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The Balancing Act: Using Mindfulness in a Technology-Driven World

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Mindfulness is far from a new concept, but implementing elements of it into the classroom is a relatively new process. How do we create a classroom environment that provides a delicate balance of technology with mindfulness, while also preparing students to develop the life skills needed to be successful in our 21st century world?

Our current system of education utilizes technology as a major delivery method for content, curriculum, and assessment. It is a terrific resource for our educational environment, but at the same time as educators we need to be mindful about how we use technology in and out of the classroom. To offset the increased use of technology, there is a greater need for human connection and kinetic activities.

This article will explore quick and easy mindful practices that can revolutionize your classroom, your relationship with your students, and your teaching practice. Practical strategies will be discussed to ensure that we do not become all-consumed by technology like the mindless automatons found in *Fahrenheit 451*. This article is organized in the following way:

1. *What is mindfulness?*
2. *Why is mindfulness needed in our oversaturated world of technology?*
3. *What are some practical strategies to incorporate mindfulness in your classroom?*

What is Mindfulness?

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of

Massachusetts. We attended this program as students to learn about mindfulness and how we could incorporate it into our classrooms. The program defines mindfulness as “Paying attention, in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn xxvii). In his book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat-Zinn lays out the seven foundations of mindfulness as:

1. Non-judging: Be “an impartial witness to your own experience” (33) and the judgments and reactions that arise. Learn to step back from your ideas and opinions, likes and dislikes.
2. Patience: Let things “unfold in their own time” (35), being open to each moment.
3. Beginner’s Mind: “See everything as if for the first time” (35), with curiosity and openness.
4. Non-striving: Be aware of striving for results. Let go, and focus on seeing things as they are moment-to-moment.
5. Trust: “Develop a basic trust in yourself” (36); honor your feelings and intuition.
6. Acceptance: “See things as they are” (39) instead of denying or resisting what is.
7. Letting Go: Practice “non-attachment” (39). Just let each experience be what it is without attaching to it.

Why is Mindfulness Needed in Our Oversaturated World of Technology?

In recent years, more attention has been dedicated to the mental well-being of students and teachers. The information offered here is nothing new. Instead, it is distilled for easy implementation in your classroom. Developing a mindfulness practice will not eliminate your stress, but it will provide perspective and the tools and space necessary to manage that stress. You and your students will be more focused, productive, and motivated to complete tasks and to think creatively. By cultivating a welcoming space that values mindfulness, you are essentially giving yourself and your students permission to take the mental and emotional space needed to think and function without being reactive. Furthermore, you provide them a chance to focus on the task at hand, find their creativity, allow for critical thinking and, perhaps most importantly, self-reflect and self-evaluate.

What Are Some Practical Strategies to Incorporate Mindfulness in Your Classroom?

After taking the MBSR program based on the teachings of Jon Kabat-Zinn, we identified five areas in which we wanted to employ mindfulness strategies in our classrooms: spacing out work, allowing time for self-reflection, being present, limiting screen time, and incorporating mindful exercises. Throughout this article, we will first share the strategy we address, then talk about the traditional mindfulness idea and/or exercise from the MBSR program that it pertains to, and, finally, how we adapt it for our classrooms.

Strategy 1: Space Out Work for Yourself and Your Students

Being mindful about your time is just as important as thinking about how much time

it will take your students to complete an assignment. Often, we do not take into consideration the amount of time things will take, both in and out of the classroom. Taking the mindfulness course taught us the importance of being aware and intentional. Following the ideas of Non-judging and Beginner's Mind, we decided to look at the data from our class without judging it and as if seeing it for the first time.

The following are a few of the ways we have dealt with spacing out work: Evaluate the time it takes to complete work by giving students a block of class time (perhaps twenty minutes or so) to complete the work you have assigned. Pay attention to how they work, how they take breaks, and how they get distracted. Even though you are going to feel the urge to get grading done or check your email, observe your students working, so you will learn about how they work and if your time calculation is accurate. This simple exercise can provide you with useful feedback as to your students' habits and needs. Once you have noticed how your students work, use that information to guide your assignments.

As you plan out your lessons, are you thinking about the time it is going to take for your students to complete the work? Are you thinking about the time it will take you to grade an assignment? Most likely, you have underestimated the time for the students to complete it and for you to grade it. Both of us have had a creative idea for an assignment and then suffered through grading because we did not consider how we were going to grade it, or how much time it would take to grade it, or both. Simply considering timing between your various class sections and varying due dates can make a big difference and can help solve the grading dilemma.

Strategy 2: Allow Time for Self-reflection for You and Your Students

Growth mindset and internal motivation are buzzwords in education. A mindfulness practice can nurture these goals by providing opportunity for meaningful self-reflection. By viewing school work through the lens of three mindfulness principles—Beginner’s Mind, Non-judging, and Acceptance—you can more accurately and deeply see the full picture of what is happening for your students or yourself in any given assignment or activity. By taking the time to ask students to self-reflect, you will not only get feedback, but also allow your students to take ownership of their learning. By reflecting on our own practices, we can develop strategies that will lead to better student outcomes and a more productive and pleasant learning environment.

After completing the MBSR program, we applied the tenets of the programs and put it in more practical terms for our teaching. We brainstormed and came up with the self-reflection questions listed below to help us evaluate our teaching and our students (see Table 1).

Table 1

Self-Reflection Questions for Teachers

<u>Questions for Teachers</u>
What is working for your students?
What is working for you?
What are your frustrations?
Do you address those frustrations or do you hope they will get better?
What complaints do you have from students and/or parents?
In order to make a change, how can you look at what you are doing differently?
What do you have control over? What do you need to accept?
What can you easily change to make students’ lives easier and still accomplish your goals?
What can you do to make your life easier?

What are other colleagues doing that seem to be working/not working? How can you get help/support to become a more effective teacher?
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Table 2

Self-Reflection Questions for Students

<u>Questions for Students</u>
What did you learn?
What did you achieve?
What can you do better?
Was this useful to you? Why/why not?
How did you use your time on this project?
How did you use your resources?
Would you do things differently given the opportunity? How?
What is working for you?
What are your frustrations?
How can you get the help/support you need to succeed?

At first blush, you may be thinking that this is just another task to add to your to-do list; however, these strategies can help you and your students work smarter. No matter if you are a beginner or a veteran in mindful practice, what is important to remember is that as long as you are making progress on the continuum, you are becoming a more effective teacher for yourself and your students.

Strategy 3: Be Present in the Classroom and in the School

The routine of school can be comforting and provide great structure, but it can also be numbing. Being present is one of the most important things we can do to foster learning. MBSR teaches that mindfulness itself is the exercise of trying to be present in our lives, and it seems a natural fit for use in the classroom as this is where we spend

most of our lives. Try this for a week: stand at the door of your classroom, and greet your students as they enter. Say hello to each one by name, or talk with them as they arrive. Listen to what they say with their words, but also watch their body language. This simple task will allow you to see their mood on any given day and give you a chance to connect one-on-one with them. As a result, you will learn more about them and trust will grow. This trust will allow some of your students the confidence to delve more deeply into their work.

Besides welcoming students to the class, you can ask questions during the class that can foster reflection on the material presented or the skill being taught or reinforced. For example, ask students, “How does this material connects with essential questions?” or “Why is this information important?”

One strategy we both have found effective is asking students why they are learning what they are learning. Allowing time for students to think about and to discuss the purposes of the lesson creates an environment of authenticity and value. Many times, we have assumed that students knew the reasons, only to discover that we needed to point out the “why.” This give and take in the class is so important because it allows students’ voices to be heard and for teachers to know what needs to be clarified.

Strategy 4: Limit Screen Time for You and Your Students

As an educator, you need to decide when you are going to plug in and out and when you are going to require your students to do the same. This is important because it will enable you to be more focused and discern what you need to pay attention to in this fast-paced digital environment. According to the tenets of MBSR, being present in the moment (whether it’s in “real life” or the digital realm) is key. Employing the

principles of Beginner’s Mind, Trust, and Acceptance towards your digital footprint can help keep balance.

After taking the course, we evaluated our use of technology and decided to make some significant changes. Be aware that you can choose when to be available and when to detach. You do not need to respond immediately to every email. Setting limits and structure on how you handle digital communication will benefit both you and your students. Decide for yourself how you plan to respond to emails and then communicate that to all stakeholders. Being clear with your students, parents, and administrators is key to the success of whatever plan you put in place for yourself.

Think about this: if you are always available for your students, it denies them the opportunity to figure things out for themselves. Even though as teachers you always want to help, you need to be mindful of how much you are creating dependence as opposed to empowering students to figure things out themselves. You need to find that delicate balance where you provide the support for your students when they need it and, at the same time, allow them the space to solve their problems. Allowing them to surmount their own stumbling blocks teaches them to be independent and to be lifelong learners. This independence fuels their self-confidence.

Communicating with your students about how you use technology is something we address on the first day of school. From there, we reinforce the idea of a blended classroom. For example, we may tell the students to take out their Chromebooks for an activity and then at the end of it, instruct them to put computers away so they can focus on the class. Also, during student presentations, instruct students to be mindful of how their attention or lack of attention will be perceived by the presenters. For example, tell students to “three-quarter,” or

tilt their Chromebook screens down, so that they can pay attention to the presenters. Another strategy is to assign work where students are not allowed to use technology. This can be tricky because we have become so accustomed to using technology; however, you can choose to relax your rule and allow for a quick Google search as needed. Other thoughts to consider along these same lines might be how you handle online grading and feedback.

Strategy 5: Provide Opportunities for Your Students to Be Mindful

We found such significant benefits from developing our own mindfulness practice through exercises we learned in MBSR that we decided to incorporate some of the exercises themselves into our classrooms. In some cases, we used them directly as we learned them, and in others, we made significant modifications. We have included some of those exercises and their adaptations in the Mindfulness Exercises section at the end of this article.

One strategy we developed ourselves relates to helping students digest feedback and takes place before handing back essays. Have students engage in an activity that emphasizes why it is important to ask questions about the comments you have written. Then, provide time for students to review those comments. You can play instrumental music as your students are reviewing their essays. Walk around the room and make yourself available for any questions. Sometimes a comment you think is clear is not understood, or it is misinterpreted. By allowing students time to read and ask questions, you put value in your comments, foster growth in their writing, and shine light on the assignment as more than just a grade.

English teachers create many opportunities for students to be mindful, and the above are strategies you can add to your

tool box. By being more mindful of what and why you are asking your students to accomplish, you will see changes in your classroom environment and your relationships with students.

One question that often comes up is, “How will mindfulness affect me?” Here is an activity that can put mindfulness in context. Hold up your pointer finger and look at it. Just focus on your finger; this is all your stress and worries. Now look beyond your finger to a wall. Do you still see your finger? Yes, but it is not consuming your entire view? No. This is how mindfulness can help you manage and cope with stress, etc. It doesn’t eliminate stress; instead, it provides you with the tools to cope and manage it. It allows you to see the full picture and decide where you choose to zoom in any given moment.

Mindfulness Exercises and Resources

Below, we provide for some quick and easy exercises to incorporate into your classroom, as well as several helpful resources.

Listening Exercise (All levels; connects to Non-judging, Patience, Beginner’s Mind, Non-striving, and Letting Go)

Both of us learned this listening exercise from MBSR and used it as originally taught to us. Find a partner and sit side by side, shoulder to shoulder, but facing away from each other. Set a timer for one minute. Create a prompt (if you are doing this with students you can easily tie this to any curriculum), and ask them to have one partner speak in response while the other can ONLY listen. After the timer goes off, turn and face each other and have the listener reiterate what they heard. Switch. This exercise reminds us that listening is an activity, not a passive event (Smookler).

Responding to a Quote (All levels; Connects to Non-striving, Trust, and Acceptance)

When we attended MBSR, we started to think of the activities that we do in our class that were already promoting mindfulness. Here is one activity we both use in the classroom, and as a result of the class, we have become more intentional about the mindfulness piece. Depending on your goal, have students respond to a quote from the literature you are reading or choose an inspirational quote. Thinking about a quote through writing is mindful and useful. It will often lead to uncovering an essential question or cultivating deep thought on a particular topic (“8 Mindful Writing Habits (and 16 Prompts!)”).

Raisin Exercise (All levels; Connects to Patience, Trust, Acceptance, and Letting Go)

In the MSBR program we attended, one of the exercises involved giving each student a raisin and asking them to focus on it. Using the five senses, really investigate it—look at it, feel it, smell it, listen to it, etc. Place it in your mouth and eat it slowly. This exercise in intention reminds us how a simple act can be transformed with attention (Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfully Eating a Raisin”). We use this exact exercise in class, only modifying it to use a Hershey’s kiss instead.

Formal MBSR Meditation Activities (Intermediate/advanced level; Connects to All Foundations)

Although we do not use all the practices listed below in our classrooms, we learned these practices from the MBSR program. Jen has her students do a short body scan, and Eileen has her students do some breathing practices. The formal meditation practices here provide instructions and audio tracks for the Body Scan Practice, Breathing Practice, Standing Up Yoga, and Lying Down Yoga. These exercises increase

awareness of breath and nonjudgmental sensation in the body (Kabat-Zinn, “Mindful Exercises: Formal MBSR Practices”).

Resources for Mindfulness

The “Mindful Educators” podcast by Erin and Dave Tashian aims to help educators, as well as other professionals, learn about mindfulness. Hosted by a middle school teacher and a guidance counselor who explore mindfulness as it directly relates to teaching and creating a self-reflective practice in the K-12 environment (Tashian & Tashian). It is a great resource for teachers who want to implement mindfulness into their classrooms.

For research and news about mindfulness, we recommend the website of The Mindfulness Institute at Ramapo College. There, you will find a compilation of significant resources to support mindfulness practice, including links for educators and up-to-date research and news.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is a process. Simply trying and practicing is the goal. Be gentle with yourself and know that you can begin again at any time. What is important is your awareness of your choices. We wish you well on your journey.

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