerns. For example, Roger R. Jackson suggests the elimination of the religious framing of Buddhist meditation to “focus solely on the main practice,” such as the observation of breath, resting of the mind, or the analysis of internal and external phenomena.¹⁰ Beverley McGuire proposes “analogous activities” in her Chinese Religions courses, where she asks her students to carry out practices such as social rituals, singing and mindfulness meditation after class and to keep a journal of their reflection upon those practices. These practices are designed to be “analogous” secular activities, which are inspired by religious practices, sharing some underlying

⁹ Some related debates and discussions can be seen in Candy Gunther Brown, “Can ‘Secular’ Mindfulness Be Separated from Religion?,” in *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement*, ed. Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, and Adam Burke (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 75–94; Sid Brown, “Invitation and Coercion in Contemplative Pedagogy,” in *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, ed. Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Gloria I.-Ling Chien, “Integrating Contemplative and Ignatian Pedagogies in a Buddhist Studies Classroom,” *Religions* 11, no. 11 (November 2020): 567.

¹⁰ Roger R. Jackson, “Teaching Nāgārjuna,” in *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, ed. Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis (Oxford University Press, 2016), 39.

pattern with them, but experienced in secular settings with non-religious goals.¹¹

The approach I take regarding meditation practice is also “analogous” in this sense, but a bit different in its implementation. In the classroom, we first read together an excerpt from a primary Buddhist text on meditation: short sections from *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* or *the Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime* by Zhiyi (538-597 CE) can work here. After finishing the close-reading, I ask students to work in small groups of 3 to 5 to write a script for a guided meditation based upon the text we just read, and they need to think about how to make it intelligible and easy to follow. We compare their written scripts and complete a final version together based on them. Then, students experience a guided meditation of their own generation as I read aloud this final version.

Such a meditation session would be different from what Buddhist practitioners actually do, and students can come up with varied understandings of what a text means when embodied. For example, when *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* says “...perceiving again and again the body as just the body,” what does it mean experientially? How to evoke an experience of “the body as just the body?” And what might be the purpose of doing so? Students’ responses vary, and the goal of the class is not to teach them the “right” way of meditating, but to enable their own exploration of their embodied existence with inspiration from Buddhism. They also come to understand the gap between text and experience through their own attempts to embody what was written, and how the ambiguity derived from that gap can lead to different experiences in practice.

In fact, with the popularization and commercialization of meditation—and particularly, mindfulness—in contemporary Western societies,

¹¹ Beverley McGuire, “Analogous Activities: Tools for Thinking Comparatively in Religious Studies Courses,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 22, no. 2 (2019): 114.

many students have had some encounters with it. Most have heard about or seen meditation in the media, and some have been doing occasional or even regular sessions through various apps. I find that the activity above can also lead students to reflect upon the continuous re-interpretation of traditions in new contexts. What are the connections and dissonances between modernized meditation and traditional forms? How and why did meditation come to be the way it is in contemporary Western societies? Designing their own meditation based upon a primary text and trying it out, students gain a direct experience of how traditions can be re-interpreted in new contexts.

3. Experiencing Concepts Creatively

When teaching about abstract concepts that invite diverse interpretations, I find that generating creative experience can be an effective way of deepening student engagement with them. One method I use for this purpose is to have students illustrate an abstract concept or an idea more concretely through creative forms, with accompanying verbal explanations. Through such activities, they can discover their own ways to play with a concept, in addition to the usual textual analysis.

One example from my upper-level seminar is students' illustrations of the Buddhist concept of "suchness" through photography. The idea of "suchness" appears frequently in the writing of East Asian Buddhist masters,¹² and students find it somewhat evasive. Of course, it can be simply explained as "as it is," but what exactly does this "as it is" mean? It can also be explained as the ultimate state of reality or truth that Buddhist practitioners seek through meditation, or as how an enlightened

¹² See, e.g., Taigen Dan Leighton, "Dongshan and the Teaching of Suchness," in *Zen Masters*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale Wright (Oxford University Press, 2010), 33–58.

master might see the world, or as an expression of buddha-nature, etc., but again, what does this mean experientially? As this “suchness” is supposedly an experience connected to Buddhist awakening, I could also resort to a quite standard explanation that it refers to something “beyond words and letters.” However, both my students and I would find such an approach unsatisfactory. While there is not a dearth of primary texts and secondary scholarship expounding this concept, they may not be very inspiring for my undergraduate students, none of whom intended to become specialists in the field of Buddhist Studies.

Chan Masters had their own ways of dealing with the ineffable. For one thing, they wrote poems imbued with imagery and metaphors, which could supposedly evoke some momentary access into that experience, providing readers glimpses of the perfect and ultimate truth. Those poems are filled with images of the moon, lakes, rivers, clouds, snowy open fields, traces of birds, transient dew, etc., which are deeply embedded within the Chinese linguistic context. Here, the linguistic and cultural barriers are both limiting and stimulating: as my students usually do not have much exposure to traditional Chinese literature, their understanding of those Chan poems sometimes may sound “off-track” to someone familiar with those poetic tropes. At the same time, their interpretations can also be refreshing, which in some way even echoes the warnings of some Chan Masters, who were concerned that their words might become repeated clichés and conceptual traps.

Following our verbal discussion of the concept and related Chan poems, I asked the students to take a 20-minute walk on campus themselves, giving attentive awareness to what they see and using their phones to take three photos that they feel could best illustrate the Buddhist idea of “suchness,” and then to come back to show the class. Students were excited to do this. They brought back both inspiring images and individual feelings to share, like moment of a white dove just taking off from the

expanse of a dull flat roof, the glittering reflection of the setting-sun on the glassy face of a high-rise projected onto a busy road, a spiral staircase presenting an illusion of being never-ending, and the blurry shadow of one's self-portrait seen from a tinted window... Students talked about how the scenes struck them and moved them to take these shots, and how those visual moments could evoke the idea of "suchness" by showing the contrasts between reality and illusion, transiency and eternity, existence and non-existence, etc., and particularly, how they could foreground the extraordinary in the ordinary. We eventually decided to set up a mini exhibition with these photos right outside our department office, entitled "Suchness on Campus."

Admittedly, there is no way I can claim whether a student's photo reflects the "right" experience of the Buddhist "suchness" or not. I am not an enlightened Chan Master engaged in mind-to-mind transmission, whatever that might mean. But I think the lesson here in an undergraduate course, particularly for non-specialist students, is to understand the interpretative and experiential potential of such a concept, which continues to enable new experience in new contexts. This can also be applied to many other religious concepts that address the ineffable and the ultimate. The learning of such a concept is not just for students to write a paper or expand their pool of knowledge, but also to find new ways of seeing, interacting and engaging with the world around them, i.e., new ways of experiencing the connection between themselves and the world.

This method of rendering Buddhist ideas through creative media can be used for different course content. In my introductory Buddhism class, for example, I ask students to make a drawing of the Buddhist cosmos in small groups, based upon a textual description. After they finish, we compare their drawings with artworks of the Buddhist cosmos from different time periods and places, discussing how and why different artists may choose to emphasize some elements and dismiss others. As the

students also need to make choices in their own drawing, such experience makes the discussion more engaged and meaningful.

Conclusion

When I initially became interested in experiential learning, I thought about it as something special, more in the form of an extra addition to my normal course plan. However, as I started to consciously prepare classes from an experiential perspective, I gradually realized that it can also be actualized as an integral part of standard classroom learning through easy-to-implement activities like those discussed above. To stretch one step further from this realization, sometimes it does not even need to be an “activity” *per se*: the way we ask questions itself can frame students’ thinking process in an experiential direction. For example, after introducing the life of the Buddha as in the standard account of the “Twelve Acts,” I ask students, “If you were a director making a film of the life of the Buddha, which aspects from the ‘Twelve Acts’ would you highlight, and which would you downplay? Are there other things you want to add to your film besides those mentioned in the ‘Twelve Acts’?” Such questions temporarily direct students to the experience of another role and encourage them to think from this new perspective. When we subsequently go through different representations of the Buddha’s life from Gandharan reliefs to a contemporary novel written from the viewpoint of the Buddha’s wife,¹³ the artistic choices revealed in those works become more relatable after the students themselves have imaginatively assume a creator’s role. In this sense, experiential learning can also be approached as a consciousness underlying course planning and execution, which constantly

¹³ Vanessa R. Sasson, *Yasodhara: A Novel About the Buddha’s Wife* (Speaking Tiger, 2018).

reminds us to frame teaching in ways that can cultivate more engaging and meaningful experiences.

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Notes on the Contributor

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