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This chapter addresses the growing interest in employing contemplative teaching and learning practices in college classrooms. The authors introduce the cajita project, a contemplative activity, which they have employed in their classrooms to help students become reflective, socially conscious scholar–practitioners in student affairs.

Birthing Internal Images: Employing the Cajita Project as a Contemplative Activity in a College Classroom

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Everything is gestation and then bringing forth. To let each impression and each germ of a feeling come to completion wholly in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own intelligence, and await with deep humility and patience the birth-hour of a new clarity: that alone is living the artist's life: in understanding as in creating.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1954), *Letters to a Young Poet*

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in employing contemplative teaching and learning practices in college classrooms. We define contemplative pedagogy as a teaching and learning experience that involves the learner in a participatory epistemology characterized by a deeply immersed, insightful learning experience fostered through carefully selected reflective practices that complement the learning assignment.

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (n.d.) website offers a working definition of contemplative practices:

Contemplative practices are practical, radical, and transformative, developing capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm centeredness is an aid to exploration of meaning, purpose and values. Contemplative practices can help develop greater empathy and communication skills,

improve focus and attention, reduce stress and enhance creativity, supporting a loving and compassionate approach to life. (para. 2)

Contemplative practices may be integrated into one's daily life in many ways. These practices may include sitting in silence; mindful walking in nature and man-made environments; meditation; contemplative prayer; yoga; and a variety of artistic forms of expression. We view pedagogy as the approach that considers both the professor's own philosophical orientation, as well as the selection of appropriate teaching and learning strategies to set up an in- and out-of-class context for learning to occur. Contemplative practices are the tools that foster a reflective, insightful dimension to the pedagogic experience. In this chapter, we describe our experience employing a contemplative, arts-based pedagogy known as the "*cajita* project."

The *Cajita* Project

In graduate-level classrooms where we have taught courses such as Foundations of Student Affairs, Students in American Higher Education, Advanced Research Methods in Higher Education, Counseling, and a seminar on Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation, we have employed a contemplative activity known as the *cajita* project developed by Professor Alberto Pulido, who is chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of San Diego. Technically speaking, *cajita* is a Spanish term for a small box, but Professor Pulido has broadened the definition, which speaks of a *cajita* as a sacred box, a knowledge canvas, a creative vessel, or an artistic canvas. In his Chicana/o and Latina/o studies courses, Professor Pulido has asked students to imagine and create a knowledge canvas he calls a *cajita*. As he teaches culture, rituals, and traditions of the Latino community, Professor Pulido asks students to develop a cultural autobiographical story told in carefully selected artifacts such as family photos, personal jewelry, green cards, newspaper articles, candles, food, and prerecorded music. The stories students create through their *cajitas* honor ancestry, family struggles, and triumphs, as well as the contributions of different family members (Pulido 2002).

Professor Pulido (2002) elaborates:

These *cajitas* are literally boxes of various shapes, forms, and sizes made out of wood or cardboard. The assignment is introduced at the beginning of the fall semester and continually discussed throughout the months of September and October to recognize and honor *El Día de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) celebrations commemorated and observed the first and second of November throughout Mexico and the United States. Traditionally, November first is known as *El Día de los Angelitos* to celebrate children whereas November second honors those who died as adults. The students'

cajitas become the centerpiece of a one-day campus-wide celebration held yearly in commemoration of the Day of the Dead. (71)

Because the courses Professor Pulido teaches focus on cultural identity and religion, the *cajita* project becomes a conduit toward understanding cultural practices that originated with indigenous practices and progressed into the creation of modern-day altars that honor Latino cultural icons such as Selena, Cesar Chavez, and Tito Puente, among others.

The outcomes Professor Pulido expects in his Chicana/o and Latina/o studies courses include having students develop hands-on experiential knowledge about Latina/o cultural expression and allowing students to connect academic knowledge with that of everyday life experience. In doing so, students take abstract intellectual knowledge and connect it to their personal lives, making learning come alive. In Professor Pulido's philosophy, students and teachers resemble artists, ready to illuminate images symbolic of their journeys and lived experiences (Pulido 2002).

We do not teach ethnic or religious studies courses, but we have employed a revised version of the *cajita* project with significant success with our graduate students majoring in higher education leadership and student affairs. In our classes, we have asked students to construct their own *cajitas* reflecting their life journeys and containing images of past, present, and future. The life paths of our master's and doctoral students will place them in professions such as student affairs administrators, community organizers, social activists, educational policy analysts, college presidents, and college professors. In essence, students are going to meet the world as it is and seek to transform it.

We believe it is important for all students who are going to engage in the world in a socially conscious way to adopt a contemplative practice of their own, to have a deeper understanding of who they are and what they bring to their profession, and to become reflective scholar-practitioners. We seek to have students acquire some way of getting deeper into the internal and external learning experience, some way to reflect deeply on what they are learning and to connect the learning experience to issues of meaning, purpose, the interconnectedness of life, and social change.

Consequently, the *cajita* project becomes our way of employing a contemplative, *sentipensante* pedagogy (Rendón 2009), a sensing/thinking approach to teaching and learning that activates the mind and the spirit. When Orlando Fals Borda, a Colombian researcher and sociologist and one of the founders of participatory action research, wanted to study the essence of culture of the fishermen of the Colombian coast, he approached his learning inquiry not only by observing the fishermen; he actually lived with them to authentically experience their rhythm of life where culture was about employing intelligence to know when and how to fish and acknowledging the heart of their work to act with wisdom and respect for life. The fishermen said that they were "*sentipensantes*," acting with heart

and mind; theirs was the art and structure of living at the foot of a river (Ricobassilon 2008).

Birth of Internal Images: Employing The *Cajita* Project

Creating a *cajita* can be a very powerful and liberating contemplative experience when and if it is implemented with great care and preparation. In this section, we outline the steps we have taken to employ the *cajita* project in a course focusing on higher education leadership in student affairs. We connect the *cajita* project to developing two key competencies student affairs administrators should master: (1) developing social and personal responsibility and (2) becoming a reflective scholar–practitioner.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2006) has advocated that students should master personal and social responsibility as exemplified by:

- Developing a strong work ethic
- Recognizing and acting on a sense of academic integrity
- Recognizing and acting on the responsibility to contribute to the larger community
- Recognizing and acting on the obligation to take seriously the perspectives of others
- Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning (para. 3)

In a 2007 report, AAC&U recommended expanding student learning to include “serious engagement with questions of values, principles, and larger meanings” (23). Further, Eaton and O’Brien (2004, 4) discuss the important role of self-reflective activities. They indicate that:

Providing opportunities for self-reflection seems to enhance students’ sense of responsibility and motivation for their own learning as the reflection and assessment processes connect directly with the students’ own work. Reflection asks them to think about how theory relates to application in the “real world,” and also helps students view their own experiences as important enough not to be taken for granted. Through reflection, students (and faculty) recognize that learning from examined experience is as important an instance of learning as from a text or lecture, and that not all learning happens in an abstract environment distant from their lives in the world. Connecting students’ lives with their academic and intellectual work may not only improve attainment of learning goals, but may also contribute to enhanced student engagement with the university program, potentially leading to improved retention, academic performance and/or time to degree—all important factors in building a vital and effective campus.

In allowing students to be reflective and socially conscious scholar–practitioners in our classrooms, we create a space that invites and values

“inner knowing (deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition, and emotions)” as well as “outer knowing (intellectual reasoning, rationality, and objectivity)” (Rendón 2009, 27). Therefore, this space created through self-reflection acknowledges students’ life experiences and provides an opportunity to construct deeper meanings of these experiences in their lives.

Step I. Introducing the *Cajita* Project. It is important to contextualize the *cajita* project, including its origins and goals. We introduce the project at the beginning of the semester including it as a key reflective learning activity in our syllabus. We tell students that they will be expected to construct their own *cajitas*. A *cajita* is a personal reflective box that represents who each student is as a person, and the special talents she or he brings to the student affairs profession. Students may select artifacts that represent individuals (in and out of college) who have influenced and validated them, the kind of student affairs administrator they hope to be, and how they hope to make a difference in the lives of students and in the world of college.

To provide a background to the project, students are encouraged to read Professor Pulido’s article, “The Living Color of Students’ Lives: Bringing *Cajitas* into the Classroom” (2002). An in-class discussion of the article and the project is critical to ensure that students realize the nature and scope of the class assignment, to recognize the expectations of the project, and to clarify any questions that the project stimulates among students. We have also found it helpful to invite former students who have engaged in constructing *cajitas* to visit the class and to share their experiences.

Basic questions that we have encountered in our classes include but have not been limited to: Should the *cajita* be only a box? Can I think outside the box? How big should the box be? Should it be a pretty box? Can the box be of any shape other than a square? What material should the box be: cardboard, plastic, wood, and so forth? We have emphasized to students that they have complete freedom to create their *cajitas*, which are so personal that no two can ever be similar. Students sometimes articulate “deeper” questions that percolate in their hearts and minds, which revolve around their own life experiences—personal and professional, as well as belief systems they value or are exploring or questioning. Some students also wonder if it is indeed possible to express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings through a small (or big) box. Engaging these questions allows an opportunity for the instructor(s) to soothe student anxieties, to validate their experiences, and to ask them to trust the reflective process.

Step II. Conceptualizing and Creating the *Cajita*. The instructor(s) and the students should realize that the *cajita* project is designed to assist each participant to become a reflective, socially conscious scholar-practitioner. Understanding that the *cajita* is a highly personal reflective box that one designs and builds using one’s own creativity and life

experiences is imperative. Each *cajita* is unique to each individual. Thus, no two *cajitas* are alike. To demonstrate that learning and teaching are bi- or multidirectional, we as instructors also engage in designing and sharing our own *cajitas*. We make it a practice to bring our own *cajitas* to class. This serves as an opportunity for the instructor(s) to experience what it means to conceptualize a *cajita* and to deal with the emotions that one experiences while reflecting upon and building a *cajita*.

It was one such emotional and reflective journey for Vijay Kanagala, coauthor of this article, who developed his *cajita* as a doctoral student in a class focusing on *sentipensante* (sensing/thinking) pedagogy (Rendón 2009) and social justice. Not knowing where to start, how to embrace the project, what to focus on, or who to include in his *cajita*, Vijay wrestled with the questions from the day he was introduced to the project. The assignment required the student to create a *cajita* that demonstrated her or his pedagogy and philosophy of education. The following is an excerpt from Vijay's personal journal entry that illuminates the epiphanous, emotional moments that led to creating his unique *cajita*.

What a serendipitous day it has been! Not sure why *Amma* [mother] wanted to clear the garage in this super cold weather but she did. And boy, am I glad she did! After a few minutes of trying to organize stuff, I decided that it was probably easier to just declutter by discarding or donating things that we did not need anymore. That old tattered suitcase lying in the corner for the longest time had to go! I took and tossed it into the dumpster outside our apartment. *Amma* sure wasn't happy. I always teased her that she was a secret hoarder! She wanted it back. She really wanted the ripped suitcase with a broken wheel back, and would not stop yelling at me until I dived into the dumpster to get it back for her.

That's when *Amma* explained. She wanted the suitcase back not because it has any utility value left but because of the emotional value *Amma* attached to the suitcase. *Amma* reminded me that this was the first suitcase that our family had bought, and used as we immigrated to the United States back in the early 90s. I was in tenth grade. I remembered vaguely but not really.

That's when it hit me, today. We, as a family, have never processed our family's immigration journey from India to the United States. We have neither talked about the financial challenges that *Nana* [father] and *Amma* faced nor have we discussed the emotional scars we had to endure for leaving our extended family behind. All of us lacked social and academic capital when we immigrated but still somehow we believed that this was the land of opportunity. I guess our unwavering belief that we will eventually find success in this distant land helped us make it.

Suddenly, it is all coming back. Here I am a son of immigrants, an immigrant myself, the first in my family to enroll in a doctoral program realizing our dream—my parents' dream. That through education, we would find success and happiness. I was living our American dream.

Who would have imagined that a spring-cleaning project that included a dumpster dive would provide an answer for my class project? Voilà! I just found my perfect box for my *cajita*. That suitcase is my *cajita*. I did not have to fill it with artifacts. Even empty, it is full of meaning. It connects me to my past in a unique way and grounds me for who I am. I did not know I had yearned for that connection all these years, but I did. My *suitcase cajita* is my identity. (V. Kanagala, personal communication, February 22, 2009)

Step III. *Cajita* Gallery Walk. By the time students are to display their *cajitas*, it is important that the class is functioning as a community of learners who have fostered trust among each other. On this momentous day, we begin by inviting students to share a meal. We have provided food and invited students to bring food of their choosing that they may wish to share with their classmates. Sharing a meal serves to reinforce community and to foster bonding among students. We then invite students to participate in a silent gallery walk.

The *cajitas* gallery walk involves about a twenty-minute silent walk as students take the time to observe and “take in” their peers’ *cajitas*. To create a mood of reverence and respect, we have played calming, soft meditational background music during the walk. Following the gallery walk, we open the classroom for volunteers who would like to present their *cajitas*. If comfortable, instructors should consider sharing their *cajitas*.

We have learned that it is best to set up the classroom as an art gallery ahead of time. Classroom furniture should be rearranged if necessary, and each student should be given the option to display her or his *cajita* for public view accompanied by a one-page description of what the artifacts that make up the *cajita* signify. The day that the *cajitas* will be displayed and presented to the entire class should be approached with significant respect and trust, for the stories students share can be powerful and filled with emotions ranging from joy to sadness and anxiety. We begin by telling students that it is important for all in class to treat each other with respect and dignity, that students should share only what they feel comfortable sharing, and that not everything is public. We ask that students present their *cajitas* on a volunteer basis. No one is forced to share her or his *cajita*. At this time we also address the do’s and don’ts of sharing a *cajita* to address questions such as: Can I touch an artifact? I don’t understand what this artifact means? Can I get an explanation now? I don’t see a name; whose *cajita* is this? Students should be cautioned to be respectful of the *cajitas* because artifacts on display may be of very emotional and personal value to the creator, and therefore priceless. Some artifacts may be controversial and due care must be taken. Over time, we have learned that the *cajitas* students create are taken home to find a special place. At home, the *cajitas* serve as memory of the class and, more important, as a symbol of student life journeys, lived experiences, and hope for the future.

Preparation for the *Cajita* Project. The confluence of three entities—namely, the individual student, the class as a whole, and the instructor—is necessary for the successful *birthing* of a *cajita* project.

The Instructor. To engage and encourage a group of students to embrace contemplative practice as a way to foster self-reflexivity, it is important that the instructor not only understands and values the same, but also incorporates one or more contemplative practice(s) in her or his own personal and professional life. In other words, to employ reflective assignments requires that professors embrace and practice contemplative ways of knowing. A deep intellectual and personal understanding of contemplative practice and a willingness to engage not just superficially are imperative to lend authenticity for the *cajita* project. Professors must also be discerning educators, with an intuitive sense of judgment about when reflective practices are appropriate and not appropriate to employ. It is also the responsibility of the instructor to create trust as well as a safe classroom context where emotion, subjectivity, and student voice are welcomed, respected, and embraced.

Further, it is important to connect the *cajita* project to one or more learning goals, and these will vary depending on the course being taught. In other words, the *cajita* project should never be employed solely on the basis that it looks interesting or that it might be fun to try out in class. Rather, the *cajita* project, as well as similar contemplative activities, should be linked to a learning objective(s) related to the subject matter. For example, whereas Professor Pulido connected the *cajita* project to Chicana/o and Latina/o history and culture, we linked the project to student affairs competencies in the areas of developing personal and social responsibility and becoming reflective scholar-practitioners.

Individual Student. The *cajita* project is an example of an assignment that addresses the learner's full complexity of mind, body, and spirit. The project works best with students who are open to taking the risk of working with emotions and intuition, are willing to participate in nontraditional ways of knowing and learning, and are receptive to contemplative assignments that engage them more deeply in what they are studying. In our experience, we have learned that not every student is ready or willing to entertain perspectives that run counter to deeply held belief systems or faith principles. These views should be respected, and alternative assignments should be available for students to complete the class successfully.

The Class as a Community of Learners. Students in any given classroom come from different backgrounds, cultures, religious perspectives, values, belief systems, and ethnicities. As a result, students have diverse worldviews, and the *cajitas* will be reflective of wide-ranging experiences and perspectives. Consequently, it is important that the students function as a community built on trust and respect for difference. In such a community, the instructor and students agree to create a safe space where feelings, thoughts, and experiences can be shared without fear of negative

judgment (though students can agree to disagree) or of disclosure outside the circle of trust. This can be accomplished by engaging in a class activity that establishes ground rules to engage in civil and mindful class discussions.

It is important to understand that although the *cajita* project may be construed as a collective project (which it can be), at its core it is also a very personal, risky, reflective journey that each participating class member undertakes and shares within the classroom circle of trust. As such, the *cajita* should be beyond judgment of the instructor and the rest of the class community. However, this should not deter anyone from being inquisitive or asking the *cajita*'s creator to elaborate about part or all of the *cajita* (in a respectful way).

Challenges to Implementing the *Cajita* Project. Professors should understand that there will be some students who will not embrace contemplative assignments such as the *cajita* project. Not every student will be comfortable or ready to participate in this kind of contemplative assignment because of personal reasons relating to faith issues, cultural anxiety, emotional discomfort, or unwillingness to share personal belief systems and life experiences. Consequently, the instructor should be open to providing an alternative assignment (such as creating another arts-based project, writing a book review, writing a paper related to the course content) in consultation with the concerned student(s).

Reflective assignments are quite in vogue these days and typically involve activities such as journaling and writing personal essays. We wish to emphasize that assignments involving contemplative activities should be very carefully designed and implemented. Employing a contemplative pedagogy requires that the instructors have: (1) done extensive background reading to thoroughly understand the nature of contemplative practice, its uses, potential, and challenges; and (2) adopted some form of contemplative practice in their own personal lives such as meditation, yoga, journaling, or poetry writing, among others. We cannot overemphasize that contemplative activities should be employed with great care and sensitivity. If poorly applied, reflective assignments can result in a less than positive classroom experience for both instructors and students.

Instructors should realize that more often than not students might have never engaged in contemplative activities during their educational experiences. As a result, the instructor needs to be keenly aware that several basic questions about the logistics of the assignment may arise. A variety of deeper philosophical questions tend to follow after students understand the project and are in the process of developing their *cajitas*. Therefore, we recommend that the instructor check in with the students as the semester progresses and revisit the *cajita* assignment to clarify questions about the project.

Finally, some students may view the *cajita* project as not relevant to their personal cultural experience, perhaps viewing it only as a

Latino-specific activity or considering it to be an appropriation of a certain culture. However, in our opinion, the *cajita* project transcends a focus on only one culture. In our classrooms, students from diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and sexual orientation backgrounds have successfully worked on creating *cajitas*. Although we are personally comfortable employing the Spanish term, *cajita*, we also recognize that this kind of project can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. For example, one professor shared that she had employed a “shoe project” with her students. Her students were asked to select shoes that reflected their life journeys; and the shoes might also be filled with different artifacts. Similarly, another professor, who worked with immigrant students, had asked them to construct images of the homes they left behind. This *home* imagery assignment was designed to facilitate self-understanding and healing within the community of immigrant student learners. A faculty member teaching any course can come up with a wide array of creative ways to engage students in contemplative activities that deepen the learning experience. In giving birth to their images through arts-based contemplative activities, the hour of clarity gets closer to being within the students’ reach.

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