**EDUC 451B Mindfulness Inquiry Andi Silver**

“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is compos sui if he have it not. An education which

should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.”

James, W. (1890/1981).

The principles of psychology.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 401.

**Learning to Breathe**

*I remember learning to blow bubbles by the side of the pool. Taking a deep breath and then going under the water and blowing out all the air as hard and as fast as I could, over and over again until it was a rhythm that made me feel like I could go on forever. Taking in all the air I could hold and then letting all the air out until I was completely empty. Feeling the bubbles cascading up over my face, my nose, my eyes, my forehead and then gone, bursting out of the water above me. Feeling my lungs and how much air they could hold, how full they seemed to be from the bottom of my diaphragm, up my lower ribs and all around like my chest was just an empty barrel to be filled with air, up to the top of my lungs by my collarbones. And then forcing all that air out into the water around me, squeezing the air out with the muscles around my chest like a bellows. Then the empty feeling, not for long, but long enough of being out of air, spent and waiting just a second for the rhythm to bring me back up for more air. Not long, but long enough to know emptiness, where the fight begins.*

*And then jump up and gulp greedily in as much air as I can hold as quickly as I can get it, so that I can go underwater again to hear the rush of bubbles around my ears and feel them push up past my face to disappear forever at the surface. The rhythmic sound of it, jump, gulp, splash, bubbles, jump, gulp, splash, bubbles, jump, gulp, splash, bubbles……..*

*Then I learned the front crawl and the rhythm that made learning to blow bubbles so hypnotic became a force to move me back and forth across the pool. The arms moving me forward and pulling through the water and the legs and feet kicking to move me faster while my breath continued to rush past my ears. My breath was the only thing that I could hear with my head under water and away from the other noises of the world. Quick breath in as I turned my head to the side and then forcing all the air out in a stream of bubbles trailing behind me. Over and over and over. Arms pulling, one then the other feathering in and out of the water in turn. Legs scissoring as they kick with a faster rhythm but just as steady. But it is my breathing that anchors me in the moment and makes swimming into a meditation rather than an exercise or a competition for me. I swim on and on concentrating on my breath, the fullness, the emptiness, the sound in my ears of the force it takes to regulate my life, the feeling of the bubbles rushing around my head to the surface and the rest of my body taking in the air and making it work for me.*

*Then the ocean. Swimming without chlorine in your eyes and making your hair stink. Swimming with something that feels alive and full of life. The tides pulling you out and pushing you back in, the restless waves crashing again and again like the rhythm of my breath. The sun on the open water revealing things below the surface and the plants and creatures that populate the scenery punctuating the rhythm with their appearances and disappearances. How much more wonderful the view outside the pool. And still the sound and rhythm of my breath driving me on like an aquatic robot. I have to remember to stop and look up so I don’t swim out of the bay, out into the sea and away forever on the rhythm of my breathing. Everything else falling away, the effort of my arms, the effort of my legs the sounds of the world up above the water and everyone in it falling away so it’s just me and my breath moving steadily on in the water, gulping air and blowing bubbles as if the world depends on it. But actually unaware of all the things that drive the world forward, and for a while, only aware of the most basic force keeping me alive and the sound of the bubbles in my ears.*

This writing contains some of my earliest memories of intentional breathing. According to my parents though, it is not the earliest example of mindful breathing being used as a tool for me to become calm and present. As an infant, if I was crying, my father used to lay me down on his chest and take deep, full breaths until I was soothed and stopped crying. My nervous system responded to the rhythm of his breath and could tap into it to regulate my own responses. Mindfulness was not the point of either swimming or soothing infants, but was an unintended consequence. When I was a baby, my father simply wanted to restore peace to the environment and found breathing to be an effective tool to restore quiet. Later in life, when I was learning to swim, I only wanted to achieve competency in the activity so that I could move on to the next badge. However, in both instances, I discovered something that would later become much more valuable to me. As Bai says in regards to mindful practices, “Language has gifted us a convenient means of *communication* but it can rob us of the opportunities of *communion* which is the sensuously grounded being-to-being connection.” (Bai, p.8) Both of these experiences came to me before I had the language to describe them or the faculty to understand their importance. Perhaps it was in part due to my inability to apply language to my experiences that enabled me to experience what Bai describes as “communion.” Inadvertently, I had begun to experiment with using my breathing as a method of self-regulation. As an adult, with my own children, I find that same practice of exposing them to my rhythmic breathing acts in a similar way, to reset their internal self-regulation mechanisms, and calm them down. When I am lane swimming now, it becomes hard to think of anything else besides reaching that same quality of my breathing, because of the rich sense of calm that accompanies it. One of the challenges I’m facing is, taking what I know about breathing, abstracting it from the sensory contexts that I learned it in, and finding that quality of in-the-moment presence in another, much more distraction filled activity: teaching. The second challenge is finding the method and the exercises to make this learning accessible, relevant and possible for my students. The third challenge is in determining the effectiveness of the practices in the classroom and discovering what the outcome will be. The questions that I want to explore are: How will I find a practice of mindfulness for myself? How will I transmit it to my students? And, what will it bring to my teaching?

When I was given the opportunity to present a lesson to my peers for feedback, I instantly began to plan a way to avoid it. Speaking in front of my peers is nerve wracking and I generally find that I struggle for the air to keep speaking. The need for a practical application of theoretical information won out over nerves in the end, and in presenting, something strange happened. The words of my lecture didn’t get choked in my throat this time even though I couldn’t see my presenter notes. Instead of feeling stressful, speaking out loud felt like a physical relief. It was like putting something heavy down after carrying it for too long and feeling the blood rush back into your hands, wrists and arm. Vital and warm, you flex your limbs and fingers feeling the balance of blood and oxygen restored into your tissues. This lecture felt the very same way, like it restored the balance of practice to theory. After sitting too long at a computer manipulating words and ideas, adding and integrating research, rearranging everything multiple times, the concepts had begun to cramp up and feel stiff. I’d lost track of what I was saying, which ideas were mine, and what I expected the audience to take away. It was in speaking to an audience that I realized where the conceptual links were weak, what needed to be emphasised more and what was confusing. I could speak for the first time without the words sticking in my throat, it was also the first time I have any memory of seeing the faces of the people I was speaking to. Watching the tape of the beginning of my lecture, I realized that the breathing exercise that I’d introduced before I began speaking had actually had an effect on me. It had allowed me to breathe and speak at the same time. Like the first time I connected breathing to freestyle swimming and felt myself move across the pool, this time my breath powered a lecture. I’d finally managed to briefly internalize an element of mindfulness, and for a few moments acted it out in real time.

Research on mindfulness has shown that teaching teachers to use mindfulness practices can be a useful method to help them survive the first few years of teaching and beyond. Jennings & Greenberg’s study into the links between mindfulness practices and reducing teacher stress indicate “mindfulness-based interventions may be ideally suited to support the development of a mental set that is associated with effective classroom management.” (p. 511). It is clear from my short lecture in the workshop that I need to implement a practice of mindfulness in my own life to keep me healthy, present and resilient during what I hope will be a long career of teaching. I wondered if it would be as simple as adopting swimming as my personal mindfulness practice? Could it focus me and connecting me more deeply to my breath and help me to regulate my emotions and reactions to stress? To test this as a possibility, I began swimming before school this last week. The mental struggle to get to that place of calm was far more difficult than I remembered as I splashed through a pool full of people dodging around each other, racing from one end of the pool to the other. My ability to focus on my breathing was definitely being challenged by the distractors of competition, not being as fit as I would like, worrying about not being fit, getting stuck behind slow swimmers, getting passed by faster swimmers. I began to see the challenge with fresh eyes and wondered if that is how hard it could be for teenagers to shut out the stressful, social, emotional, hormone riddled, school setting and come to a place of calm. A diverse classroom will be a much more difficult space for self-reflection than a quiet, private space, both for myself and the students. There is much more involved in teaching mindfulness than intention, and while Bai argues that “excessive linguistic and conceptual activity interferes with our experiencing a deep being-to-being interconnectedness with the world.” (p.16), I don’t think swimming alone will be a substantial enough tool for me to use as my mindful practice. Certainly, increased empathy, self-awareness and emotional regulation that should result from mindful practices, could improve interconnectedness between individuals, so to a certain extent, I agree that mindfulness practice should not become too theoretical. However, it seems that as a teacher, I have a responsibility to be a learner as well. According to neuroscientist, Dr. Richard Davidson, “(p)eople who are teaching these methods need to be grounded in them, themselves.” (Bahnsen, 20:02-20:12). Just going swimming isn’t enough to feed a thoughtful practice of mindful inquiry that I intend to teach directly in my classroom. I will continue to work on mindfulness in my life but will seek to augment my practice with a recognized system that I can be sure is both developmentally and educationally sound.

Once I have a personal mindfulness practice, how will I transmit it to my students? Directly by introducing mindfulness instruction or indirectly by cultivating mindful practices in my life and having them inform my teaching style? Indirect modelling of mindfulness, simply based on the teacher learning a practice and modelling their mindful behaviour in the class, is one way to begin. Mindfulness training programs encourage teachers to “cultivate mindfulness skills and knowledge in their everyday lives both inside and outside the classroom, rather than utilizing mindfulness as just a resource to be taught directly to students.” (Meiklejohn et al., p.6). The case for indirect mindfulness benefiting the classroom experience of teachers is strong. One study of Mindfulness Based Wellness Education (MBWE) found that participants noticed improvement in 5 categories: “(1) personal and professional identity, (2) reflective practice, (3) holistic vision of teaching, (4) social and emotional competence on practicum, and (5) engagement in teacher education.” (Meiklejohn et al., p. 6-7). These improvements were based only on the teacher’s experience of mindfulness outside of the classroom, and how they felt their time in the classroom was impacted by their training. The research on directly training adolescents to be mindful themselves, is yet too limited in scale to make a concrete claim of its effectiveness. The anecdotal evidence is positive and leads me to believe that there could be a benefit in teaching students to be self-aware and giving them tools to help them self-regulate their emotions (Meiklejohn et al., 2010). The distinction that needs to be made is not whether the method of mindfulness instruction is direct or indirect, but whether the practice of mindfulness is internalized and authentic on the part of the instructor. To be more than just a hollow tool for classroom management, effective mindfulness in the classroom must come from within the teacher.

What will the practice of mindfulness bring to my classroom? In regards to increasing the creative confidence of individuals within my art class I can only look at research relating to adults and hope that similar findings are possible with adolescents. For example, “research with adults has found that additional cognitive and affective skills such as attention, concentration, empathy and creativity can be cultivated by meditative training.” (Broderick & Metz, p.43). I don’t know how to measure creativity, but some things I would look to as indicators might be individuation between student products, less reliance on mass-media images, a sense of exploration in the planning stages of project work, positive self-talk, and the classroom environment. As well as encouraging creative confidence, I hope mindfulness will foster classroom expectations and an environment that reduces my need for more traditional classroom management techniques. For myself, I hope my own practice of mindfulness brings me patience, compassion, and a long, satisfying career. “Research indicates that contemplation and mindfulness practices increase awareness of one’s internal experience and promote reflection, self-regulation, and caring for others.” (Jennings & Greenberg, p. 511). The practice of mindfulness seems to be a useful tool to encourage social emotional competency that will feed a classroom environment that is safe, supportive and collaborative. Jennings and Greenberg mention mindfulness as a tool to encourage a pro-social classroom where the teacher leads the students towards increasing self-regulation, and non-judgemental attitudes. Orr writes about mindfulness being put to use to counter oppression in the classroom. She proposes that “(t)his empowerment radically deepens and widens their education. With it they can decide not only to reject oppressive and discriminatory positions, but begin to live these decisions in all areas of their lives. (p.493). Mindfulness practices have great potential to impact both the teacher and the student in the classroom.

**My question**

Can the daily practice of mindfulness training exercises and instruction increase the creative confidence, as well as decrease the stress, of students in my art classroom?

**Context**

My inquiry has always centered on activating students in art class to become less creatively inhibited. I began my inquiry interested in types of movement to encourage the brain-body connection and facilitate non-linear creative liberation. I’ve moved away from movement towards a practice of mindful exercises to alert students to their own sense of agency in their art work and in their lives. For me, in this context, mindfulness (exercises, training and awareness) means an enhanced ability to focus attention in the present moment in a non-judgemental way for the purposes of increasing creative confidence, increasing attention span and general lowering of stress in both the teacher and the students.

Initially my inquiry was focused on the brain-body connection and how the requirement of stillness may negatively impact the students’ capacity to demonstrate imaginative thought. I was concerned with the potential for students to be creatively stifled just by the act of enforced sitting in rows. I spent time focusing on both the small ways I could introduce a less physically restrictive atmosphere into my classroom, to much larger ways that I could introduce physical practices into my teaching in order to engage the bodies as well as the minds of my students. I imagined yoga, martial arts, team sports, informal stretching, walking and even just large scale art making that engages the whole body rather than just the hand, in order to emphasise body-brain connectivity, and promote creative connections in the students’ art work.

During the short practicum it struck me what an imposition it would be to enforce a regimented physical regime in the art classroom. The timeline for instruction is already so short that reallocating time from art instruction seemed to be a disservice to the subject of art. As well, the implementation of a physical regime began to feel too specific. I started to see my focus on physicality as somewhat arbitrary, just one of many possible avenues towards promoting students creativity that could do as much harm as good. Additionally, when confronted with students who may not be able to participate physically, it began to seem restrictive rather than liberating for students, and may simply put up another obstacle for students to surmount on their way to art making. Through researching the body-brain connection and the benefits of physically engaging students, I realized that while I am an advocate for linear PE to foster a sense of healthful physicality as a lifetime habit, I don’t believe PE belongs in the art classroom. Physical activity has a more supported place in the gym with highly skilled teachers who can assist with correct postures and safe practices. Coming to this conclusion forced me to start searching for something else to encourage creative confidence, increased attention spans and a non-judgemental methodology of self and peer assessment in art classes.

What I found was that a large donation of intellectual property had been made to UBCO by Ulco Visser (Walker, 2013). The Colorado educator donated the SMARTinEducation (SMART) program. It is a mindfulness based program designed to maximize the health and emotional wellbeing of classroom teachers (Marck, 2013). The SMART program, like all mindful awareness practices, has its roots in Buddhist meditation, but has had its faith based elements removed to become a secular practice aimed to promote present-centered, non-judgemental focus of attention. Hearing about this donation got me interested in the potential for incorporating mindfulness into my classroom. Mindfulness training has been implemented in different ways with positive results in adult settings where improvements were noted in brain function, behaviour, overall health, stress levels, emotional stability and immune function, to name only some of the measurable impacts (Meiklejohn et al., 2010). Many research projects have been, and are currently, being undertaken to determine the efficacy of mindfulness practices when applied to adolescents. There is strong evidence to suggest that incorporating mindful focusing exercises into classrooms has a positive effect on the physical and mental health of teachers as well as students (Meiklejohn et al., 2010). Stress is known to negatively impact an individual’s ability to learn (Meiklejohn et al., 2010), and school related stress is in the top three for children aged 9-13 (Kaszniak, 2009). If practicing daily mindfulness can reduce students stress levels (Hart, 2004), could it make students learn better, as well as contribute to an overall improvement in general well-being for both teachers and students?

The potential for overarching improvements to the quality of life for everyone participating in mindfulness exercises feels sufficient to move forward with this inquiry. But more specifically, in relation to the art classroom what I wonder is, if in practicing mindfulness, students would become more willing to move through the preliminary stages of art making with less negative self-judgement. In the short practicum I felt the waves of self-doubt in the room that seemed to inhibit art making, displaying art and general creative confidence. I hope to convey to students that when they try something new and do not immediately achieve mastery that they have not failed. I want students to recognize the difference between thinking they have failed and engaging in the process of trial and error. Mindfulness training seems to present a method for both teachers and students to adjust our patterns of thinking to a less judgemental acceptance of the present and provide us with the internal motivation to move forward (Hooker & Fodor, 2008). As a place to encourage acceptance of learning in the moment, and through process rather than products, I believe that the art classroom is an ideal setting in which to introduce a practice of mindful, non-judgemental awareness.

**Approach**

I will refer to the references below as well as continue to compile additional references from peer-reviewed journals such as *Canadian Journal of Education, Mindfulness,* *Review of Educational Research* and others. There is a growing body of publicly available documents that anecdotally back up and advocate for mindfulness, awareness training, meditation and contemplative practices with adolescents in and out of the school setting. Organizations like *Mindful Schools, Learning to BREATHE, Healthy Habits of Mind, The Mindful Word* and the *Association of Mindfulness in Education* are a few of the primary public resources that I will be using to guide my continued inquiry. I will try to keep aware of new developments in mindfulness, both the professional field and mainstream society, during my long practicum by checking in with them and trying to arrange for mindfulness training once I am finished the BEd. program. I will keep an observational journal each day to note the practices we engaged in and any feeling(s) associated with the practice or my general impressions of success or resistance to either the concept of mindfulness or the specific exercises. I will also encourage students to engage in mindfulness outside of my classroom and will ask the rest of the staff at my school to take note of what we are doing in the art room so that they will be aware and in a position to respond to the subject if it is brought up in their classrooms.

**Lines of Study**

At the start of each class I will introduce one of a series of mindfulness exercises lasting between 1-3 minutes. It will be the first thing that we do, before we work in our visual journals, in order to enter the art room and understand it as a different space in which we are operating with distinct expectations. The mindfulness exercises will be introduced to make a clean break from the previous events of the day and facilitate a more open, non-judgemental state of mind in which we can experiment with our artistic confidence, find and respect diverse solutions to design problems and escape from worry about future events or past occurrences. I will encourage students to consider importing mindfulness training into other areas of their lives. During the rest of class and the rest of the day I will also model mindfulness in my interactions with students and staff. This indirect method of introducing mindfulness to the students will primarily benefit my own emotional, mental and physical health during a fairly high-stress time in the B.Ed. program. (Meiklejohn et al., 2010) Through this moderation of my own responses to unfamiliar and potentially overwhelming stimuli, and mindful awareness of my intentions with this inquiry study, I hope to be able to model being in the moment, being non-judgemental and being able to return my focus to my original intentions. This indirect method of modeling mindfulness is secondary to the direct instruction of mindfulness training.

Exercise 1. **Breathing**

* In this exercise the class is asked to sit at their desks with their feet flat on the floor and their hands spread comfortably on the desk. We will begin our breathing by taking a deep breath in to the count of 5 and then release our breath, also to the count of 5. This will be repeated 3 times. We will continue breathing in evenly, all the while we are focusing on the sensation of our breathing, filling our lungs completely and emptying them completely. We are not troubled by our mind wandering to worries like tests we must take or homework we must do. We will let these thoughts bubble up, imagining them coming up through water and then when they reach the surface, popping and releasing the worries and allowing our minds to return to our breathing. 3 more deep breaths and then a chime will bring us back to the class. (Hart, 2004)

Exercise 2. **Focused Listening**

* In this exercise students will be asked to sit with their feet flat on the floor and are welcomed to put their heads down on their desks. We will establish a quiet room with no talking and then I will ring a chime. We will listen to the chime, focusing on the sound as it fades out slowly, understanding that if our attention wanders we need only to reel it back in like a boat at anchor. It is natural for our thoughts to drift away from our intentions, just like the sea moves a boat away from its anchor. We are using the sound of the chime to refocus our attention when our thoughts wander to troubles, trivialities and distractions. Hear the sound and remember your intention to listen till the very end. When you hear the sound of the chime come to an end, put up your hand and wait until everyone has their hands in the air. Continue your effortless breathing, deeply and evenly. (Hart, 2004)

Exercise 3. **Body Focusing**

* In this exercise students are asked to sit at their desks with their feet flat on the floor and their hands folded in their laps. We will establish effortless breath and will then begin to clench all the muscles in our bodies beginning with clenching our toes, feet, calves, squeeze legs together, tighten the muscles in our hips, bottoms, up our lower backs. Flex the muscles of the stomach and tightly wrap the muscles of the ribs and upper back against our bones. Shrug your shoulders up as high as they go and make fists with your hands. Grip all the muscles in your arms and up your neck into your jaw. Clench your teeth, squeeze your eyes shut and finally RELEASE.
* In reverse order, fully release all the muscles around your eyes, jaw, neck and shoulders… until we have actively released all the long muscles of the body. Be conscious of the feelings of relaxed v. wound up tight. Make it your intention today to release the stress that gets stored in your body and be aware of the stress that you hold in your muscles so that you can let it go.

**Conclusion**

Mindfulness practices interest me for two main reasons. First, for the potential that practicing mindfulness in my own life will help me to be compassionate, resilient, support my general well-being and help me to create a positive classroom environment. Second, because of the potential for mindfulness practices in the classroom to create the conditions for creative confidence to flourish in students and encourage a sensitivity to the imperfect process of art making that requires mistakes, accepts them, and continues focusing on the individual intention rather than the external distractions. As well, I want to provide students with high quality tools to self-regulate, allowing them to focus longer and more deeply both in and out of school. In order to have students take something away from my class that can help them in their lives, not just if they choose an artistic career, I want to plant the seed of mindfulness. “With yogic meditation techniques such as mindfulness, they can bridge the socially constructed gulf between mind and body, feeling and spirit, ideas and life, and self and other that current pedagogy is often unable to span.” (Orr, p.494).

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