

A Reflection on Mindful Meditation

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Acknowledgment

Much of this keynote was catalyzed by Britany Wise who wrote the unpublished manuscript *Mindfulness Meditation in Art Education*.

At this time of the global pandemic, lives can seem out of control as chaos and violence are in the news and the streets of our neighborhood. This is particularly true in the United States as protests are common and the COVID-19 virus continues to expand as people ignore precautionary medical advice and continue to socialize nearby without a mask.

Chaos and turmoil are difficult even for the citizen who has many experiences in difficult times such as warfare, social unrest, economic crisis, and health concerns like Ebola, avian flu, AIDS, and now, COVID-19. But this talk will focus on helping children. I will propose school procedures that can help stabilize the students and their environments. In this, I will refer specifically to Mindful Meditation.

Though I do meditate every day, I do not consider myself an expert. As a former Sensei of a martial arts dojo, I used an Eastern approach appropriate for the martial style. Though difficult at times for Westerners, it did have a positive impact on the students in the dojo. We began and ended each class with a traditional Eastern style mediation. Now, I follow a different pathway and a different style of meditation – the pathway of Hocq'reila. Perhaps this is because my Western mind is more suited to the approach of centering, balancing, and expanding. As an Elder of a Hocq'reila spiritual group, this is the practice we employ. Our ceremonies follow the philosophy of Forgiveness, Balance, Harmony, and Love.

Mindful mediation provides the opportunity for everyone to practice in their daily lives to stabilize the overly active mind and allow a space for the mind's activities to be mentally and emotionally sorted and organized. As I heard about Mindful Mediation in my praxis research, I was curious about the implementation and practice in a wide variety of public schools in the U.S., including schools from the inner city to the rural environment, schools which receive adequate funding to poverty schools barely surviving, to large racially and socioeconomically diverse schools to smaller parochial schools with similar race and philosophies of religion leading the educational pathways. I asked myself, "How can Mindful Mediation be effective in such different environments?"

I am blessed to have amazing students in an equally amazing Art Education Program at Missouri State University coordinated by Dr. Fatih Benzer. In one class I teach, *ART 460: Critical Theory*, students write a seminar paper about an art education topic of their choice. The 20-25-page paper reveals the depth of their thinking and the relationship new art teachers will have in the profession. In the Spring, 2020 class, Britany Wise wrote her paper, *Mindful Meditation in Art Education*, which was the start of my journey into praxis breadth for personal and student health.

In a different class *ART 401: Secondary Methods*, I asked the students to voluntarily participate in mindful meditation at the beginning of each class. They all agreed, though not all received the same level of benefit. With the weekly survey I conducted, I asked each student to write before the meditation how they were feeling, and then immediately after the mediation, I asked the same question. The entire process was less than 15-minutes per class.

The students' responses varied from week to week and season to season. Additionally, I asked them to respond to the survey below:

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
Meditation before class is beneficial	2	10	4	0
I will use Mindful Mediation in my future classroom	0	7	9	0
I am only doing this because I feel forced to participate	1	2	9	5
This is a waste of time	0	3	5	9
total	3	22	27	14

Table 1 Student responses to a survey on meditation in an Art 401 Secondary Methods course.

The group where the research was conducted was in a small undergraduate art education class for secondary art methods with a small nth of 12 students. Unfortunately, the pandemic halted meeting classes in the physical classroom so the data are limited, but hopefully, this research can be replicated in another location and time. As evidenced by the graph above, student responses varied from “forced participation,” “waste of time,” to “meditation is beneficial.” Missouri State University, where this data was collected is a comprehensive university located in Springfield, MO (USA) in the region of the Ozarks. The region is typically conservative and Christian, which unfortunately resists the concept of meditation taught in public education. But students in attendance in this class did come from other regions nationally and internationally. In this class, there were 2 males and 10 females. All were Caucasian. Most were economically middle-class and in their 20s. One was an older returning non-traditional student.

At the end of each weekly meditation session students were asked to respond to “How did you feel before the meditation?” and “How did you feel after the meditation?” The weekly results are shown below in table 2 with the majority of student stating that they were stressed, tired, anxious, tense, or rushed before the meditation (a composite of 60 comments) and afterward responded that they were relaxed, calm, in tune, or rested (a composite of 55 comments).

These data were collected from 13 January 2020 until 13 March 2020.

Before Meditation	Similar word frequency	After Meditation	Similar word frequency
Stressed	22	Relaxed	24
Tired	20	Calm – Intune	20
Anxious – Tense - Rushed	18	Rested	11
Good - Happy	18	Distracted	9
Overwhelmed	5	Tired	8
Worried - Nervous	3	Fine	4
Eager	3	Numb - Unfocused	3

Table 2. Student responses to the end of class session open-ended responses on meditation in an Art 401 Secondary Methods course.

One of the conflicts to practicing meditation is found with many people is their reliance on devices and instant access to the Internet. This is true in the family, classroom, and boardroom. Harrison (2018) noted that we are becoming dependent on or addicted to our cell phones. Research indicates that some people experience significant stress and anxiety when they are separated from their phones. They can experience withdrawal-like symptoms. The study conducted by De-Sola Gutiérrez, J., Rodríguez de Fonseca, F., & Rubio, G. (2016) reinforces that phones are like drugs to the mind; they are especially addicting to students. Even with the need for connectivity, we can settle our over-active minds through a daily practice of meditation. We can reduce our addiction and reliance on activities outside of our body-mind connection. Mindfulness meditation is a mental training practice that involves emotions, thoughts, and sensations in the present moment (Wong, 2019). According to Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk, peace activist, and founder of the Plum Village Tradition, “We have within us a miraculous power, and if we live our daily lives in mindfulness, if we take steps mindfully, with love and care, we can produce the miracle and transform our world into a miraculous place to live.”

The evidence of the data I collected in a small group of undergraduate art education students indicated that there are significant opportunities for each person to quiet the chaotic mind through daily meditation. Though some may become more committed to their practice, the daily Mindfulness Meditation we can teach in our classrooms for 10-20 minutes a class could provide meaningful alternatives to stress and anxiety that students and teachers can experience in this turbulent time of social, economic, and political changes.

As a result of the benefits of teaching to students who are calmer and more receptive, in England, over 300 schools are incorporating mindfulness into the curriculum. They started this after seeing the results of a mental health survey that concluded that one in eight children in England between the ages of 5 and 19 suffered from at least one mental disorder in 2017 (Magra, 2019). Like in England, various programs are finding successes in the U.S. For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, Coleman Elementary School has replaced detention with mindfulness (Bloom, 2016). The success from Coleman Elementary encouraged Patterson High School to include a Mindful Moment Room, where students can come in at the end of the day to relax or

do yoga (Bloom, 2016). Instead of going to detention and being punished for negative behaviors, students were able to go to a quiet room and practice breathing and stretching exercises. The district believes this has helped maintain good behavior in the classroom. This is a reoccurring scenario in many locations in the US.

In California, more schools have been introduced to mindfulness meditation. At Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary School, teachers have been trained in a UCLA program called *Calm Classroom* (Walter, 2017). The *Calm Classroom* program comes from the Luster Learning Institute, which implements it in schools nationwide. They have seen many successes. According to the Luster Learning Institute, they have seen a 21 percent improvement in standardized test scores, a 75 percent decline in school violence, and a 73 percent decrease in-school suspensions in Chicago public schools (Walter, 2017). As teachers are trained to introduce and implement meditation, the results are obvious in many ways. When the teacher instructs the students to get into their mindful bodies, the students will be ready to listen for the next step in the chosen mindful activity (Ackerman, 2017). The positive results are seen at all levels of education and in various settings. For younger students, the butterfly is done by bending their arms and lifting their elbows up and down in a “wing-flapping” motion. This is done in a slow, repetitive motion. The younger children do this together as a class, and the teachers say it is incredible to watch these, normally hyperactive, students, seated quietly at their desks, moving their arms in unison. (Walter, 2017).

One solid strength that we, as art teachers, have is the ability to teach artistic practices from studio processes to aesthetics, analysis and criticism, to art history. We can be the foundation for student well-being by providing creative outlets for each student at their specific level. Greenhalgh (2017) noted that creative activities tend to ease people into a process of focus, concentration, absorption, and flow, which is the same process experienced when meditating. This is why art is naturally mindful. As part of the creative processes, we can encounter arts-as-therapy that may be revealed through two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and four-dimensional activities, which can engage several senses simultaneously helping to connect with parts of the self that are not readily available in traditional talk-therapy, such as inner feelings and unconscious thoughts (Perryman, 2019, p. 5). I believe that in every classroom, each student has some degree of varying needs.

According to various studies, doing mindfulness meditation activities with a classroom can be beneficial in many ways. Coholic (2016), in this study, showed results of improvement in areas of emotion regulation, mood, coping/social skills, confidence and self-esteem, empathy, and the ability to pay attention and focus. These were results found amongst a group of vulnerable children aged 8-12 years old, who were involved with child welfare or mental health services (p. 8).

Another study by Darville (2018) conducted with college-aged (19-23) students revealed that a six-week yoga meditation session helped improve total mindfulness while decreasing rates of anxiety and stress (p. 3 Lemay, 2019). Thorpe (2017) discovered through data analysis that practicing mindfulness meditation for longer periods provides evidence to lower blood pressure, which was evident after a year of practice. Other benefits from consistent, daily meditation include improved emotional health, reduction of memory loss, helps generate kindness, improves

sleep, helps control pain, and may even help fight addictions. Mindfulness meditation can benefit each person in many ways. According to undergraduate student Wise (2020),

When I practice mindfulness meditation, I tend to stick with the art method the most because art is where I find the most comfort and success. I have a mixed media sketchbook that I use for my mindfulness activity of the day, as I do one each day. These activities do not need to take a lot of time. Mine takes anywhere from five minutes to an hour, depending on how much time I have in the day. Over four months, I have noticed improvements in myself while practicing mindfulness meditation. When I first started, I was very stressed. I still get stressed from time to time, but I don't get stressed as easily or as intensely as I did before. (unpublished manuscript)

As Wise noted, many students benefited from a 15-minute mindful meditation. Anecdotally, from my perspective, it was a calming experience that increased the comfort of a safe-space dialog for many topics in art education in future classrooms including racism, bias/prejudice, poverty, immigration, and religion. Although, this study did produce some responses that were not as positive I would have hoped (see table 1). I anticipate that the pandemic and loss of seated instruction did significantly alter the potentiality of the benefits of meditation for all persons. For some, the benefits of meditation may have not been too obvious or the benefits may have been noticed at a future time of reflection. Unfortunately, I do not have the data I would have collected and analyzed to support or dispute my assumptions.

It is my hope for all persons, students, teachers, administrators, and community members can support and enhance educational paradigms like mindfulness, which can easily be taught and understood so that it may create opportunities presently unimagined. As Allan and I wrote in *Global Consciousness in Art: A Passport for Students and Teachers*, "Changing hearts, minds, and attitudes of individuals are necessary to change the current socio-cultural and educational trajectory. Mahatma Gandhi reminds us that we must be the change we wish to see in the world"

and,

Much of what we do in the arts is intuitive. Investigations, integrations, and art-making revolve in a sphere that acknowledges the many other cognitive, motor, environmental, sociocultural, and individual ingenuity. In this, the arts are not minimized but enhanced through disciplinary bridge-building to reduce content silos frequently employed in education. Understanding integration, collaboration, and connoisseurship must be developed from first-hand experiences through strategic and systematic learning opportunities to construct new forms of knowingness.

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