

Mindfulness and English Teaching

The practice of mindfulness has spread to many schools in the UK with teachers and children being encouraged to be mindful in a variety of ways to deal with some of the stresses of school. The [Mindfulness in Schools Project](#) and other organisations have spearheaded the teaching of [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#) (MBSR) techniques with teenagers and primary pupils. A [Wellcome Trust Study](#) funded to the tune of £6.4 million -- and conducted by several universities -- began in 2015 looking at the effect of mindfulness in 76 schools, examining whether it can improve well-being amongst teenagers.

With mindfulness is very much “in the air” at the moment, it’s worth asking whether it has anything to do with English teaching? I’d like to argue that it does, both in regards to English teaching pedagogy and the content of English lessons.

What is mindfulness?

What often gets lost in all the discussion about mindfulness is a clear definition of it. Having practised it every day for nearly two years now, I believe it’s definition is both simple and complex. The Mindful Nation UK report provides this explanation:

Mindfulness means paying attention to what’s happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness. It is typically cultivated by a range of simple meditation practices, which aim to bring a greater awareness of thinking, feeling and behaviour patterns, and to develop the capacity to manage these with greater skill and compassion. (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG), 2015, p. 8)

Mindfulness is all about living “in the moment”: accepting what is in front of you and in your head right “now”. That means, if you’re reading this, concentrating upon what you’re reading and accepting that you’re reading it in this present moment, and if you’re feeling hungry, anxious or sad while you are reading it, accepting this fact in a kindly fashion. Being fully present in the moment is easier said than done; this is why mindfulness is a practice. You learn to practice mindfulness in the same way you might practise a musical instrument; usually, most people use their awareness of their breathing to help them focus upon the present moment, both in formal meditations, which can last from a minute to an hour or so, and in many other situations. Mindfulness is meta-cognitive in that encourages you to think about your thoughts and feelings, becoming aware of them as sensations in the body that come and go, that are transitory, and ultimately, quite illusory.

Mindfulness and the stresses of English teaching

The first obvious use of mindfulness for English teachers is to practise it themselves. English teaching is possibly one of the most stressful jobs there is in teaching because it is a “high-stakes” subject with the future of students and often schools riding upon the results achieved in a small number of English exams. This makes the job very stressful at times. Practising mindful meditation for a few minutes a day can help a little with this – I’m not going to pretend it’s a universal panacea, but it definitely can help. I educate the beginner English teachers on my PGCE course at Goldsmiths to take a few minutes each day to concentrate upon their breathing, and accept their thoughts and feelings as they focus upon their breathing; I encourage them to return to concentrating upon their breathing when they feel stress in the classroom and meetings.

There’s a lot of evidence if this is done systematically and over time, it can significantly improve stress levels (Williams & Penman: 2011). Mindfulness can be practised anywhere; once English teachers have got the hang of it, they can teach “mindfully”, living in the moment in their classrooms, learning to accept their feelings of stress in the classroom context, and create a sense of calm within themselves, which then, over time, can emanate out to students. In this sense, it’s a great classroom management tool; when you feel that you’re getting angry or frustrated in school, I would encourage you using this as a reminder to focus upon the moment you’re in, to focus upon your breathing, and take a moment to calm yourself (see [Mindful Classroom Management](#) for more on this). This makes very sound neurological sense: gaining a sense of calm in a frenetic environment enables you to activate the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, the thinking part, rather than relying on the limbic system which activates “flight or fight” responses, which are usually inadequate in most school situations (Williams & Penman). So, for example, rather than shouting at a class to be quiet, the mindful English teacher takes a moment to calm him or herself, and focus upon praising the students who are paying attention, saying calmly “I’m glad to see x, y and z listening to me...” and smiling. My experience is that this restores order much more quickly than stressful out shouting.

Mindful Shakespeare

There is a rich tradition of mindful thinking in literature which the English teacher can draw upon. Most writers focus upon the thinking and feeling processes, which shape people’s responses to the world around them.

Let’s take the most famous of them all: Shakespeare. Many of his plays achieve mindful effects in that they make us consider his characters’ thoughts and feelings very deeply, and often explore the ways in which desire and cravings pull people out of “living in the moment”. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* reveals to us the thinking processes of the two protagonists. We see Romeo ‘yearning’ for sex with Rosaline at the beginning of the play; his head is full of maddening desire, but when he sees Juliet and interacts with her, we observe him “living in the moment”, she becomes his “light, his sun”, and she reciprocates revelling in the sensations of his talk, his touch and his body. The moment they are apart, they are propelled out of the moment, and once again full of maddening yearning. At the end of the play, after the suicide of the two lovers, the two families learn to accept that people from different families might love each other, constructing statues to their dead children, emblems of their acceptance that their enmity was wrong. When read mindfully you notice that Shakespeare is wonderfully “meta-cognitive”; many of his plays have characters reflecting upon their thoughts and feelings, and thinking about the implications of their dreams and desires. Most of the characters themselves are often not “mindful” in that they don’t often accept their emotions in a mindful fashion but are impelled to act upon them in destructive ways, but the plays themselves encourage mindfulness in the audience because we are invited to think about our own thoughts and feelings.

The Romantics and Mindfulness

While most of literature has a mindful element, there are some writers who are explicitly mindful in that what they say is almost exactly in tune with the tenets of mindfulness. This is especially true of the Romantic poets, who championed the idea that getting in contact with nature can be a healing experience because you feel in the inter-connectedness of all living things. This is an important idea prevalent in mindfulness; once you start concentrating upon the breath and the sensations in your body for sustained periods of time, you become much more conscious that we are creatures of nature: full of breath, blood, bodily sensations -- and not ghosts trapped in the machines of our bodies. This, in turn, promotes a genuine sense of kinship with all living things, which goes beyond words. Wordsworth, Coleridge and William Blake return again and again to similar ideas. Furthermore, these poets challenge their readers to fall in love with the transitory nature of life. Blake wrote:

He who binds to himself a joy

Does the winged life destroy

He who kisses the joy as it flies

Lives in eternity's sunrise

This is probably the most mindful of the Romantic's poems in that it suggests that if you are conscious of a joy, but "kiss" it goodbye, accepting that it will go, then you'll always be living in the moment, the eternal "now".

Mindful Classroom Management

Increasingly, mindfulness is being used by schools to manage students' behaviour. However, it's important that it is not used as a 'punishment'; the whole point of mindfulness is that it is voluntary. No one should be forced to do it against their will. Teachers should be trained in it if they are aiming to use it with their students. This webpage on the Oxford Mindfulness Centre is a good place to start: <http://oxfordmindfulness.org/about-us/training/>

Teachers may find it's best to use it for themselves, to calm themselves down in stressful situations. These are some suggest steps to follow:

1. **Acknowledge.** Become aware of your feelings in a difficult situation, such as a class being rowdy.
2. **Accept.** Accept any feelings of frustration that you have by saying to yourself, 'It's OK to feel anxious etc'.
3. **Become aware of your breathing.** Take a few seconds to count your breaths in and out. If you want, use a strategy like 7-11; count for seven seconds on the in-breath and 11 on the out breath. The point is to become aware of your breathing.
4. **Mindfully reflect.** Taking a moment of quiet for yourself can help you think of long-term strategies for dealing with misbehaviour. I find that writing notes in a book about who is doing what really helps, or doing an action that does not involve the voice, such as raising your hand, walking around the room etc.

Obviously, there are times when you have to intervene immediately in a difficult situation in the classroom, but many times, taking a moment to calm yourself helps much more than knee-jerk reactions such as shouting, threatening detentions etc.

Further Research

Books

Gilbert, F. (2017) *The Mindful English Teacher: A Toolkit for Well-Being and Learning*. London: FGI Publishing. I will be exploring some of my book at the NATE conference, 2018.

Williams, J., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*. London: Piatkus. This was the book that really showed me how to practice mindfulness properly, and comes with a CD.

Weblinks

Mindful Nation UK report: http://themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/Mindfulness-APPG-Report_Mindful-Nation-UK_Oct2015.pdf

The Communications team at Goldsmiths made a video of me explaining mindfulness here: <https://twitter.com/StudentsAtGold/status/925696812073267202/video/1>

Thich Nhat Hahn is a Buddhist monk who writes beautifully for all audiences about mindfulness. He has written many books, but you could start with his YouTube videos (just search for his name) or start here with this article:

<https://www.lionsroar.com/mindful-living-thich-nhat-hanh-on-the-practice-of-mindfulness-march-2010/>

Mindful Teachers: <http://www.mindfulteachers.org/p/free-resources-and-lesson-plans.html>

The Calm Classroom Initiative: <https://www.calm.com/schools>

Mindfulness in Schools Initiative: <https://www.mindfulnessfoundation.org.uk/teachers/>

Mindful texts

Most texts have a mindful element. For example, in *A Christmas Carol* the Ghosts of Christmas are essentially 'mindful' voices in Scrooge's conscience which guide him to be compassionate and enjoy the present moment, instead of hating people.

Many poems are mindful, with some arresting illustrations being George Herbert's 'Love', Coleridge 'The Lime-Tree Bower: My Prison', Gerald Manley-Hopkins' 'To Windhover' and William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence'. Seamus Heaney is probably the most striking example of a modern poet exploring what it means to live in the moment.