

Mindful ELA: Lessons from a Grassroots Wellness Initiative

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Over the past five years, Northern Highlands Regional High School has, through the ground swell of teacher involvement and support of the community, become a place where mindfulness practices have been used to develop a stronger sense of social and emotional wellness. The administration’s willingness to let a professional learning community (PLC) do its own research, seek training, and run programs, coupled with their willingness to listen to all stakeholders and try new policies has created a culture in the school where social and emotional learning has a subtle and integrated presence.

SEL and Mindfulness in the Classroom

While social and emotional learning may suggest a specific curriculum adopted by a district, its main components are inherent in many different teaching frameworks. Linda Lantieri (2015), a pioneer of social and emotional learning, argues that we must “widen our vision of education” to include social and emotional wellness and mindfulness in a more inclusive and holistic way. Lantieri and Zakrzewski (2015) argue that social and emotional learning and mindfulness are complementary practices that can support students in managing their emotions. After several English teachers participated in both in-school and off-site professional learning, principles of social and emotional learning and mindfulness have become integrated into many of our ELA classrooms. In this article, we will reflect on the factors that inspired these curricular changes and share several mindfulness techniques that we have

adopted in our two English language arts classrooms.

Context for the Wellness Initiative

Our school’s Wellness Initiative was catalyzed by two factors: teachers’ concerns about students’ emotional needs and the deaths of several recent graduates. A group of teachers were growing concerned about students’ stress. We have a highly motivated, competitive, generally college-bound student body, and our school culture is quite focused on academic and extracurricular achievement. Many of our students were suffering from internal and external pressures to secure a spot at an impressive college they believed would position them for a successful future. They loaded their schedules with AP classes they were not interested in, pulled all-nighters, and showed visible signs of distress. On the other hand, students who did not buy into the high-stakes academic culture sought unhealthy ways to cope with the environment. In an effort to address these student problems head on, a group of teachers formed a professional learning community (PLC) focused on student stress.

During a concurrent five-year period, several recent graduates died of suicide and drug overdose. After two former students died by suicide within six weeks of each other, the growing emotional needs of the school community were glaring to all. In the wake of these tragedies, faculty members grew increasingly concerned about more directly addressing our students’ social and emotional needs. While everyone wished the circumstances were different, the obvious exigencies of the community were brought into focus, and members of every part of the school community were moved to take action.

In the PLC, teachers learned together through several methods: discussions of books and articles, sharing our learning from off-site professional development, sharing classroom practices, sharing articles, and reflecting together on experimentation in our classrooms. Through a multi-year collaboration that included faculty from across all departments, we had garnered what Chenelle and Fisch (2014) describe as the cross-disciplinary power of PLCs:

At this point, we had created a sense of community in which we recognized our shared goals, expectations, and challenges. We were no longer just a group of teachers from different disciplines. We were a community of grade-level-specific professional learning teams, recognizing common values and goals and eager to think about how we could work together to meet the shared needs of all our students. (p. 3)

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every discipline. Once school leaders learned from several PLC members about the benefits of this work, they introduced a school-wide Wellness Initiative and invited members of the PLC to assist in the development of staff and student programs.

English language arts in particular, with its explorations of the human experience and development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, lends itself to contemplative, mindful, and reflective practices. In the sections that follow, we describe several activities that we have adopted over time in our two classrooms. While a few of these activities are more tailored to ELAs, all of them can be adapted for learners across grade levels and content areas.

Joe's ELA Classroom: Deep Listening and Mindful Writing

Deep Listening: A Mindful Model of Small Discussions

Our students' minds are often racing. They think about what happened in the previous class, what is happening in the next class, why their phone just vibrated, something their friend recently said. Rather than being focused and present, they are distant and distracted. This is especially apparent in their conversations; students are often formulating responses and thinking three steps ahead before they have heard everything said. Deep listening helps them to slow down and actually listen nonjudgmentally, a habit of mind that Jon Kabat-Zinn identifies as a core principle of mindfulness (Mindful Staff, 2017).

I usually guide students through deep listening in two steps. First, I divide them into pairs, keeping in mind the students' social dynamic. Then, I invite them to close their eyes if they feel comfortable, and I play the sound of a bell. When they can no longer hear the bell, they raise their hands. Rather than a contest, this is a way for students to hone their

abilities to listen and feel what it is like to focus their awareness.

The second part involves having the students speak to each other. For a designated period of time—I usually start with one or two minutes and give them more time as they grow more comfortable—one person speaks to the other, and the listener is not allowed to respond. They can offer slight reactions physically, but they should not verbalize any agreements, disagreements, or say what they want to say. When the time is up, a bell rings, everyone takes three deep breaths, and then the other person speaks. The second person does not have to respond directly to anything the previous person said. It is okay if they do, but the focus should be their own reaction to the discussion topic. Once both people have spoken, the bell rings again, everyone takes three deep breaths, and then they talk about both the content of what was said and the experience itself. This can be done with almost any prompt. It can relate to news or a reading assignment; it can be a way of reflecting on a project or semester; it can be a response to a quote. The important thing is that people slow down and listen to each other without a need to respond at the first break. If a person runs out of things to say during their allotted time, that person can sit silently until they think of something else.

Weekly Writing Assignments: Rethinking Writing Prompts and Grading

Influenced by Lucas's (2012) criteria for effective grading of writing, I developed a yearlong assignment that utilizes pass/fail grading for frequent writing. In my ninth grade classes, I give a list of several dozen writing prompts. Students have to submit a one- to two-page writing piece every week. Half of the writing prompts are focused on some main tenets of mindfulness: reflection, empathy, loving kindness, gratitude, beholding. This is designed to allow students to reflect more deeply on their lives,

relationships, and learning and get in touch with their place in the school community. The writing assignments include the following options: write about something good you have done, something you are proud of; write about something that makes you happy; write about something you learned this week outside of school; share a meaningful story. This gives students an opportunity to be contemplative and reflective while also building a consistent writing practice. The pass/fail component allows the students to write freely, without judgment. Since students are not worrying about the grade, they are able to focus on the honesty of their reflection and the content itself.

Ongoing Reflections On Classroom Practices

These practices are part of a larger classroom philosophy that focuses on integration. Rather than using practices as quick fixes, these mindful practices allow the students to consider their place in the world of reading and writing. As they develop empathy and become more reflective, they are able to integrate many seemingly disparate parts of themselves as students and citizens.

Lauren's ELA Classroom: Easing Transitions, Anchor Breaths, and Object Meditations

Transitions can be especially jarring in schools, both for students and teachers; when the bell rings, students flood the halls and swarm from one end of the building to another, often chatting about a challenging quiz as they attempt to settle into their seats. Between class periods, I may find myself answering questions from a lingering student, queuing up a document on my computer, or tidying up from the previous class. The five minutes of passing time can feel frenzied if I neglect to pause, take a few breaths to check in with my body and emotions, and make a conscious effort to greet students as they enter the classroom. In *Mindfulness for*

Teachers (2015), Jennings emphasizes the benefits of greeting students warmly and establishing a routine for entering the room (pp.123-124). In my own classes, I try to begin each period with a welcoming word or two (“Good morning. It’s nice to see you. Thank you for coming.”) before launching into the day’s activities. Students respond in kind, which lightens the mood of the classroom and creates a more welcoming environment for learning.

The Anchor Breath

The “anchor breath” activity (Rechtschaffen, 2014), one I utilize frequently, works well with students of all grade levels. I guide students to focus on the sensations in their stomachs during a few slow, conscious breaths. They notice the rise and fall of their bodies and the groundedness they feel with each breath. I teach them the metaphor of the breath as a ship’s anchor—the ship is subject to outside forces, but the breath keeps the ship anchored and secure. Students are eager to unpack the symbolism, recognizing the waves and wind as turbulent thoughts and emotions.

I hung a sign depicting an anchor above my blackboard. It reads, “Feeling stressed? Remember the anchor breath.” When a student tells me they are particularly stressed or anxious, I remind them of the anchor breath or lead the class through a few breaths together. It only takes a minute of class time, but this simple lesson on abdominal breathing helps students feel more embodied, focused, and ready for a transition. On occasion, I’ve utilized a web-based tool, like a digital meditation bell or GoNoodle’s “rainbow breath” video, but I like to show students that they can regulate their thoughts and emotions without the support of a device.

Object Meditation and Writing Lesson

Many formal mindfulness trainings invite participants to focus on and

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think about an object: either on something edible, like a raisin, or on a natural object, such as a leaf or acorn. In my ELA classroom, observing objects has helped my students cultivate focus, attention to detail, creativity, and even empathy. When the weather is nice enough, I lead students outside on a brief, silent walk. I prepare them with my expectations before we leave and suggest that they walk slowly and silently around a small area of the school grounds, noticing their surroundings. Sometimes I incorporate a walking meditation by prompting students to pay attention to the feeling in their feet as they walk. After a few minutes, before we return to the classroom, they select one small object to bring back to the room. I lead students through a guided meditation during which I prompt them to silently answer open-ended questions about their object: What does the texture feel like? How would you describe the color? What is its temperature? Where did it come from before you picked it up? After a few minutes of focusing on the object, I invite students to write about their object. Their writing may take the form of a poem, a narrative, or a form of their own choosing. When they write after a brief meditation, students are focused and deliberate in their word choice. They take their time, and ask for more when time is up. This short activity helps students develop their observation skills and experience the writer’s gift of capturing the intricacies of the world.

Bringing in Lessons from My Own Practice

My ongoing mindfulness practice helps me develop my ability to regulate my own emotions and be more present in my personal and professional life. I draw from my training to create new lessons, such as an imaginary party activity I developed to teach active listening and speaking skills through play (Zucker, 2018). I continue to grow into a more mindful educator thanks to the trust of my administrators, who encourage me to selectively apply what I’ve learned in trainings, and the support of a passionate network of colleagues who continue to explore these practices together. While students’ stress has not disappeared, I am encouraged by how quickly they can learn and take comfort in the transformative power of a few deep breaths.

An Evolving Initiative

The reason we have had success incorporating these practices and philosophies into our school culture is the investment from all stakeholders. Members of the administration, faculty, students, and other community members have worked together to shift the culture to one that values the whole child, whole school, and whole community. Furthermore, these practices were not mandated or formalized through the adoption of a particular curriculum; rather, staff members were given opportunities to practice the skills themselves and then given explicit permission to experiment in their classrooms if interested. Many of the teachers in the school, and specifically the English department, continue to explore their own ways of fitting mindful practices into the classroom to support students’ social and emotional development. ●

Join the conversation!

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—Tom Vander Ark, 2015

“10 Tips for Developing Student Agency,” *Ed Week*

This issue reflects on student agency in the classroom. How does a teacher, department, or school foster agency in students? What approaches and practices can help cultivate agency? What resources are needed to support this process? How does the exercise of student agency affect a student’s everyday learning practices? What is the role of the teacher in this environment? What are some short- and long-term effects of agency on the student? On the teacher? On education? **Deadline: June 15, 2018**