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“No Time” Assignments: A Spiritual Perspective in Teacher Education

Abstract
In this observational and reflective essay, I would like to discuss my experience with a type of assignment offered for educators in a holistic and integrative masters program who are interested in professional growth. I call this a “No Time” assignment and have found this type of assignment to be powerful in facilitating teacher growth, reasonably easy to formulate, and requiring little time outside of the educator’s normal activities. In this essay I will (1) briefly summarize a framework for the essence of a “No Time” assignment based on a perspective of spirituality in education, (2) describe the basic components of a “No Time” assignment, and (3) further clarify “No Time” assignments through examples from my work integrating the assignments into course work for the MA in Education, Holistic and Integrative Education program.

Keywords
holistic education, integrative education, spirituality

Author Statement
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In this observational and reflective essay, I would like to discuss my experience with a type of assignment offered for educators in a holistic and integrative masters program who are interested in professional growth. I call this a “No Time” assignment and have found this type of assignment to be powerful in facilitating teacher growth, reasonably easy to formulate, and requiring little time outside of the educator's normal activities. In this essay I will (1) briefly summarize a framework for the essence of a “No Time” assignment based on a perspective of spirituality in education, (2) describe the basic components of a “No Time” assignment, and (3) further clarify “No Time” assignments through examples from my work integrating the assignments into course work for the MA in Education, Holistic and Integrative Education program.

Framework
A major focus of my research for the last several years has been the implications of a spiritual perspective for K – 12 public education. It should be noted that by a spiritual perspective I mean a perspective that would be judged consistent with the essence of a variety of spiritual traditions, a holistic philosophy, and the implications of the new sciences; that is, a perspective that is not dependent on a specific religious or spiritual tradition or belief, and is reasonably consistent with current progressive educational theory (see for a more detailed explanation of this type of perspective). A key concept underlying a “No Time” assignment comes from my experience as a student and teacher in a holistic spiritual tradition for over thirty years. In that tradition, there is a guideline that when we speak about our experience, we try to speak about our observations versus our reflections. For the purposes of this article, the difference between a reflection and an observation is that a reflection generally means that we reflect back on our experience, whereas an observation refers to what we actually observed in the moment. As defined, an observation requires some degree of presence in the moment so that we actually “see” our experience (in Buddhist terms, are mindful), versus just remembering the experience. At this point, I will give one example from my experience working with educators to clarify the difference between a reflection and an observation. In one assignment teachers were asked to focus on listening attentively. Later, I will go into more detail concerning the task, but what is useful to note here is that a common comment in their papers for the assignment was something like, “I thought I listened well; was I surprised.” I would suggest that if I had asked the teachers to take time in class to reflect on their experience of listening attentively during the past week, then that type of comment would be less common. I would add
that in thirty plus years experience as a student and teacher in a holistic spiritual tradition, I have seen the quality of discussions based primarily on observations versus reflections. I should add that I am not downplaying the importance of reflection in teacher education and growth. Reflection is clearly superior to not reflecting on our experience, and can be the basis for a change in our awareness of our teaching patterns and the foundation for significant professional growth. In fact, in our MA program, we consistently require reflection from our students. What I am suggesting is that observation can be a powerful tool for teacher growth that should be integrated into our work with educators.

**Format**

In this section, I will give you one example of a “No Time” assignment and briefly comment on the components of the assignment. Here are the instructions for the first “No Time” assignment:

Individual “No Time” assignment, Eighth cohort, 2/19/05:

This assignment requires no time beyond your normal activities, except for less than 30 minutes to write up your observations.

Task: The goal for this task is to notice any patterns concerning your ability to listen attentively to others. Your task for the following two weeks is to attempt to listen attentively (when appropriate) to your colleagues, students and other people in your life, and notice any patterns in your attempts to listen and the nature and quality of your listening, including factors that make attentive listening more difficult, and factors that make attentive listening easier.

Clarifications:

1. Be aware of situations in which in your opinion attentive listening is not appropriate (e.g., inappropriate behavior that needs to end immediately) and notice any patterns in the nature of the situations.
2. Initially, observe your feelings and thoughts, but do not try to suppress or change them; i.e., if you notice yourself not listening attentively, allow yourself to nonjudgmentally observe the feeling/thought (i.e., don’t judge it as good or bad) before refocusing on attentive listening.
3. Make any adjustments to the directions that make you feel more comfortable (e.g., only try the experiment one hour a day), or allow you to explore the task more deeply (e.g., purposely put yourself in a situation in which you typically do not listen attentively with the intention to listen attentively).

Write up: Approximately one to two days before the next class, take no more than 30 minutes to write up your observations concerning the task, include any implications for your teaching. I prefer typewritten, but will accept handwritten for this assignment. In most cases, your write up will be less than one full page.

Comments: (1) Before the first “No Time” assignment, I spend some time (usually in the context of a short experiential activity) making sure that the student understands the difference between a reflection and an observation. In addition, I clarify the difference in the processing of each “No
Time” assignment, using examples of likely observations from the students. (2) Time is required initially and in the processing of each assignment to emphasize the need for being nonjudgmental concerning our patterns, and noticing that we all have patterns that we do not like to recognize. (3) In the processing, I like to emphasize the use of “skillful means,” especially helping them discriminate between experiments that are within an optimal range of dissonance, and experiments that are destined to be frustrating or not meaningful. (4) We process the assignments in a number of ways: students share their observations in small groups; whole class discussion; and collecting and commenting on their written summary.

I will share some excerpts from students’ papers on “Listening Attentively” that give a better sense of the power of the assignments. A few insightful observations: “In this argumentative conversation I was thinking of what I was going to say next rather than attentively listening;” “I really wasn’t just listening. I was constantly thinking about my behavior;” “I found that noise and exhaustion were factors that often made it difficult to focus;” “I found that I will be trying to listen to one person but will be trying to hear what is going on with the other people around me and end up not listening to either;”

A number of students shared “success” stories in the process of completing the assignment. For example, one student shared her experience with an interfaith group that was talking negatively about another member of the group – she noticed her feelings of discomfort and “pointed out that being an interfaith group and talking about love, compassion and understanding… maybe we should try our love, compassion and understanding with this lady…. The lady was approached in a very different manner in the next couple of days, no one fed into her negativity and she began to approach us with a more positive attitude.” Another student reported, “It even appeared that by me listening [versus a nonproductive pattern] and not letting him go on tangents that he was becoming much more succinct in his explanations.” Finally, one teacher shared his experiment of trying to listen attentively to disrupting students instead of “lecturing them” and “discovered a lot about my students I did not know. In one instance, “I continued to listen to him for 10 minutes and since that conversation he has been an angel in my class. I truly feel that he felt heard and that all he needed was someone to simply listen.”

Students also noticed examples of when attentive listening may not be the best option. For example, one teacher noticed that when she tried to listen attentively without interrupting to certain students during whole class instruction, “other students in the class would stop working to focus on the conversation, or take advantage of the fact that my focus was on a particular student [to act inappropriately].’

One student captured the essence of the experience of many students, “This assignment has taught me the importance of attentive listening. I was forced to focus on my ability or inability to listen. This task was a great eye opener to me.”

The fact that the processing of the assignment focuses on observations deepens the understandings that result from the assignment. For example, in the processing, we realized that listening actively
can a positive experience even when we do not like the other person or are not interested in the
topic of the discussion. We realized that in some situations, active listening is not appropriate – what
is more important is that we decide to not listen attentively, versus not listening due to habitual
patterns. In some of the assignments, the negative experience of the teacher that is typical of the
group becomes a basis for a productive discussion of what alternatives were available to the teacher,
and an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what effective teaching means in practice.
Other “No Time” assignments include: complete at least one act per day that you feel might
“change the world in a positive way;” “Not Doing” (e.g., not allowing yourself to automatically react
in a certain habitual way); “Reading the World,” based on the concept discussed in a book on critical
pedagogy; “Nourishing Our Inner World and Our Outer World of Service;” “Thinking with Yes,”
based on a short article suggesting the experiment, “So, first find out whether you can say ‘Yes’, if it
is impossible to say ‘Yes’, only then say ‘No.’” After we completed a few, students generated
possible assignments that became the basis for actual assignments they completed.
In conclusion, I believe “No Time” assignments can be an effective supplement to our education
courses that give the students an opportunity to clearly see their patterns in teaching, experiment
with those patterns in a supportive atmosphere, and understand commonalities of experience, as
well as alternative patterns. In addition, the assignments are not burdensome, and allow them to
connect their day-to-day experiences with the concepts covered in class.