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SCULPTING THE MIND, SHAPING THE STUDENT: MINDFULNESS PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

JILL E. LUEDKE AND DEBORAH ULTAN BOUDEWYNS

INTRODUCTION

As teachers of lifelong learning research skills, it is part of the librarian's responsibility to give students tools to help them handle their frustrations and preconceptions about research. In an effort to fulfill this obligation, both Jill Luedke and Deborah Boudewyns have been devoting a few minutes of their research instruction sessions to guided meditations. Similar to the beginning of a yoga class, the purpose of beginning a traditional lecture or seminar with quiet and stillness is to give the students a moment to collect themselves and become a collective body. The intent, of course, is not to turn them into Buddhist monks or even assume that would be of any interest; and therefore useful to avoid the stigmas and stereotypes associated with "meditation" by referring to the exercise instead as a simple practice in relaxation. Whether or not the terms "mindfulness" or "meditation" are applied to the short classroom relaxation activity, the objective is to bring attention and awareness into the present moment. It is advisable to inform the class about what to expect including the length of time for the exercise and what will follow. An image guessing game that is subject-relevant to the course or geographically relevant to the college/institution may directly follow the relaxation exercise as a technique to immediately engage the students and center their attention on the instructor and the instruction at hand.

Inviting a few moments of mindfulness or guided meditation in the classroom supports focused learning and interaction that serves as a positive disruption to the routine classroom experience. Distraction and disinterest are barriers to the learning process that may be eliminated by supporting an integrated and positive environment. To transform the distractions and anonymity of the traditional classroom, enhancing cognizance of the present moment through breath awareness encourages self-integration of mind, body, and spirit, as well as the sense of being part of a unified collective. Promoting trust in the classroom also creates a level of vulnerability that awakens innate alertness, which results in focused and engaged learning. Instruction librarians can use mindfulness exercises in the classroom as tools to reduce student behaviors that inhibit focused attention and intentional learning. The instruction librarian that provides students the opportunity to open their awareness to the breath and body will be able to personalize the classroom environment, defining an attentive and engaged learning experience.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness can be thought of in contrast to *Mindlessness*. *Mindlessness* occurs when attention is distracted by thoughts of the past or future, which limits the ability to focus on our immediate experience. *Mindfulness* is purposeful attention on the present moment. It has its roots in Buddhism and has been popularized in the west by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn's eight week course, *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)*, which he has taught across the world since 1979, has helped spread the secular applications of mindfulness. Practices that cultivate mindfulness, such as meditation and yoga, have been shown to improve concentration, creativity and compassion, as well as lower blood pressure and reduce stress. The Tree of Contemplative Practices, created by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, illustrates a range of different types of mindfulness practices, some of which may be easily incorporated into the academic classroom. The tree is available as a template that can be adapted. © The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society Concept & design by Maia Duerr; illustration by Carrie Bergman

Figure 1: Tree of Contemplative Practices

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Mindful practices or contemplative practices are practical, radical, and transformative. Benefits from these practices over time and even momentarily (e.g., the duration of a class) help develop empathy, enhanced communication, focus and attention, and reduction of stress. Meditation or mindfulness exercises can also help to increase creativity and navigation when faced with distractions. Mindful exercises employed in the classroom may neutralize distractions as well as encourage a respectful environment that promotes thoughtful and attentive behavior.

MINDFULNESS AND PEDAGOGY

An extensive body of research exists on the use of mindfulness in teaching, called *contemplative pedagogy* or *contemplative education*. The Summer 2013 special issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* was devoted to contemplative studies in higher education. Dr. Arthur Zajonc's article in that issue, "Contemplative Pedagogy: A Quiet Revolution in Higher Education," provides a good overview of the growth of this pedagogical model over the past fifteen years. Contemplative pedagogy is a holistic approach to teaching that attempts to educate the whole student, emphasizing *how* to learn by cultivating attentiveness, self-awareness, stress management, compassion, and non-judgment. Dr. Zajonc is former director of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, and Founding Committee Chair for the Center's Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), founded in 2009. Since the founding of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society in 1997, the Center's academic program has been working to develop the field of contemplative pedagogy within higher education.

Alternative approaches to teaching incorporate mindfulness and contemplation in order to encourage an engaged teaching and learning environment. There are notable educators who are doing poignant research and writing on the topic of mindfulness in education. Humanities professor from York University in Canada, Deborah Orr (2002), for example, discusses the holistic human ontology, as promoted by Indian philosopher Nagarjuna and western philosopher Wittgenstein, suggesting that "Learning affects students at all levels: body, mind, emotion and spirit" (p. 477). Orr (2002) furthers this idea noting a need for transforming pedagogy to engage students in a more holistic fashion that eliminates the dichotomization of mind and body. On par with bell hooks (2009) and her advocacy of an engaged classroom to facilitate open minds and self-actualization, mindfulness pedagogy erases the assumption that the mind is both radically distinct from and of greater value than the body.

Both Deborah Orr (2002) and Jennifer Musial (2011) describe the value of overlaying the yoga class with the traditional learning classroom. In her 2002 article, “From the Uses of Mindfulness in Anti-oppressive Pedagogies: Philosophy & Praxes,” Orr writes that “...the mindfulness practices that have been developed by the yoga traditions to address the binaristic thinking can be usefully integrated into critical pedagogy” (p. 480). Musial probes the question of what a yogic, heart-centered pedagogy might look like in her 2011 article in *Feminist Teacher*. By applying the meanings associated with the chakras to the needs of the classroom, Musial (2011) shows how to establish a learning environment that cultivates awareness with the integration of mind and body.

STARTING A PRACTICE

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, formed in 1997, blends contemplative awareness and contemporary life in the higher education setting. The Center offers two grant programs to Teaching and Learning Centers to foster and support the use of contemplative practices throughout the curriculum: Contemplative Pedagogy and Teaching and Learning Grants, and Invited Speaker Grants. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMH) is an initiative of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, and has held annual scholarly conferences since 2009.

Many universities and colleges across the country have centers devoted to mindfulness, which frequently offer courses, workshops, and training for incorporating contemplative pedagogies into the curriculum. Included among these are

- University of Massachusetts’ Center for Mindfulness
- Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching’s Mindfulness in the Classroom program
- UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center
- University of Minnesota’s Center for Spirituality & Healing
- UC San Diego’s Center for Mindfulness.

Gaining experience in mindful exercises and cultivating a personal practice will help educators be more resilient, compassionate, and pedagogically nimble in the classroom. This direct experience will be useful when educators decide to teach mindful exercises to their students. In-person and online instruction are beneficial for building a foundation in mindfulness practices. Many of the institutions listed above offer free and fee-based courses and modules in mindful practices. Additionally, these websites offer online content and resources.

- The Mindful Teacher (www.themindfulteacher.com)
- Mindful Living Programs (www.mindfullivingprograms.com)
- *Mindful* magazine (www.mindful.org)
- The Center for Mindfulness in Fresno (www.centerformindfulnessfresno.blogspot.com)
- The Mindful Center (www.themindfulcenter.com)
- Mindful Schools (www.mindfulschools.org)

Yoga studios and Shambhala centers also provide mindfulness and meditation practices. A practical guide for mindfulness in the classroom is Deborah Schoeberlein’s (2009) book *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything*. Schoeberlein (2009) shares her experiences with mindful teaching and training students to develop mindfulness themselves. She focuses on elementary through

high school age students, but her very practical strategies and techniques can be applied to a variety of classroom environments.

ASSESSING MINDFULNESS PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

To gain some insight into the responses of the students and faculty after introducing mindfulness exercises into several classes, Jill and Deborah collected feedback both formally and informally. Jill's online survey indicated that the students didn't mind referring to the exercise as a "meditation" (despite its conventional meaning) and confirmed that a majority of the students felt more focused or attentive during class. Over 80% of the students said they felt more relaxed. The students also offered some anecdotal feedback. One student for example noted: "It seemed strange at first, but then when you get into it it's very lovely." Following a research instruction session, led by Deborah, for a class of over 100 students, the instructor passionately commented: "Whatever you did to the students, I want you to come back and do again!" The instructor was responding to an entirely focused and attentive class; you could have heard a pin drop in the big lecture hall.

Tables 1 and 2: Student Survey on Meditation in Class
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CONCLUSION

Incorporating mindfulness exercises into the classroom is a useful tool for gaining the focus and attention of students. For teaching librarians, mindfulness practices may be particularly useful when having to facilitate the one-shot classes. If practiced independently, mindfulness practices may have the added benefit of easing anxiety that teaching librarians may have when assuming the guest-instructor role. Taking a moment to create a mindful teaching and learning space that gives students the opportunity to collect themselves and tune into the instructor is a method of growing interest in the attempt to cultivate an engaged learning environment. Contemplative pedagogy and engaged pedagogy value teaching that encourage thoughtful and mindful learning, supported by techniques that facilitate focus and attention, positive interaction, and a collective experience. Instructors who develop some form of their own mindfulness practice will be more confident and able to lead mindfulness exercises in the classroom. Vanderbilt University and the Center for Contemplative Studies offer strategies for developing personal contemplative practices and how they may translate into the academic environment. By bringing mindfulness exercises into the classroom, teaching librarians may be able to personalize their research methods sessions and create concentrated learning experiences for the students. As bell hooks (2009) expresses: "When we bring conscious mindfulness to work in the classroom we often have an ecstatic experience..." (p. 150).

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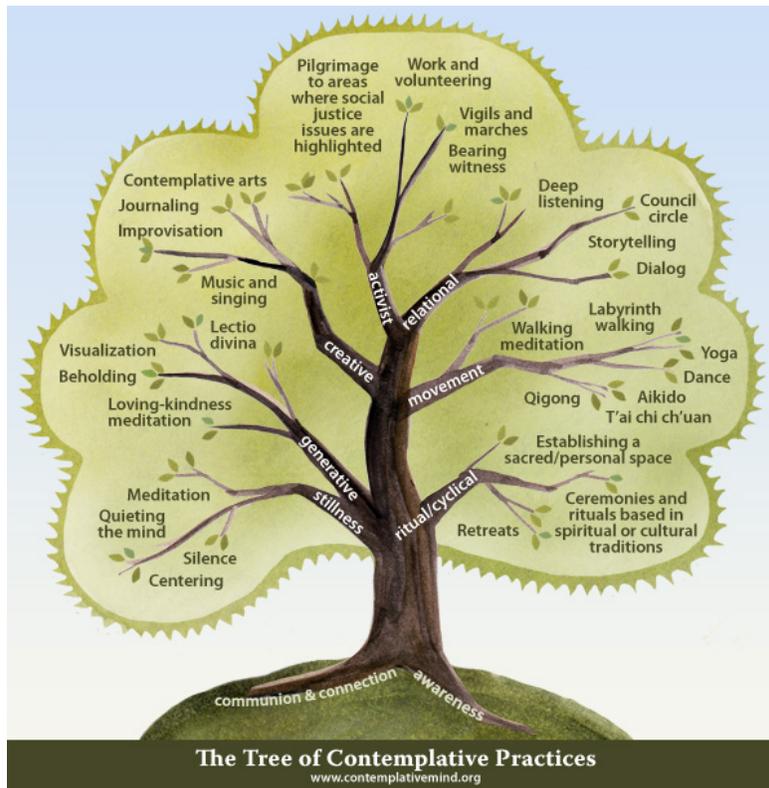
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APPENDIX A

Student comments from Jill Luedke's survey about mindfulness in the classroom

- Thank you, Jill for your insight and inspiration unto us of mindfulness... I even signed up for a yoga class, this fall on the main campus.
- It seemed strange at first, but then when you get into it it's very lovely.
- I loved it, and found it very helpful.
- I think it was very beneficial. Coming from someone with ADHD, Jill's meditation allowed me to become more focused and stay focused longer while also being very relaxed and attentive. Definitely wish I had someone do that before all my classes.

FIGURE 1



Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

TABLE 1

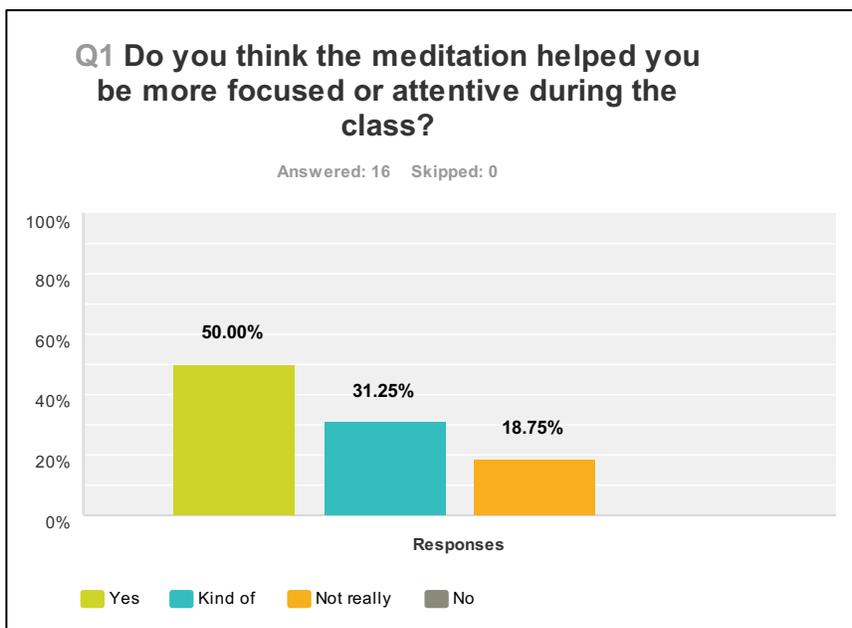


TABLE 2

