Paths to Mindfulness

It’s not time on task, but the quality of our attention during an experience that results in significant learning. Deep learning enhances concentration, encourages focus on key points, and promotes thinking. “Contemplative pedagogy” focuses on using mindfulness techniques to enhance our teaching and our students’ learning. Few of us were trained in mindfulness techniques, but the good news is that they are easy to learn and just as easy to share with our students.

✓ **Focus.** Before class, identify no more than three crucial things that you want every student to remember or be able to do after the class. Focus intently on how to get students to remember or do those things. Do this for every single class or online lesson.

✓ **Center yourself.** Reserve 5 minutes for yourself right before you teach. Prioritize this. Do not schedule anything in the 15 minutes before class. Find a place that you can be alone, close your eyes, and concentrate on your breathing. Walk slowly outside if the weather is nice. Don’t think about your class; simply bring your awareness to your breath and the present moment. Centering yourself before you teach will make you more present, aware, and focused when you teach.

✓ **Breathe.** Many teachers put so much pressure on themselves to talk that they don’t breathe anywhere near as much as they should. Take a deep breath before answering any student question and tell them you are doing so. When you ask a question, teach students to first take a really deep breath and then think. Give them time to do this. Before making a key point, take a deep breath. Practice. Practice. Practice. You (and your students) will soon realize that slowing your mind allows for deeper thinking.

✓ **Show students how to center themselves.** Our students have many things that hinder their attention and concentration in class. Begin every class on time and use the first 2 minutes as a quiet time for students to close
their eyes (if they are comfortable doing so) and simply breathe and bring their attention to the present moment. Ask students to bring their awareness to how the chair feels, how the air in the room feels, and to what sounds they hear. Emphasize that nothing requires them to act or respond. If this sounds like too much, simply ask them to breathe deeply and think about the most beautiful place they have been. The goal is simply to slow distracting thoughts and concentrate on the present moment.

✔ **Show students how to silence their inner critics.** Show them how to intentionally use their inner critics and not allow their inner critics to use them. This is especially impactful before a stressful or intimidating activity like an exam or the drafting of a writing assignment. As part of the tip above this one, ask students to bring their attention to their “inner critic”: thoughts that are negative, self-conscious, critical, or skeptical like “I’ll never pass math” or “I’m not a good writer” or “what’s the point of this activity?” Have students practice parking their inner critic in a safe place for the moment.

✔ **Stop.** Take “silence breaks” after you cover a key concept. Ask students to be silent and focus their minds on what they just learned. What does the concept mean to them? Can they play around with an idea or see the idea in a concrete thing or task? Give students time to think.

✔ **Hum.** Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it. Tell your class that you need a way to get the group’s attention after small group activities and discussions or to begin class. Tell them you’re going to hum and ask them to simply try to match your pitch. Joke about how there aren’t any points off for humming talent. This feels risky, but students will go along with it, and it works. It’s centering, and the vibrations from humming are also relaxing. If student buy-in with this lessens during the semester, you know their focus is slipping.

✔ **Play music.** It can grab our attention while calming our minds and centering our thoughts. Play music that does this for you, and ask students to bring in ideas for music that can help calm the brain and center thinking.

✔ **Use short, reflective writing.** Journaling, reflective writing, and freewriting aren’t just for English classes: they are centering experiences and can be an important component of a complete learning cycle (see *Top 10* #24). Have everyone stop, breathe deeply, sit silently for a minute (eyes closed if comfortable), and then write a reflective paragraph on a key concept that they just learned.

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✓ Do not over-plan a lesson. When you outline or plan a class too thoroughly, you sacrifice flexibility and responsiveness. Determine the 1 – 3 key things you want students to learn, practice centering yourself, and breathe deeply. Then go to class prepared to listen at least as much as you talk. Meet your students where they are. Yes, the task of focusing a lesson on your 1-3 key things can seem to be at odds with being flexible and responding to students. That’s why teaching is an art!

Our society encourages multitasking, and we are bombarded with information on a daily basis. Creating a mindful classroom requires consciously incorporating mindfulness techniques in your courses, which means practicing them yourself (that’s what summers are for!). Try some of these ideas. Reflect on how calming your brain allows you to center yourself and improve your concentration, awareness, and thinking. Becoming a mindful, reflective teacher who inspires students (Top 10 #29) is very hard work, but, ultimately, it’s also the most rewarding kind of teaching there is.

THANK YOU to all who have responded to our Teaching Top 10 lists this year and to everyone who is working to become a better teacher. Thanks to the Center for Teaching for distributing all thirty Top 10 issues (see the full list below). We trust you have noticed that Joe has (partly) restrained Bill’s propensity to sprinkle commas like raisins and that Bill has (almost) convinced Joe that one’s life is not extended one minute for every word that one writes. That is to say, we hope that you enjoyed reading them as much as we enjoyed writing them.

Get their hearts first, and their minds will follow.

Joe Finckel & Bill Searle
Teaching
A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty
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