

# A Contemplative Approach to Teaching Observation Skills<sup>1</sup>

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*Careful observation of one's experience provides access to present-moment information, the foundation for mindfulness practice and contemplative education more generally. Contemplative observation comprises a set of trainable skills, including noticing, slowing, and reflecting. Skillful ways to work with observation, including distinguishing (between observation and interpretation), recalling, and describing, can also be taught, learned, practiced, and applied. Two assignments drawn from a course on the psychology of perception, sensory awareness practice and sensory description, are presented as tandem means for teaching all six observation skills. Several aspects of this contemplative observation pedagogy make it useful in higher education generally, and it is also well suited for content-specific use in or adaptation to courses across a variety of disciplines. The aim is to foster (instructor and) student engagement with discovering lived experience through the refinement and focusing of observation skills.*

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Generally speaking, people use two sources of information as the basis for all manner of mental activities such as questioning, understanding, decision-making, planning, etc. One entails recalling that which has been previously learned, and a great deal of educational effort has traditionally focused on cultivating this resource. The other requires cognizance of that which is occurring in the present moment, an ability that has been largely ignored, or at best taken for granted, throughout many higher education enterprises. The growth of contemplative education offers an increasing array of pedagogical theories and methods that can help educators to understand and leverage the relevance of present-moment information to higher education generally, as well as to the learning of subject matter specific to a given discipline.

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Mindfulness, a prominent component of many contemplative pedagogies, involves the commitment of attention to occurrence in the present moment, which can thereby cultivate awareness of present-moment information. Mindfulness emphasizes observation while de-emphasizing the interpretation of observations. This foregrounded role of observer offers a vantage point well suited for witnessing the arising and passing of moment-to-moment phenomena, whether they appear internally, e.g., bodily sensations, or externally, e.g., sights and sounds. Observation thus plays a central role in making any sort of present-moment information available for use, either in the moment or subsequently. From this perspective, observation plays a foundational role in taking a contemplative approach to experience. Training the powers of observation can equip students with a needed basis for personally informed inquiry: "... questions invariably have their origins in observations. But I have noted, year after year, that few of my students have ever been invited to take the time to quiet themselves and patiently observe their surroundings" (Uhl and Stuchul, 2011, p. 62). Such an invitation can be offered systematically via the methods detailed below.

This paper explains a contemplative approach to the teaching and learning of observation skills to offer a platform that can be used in or adapted to a variety of applications in higher education settings. More specifically, we introduce six observational skills that have served as learning objectives in a course on the psychology of perception. Though training of observational skills can contribute to teaching and learning in a wide range of courses, we focus on this perception course in order to illustrate the use of two assignments for teaching and assessing these observational skills. After doing so, we suggest ways to make use of the presented pedagogy in a broad variety of educational contexts.

### **Observation Skills**

We distinguish between six skills that can be involved in a contemplative approach to observation: noticing, slowing, reflecting, distinguishing, recalling, and describing. The first three skills (noticing, slowing, and reflecting) are themselves ways of observing—becoming aware of something that is happening within the field of one's experience—thereby bringing the present moment more fully into focus. Rather than competing with each other, these three observational methods can mutually support one another, providing synergistic means for developing greater powers of observation. The remaining three skills (distinguishing, recalling, and describing) make precise use of what has been observed. These three can operate independently or combine in ways that support several specific aspects of learning. As with other skills, all six can be trained, learned, practiced, and applied.

*Noticing* refers to explicit awareness of some part of one's subjective experience. This mode of observation includes unelaborated detection (awareness that something is happening now) as well as elementary discrimination of some specific

quality, e.g., smooth, yellow, or large, from its alternatives. Noticing is evident in observers' reports such as "I am outside, lying flat on the ground on my stomach; the pressure of the earth on my stomach, chest, and legs feels soothing and restful" and "I felt the knot in my stomach tighten and expand, engulfing my insides, and it quickly spread to my neck, face, and ears." As evidenced in these examples, noticing has the power to bring innumerable aspects of lived experience into the light of conscious awareness.

*Slowing* provides a less obvious means of observation by emphasizing relaxation as an avenue for inviting greater awareness. To the extent that students' minds are racing with fast-paced thoughts, slowing offers a deliberate respite in which less is more. From a contemplative perspective, mental relaxation readily accords with letting attention stay with whatever is actually happening in experience, rather than making the effort to switch attention to something else. (Upon initial encounter, this reputed combination of relaxation and awareness can appear counter-intuitive, especially to people who are not experienced with contemplative practice.) By slowing, it becomes possible to observe aspects of lived experience that are rarely noticed or that have not ever been noticed previously. Slowing may be evident, for instance, in this student's verbal report: "At the end of a deep exhale, I felt the tight outside edge of my foot roll firmly onto the floor. The tension in my ankle released and a dull pain traveled up the outside of my calf."

In *reflecting*, the observer's own sensory processing, as well as attentional, emotional, and other functions of mind, themselves become objects of observation. Reflecting is apparent in verbal reports such as "My mental focus on the orange comes and goes without my meaning it to." A form of metacognition, reflecting can highlight the occurrence of various subjective phenomena associated with sensory information, including the degree to which something is being experienced as pleasurable or unpleasant (hedonic value), one's own emotional reaction or other personal response, as well as any interpretation regarding the meaning or significance of experience. Reflecting is metacognitive because it involves becoming cognizant of one's own mental activity, e.g., "Seeing the mountain range in the distance, I noticed the thought arising that it must be cold up there."

Once the practice of observation becomes proficient, there are many ways of using the foregrounded present-moment information. Intimate encounter with the rich phenomena of experience affords a personally engaged manner of learning. With regard to application in contemplative education, we identify three skills that work with ramifications of observation now made accessible: distinguishing, recalling, and describing.

*Distinguishing* refers to discernment between observation and interpretation. Importantly, interpretation is broadly construed as any thinking about observed phenomena, such as assigning meaning (or raising questions) based on already established knowledge, belief, or opinion. Observation and interpretation typically mix together, and without training they are difficult to distinguish. For example, the

statement “I saw tall grasses quivering because of a passing breeze” contains an observation (seeing tall grasses quivering) and a theoretical explanation about the cause (a passing breeze). It tends to be difficult at first to distinguish direct experience from the interpretations that naturally arise, but this gets easier and more reliable with practice and feedback.

*Recalling* retrieves observations that were previously encoded, stored, and retained in memory. This cognitive function is necessary to make available any observation that is not current or recent enough to persist in the short-lived buffer of consciousness known as “working memory.” The statement “Last week I was surprised to encounter a big, slow-moving raccoon on my evening walk” implicates the effective retrospection provided by recalling. Without recalling, it would be impossible to discover patterns across observations over time.

*Describing* uses language (or possibly other modes of expression such as artistic rendering) to express one’s observations in a manner suitable for communication to others. When spoken aloud, describing typically offers meaningfully expressive nonverbal components such as gesture, body language, the tonal quality of speech, etc. When written, describing is constrained to the use of words and punctuation to convey what was observed. Mastery of this skill is reflected in listeners or readers feeling that they have a sense of what experience was actually like for the experient (the person who had the actual experience).

### **Psychology of Perception Course**

Now that we have explained six trainable skills involving observation, we introduce a college course on the psychology of perception. This particular lower division course fulfills a science breadth requirement, has no prerequisite, and is open to all students. The first author has taught this course well over a dozen times, twice at American University in Washington, D.C., the rest at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. The second author has served as Teaching Assistant in this course, which has evolved over a 17-year span to engage multiple, complementary ways of knowing, with the objective of developing students’ observation skills.

Three assignments combine in the training and assessment of all six observation skills. Laboratory exercises require careful use of observation in a highly structured context to provide the empirical basis for drawing conclusions and raising questions. Through instruction, modeling, and separation of sections in lab reports (e.g., Procedure, Observations, followed by Conclusions and Questions), the distinction between observation and interpretation is introduced and reinforced throughout the term. Lab reports rely on recalling to various degrees, and are readily assessed with regard to comprehensive reporting of numerous relevant details (facilitated by slowing and noticing), distinguishing between observation and theory, and precise description. Typically, most students improve in all of these skills over the first few laboratory reports. Because the laboratory exercises employed

in this course are specific to the topic of perception, though they readily generalize to all empirical disciplines, they will not be addressed in detail here. Rather, two additional assignments—sensory awareness practice and sensory description—are presented more thoroughly because they are well suited for use (or adaptation) in most or all higher education curricula.

### **Sensory Awareness Practice**

Whereas any psychology course on perception is likely to involve laboratory exercises, this course also provides training in a contemplative technique we coined “sensory awareness practice” which has been introduced previously:

It helps to start simply, such as focusing attention on only one sense modality at a time. Within bodily sensation, for example, students are instructed to place their attention on the sole of their left foot. After a slow, verbally guided sequence of shifting attention from sensations in one body part to another, students realize that paying attention opens up an enriched world of experience. Similar guided observations in other sense modalities such as hearing and sight make it evident that, taken together, our senses supply a vast array of sensory experience each moment that often goes unnoticed. (Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007, p. 5)

In the perception course, this sensory awareness practice is guided numerous times during class meetings, often quite briefly (for about two minutes), occasionally lasting for twenty to thirty minutes. It is also assigned as weekly homework. In a sequence spanning an academic term from introductory through more advanced levels, sensory awareness practice can first focus selectively on one single sense modality on its own, and after having sampled multiple modalities in this fashion, advance to combining a pair of sense modalities within a single session (e.g., first one, then the other, then both simultaneously), which can progress to a including even more senses within a single practice session.

Sensory awareness practice trains the learner to notice, slow, reflect, and distinguish amidst the unmitigated perception of bodily sensations, touches, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and any other sensation that may occur in the present moment. Though instructors may find it difficult to obtain sufficient evidence to assess performance in attending to sensory experience during sensory awareness practice, subsequent reports—including sensory description described next—can reveal much about the extent and quality of students’ sensory awareness (sensitivity). Unlike the techniques of lecture, discussion, question and answer, or call and response exchange between teacher and student, sensory awareness practice emphasizes the observation of the sensory data of lived experience. This practice affords opportunities for developing contemplative precision (becoming aware of

detail, discerning between observation and interpretation), sensual appreciation, and greater embodiment.

As an experiential introduction to sensory awareness practice, we invite you—gentle reader—to follow these instructions, pausing for several seconds between steps:

1) sit in an upright posture that is comfortable and allows you to see this page;

>> are you actually following these instructions,  
and not merely reading quickly? <<

2) allow yourself to settle more deeply into this wakeful yet relaxing posture;

<< >>

3) gently focus on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body;

<< >>

4) allow your breathing to guide any adjustments to allow your posture to relax further;

<< >>

5) notice where you feel the breathing;

<< >>

6) breathe slowly, noticing any shift in body sensations through several breathing cycles;

<< >>

7) close your eyes for several slow breaths, noticing body sensations, before continuing...

<< >>

Good—now that you have completed the above exercise (indeed, have you?), please consider: What stands out to you from your experience during this exercise? In what ways did your bodily sensations change? Did you notice anything that you had never noticed before? Answers to these questions can reveal what was observed during the exercise.

Though responding to such questions requires words, once it has been learned, the personal practice of sensory awareness need not involve verbal description. Rather, it is the tuning into direct experience as it happens. To effectively facilitate this focus on unfiltered, raw experience, guidance should be provided with a soft voice, with repeated and extensive silent gaps, with occasional offering of encouragement or new directions that avoid undue verbatim repetition by conveying the same gist with varied phrasings. Upon completing the practice session, it can be helpful to prompt reflection by inviting students to jot notes on the experience for a minute or two, and/or invite brief oral reports of their observations.

Over the years, we have found that sensory awareness practice deepens students' dwelling in their sensory fields, and leads to increased sensitivity to specific qualities of sights, sounds, etc. Apparent effects include enhanced ability to tune into one's own body and the world in which we are embedded, with learners reporting increased sense of being grounded, centered, and present, increasing engagement with awareness, and even diminution of self-centeredness—"in that observation, there is no centre as the 'me' looking..." (Krishnamurti, 1983, p. 130).

### Sensory Description

Sensory description could be assigned in any context, though it seems optimal to precede this with some sensory awareness practice (which hones all the observation skills except for recalling and describing—see Table 1). The to-be-described experience can be observed introspectively, in the moment, or recalled retrospectively. Describing (near-) present-moment observations (kept briefly available in working memory) has the potential to bring experiences into more intimate contact with their lived experience, albeit from a verbally mediated point of view.

**Table 1.** Observation Skills Trained and/or Assessed in Two Assignments.

Observation Skill	Sensory Awareness Practice		Sensory Description	
	Trains	Assesses	Trains	Assesses
Noticing	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Slowing	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Reflecting	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Distinguishing	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Recalling	No	No	Yes	Yes
Describing	No	No	Yes	Yes

The sensory description assignment focuses primarily on verbal description of the writer's own phenomenal experience, with particular emphasis on sensory aspects. Each paragraph describes a continuous thread of actual experience, no matter how long (or short) this makes the paragraph. The point of written sensory description is to make it as easy as possible for readers to engage the sensory level of the writer's experience, the raw feel of this person's lived experience. As this assignment has been fine-tuned over the years, several pointers help steer students into the heart of this novel and nuanced form of expression, and are explained next.

Sensory experience involves sensations in one or more sense modalities (e.g., bright orange glow to left of center; cold, damp, evenly distributed pressure across upper back). Our lives also include experience that may not be sensory: "I am wishing for justice"; "I was feeling anxious." These descriptions contain no clear expression of sensory qualities such as bodily pain, visual texture, auditory loudness, etc. While the actual experience referred to may have included sensory components, due to the lack of explicit sensory detail, it remains unclear whether wishing for justice was experienced in a purely abstract way, or involved bodily sensations or visual imagery, e.g., a tightening in the chest or picturing a clenched fist.

When given leeway, some readers easily fill in their own imagined details of what an experience must have been like. However, they might get it wrong! To let them know what the lived experience was actually like for the writer, a complete and detailed description employs explicit language that specifies the sense modality and specific sensory qualities experienced. This goal is clearly accomplished when even readers who have not had such an experience nonetheless "get it."

It is easy to mistake description of events for description of lived experience. For example, "The dog lay down" provides no information regarding how this event became known to the writer—it could be directly witnessed via one or more sense modalities (seen, heard, or felt bodily), or without such witnessing, it could be learned from received communication, be inferred, or even guessed. Even movement of one's own body can be described in event terms without any explicit description of the experience of undergoing physical movement, and indeed this proves to be the most difficult modality for students to describe at the experiential level. For example, "lifting hands up to interlace fingers on top of the crown of the head" describes an event in some detail, but it remains unclear to the skeptical reader where the event information came from. A description that clearly expresses sensory qualities of the experience of the person who moved their hands must include visual and/or somatic details, such as "I saw both arms slowly ascending smoothly in front of my torso" or "toward the end of this movement I started to notice tension growing in my upper back, evenly on both sides."

There is no formula that tells whether specific words or phrases are clearly sensory. Rather, this is a more nuanced difference that hinges on context and

level of detail. Many words, by themselves, are ambiguous as to whether they describe sensory experience. The word “pain” may refer to painful bodily sensations, though “It pained me to admit that I was wrong” refers to experience that may not involve painful bodily sensations. Inherently ambiguous terms (e.g., discomfort, feeling good, electrified) do suffice when accompanied by phrases that clarify their meaning, and can be further bolstered by providing lots of details.

Sensory description works well both as a brief, in-class assignment, as well as a more extended homework assignment. It is helpful for learners to be presented with small portions of other students’ sensory description—we have requested students to read aloud small, self-selected excerpts for this purpose. At a minimum, this offers helpful exposure to others’ range of experience and expressive style. At times it can be leveraged to focus on a particular aspect of sensory experience or description that would benefit from collective scrutiny. Regardless, it helps when the instructor raises questions or provides other feedback about the experiential descriptions voiced in class. This serves to point out ambiguous or possibly non-sensory descriptions as described above, and prompts students to reflect further on their own and others’ lived experience.

Despite recurring requests from students, we have chosen not to provide sample sensory descriptions for students to use as models. Though other instructors might justifiably choose to do so, this decision guards against the risk of model assignments having the undesirable effect of limiting the range of approaches taken by student writers. Though often experienced by students as including a sense of struggle, this tactic supports each student in their authentic expression of their own idiosyncratic experience. (Over time, the valid need for exposure to others’ sensory descriptions gets largely met through the alternative process of students reading them aloud.)

Learning objectives targeted and addressed by sensory description include noticing specific aspects of sensory experience, noticing one’s own mental processing of sensory information (e.g., which sense modalities are customarily favored in which contexts?), slowing, reflecting, complete and precise description, unambiguous expression, and distinguishing between observation and interpretation.

In support of students attaining these objectives, we provide feedback on sensory descriptions by highlighting (on paper) or converting font to bold (in electronic documents) the clearly sensory portions of text, as well as writing specific margin notes and more global comments. On paper, we use a highlighter to draw a thick color line through each word that forms part of any clearly sensory description, and to merely underline each word that is part of description that is ambiguous with respect to sensory content. Students quickly catch on to the ideal of receiving assignments back with all text being marked as clearly sensory.

Margin and end notes focus on a variety of topics, some pertaining to the task of sensory description, such as appreciating the writer’s accomplishment and suggest-

ing ways to improve. Examples include: “more details needed” / “please elaborate,” “Excellent narrative with several sensations—next time, emphasize even more sensory details!”, “Helpful specifics about location and timing of sensations,” “Too much interpretation, not enough sensory description.”

We also offer feedback on important issues that extend beyond the rather specific aim of sensory description per se, such as personal insights, advancing theoretical understanding, or raising thoughtful questions. Examples include: “Good description of how pain changes your perception,” “Interesting theory—how would you test it?”

To earn the highest possible grade (A, Excellent) on this assignment, a majority of text must contain clear sensory description, such that the reader confidently knows something of what the writer’s lived experience was like. If sensory description is assigned repeatedly throughout the course, it may be helpful to adjust the evaluative criteria for this and other grades to increasingly demanding levels over the course of the academic term. Students report that sensory description is personally meaningful: it enhances appreciation of their own experience and contributes to effective writing that gets lauded by instructors of other courses.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Sensory awareness practice and sensory description afford important opportunities for training and assessment of observation skills. Either may be used in isolation, though in combination they work synergistically, deepening sensory awareness and fostering more complete and accurate sensory description. The point of this form of active learning is to engage the unpredictable process of discovery, which comes alive when the learner’s own experience is reflected in or recognized as pertinent to the subject matter.

Integrating sensory assignments into a course can strengthen the student’s observational skills, regardless of discipline or course content. This contemplative pedagogy helps to personalize the content of a given course for each student, which can deepen their experience of the material. Embodied engagement with course material empowers students as active learners through valuing their individual subjective experience, which provides an important source of relevant information, and can facilitate students’ attentiveness toward instruction and learning. Moreover, the ability to notice currently occurring bodily feelings and sensations in other sense modalities is also useful to teachers, providing a pivotal means for discerning between events in the classroom and the instructor’s own personal response to them, thereby opening up more options regarding what to say or do in the next moment (Brown, 1999).

This promotes personal contact with any subject matter, as well as strengthening the student-teacher relationship; it could be a great way to introduce students to a course by inviting students to notice bodily sensations while contemplating the central topics of the course. Keen observation provides a person with the

inputs needed for engaging a wide range of intelligences, from evidence-based decision making to aesthetic appraisal, as well as becoming more intimately familiar with one's own mind and experience. Therefore the training of observation skills can contribute to education in laboratory sciences, field sciences, education, law, the arts, creative writing, and other areas of inquiry that can be deepened through more engaged, embodied, and integrated learning.

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