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**Moving from Multitasking to Mindfulness**

By: [Kristin L. Roush, PhD](http://www.facultyfocus.com/author/kristinroush/) in [Teaching and Learning](http://www.facultyfocus.com/topic/articles/teaching-and-learning/)

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*“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 master of himself 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.”*
William James, (1842 – 1910)
Psychologist, Philosopher

Looking out at our students in classrooms today, with their texting, Facebook updates, Instagram messages, e-mail checking, Google searches, and tweeting, it’s hard to imagine what was so distracting for college students more than 100 years ago when James made this statement. Yet, even then, he recognized the propensity of the mind to constantly seek novel material, to leap from thought to image to belief to fear to desire to judgment and back again — all following one’s own quirky train of thought resembling the chaotic movements of a swarm of bees around a hive. Time passes through a warped dimension when the student finally returns to some semblance of attention, unaware of all the cognitive detours taken between points A and B. And that’s just the internal process, prompted by nothing in particular. How much more distraction is invited by today’s mobile technology?

When the term, “multitasking” first emerged, it was worn as a proud badge of accomplishment, touted as proof of the time-saving, productive, and therefore efficient executive. Now, research consistently shows that multitasking is not associated with peak performance; in fact, the opposite is true. More insidiously, multitasking is like drunk driving. Engaging in it impairs performance while simultaneously giving one the impression that functioning is unaffected or even improved. Furthermore, since the brain can only do one thing at a time, what is experienced as multitasking is actually “rapid task switching,” a challenge for the brain that actually compromises learning (Parry, 2013).

**Contemplative Pedagogy**

In her groundbreaking books, *Mindfulness* (1989) and *The Power of Mindful Learning* (1997), Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer lays the foundation for contemplative pedagogy, an educational model that seeks to cultivate deepened awareness and insight through introspection and mindful self-reflection. Teaching methods of inquiry such as journaling, guided meditation, conscious breathing, silence, and drawing stimulate deeper understanding of the material leading to a more personally meaningful experience of education. According to Tobin Hart, professor of psychology at the University of West Georgia, “Inviting the contemplative simply includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding… What we know of learning is that the predominant factor is not merely time on task; it is the quality of attention brought to that task. If our attention is somewhere else, we may have little capacity to be present (Hart, 2004).”

**Defining Mindfulness**

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience, moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness meditation is a formal practice that involves regular meditation, intentionally re-focusing on the breath, or some other “anchor,” as one observes and retrieves the wanderings of the mind. Informal mindfulness is the daily intention to apply awareness to everyday activities without attachment or judgment.

At least two decades of neuroscientific and psychological research with adults has confirmed the benefits of mindfulness practices in improving such cognitive processes as working memory, attention, problem solving, and verbal reasoning (Chan, et al, 2008). Just 10 minutes of mindfulness each day has been shown to alleviate stress, boost immunity, decrease pain, lessen anxiety, decrease insomnia, and improve creativity (Schoeberlein David, 2009).

**Meditation in the Classroom?**

No, not necessarily… but some do. Mindfulness in education, and a great deal of validating research, has been around for several years, particularly in K-12 settings. Research confirms the myriad of benefits to both students and teachers (Poulin et al, 2008; Soloway, et al, 2011). In her book, *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness* (2009), Deborah Schoeberlein David lists the following benefits of mindfulness practices in the classroom:

Benefits for teachers:

* Improved focus and awareness
* Increased responsiveness to student needs
* Enhanced classroom climate
* Improved overall well-being, emotional balance, and stress management

Benefits for students:

* Improved “readiness to learn”
* Strengthened attention and concentration
* Reduced anxiety before testing
* Increased self-reflection and self-calming

**Mindfulness: Hitting its Stride in Higher Education**

Many colleges and universities throughout the United States have established mindfulness programs and centers on their campuses. They host student mindfulness groups, and conduct workshops for students, faculty, and staff. Many have dedicated silent drop-in spaces for quiet pauses during the day. At these and other campuses, faculty have begun their own mindfulness practices and incorporate both direct and nuanced teaching methods in their classrooms.

You don’t need to be a seasoned meditator and you don’t need special training to get started incorporating mindfulness practices in your classroom. In fact, you don’t even need to teach a mindfulness module to your students, although that would be preferred. Learn some of the basic concepts, maybe complete some training, and then spend a few minutes introducing the concept to your class.

Find ways to illustrate and model focused attention:

* Once in a while, have students sign the attendance sheet using their non-dominant hand. Notice how much focus this demands, and how it feels while doing it.
* Ask students to write at the top of their notes, “If I was going to be distracted by something today during class, it might be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I choose to set this aside during this class time.”
* When students break into small group discussion, notice and point out how the seating arrangements affect energy flow and feelings of inclusion or exclusion.
* Take your own mindful break to get yourself centered while erasing the board, administering tests, or walking to and from classes.
* Acknowledge your transition process while commuting to and from campus.
* Pay attention to your breathing … especially that exhale part. The exhale is where the magic resides.

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*Kristin L. Roush is a psychology professor at Central New Mexico Community College.*