

Article

# “Deep Listening” in Buddhist Studies: Teaching and Learning during a Pandemic

Frances Garrett \* and Sophie Chase

Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5R 2M8, Canada; sophie.chase@mail.utoronto.ca

\* Correspondence: frances.garrett@utoronto.ca

**Abstract:** Co-authored between a professor and student, this essay discusses how an experiential learning assignment of “deep listening” was integrated into an online course on histories of Buddhist meditation. Paired with a group art project, the work provided not only an opportunity to practice critical communication skills, but also a sense of connection and community, which is especially important during the conditions of pandemic isolation. The course design relied on pedagogical principles specifically aimed at supporting student well-being, such as trauma-informed teaching. We reflect on how grounding course design in inclusive, anti-oppressive and care-focused principles may enable new outcomes in teaching and learning beyond this pandemic year.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Studies; meditation; trauma-informed pedagogy; student well-being; experiential learning; online teaching; deep listening; anti-racism; contemplative pedagogy



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## 1. Introduction

The “deep listening” assignment discussed here was conducted during a winter 2021 University of Toronto course on Buddhist meditation and race in North America. This essay is co-authored by the course instructor, Frances Garrett, and an undergraduate student enrolled in the course, Sophie Chase. Frances Garrett teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Buddhist Studies, Tibetan Studies, and Tibetan Language in the Department for the Study of Religion. Sophie Chase is a fourth-year undergraduate student majoring in Sociology and minoring in Forest Conservation Science and Environmental Biology, who will be attending law school after graduating. Although the two authors interacted asynchronously online throughout this semester, Frances Garrett and Sophie Chase have never met in person. They have composed this essay after more than a year of pandemic isolation in Toronto, with local COVID-19 cases at an all-time high at the time of writing, and the city in its third phase of lockdown. In the following pages, Frances Garrett provides an overview of the course and her approach to course design under these exceptional circumstances, and then Sophie Chase offers her own experience and analysis of the deep listening practices she undertook for the course. They write in the first person in their respective sections of this essay. In a concluding section, Frances Garrett explores how grounding course design in inclusive and care-focused pedagogical principles may enable new outcomes in teaching and learning beyond this pandemic year.

## 2. Overview of the Course, “Buddhist Meditation and Race in North America”

This third-year undergraduate course, newly developed and taught for the first time in the winter semester of 2021 by me, Frances Garrett, focused on the role of race in histories of Buddhist meditation in North America. With the University of Toronto operating online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was developed as an asynchronous online course. Over the 12-week semester, 54 students examined how Buddhist meditation practices, including mindfulness, have been shaped by and have contributed to forces such as colonialism, Orientalism, capitalism, and white supremacy in the last hundred years or

so in North America. We set the foundations for the semester with what I called Unit 0, in which students learned fundamental concepts of anti-racism and intersectionality by attending an online Coursera course entitled “Anti-Racism 1”. In this engaging and well-produced 12-h introduction to critical race theory, students learned how to think about concepts of “whiteness” and white privilege, how to distinguish between being not racist and being anti-racist, and how to define systemic and institutional racism, among other topics.

After Unit 0, the course was built around 2-week “case study” units at the beginning and end of the semester, in which students studied two prominent American Buddhist teachers, Lama Rod Owens and Ruth King, reading selections of their writings and listening to podcast interviews and videos featuring each author. We started the semester with the 2020 book *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger* by Lama Rod Owens, a practitioner and teacher who writes about working with anger using Buddhist ideas and practices, and our final unit, at the end of the semester, featured Ruth King (2018) and her book, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out*. Both texts are engaging and candid explorations of how mindfulness and other Buddhist practices can be used in anti-racism work.

In the weeks between modules on the work of these two influential Black Buddhist leaders, we studied how Buddhist meditation practices were transformed as they moved into North America. Reading works by Joseph Cheah, Ann Gleig, Wakoh Shannon Hickey, Sharon A. Suh and others, we explored how forces such as colonialism, Orientalism, capitalism, modernity, and white supremacy shaped (and continue to shape) the development of Buddhism in North America. Some of our readings traced how mindfulness was channeled into “scientific” psychology and medicine, which was then largely marketed to affluent white people (Hickey 2019). Other readings addressed how some forms of postmodern and postcolonial forms of North American Buddhism are embracing pluralism and diversity, and how they are unearthing voices of individuals and communities who have been historically marginalized or oppressed. We learned about how the contemporary mindfulness movement has in some cases diverted attention away from systemic drivers of racism, sexism, or poverty, but we also heard from influential Buddhist teachers today, such as Lama Rod Owens, Ruth King, Sebene Selassie and others, who are carefully and powerfully reorienting Buddhist practices such as mindfulness toward social justice.

### 3. Frances Garrett’s Approach to Course Design during a Pandemic

Because many of the materials and topics of this course are quite difficult emotionally, all the more so after many months into a pandemic and given the disturbing escalation of both anti-Black and anti-Asian racism across North America, I designed coursework that aimed to help students navigate their schoolwork and lives with as much support and compassion as possible. Students this semester were dealing with an unusual level of stress, their lives more complicated than ever as they dealt with repeated mandatory pandemic lockdowns and the resulting experiences of loneliness, illness, or fear of illness, plus the challenges of online learning and the rise in racist violence and media attention to racism. Course content that focused on racism and the effects of white supremacy could never be easy, but this year, with stress levels already running very high, it was essential to give careful attention to course design that attended to student well-being.

Each week students did readings, listened to an audio lecture by me and by the author of the week, and watched a video interview or lecture with the author if available. They then completed a short, online, written reflection, to which I responded. My own “lectures” were provided as audio-only files, and I strongly encouraged students to listen while walking outside. In 2020–2021, students and faculty alike have spent more time than ever on screens. Walking outside can be strongly health enhancing, and I offered research on how walking can enhance creative thinking and problem-solving (e.g., Chatterjee 2019). Another assigned project throughout the semester involved creating a personalized self-care plan, following a protocol developed by the University of Buffalo School of Social Work

(Butler and McClain-Meeder 2015). For this assignment, which was worth 15% of their final grade (and which they self-graded), they studied a set of resources and conducted self-assessments in which they identified for themselves what they value and need daily in order to create what the protocol calls a “maintenance self-care plan”. Students also developed a set of specialized approaches that they could call upon in a crisis, which was referred to as their “emergency self-care plan”.

The remaining coursework was a project called “Speaking Out and Listening In”, and it is this component of the course that is the basis for the current essay. The main part of this project asked students to conduct four conversations with two different people: in two cases they would mainly be listening, and in two cases they would mainly be speaking. I did not ask them to engage in any particular topic of conversation, and their conversations were not required to be about the course material; the objective of the assignment was to observe and analyze only the experience of listening deeply and being listened to by another. After each pair of conversations, in which they were asked to practice actively witnessing their thoughts and emotions while maintaining focused attention on what they were hearing or on how it felt to be heard, they wrote an extensive analysis of the experience. Sophie Chase’s contribution to this essay, below, is a condensed version of her written work for this assignment. Before conducting their first conversations, students reviewed variations of deep listening practice in different contexts. These included the practice of “bearing witness” as it appears in socially engaged Zen Buddhism, the “listening circle” practices that are important in many Indigenous communities, and practices known as “embodied listening” (Dixit et al. 2020; Rome and Martin 2017; Weaver 2018). They reviewed resources provided by the Listen First project, which has a concise list of tips as well as a longer guide (Listen First Project 2021). They read a book chapter on “Dismantling Privilege with Mindful Listening” by Beth Berila (2015), from her book, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy*, and the role of deep listening in anti-racist work was also addressed by two featured books for our course, Lama Rod Owens’ *Love and Rage* and Ruth King’s *Mindful of Race*. In addition to these materials, students watched an example of deep listening as part of the Coursera Anti-Racism 1 course they took in the first week of the semester, and a very short example of myself listening to my son speaking about an incident of ableism he experienced as a university student (Garrett 2020).

In their written analyses following each pair of conversations, I asked students to discuss the process of preparing for the conversations, describing what resources they had studied and how they prepared their conversation partner for what they were about to do. They were asked to reflect on the feelings, attitudes and concerns they had before the first conversation, commenting on whether they felt worried or stressed about it, thought it would be easy, or felt as though it was something they had experienced before. I did not ask them to share the content of their conversations, both to respect privacy and also to emphasize that it was the process of conversing and not the content of conversation that was to be analyzed. However, they were asked to describe the format of each conversation, noting whether it was in person or online, with someone they knew or a stranger. They then analyzed the experience of listening, noting what went through their minds and how their bodies felt, and how they felt immediately afterwards and a couple days later with more reflection. The experience of being listened to while speaking was then analyzed in a similar way. Finally, students reflected on the exercise in light of readings from the course. In the next section, you will read Sophie Chase’s detailed and thoughtful analysis of her experiences with this assignment, written more or less in the way it was submitted for this assignment.

The second component of “Speaking Out and Listening In” involved the creation of an individual artwork, each piece of which came together into a group art project. Following the model of the online project at postsecret.com, students created art in which they anonymously shared a secret. My original intention was to assemble these as a physical mural on campus, although by the end of the semester we were still in lockdown in Toronto and campus buildings were not easily accessible. I instead created a group

mural online at <https://speak-listen.live/> (accessed on 5 April 2021), and students were asked to view the group project and reflect on that experience. I will say a bit about student reactions to this assignment at the end of this essay. I would like now to turn to Sophie Chase's work.

#### 4. Sophie Chase's Experience of the "Speaking Out and Listening In" Practice

Positioning myself as a white woman, I (Sophie Chase) think it is important to state that in this course I have learned practices and perspectives of Buddhism, spirituality, and mindfulness from many whose traditional culture and heritage is represented in these practices. I have also learned how harmful colonization and appropriation has been to these practices, marketing and exploiting traditional notions of spirituality in a sanitized way for white audiences, while also inhibiting peoples from whom these practices were stolen from participating themselves. I acknowledge that these processes are ongoing, and in this way, I would like to say that all of the notions I discuss here are not new, as they find their roots in forms of Buddhism, a religion and culture which is not my own. To this effect I would like to highlight Lama Rod Owens, a Buddhist teacher, whose work has deeply inspired the formation of my reflection on the "Speaking Out and Listening In" practice, as outlined below.

In thinking about this assignment, I was struck by a quote from the article "How to Listen Deeply: A Guide for Organizations" (Dixit et al. 2020), which says that deep listening "means not assuming we know how someone feels, and not filtering the speaker's experience through the lens of our own experiences". This is so often an attempt to be helpful, and I am certainly guilty of this. Lama Rod Owens (2020) writes about attempting to understand himself first before trying to understand others, because in order to offer his support and knowledge, he must first understand his own biases and limitations. Learning from Lama Rod Owens, I think it is important for deep listening to come from a place of self-love and self-acceptance. In this way one can avoid placing one's own unrealized biases onto another, a practice which could result in harm and the possible perpetuation of colonizing understandings.

In preparation for my conversations, I especially valued two tips from the Listen First Project (2021): "Listen to and consider others' views before sharing your own" and "Be present and curious rather than thinking of how to respond". In the past, I have struggled with these things. I am sometimes an anxious speaker, and I'm often asking myself: "Do I sound intelligent? Am I participating adequately?" These readings helped me to see the negative effects of this attitude. I also reviewed work by Dixit et al. (2020) and Weaver (2018) on how mindfulness and deep listening can and should be incorporated into workplace relationships. I found these texts interesting for reflection, particularly in terms of my own work environment at a law firm, which can be a rushed workplace with little time for careful conversation. I thought about how conversation, relationships, and productivity would be more effective if people felt heard and as though they had a chance to speak.

In reviewing David Rome's (2010) essay in *Mindful*, I worried about his distinction between a "poor listener" and a "good listener", which to me seems reductive and harsh. I would prefer a more positive spin, something along the lines of a "developing listener" or a "learning listener". Practices such as this require a lot of vulnerability, and support is crucial. Aside from this, I did appreciate this essay's use of "deep listening" instead of "active listening", the former emphasizing a contemplative, personal, and empathetic type of listening, as opposed to the repetition promoted in "active listening". Deep listening promotes more effective self-awareness and self-reflection. Despite some reservations about this essay, particularly in light of Ann Gleig's (2019) critique of the mindfulness movement as well as issues of accessibility and commodification, I did appreciate the essay's emphasis on working with not only the emotional, spiritual, cognitive, or intellectual components of conversational relationships, but also attending to physical components. This approach could help us to be more aware of how we hold ourselves and how we approach others,

how we experience the presence of those around us, and how we describe what we feel and where we feel it, in this way, addressing what it means to feel something “in one’s gut”.

In explaining the assignment to my conversation partner, I aimed for transparency and honesty. I did worry about whether knowing so much about the assignment would make my conversation partner feel more uncomfortable or overwhelmed by the task, but overall, I felt that my partner would benefit from being aware of the practice’s dimensions and effects. Along these lines, I hoped that if my conversation partner knew about the literature on this practice, they might also be able to get more out of the experience. So, I shared the resources, and we had a conversation about them.

Because I had planned to conduct my first set of conversations with my partner, with whom I live and feel comfortable and safe, I was not too worried beforehand about this form of honest and vulnerable sharing. I knew that talking with them would feel natural, although I was not quite sure how to ease into this particular conversation in a way that would not seem forced. I believe I include deep listening in many aspects of my everyday conversations (at least those that last long enough). On reflection, I recall that my mom fostered deep listening in our family, especially between me and my younger brother. In this way, I think that I am quite adept at sympathetic or empathetic listening, although there are aspects of deep listening that I need to work on. I find that I often catch myself thinking of the next thing I want to say, while still “listening” to what my conversation partner is saying. This suggests that I am likely not fully appreciating what my partner is saying to me. Prior to my first conversation, I made note of this limitation and others, including a tendency to interject and interrupt with my own comments if I feel passionate or opinionated about a subject, as well as a tendency to tune out when I am not so interested. I am not proud of these attributes, but I think the key is to recognize weakness and then to pay attention and continually work on these traits, until doing better becomes second nature. In considering all of this, I went into the conversations for this assignment with my limitations in mind and took this as an opportunity to try to be aware of my weaknesses in real time and give my partner my full attention and focus.

I live in a basement apartment with my partner and our cat. Because our space is so small, we are always communicating in deep debate, irritated snips, or loving affirmation. This assignment was interestingly different. Usually our conversations are dynamic, back and forth, so this opportunity was quite special, giving both of us the chance to speak freely and be fully heard. Each conversation progressed in an arc, a little slow at first, then picking up, the speaker really flourishing, speaking fully and uninterrupted, and then slowing down. While the conversations were happening, I did not feel impatient at all, which was special because I often feel so busy with school and work. My life is sometimes little more than rushing around. Setting aside this time to check in with myself and with my partner felt so special simply due to the connection it offered us. Interestingly, as it was part of the assignment to set aside time for this discussion, I was able to associate a more tangible form of “productivity” with this conversation from the start. This accessible entry allowed me to really experience positive effects from the conversation, even though I had never spoken or listened in this form before. Thus, moving into the first conversation I felt relaxed, comfortable, and open to furthering the discussion, really being in the moment. Given this realization, I feel motivated to make this practice of setting aside time for conversation a more common occurrence in my life. I hoped to see further how this type of conversation could be productive, even when not tied to schoolwork. I felt that this experience would not only be positive for me, my self-awareness and self-love, but for the people in my life as well. Notably, from this first discussion I also realized how critical compassion is to conversation. You cannot fully understand another’s opinion or perspective without seeing them as someone with the capacity for vulnerability. As such, I paid extra attention to compassion throughout my discussion, employing the tenets of deep listening to enhance my understanding of using empathy within conversation.

Throughout this first conversation my responses were less rushed than in a typical conversation with a friend, and I felt less pressured to interject or say anything at all. As

a result, I noticed that the conversation had less to do with me and more to do with my partner. I really just had the chance to listen and be present; I was not wandering or drifting off, I was not performing a smile and remembering to nod, or making sure to ask questions, worrying about what to say next. As a result, my responses came more naturally, as I was just thriving in the experience of watching and appreciating my partner's moment. In this way, I watched my partner progress in their own dialogue, almost as though they were conversing with themselves, allowing their thoughts to flow from one to the next without interruption. It was beautiful to almost be a mediator or onlooker to the conversation, to be so present as well as so peripheral. After the conversation I felt so connected, which was special during the pandemic, as connection has been so difficult and hard to obtain. I also felt a desire to reflect, think and build, and then to gain new perspectives around my own opinions and biases. I tried to be open in self-awareness, letting go of biases and judgements about what my partner had communicated. I also reflected on how it could be possible—without reducing my own sense of self—to take in alternative perspectives and understand them against my own, with the possibility of altering my own opinions and perspectives if I saw fit.

When it was my turn to speak, I noticed that although I feel comfortable with my partner, I still fidgeted, played with my hands, cracked my knuckles, and moved my hair while talking. For me these actions express nervousness, and for the sake of developing my own self-love and self-confidence, I want to work towards overcoming these movements, aside internalizing my own worth and value. That said, being listened to, turned towards, looked at, and affirmed with a head nod or an "I agree" or a "that sounds good" were all extremely validating. Validation is an interesting emotion: it goes to your head and your heart in equal measures, making you feel worthy in the knowledge you have to offer but also in your whole being, as though you have a place and a purpose. This reflection brings me to the notion that there is a place and time for everything, and maybe that should reflect how I am feeling and what I am going through. That is, I would like to start connecting my emotions and experiences with the particular type of conversation that I might need. Do I need to talk something out with someone? Or do I just need to speak and be listened to, in a sense almost talking something out with myself?

In concluding, I find myself always coming back to Lama Rod Owens saying that he arrives at talks or conferences from a place of trying to understand himself. He says he must first understand his own struggle before he can impart knowledge to others, or else he would be colonizing them. I would like to keep reflecting on what it means to give advice and to listen and share, but to also be completely open and not impress my own views on others. Beth Berila's (2015) work also brings these ideas directly to post-secondary education and the experience of the university student. I appreciated her attention to intersectional feminism and the problems of systemic oppression, and how her teachings on mindful listening can play a role here. I also respected Berila's (2014) suggestion that the value of deep listening goes beyond oneself, moving outwards to interpersonal and group levels. In this way I connected our exercise of deep listening to future practices of my own that may involve listening as a group, speaking as a group, or general conversation within a group. I valued Berila's discussion of how privilege accounts for defensiveness in conversation with one or many others, and how mindfulness can help us recognize and reflect on this defensiveness, helping white people to understand how we profit from privilege and use it to oppress others. Lastly, I appreciated Berila's discussion of the "pause"; that moment between listening and speaking. Normalizing a pause can help us habituate not thinking of a response while listening, and instead giving full attention to another speaker before taking time to form a response. Moreover, in taking a pause you give yourself the time to ask how you feel. This is especially important if you are having a conversation that provokes initial reactions of rage, anger, sadness, or annoyance, for example. Taking a pause allows you to ask *why* you feel a certain way and what is actually coming up. Pauses allow for more effective communication, and when

this type of mindfulness is integrated into conversation, we can become more self-aware and compassionate.

### 5. Reflecting on the Second Pair of Conversations

Going into the first conversation, I had assumed it would be relatively easy. I considered myself a fair conversationalist and an active listener. One of the biggest changes I made between the first and second conversation was letting go of these assumptions. Although I learned so much from the articles on deep listening when I first read them, I also took them as validation of what I already knew; in other words, I fit the ideas to what I already thought my strengths and weaknesses were, as opposed to expanding my sense of what my strengths and weaknesses could be. Only after the first conversation did I realize that I had in fact never experienced anything similar to this before. I had never really provided someone with all the space they needed to speak, nor had I ever really experienced that as a speaker. I realized how fast-paced typical conversations are, in comparison to this slower, more methodical, and intensely thoughtful form of sharing.

Therefore, as I moved into my second pair of conversations later in the semester, I tried to leave all preconceived notions and assumptions behind. I even tried to leave behind what I had learned from the first conversations: as this form of communication is so personal and individualized, I thought what was true in a conversation with one person would likely not apply to a conversation with a different person. I did make note of a few reminders from the first conversation: (1) that truly active listening means not forming my own thoughts or responses while my partner is speaking, and (2) to leave time for pauses, because not only is conversation allowed to be slow, at times it probably should be slow. I also reviewed the page of tips by the [Listen First Project \(2021\)](#) and was inspired by two suggestions: “Listen to and consider others’ views before sharing your own” and “Be present and curious rather than thinking of how to respond”. I think this consideration is often the overlooked step in active listening. To listen is one thing, but to sit with and consider your partner’s position and their journey is another thing entirely. The notion of curiosity also intrigued me. How could I foster curiosity but also listen actively without thinking of my own response? I felt that I should be curious to hear and consider my partner’s thoughts, opinions, and story, but this need not require asking questions to further the story based on my own assumptions and interests. Keeping these notes in mind, I moved forward into my second pair of conversations with the broadest form of curiosity I could muster.

As with the previous conversation, I sent my conversation partner the course materials and reviewed the content with them. I found that this method of educated discussion had worked effectively the first time. We discussed what we wished to get out of the conversations and how we hoped the conversations would impact us. This dialogue helped make the conversations our own, allowing us to flow through the experience not as an assignment but as a practice that we could implement in our own lives to maintain healthy connections and relationships. This time I felt more confident in my conversational abilities, although my goal for this experience was still to learn and develop, as I do not believe conversations are something you can fully master. Given that there are so many types of conversations and many types of people to converse with, one must be attentive, respectful, and open to input.

I had both conversations with my mom over Zoom. COVID-19 has made it really hard to communicate with family, and as frustrating as Zoom can be, I couldn’t imagine the pandemic without it. My mom talked a bit about her love/hate relationship with Zoom. She is an ESL teacher who has been teaching online for over a year now. She finds it especially hard to speak to a sea of black screens when her whole class has their cameras turned off. The pandemic has really made her realize how much she relies on body language in everyday conversation. Thus, especially now, the process of slowing down seems crucial to healthy and constructive discussion.

During this conversation, I tried to notice each of the thoughts that crept into my mind, acknowledging their presence as part of my learning process, letting them go with love. This worked much better than trying to ignore the thoughts. I brought this up with my mom in our debrief, and she had had a similar experience. Upon reflection I thought about how and why we value our own thoughts and contributions. My mom and I talked about this, agreeing that sometimes we might want people to value our ideas, or we might be really invested in a topic, or we might be seeking connection. This assignment has taught me that knowing one's reasons for speaking and knowing what one needs from a conversation are both really important. In this way we can help foster a conversation that is not only beneficial for ourselves but also beneficial for others.

Immediately after this second pair of conversations I felt heard and listened to, and as though I had accomplished something. This was a rewarding feeling, as especially during the pandemic, as there have been many days where I did not feel as though I had achieved much. COVID-19 has challenged my motivation in general, and this conversation reminded me that sometimes just connecting with someone else is enough. I was grateful for the space that had been provided for me by my conversation partner, and for such a rich and nourishing discussion. These feelings of gratitude and connection lasted for a few days. Especially during exam season where success is measured by deadlines and grades, I was grateful to have had this reminder that there are other things that are required for living a balanced life. In the end, I found both sets of conversations reassuring and supportive, and I am definitely going to incorporate these practices of active listening and giving space for others to speak into my everyday life. This will become increasingly important as I move into Law School, a space so focused on competition and individualism. I hope to employ practices of "Speaking Out and Listening In" to hold space for community, for conversation, and for relearning.

## 6. The "Speaking Out and Listening In" Art Project

Before commenting on Sophie Chase's analysis above, I (Frances Garrett) would like to return to the second part of the "Speaking Out and Listening In" assignment, the anonymous art project that I mentioned briefly above. After they had submitted their own art works, many of which were intensely personal, I asked students to reflect on what they thought and felt while looking at the gallery of student work at <https://speak-listen.live/> (accessed on 5 April 2021) and how they thought the project was relevant to themes of the course, including the Speaking Out and Listening In conversations they had conducted and analyzed. Their responses were deeply thoughtful, moving, articulate—and often surprising to me. Sophie Chase herself wrote the following:

The artwork the class produced is so beautiful and meaningful. Looking at all of these posts makes me feel as though I am part of a collective, part of a whole and not isolated. Sometimes, especially during COVID-19, we forget that we are surrounded by people, who experience the same emotions, feelings, and experiences that we do. This is comforting. I saw my own secrets in postcards that were not mine, and my own experiences. This assignment created a sense of anonymous community, which is unique and special.

I think this project is about healing, and healing as a community. I think the project also relates to communication: without fearing repercussion, you can just be completely honest with yourself. I often find that the first person I lie to most is myself, so there is something integral about learning how to be honest with yourself and developing a sense of self-love.

Other students had similarly poignant responses to this assignment, and I would like to introduce two more students' perspectives. Lauren is a fourth-year student double-majoring in Cognitive Science and Religion, with a minor in the Buddhism, Psychology and Mental Health program. In her semester-end reflective analysis, she concluded that both components of the "Speaking Out and Listening In" project allowed students "to put our knowledge into practice and actually *see* the knowledge we acquired during this



course". She wrote that "Through this course, and this assignment in particular, I have learned who I want to be as a person and who I want to be for others (no matter who they are)". Elsewhere Lauren expanded on her experience as follows:

I've never taken a course that has been this student-centred and motivated by compassion. I felt hesitant and uncertain at the beginning of this course. I began with the same mentality I had throughout my undergraduate career, not thinking of much other than my GPA. Instead, I was offered a chance to actually breathe and take in the course content in its entirety—something which I have rarely been able to do. I've had the privilege of taking so many courses in university that interest me but have had to put my curiosity and genuine enthusiasm to the side, in order to even pass. I've submitted countless essays, reviews, and other work that I was dissatisfied with, knowing that if I were given the opportunity to reflect genuinely, I could at least say I was proud of my work. In this course, I was actually given that opportunity—something I genuinely never thought I would experience in undergrad. This helped me want to produce work I was proud of, and because of that this semester I submitted some of my most gratifying work ever. I've never been more passionate and truly grateful for a course, and I'm so glad to say that it genuinely made an impact on not only my academic life, but my mental, physical and emotional life as well.

JP, a third-year student majoring in English with minors in Cinema and Religion, also reflected on how the course's design resulted in a motivating and personally relevant educational experience. She explained that "I felt like I had actually learned or understood something that is important and beneficial in my life, rather than a random piece of knowledge that I most likely won't re-visit". She continued:

This course taught me a lot about re-framing the idea of myself as a person, and the idea of existing within my body and being my own friend—taking the time to understand and communicate with myself. It also taught me a lot about being myself within a collective or community, and how these connections or conversations can teach me so many new perspectives, ways of living, and opportunities. The assignments allowed me to practice open-minded listening and initiating conversations without fearing judgement.

These remarkable testimonials are but a few of many, and I was truly surprised at the overwhelmingly positive experiences students had with the coursework overall. I was also intrigued by how eager students were to engage in schoolwork that they found meaningful to their whole selves, that is, not only intellectually interesting but also physically and emotionally worthwhile. Before the pandemic sent us suddenly into online teaching and learning, I had spent several years carrying out research and practice about how embodied engagement with outdoor spaces can expand learning and also benefit student wellness (Garrett et al. 2019; Garrett 2021b). I am strongly committed to teaching that strengthens engagement with academic work while also attending to student well-being, but it was not easy to be confident about meeting these aims in an online environment.

## 7. Teaching during a Pandemic, a "New Normal"

Although teaching online was somewhat (but not entirely) new for me, the design of this course emerged from several years of my experimenting with pedagogical strategies that are specifically aimed at supporting student mental health. Most recently, I have been inspired in particular by two main bodies of work: trauma-informed pedagogy and pedagogical work on designing for care, both of which are especially focused on building inclusive learning communities in the classroom. I rely on powerful and pioneering colleagues who write and speak about these approaches more articulately than I can, and I am increasingly drawn to their work as the mental health crisis among post-secondary students continues to worsen, broadening the chasm of inequities that characterize higher education. Robin Phelps-Ward, a scholar of racial marginalization in postsecondary education, writes:

I find that few traumatic events and situations (school shootings, alcoholism, sexual violence) occur by happenstance. Many are rooted in systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classicism and homophobia. Thus, as educators we must acknowledge that past and current experiences of trauma are a reality for our students, especially the most marginalized, including students of color, LGBTQ2S+ students, international and ESL students, undocumented and low-income students, and those with disabilities. (Phelps-Ward 2020)

Although the circumstances of 2020–2021 have given almost everyone experience with trauma, these experiences are not spread evenly across populations. University and college professors may not be trained to diagnose trauma, but we can certainly learn to recognize its various manifestations and learn to employ trauma-informed pedagogical practices wherever possible. In my own courses, I am increasingly called to use the principles of trauma-informed teaching to design courses that have the best possible chance of meeting the educational needs of the largest possible number of students. As we moved into online teaching in 2020, I relied on these seven principles to shape my courses: (1) Safety; (2) Trustworthiness and transparency; (3) Connection and support; (4) Collaboration and mutuality; (5) Empowerment, voice and choice; (6) Social justice; and (7) Resilience, growth and change (Tinklenberg 2021). A couple of short videos introduce how I have begun working with this framework in my teaching generally (Garrett 2021a, 2021b).

The course under examination in this essay was oriented squarely toward trauma-informed, anti-oppressive and inclusive pedagogical principles—as well as other key practices aimed at enhancing student well-being—in various ways. For example, the audio-only lectures encouraged students to get away from their screens and walk regularly; the weekly written reflections aimed to facilitate a sense of empowerment by allowing students' own voices and experiences to stand at the centre of their learning, also demonstrating that what they think really matters to me; my choice of diverse authors and experts in course readings centred issues of representation, empowerment, and social justice; and the self-care assignment acknowledged that being able to work critically with difficult topics and experiences such as racism requires a safe community of trust as well as a degree of self-awareness. Although these aspects of this course are not addressed in this essay, they form an essential context for the "Speaking Out and Listening In" project discussed here. In the context of teaching about power and privilege, emphasizing the importance of "speaking out" as well as "listening in" was critical. Anti-oppression pedagogies and feminist intersectionality theory can help orient coursework carefully and in a way that does not simply recentre experiences of students in privileged positions, and that helps students to see the nuanced workings of power and privilege in their own lives and the lives of others (Berila 2015). Research and practice in contemplative pedagogies, moreover, can orient course design toward relational and non-divisive practices that help to build compassionate and connected learning communities (Ferber and O'Reilly Herrera 2013).

Much of what I admire about Sophie Chase's work on the "Speaking Out and Listening In" project, as shared above, expresses what is most important about education in general, in my opinion. Her analysis demonstrates thorough, critical, and deeply thoughtful preparation and reflection, and her genuine care to do her very best at this work is clear. She approaches her work with humility, curiosity, and an authentic interest in learning. Not only does she effectively relate the "Speaking Out and Listening In" exercise to other course materials from the semester, but she also finds the work significant in her own personal and professional life. In the same way as Lauren, JP, and a number of other students in the course, Sophie Chase writes that this work did not feel like an assignment, but rather "a practice we could implement in our own lives". In her analysis of the conversations she undertook for the course assignment, we see her think deeply about how this exercise has broad significance to the work of considering others' views, even when those views are substantially different than our own, and she sensitively explores the value of examining and sometimes changing one's own assumptions. As she explores how it feels to have one's worth validated, as she puts it, she also arrives at new kinds of thinking about what she

(and others in general) needs in order to thrive in personal and academic or professional circumstances. Sophie Chase, Lauren, and JP each wrote about a sense that these exercises really “put into practice” what they had studied in books and articles for the course, an opportunity that they do not often have in their other courses.

Finally, although this course was conducted asynchronously online and none of us ever met in person, nor did we meet as a full group synchronously online, I was glad to find that a key outcome of the “Speaking Out and Listening In” project for many students was a feeling of deep connection, something that is at the core of contemplative pedagogical theory but that is also especially important during this isolating and scary pandemic year. Students found themselves connecting deeply with people in their immediate lives through these deep listening experiences. Many chose as their conversation partners a romantic partner, friend, or parent and held conversations that they said strengthened those relationships. However, even those who spoke with strangers (when I linked students with others in the class because they had no one else to converse with) said they experienced a nourishing type of intimacy and connection that endured for days or longer beyond the conversation itself. The online art gallery of student work generated a further sense of connection with other students in the course, and the sense of community created by these interlinked exercises—both within the (asynchronous) classroom and in students’ lives outside the classroom—was an unexpected delight for me. Essential to well-being and effective functioning all the more so now, during the pandemic, these are foundational goals of education, I believe, and I am inspired by my student-collaborators to make these approaches my “new normal” for teaching.

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