

**Contemplative Practice in the Community College Classroom:
Developing a Mindfulness Pedagogy
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Introduction

Recent data from the Princeton Review's annual list of "happiest colleges" implies that educational experiences should instill joy and happiness. And Yale offers an online course touted as Yale's most popular course ever, "The Science of Well-Being." In this course, Dr. Laurie Santos explores the research about the source of happiness and teaches students how to develop practices that employ those strategies. Although "joy and happiness" are not explicitly mentioned in our discussions of teaching and learning at Lane and other community colleges, important developments in theories of critical reading and writing pedagogies have recognized that certain habits of mind are important for learning.

In 2011, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project together outlined the role that "curiosity, openness, engagement, persistence, metacognition and flexibility" play in students' development of reading and writing skills. *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* articulates "the rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills" that support college readiness and success (1). Given the positive correlation between some of these habits of mind and the joy of learning that comes with them, finding the best way to instill these habits in our students seems essential in developing an equitable pedagogy.

Toward that end, on my sabbatical I undertook a number of conferences and professional activities to study how infusing mindfulness and contemplative practices in the classroom supports the habits articulated in the *Framework for Success*. I researched contemplative practices in the classroom, interviewed experts, attended conferences, participated in a summer institute at Smith College in Northampton, MA, studied MBSR in an 8-week course, and developed my own meditation practice. My purpose in working on this sabbatical was to develop my own capacity for embedding contemplative practice and mindfulness into writing and literature classes as a means by which we might bridge that equity gap and provide our students with the same learning opportunities and pedagogies as those at sites of privilege such as Vanderbilt and Princeton.

Each week, as I learned more about mindfulness, I spent time on a reflective practice to apply what I learned to the classroom. My goal was to create meaningful bridges from the metacognitive skills in the abstract to concrete, practical exercises. These exercises and the framework I have built relate to skills and habits of mind rather than curricular content.

So my goal in the synthesizing final step each week was to connect theory to practice: improve students' presence and ability to be still, listen deeply, and bring compassion to their own learning process. I believe these behaviors will improve their ability to synthesize, manage their time, bring sustained attention to complex tasks, and change learning strategies. In other words, the exercises that infuse my curriculum will merge "mindfulness" with "metacognition."

As part of my sabbatical presentation, I shared alternate nostril breathing, a practice I will be teaching my students, both in my hybrid and online classes. Some practitioners claim that breathing this way can restore equilibrium and improve brain function, calm an agitated mind and help balance the left "thinking" brain with right "feeling" brain. And, we all know, being calm and centered helps with our attention.

The Practice

When practicing alternate nostril breathing, it's important for you to become as comfortable as possible, adjusting your position and setting everything aside. First, practitioners take a deep inhale through the nose--and sigh it out through the mouth, completely releasing the body to the chair, letting go of any tightness or stress, resting hands comfortably in the lap and lowering the gaze or closing eyes.

Next, you form an old-fashioned peace sign with your two fingers, and rest those two fingers right between your eyebrows. Placing your fingers on your forehead is a way to engage the parasympathetic response and send a message to your body to slow down.

Then, you breathe in through both nostrils as naturally as possible, no striving, to a count of about 3 or 4. Then, exhale from both nostrils with a similar count, resting in your exhale.

Next, using your thumb, you close the right nostril and breathe IN through your left nostril. Take in your breath again to a count of 3 or 4, whatever feels comfortable. Again, no striving. Now, using your ring finger to cover your left nostril, you breathe OUT through your right nostril. It's effective to exhale for the same count or maybe one or two counts more than your inhale.

Next, you inhale through the right nostril, following the breath to the end and using your thumb to close your right nostril so that you can exhale through your left nostril. It helps to picture an upside down letter “V” as you breathe in one side, out through the opposite side, and then back in through the same side that you just exhaled.

After practicing this alternating breath for 3-4 minutes, you can breathe through both nostrils and without opening your eyes, bring yourself back to the present, visualize the room you are in, slowly move your body, and gradually raise your gaze or open your eyes.

Purpose, goals, objectives

What I’ve just illustrated here is a breathing exercise that may help students integrate the habit of mind of sustained attention with the metacognitive skill of knowing how to review and synthesize what they’ve learned.

Such habits of mind are essential for success in college writing, as outlined in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. And this was the impetus behind my sabbatical, to link mindfulness practices with my pedagogy.

Virginia Heffernan argues that the term mindfulness has a “dizzying range” of meanings. It can be called a “relaxed-alert frame of mind, equanimity. . . or awareness of the breath,” for example. Jon Kabat Zinn defines mindfulness simply as paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. But this definition is not without controversy. Despite the success of his ground-breaking Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts, Kabat Zinn has been accused of stripping meditation of its Buddhist roots. Looking at its present-day popularity, we can all see that the term “mindfulness” has been commodified and watered down. Deepak Chopra led a 2-minute meditation on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, and while this does illustrate the reach of this ancient practice, such a sound-byte exposure can also mislead the public into thinking that mindfulness is a thing and not a practice.

These are examples of an emergent criticism of populist mindfulness practice referred to as “spiritual bypassing.” Spiritual bypassing is the “widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks” (Fossella, 2011). One of the assumptions of spiritual bypassing is that power differentials disappear when we are mindful. Or that there’s no need for social engagement if we practice mindfulness.

Details and Work Completed

At Radicalizing Contemplative Education, the 9th Annual Conference of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education in Scottsvalley, CA, Drs. Carla Sherrell and Judith Simmer-Brown shared Time magazine covers to illustrate the media's white-washing of mindfulness with covers that almost mirror each other despite the 11-year gap in publication. They argued that most of the images of meditation reaching mainstream America are like these two covers that feature young, privileged, white women sitting in bliss. When we take in these images, it's important for us to ask, what are we assuming about mindfulness and meditation? Who is present? Who is missing?

True contemplative practices in a global context involve sitting with difficult issues such as social justice, inequity, and trauma. And grappling with these issues doesn't typically result in a state of tranquility. Remember, our students are fully aware of power differentials. They can be in various stages of recovery, in debt, out of work, some even homeless. Still, it's possible to use mindfulness to help all students recognize privilege, power, and difference, and help them to cope with their struggles or disadvantages.

According to Drs. Sherrell and Simmer-Brown, the focus at Naropa University is to educate students about the risks of spiritual bypassing in order to help them develop a more nuanced, mature mindfulness practice--and a life of personal growth open to suffering and true social engagement. The practices they offer illustrate specific ways to liberate the mindfulness movement from white privilege. It is my goal to adapt these practices for the community college classroom in the following ways:

1. The first practice is restoring body awareness to mindfulness practice as an essential gateway to sociocultural location and difference. Awareness and wisdom do not come from "fixing" the body and feelings that arise. So, for example, in the writing classroom, we use our developing presence as a community of practice to build trust and compassion. Like all scaffolding in the classroom, trust and compassion develop in students through practice, over time. Our practice also deepens, and I am always mindful of intersectional differences among students--many of which may be invisible. Thus, the mindfulness practice we engage in in Week 1--such as our opening alternate nostril breathing--is very different from the "self-compassionate letter" we may try in Week 8.
2. Second, Sherrell and Simmer-Brown encourage practitioners to employ awareness practices that explicitly identify patterns of privilege and power as an expression of waking up to unacknowledged privilege. A loving-kindness practice is one tool for acknowledging one's own privilege and expanding students' circle of identification. A writing exercise that I will adapt that I learned at the Smith

Institute from Mirabai Bush, co-founder of CMind, faculty at Smith, and author of *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, is a “befriending” exercise called “Just Like Me” in which students find an image of a person with whom they do not identify and through guided reflection, discover how that person is “just like them.”

3. Finally, a third way to disentangle mindfulness from privilege is interrupting the systems that suggest that there is only one way to be mindful. As we know, mindfulness is an ancient and global cultural practice; it is not just stillness. It’s sitting, eating, moving, doing everything mindfully. As Thich Nhat Hanh advises, being aware of washing the dishes while you are washing the dishes. I will be offering a variety of tools I learned through practicing MBSR and by attending sessions at both the Summer Institute and conferences.

Mindfulness is only a piece of the contemplative work we bring to our classrooms. This “contemplative tree” from CMind, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, illustrates the diversity of ways our students can bring mindfulness into their days. Here, the roots symbolize the two intentions that are the foundation of all contemplative practices, and the leaves represent the wide range of practices that may include stillness, movement, ritual, storytelling, listening, art, or other practices. Activities not included that may seem mundane--such as gardening or eating--may be experienced as contemplative when done so with the intent of cultivating awareness and wisdom. The handout I provided at campus in-service includes the CMind tree and a blank tree for you to explore possible contemplative practices you may engage with or practice with your students.

These three interventions into “spiritual bypassing” hold promise. But I’m aware that mindfulness practice in my writing classroom will not resolve the ironies and contradictions inherent in American culture. Still, we can acknowledge intersectional differences and examine cultural appropriation.

While participating in the **Summer Institute for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) at Smith College, Northampton, MA**, I observed a campus steeped in the #BlackLivesMatter movement: Banners still dressed empty sorority houses and dorms, and while on a walk, I found a beautiful student labyrinth with prayer flags, poems, and offerings acknowledging trauma and grief stemming from current issues, both political and personal. It occurred to me that whereas the community college student could be juggling parenting, coursework, and the struggle to piece together a liveable income through part-time jobs and financial aid, the Smith student must have had the luxury of discretionary time to engage in contemplative practices and explore social justice issues in this way. I recognized the irony that this social justice work was

taking place at a site of extreme privilege: tuition and fees at Smith is currently \$72,292.00 per year.

So, since we don't always have time or resources to construct a labyrinth with our students, how can mindfulness occupy their daily lives? What are other accessible examples of contemplative practice? Our students live stressful lives, and sharing tools for reducing stress is certainly a worthwhile practice that supports writing development.

In Spring term 2018, I studied **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in an 8-week course with Dr. Lisa Freinkel at Calyx Contemplative in Eugene, Oregon**. In her course, Dr. Freinkel emphasizes, "Mindfulness is awareness: noticing, not fixing."

Some examples of MBSR mindfulness practices that I plan to bring to the classroom:

- Writing a self-compassionate letter and starting each day with gratitude
- Employing the acronym STOP during times of stress: "Stop, take a breath, open/observe, proceed" when students experience frustration as writers or before they take an exam
- Practicing RAIN: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture (one of Tara Brach's practices)
- Practicing with the Nine Dots exercise to illustrate--coming back to the Habits of Mind--the habit of mind of flexibility with the metacognitive skill of managing frustration
- Taking your seat: establishing a dignified posture even in a brief in-class meditation, being relaxed yet alert (what Jon Kabat Zinn calls "falling awake")
- Engaging with the "magic eye" exercise, helping students integrate the habit of mind of persistence with the metacognitive skill of knowing how and when to change strategies
- And finally, experimenting with the "Raisin Meditation"

Meditation with a raisin is a key exercise in the MBSR curriculum. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, "The raisin exercise dispels all previous concepts we may be harboring about [mindfulness]. It immediately places it in the realm of the ordinary...the world we already know but are now going to know differently. Eating one raisin very, very slowly allows us to drop right into the knowing in ways that are effortless, totally natural, and beyond words and thinking. Such an exercise delivers wakefulness immediately. There is in this moment only tasting."

Results and Outcomes

Recalling the NCTE's "Habits of Mind," the raisin meditation builds on the habit of mind of curiosity. We might ask, how can practicing with a curious mind help a student develop greater metacognitive awareness of their thinking process and an understanding of what they're doing and why. With the raisin, participants often realize--through an open and curious investigation--they really don't know raisins as well as they thought they did. (Maybe I actually like raisins?) If this is so, what else can students become curious about and open to discovering in the writing process?

This focus on curiosity leads me to a realization I had regarding mindfulness in the classroom. I often teach hybrid courses in the Mac-assisted classroom and have struggled with the barriers presented by the computers and phones. I was intrigued when I attended "**Technology and Love,**" a session at the **ACMHE annual conference in Scottsvalley, CA**, that explicitly addressed the integration of technology with mindfulness practices.

Dr. Suzanne Klatt shared a practice from her Contemplative Inquiry Lab at Miami University, during which we explored with and through our cell phones, attempting to connect with others and ourselves in a new way. Rather than avoiding our phones, we fully "plugged in." She asked all of us to take out our phones, hold them in our hands, feel their corners. We were asked to resist tapping those familiar buttons we are so accustomed to tapping when we just look at our home screen.

Modifying a traditional "lovingkindness" exercise, she asked us to choose people from our contact lists with whom we have distinct reactions toward:

- First, we were to choose someone who is easy to love/feel gratitude toward, someone who has been a benefactor of sorts--perhaps a grandparent, elder, or teacher
- Next, we chose a person for whom we don't have a charge when we think of them, perhaps someone we just met at the conference and feel some neutrality toward
- And finally, we chose someone who is difficult for us, perhaps a person whose values we don't share or who has harmed us. Someone for whom we need to let go of negative feelings

Each time, we drafted a brief text to this person from our contact list. Our assignment: to notice what we were feeling. Sending the text was not part of the assignment. It was just about noticing our feelings--where we might be stuck, how these feelings might manifest themselves in our bodies, where we felt the tension.

Prior, I had seen technology as inconsistent with a mindfulness practice, but here, we considered how we might let go of negative feelings for our greater good, utilizing technology *while* practicing contemplation.

It's important to note how this exercise connects to the intersection of power and privilege. Who owns an iPhone? Some of my students do, but I also know that some still carry flip-phones or may not have a phone at all. How might we adapt this exercise to acknowledge barriers that may be in place? Since I teach in the computer-assisted classroom, an option would be to invite students to complete the exercise either on their phones or within their email contact lists or even at home.

Reflections

So what, now what? Where do we as educators start given an uphill battle to bring mindfulness to those who need it most while acknowledging that trauma and suffering are deeply rooted in systems of privilege and power?

At his talk at the **Wisdom 2.0 Conference I attended in San Francisco, CA**, Jon Kabat Zinn referenced a character in James Joyce's *The Dubliners*: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." Zinn says that many of us live our lives just like Mr. Duffy. We seem to be holding our breath, and thus regularly disconnecting from our bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It stands to reason that if we are disconnected from ourselves, we are also disconnected from the world around us, causing us and others great suffering. Kabat Zinn extends this argument to a more global context and says that our problems with the earth as a whole stem from our lack of connection with our own bodies.

So, becoming mindful involves paying closer attention to our bodies--seeing emotions as visitors arriving with a message. Kabat-Zinn's focus on embodiment is in perfect alignment with my **iRest Teacher Training** earlier this year, during which my instructor emphasized the importance of welcoming all feelings--worry, anxiousness, even pain--as messengers. Her course emphasizes that feelings are like children tugging at our sleeves. Paying attention to our bodily sensations that arise is what Rob Brandsma, author of *The Mindfulness Teaching Guide*, calls "inviting our monsters to tea."

Kabat Zinn's message is that with mindfulness, there's no place to go. No striving. If you're already whole, there's no improving you. Our job instead is to come to terms with our intrinsic wholeness and learn how to care truly for ourselves and by extension, each other. Deep self care is not a temporary fix. It's about knowing what we need in a given moment, and sometimes, saying no.

Our students always seem to be striving: writing papers, studying, racing to work, paying bills, getting family meals on the table. All are vital, necessary parts of life. According to Dr. Kristen Neff, professor at the University of Texas, pioneer in self-compassion research and author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, we live in a culture of endless striving and competition, and because of these pervasive behaviors, self-compassion cannot be seen as a luxury. Research has shown that self-compassion leads to healthier habits, lower anxiety and depression, and more satisfying relationships. The alternate nostril breathing, “Just Like Me,” and loving kindness exercises I shared earlier are concrete ways we can address these challenges inherent in the community college experience and encourage students to be open and curious, thus strengthening their metacognitive skills.

Practicing mindfulness in our classrooms holds promise, so long as we do so with care and awareness of the inherent contradictions in our culture that we are bound to encounter on the path. We must practice humility, realize that in each moment or classroom, there is potential for making a difference. And that can all start with the breath.

Since endings are as important as beginnings, I’d like to end with a poem. Simply reading a poem and inviting students to consider its meaning or connection to their lives is a way to bring contemplative practice to the classroom. For Mary Rose O’Reilly, author of *Radical Presence*, teaching is about *creating a space that allows students the freedom to nourish an inner life*. Practicing a minute or so of silence after reading a poem provides space in that inner world where thoughts can bubble up and discoveries can be made.

“The Guest House,” by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Some Favorite Online Resources

Dr. Tara Brach, author of True Refuge and Radical Acceptance

<https://www.tarabrach.com/>

RAIN practice on Mindful <https://www.mindful.org/tara-brach-rain-mindfulness-practice/>

Dr. Rick Hanson, author of Resilient, Just One Thing, Hardwiring Happiness, and Buddha's Brain. Year-long online program, The Foundations of Well-Being

<https://www.rickhanson.net/>

Sharon Salzberg, author of True Love and Real Happiness

<https://www.sharonsalzberg.com/> and Sharon Salzberg's online course Real Love via Tricycle magazine: <https://learn.tricycle.org/courses/real-love>

Mindful Magazine, daily practices and guided meditations

<https://www.mindful.org/magazine/>

Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/> and <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/#> Excellent resource for classroom exercises, videos.

Mirabai Bush, author of Contemplative Practices in Higher Education, co-authored with Daniel Barbazat <http://www.mirabaibush.com/>

Dr. Kristen Neff, pioneer in self-compassion and author of Self-Compassion Step-by-Step and the Mindfulness Self-Compassion Workbook <https://self-compassion.org/>

Jack Kornfield: podcasts, books, meditations, live Monday night talks@ Spirit Rock <https://jackkornfield.com/podcasts-dharma-talks/>

Calyx Contemplative Care, MBSR Training in Eugene

<https://www.calyxcontemplative.com/mbsr-in-eugene>

Podcasts

On Being with Krista Tippett

Being Well with Rick Hanson

Metta Hour with Sharon Salzberg

Greater Good Podcast

10% Happier with Dan Harris

Rubin Mindfulness Meditation

Tara Brach

Sounds True: Insights at the Edge

Jon Kabat-Zinn on the On Being podcast, Opening to Our Lives:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/jon-kabat-zinn-opening-to-our-lives/>

Free webinars via CMind: The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society:

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>