

MINDFUL CREATIVITY

THE ZEN OF LEARNING

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal

Research Project for Spring 2019
Submitted by Jaclyn Hardy Walker
English Department
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Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status

Full-time hire date: August 2009
Previous Sabbaticals: 0

TOPIC

Mindful meditation in the classroom K-12 is becoming more common as researchers, psychologists and educators find that it helps students focus, increase memory function, improve concentration, regulate emotional control and reduce stress. Likewise, the college environment is in dire need of meditative practices to combat a fast-paced learning environment. This sabbatical proposal has as its goal of integrating mindfulness meditative practices into the higher learning classroom and college institution. It will build on the Fall 2017 sabbatical research of Henny Kim-Ortel.

BACKGROUND OF PROJECT

The longer I have taught writing and practiced meditation, the more I see the need for meditation in the classroom. The classroom is a creative space where energy flies. The hopes, fears, expectations, and assumptions of every person in the classroom converge to create meaning that did not exist before that moment. Learning happens in such a dynamic way. We have students with a wide range of learning abilities and students who are differently prepared for college learning, and somehow we manage to work together, collaborating to help one another succeed. The variety of stressors students encounter in college is many: time management, workload, financial budgeting, literacy skills, and the list goes on. According to Mindful Schools, a leading cooperative on meditation in education, "toxic stress occurs when life's demands consistently outpace our ability to cope with those demands." We can see this outpacing happening within Ventura College, as students of all needs and abilities struggle to maintain their coursework, perform well on tests and focus their attention. The same stressors are negatively impacting educators as well, and teachers are finding ways to help students and themselves cope. This is nothing new. Sure, times seems harder as we face political, social, and technological demands that are new and overwhelming, but education has continued to move forward in light of fresh initiatives, budget cuts, changes in programs and administrative leadership and new policies focused on renovating our approach to remediation. How we embrace and face these transitional periods will reveal our values in education. For me, meditation is a way of *being* that makes life enjoyable. When I bring mindfulness into the class it positively shapes students' interactions with one another while grounding and motivating students to continue on with their studies.

MINDFUL CREATIVITY

CON'TINUED BACKGROUND OF SABBATICAL PROJECT

Current research on mindful meditation shows the development of cognitive and performance skills in practitioners of all walkers of life. In addition, the social and emotional learning that is fostered through meditative practices in the classroom opens pathways to student success by lowering anxiety and stress, helping students feel calm and comfortable to create, learn and grow. The college environment is a relatively untapped spaced concerning mindful meditation research and classroom practice. A good example of leadership of embedding a philosophical shift toward mindfulness in meditation is The George Lucas Education Foundation Edutopia, which is a well-established community that is archiving research on mindful meditation practices nationwide in K-12 (especially over the past ten years). However, very little research has been done on practicing mindfulness in the college setting. Ventura College can be a leader in this charge, but it will require a collective cultural shift. The benefits of such a shift, including support of this sabbatical research, are boundless.

PURPOSE OF SABBATICAL PROJECT

The purpose of this sabbatical project is multifaceted: (1) dovetail work of Kim-Ortel's Sabbatical and continue to research and archive mindfulness techniques within the classroom (2) participate in intensive meditative practice and training at Upaya Zen Center in New Mexico, (3) engage in writing practice, and (4) apply meditation techniques in the classroom and provide workshops campus wide.

COMPONENTS OF SABBATICAL PROJECT

Research (on mindfulness)

Research has shown that the methods for practicing mindful meditation in education has great benefits. The Mindfulness in School Project conducted a wide range of studies on mindfulness in the areas of emotional well-being, learning, mental health, physical, and meditative impact on social and emotional health. Drawing on research of adults and mediation the study explains, "There is reasonably strong evidence for the positive impact of mindfulness on a wide range of mental and physical conditions, on social and emotional skills and wellbeing, and on learning and cognition. There is also good evidence from neuroscience and brain imaging that mindfulness meditation reliably and profoundly alters the structure and function of the brain to improve the quality of both thought and feeling." I will continue to

Fieldwork (the practice of mindfulness)

We can research and discuss mindful meditation endlessly, but the real understanding of mindfulness comes from the practice itself. I would like to attend a year-long writing intensive at Upaya Zen Center in

"We usually evaluate creative process in terms of how much feeling or thinking was behind the work or how well the work was done. Isn't there any other way of appreciating the process? What if the standard of excellence was how fully present the artist was during the process?"

-Kazuaki Tanahashi



Santa Fe, New Mexico to deepen my 10 years of meditation practice and further my training. I have used writing meditation in my classes for as long as I have been a meditator, but only recently have I begun to apply meditation breathing and visualization exercises exclusively in classes (in addition to writing practice). I would like to use my training at the Zen Center to acquire strategies for more effective meditation practices in the classroom and campus wide.

Writing

I am a teacher of writing; I am a writer. I will use sabbatical to further my writing practice. I have found that one of the most useful lessons I can provide my students is anecdotes of my own writing process and journey as a writer. Sharing with students how I create and use writing in life and the struggles and process I experience (whether it is brainstorming and idea, free writing, organizing my thoughts, or building on an idea) is helpful in opening students to new ways of thinking about writing. I have recently applied for and was accepted into a year-long writing intensive with professional writers Natalie Goldberg and Robert Wilder. The writing intensive titled "Sit, Write, Walk" was created by Goldberg and Wilder to encourage writing as a practice and to help ground writers in the practice of meditative writing. I will attend four seasonal 5-day workshops at the Upaya Zen Center and will meditate and write. Essentially, I will use the practice I experience to guide other writers in a practice.

Meditate in Classroom & Campus wide

In the wellness movement, meditation practices are essential to well-being and positivity. Anyone who has tried meditation, even for five minutes, can feel the immediate shift in presence and the calm that comes with it. Our school will benefit from this same shift and groundedness in the present moment. As an institution, we have seen many changes in initiatives such as Basic Skills and Equity, and now that we are shifting to a new way of transforming remediation it is an opportune time to integrate a holistic approach to student learning that includes mind work. Along with using meditation in the classroom, I have been the faculty advisor for the meditation club and have led meditation workshop during the Diversity Festival. I would like to continue to do this. Currently, outside of class, I meditate with students and colleagues on a regular (and often impromptu) basis. We all feel more prepared to face the many challenges and opportunities of academics and workers. I would like to help lead the shift towards a more present approach to living as intellectuals within an academic community by offering a series of workshops for classified, faculty, staff and students to meditate and practice integrating these simple techniques into their daily lives.

VALUE OF SABBATICAL PROJECT TO VCCCD AND VENTURA COLLEGE

For the majority of our students, writing courses are a gateway to students' academic success in other courses across the disciplines. Success in these courses often determines success in college. Students in college learning to write to the standards of college academic writing bring a wealth of capital and skills to the classroom. Even so, they are in need of fundamental practice of academic writing skills. Additionally, in light of recent shifts in assessment practices and placing of college students labeled "basic skills," our task as a college is to find more effective ways of placing and supporting students in college-level courses with hopes of increasing their success in college (and helping some of them transfer to a CSU or UC). The way I see it, mindful meditation practice in the classroom offers a wide range of support for students navigating the college setting. It helps to lessen a student's stress and anxiety levels and offers a way to approach learning that is creative. Consequently, if we can continue to find innovative ways to help students access their own creativity to build confidence and skills in writing courses, they will be more successful in other courses where reading and writing skills are needed to thrive. Therefore, open-minded ways of engaging students in their own creative processes like meditation is a must if we are to engage students in the process of learning and inquiry. The research and knowledge gained in my sabbatical project is meant for all learners in all disciplines, so it has the potential to continue to build interdisciplinary communities on campus and beyond, especially if implemented in professional development Flex workshops and in the Tutoring Center/Writing Center. Collaboration is a means of spreading and building knowledge, and

this project can be useful to individual instructors teaching writing across disciplines or in larger groups to generate meaningful academic discussions. For instance, in a week I will hold a workshop during the ALAS Regional Conference at Moorpark on integrating 1-minute meditation practices into the classroom.

VALUE OF SABBATICAL PROJECT TO VENTURA COLLEGE STUDENTS

Our students are smart and have a strong desire to learn, but many of them are ill-equipped for the rigor of academic learning in college, and this takes on many different forms from test-taking to time management to staying organized under stress. These areas we have very consciously worked on with our more recent introduction to skill-building classes with Steve Turner, which are very successful, and also successful in classrooms where teachers are helping students process how to be college students. Now that many of these foundational structures are in place, it is time to help students go beyond to reaching their potential. One area of potential with all of our students that is often overlooked is the field of creativity that all humans possess, which is under-tapped within education, especially in higher learning. Meditative practices help us to enhance our creative energy.

One of our tasks as educators is to bring out the very best in each individual student. Therefore, tapping into the creative mind of the learner is essential for understanding how they think and what they value. It also draws on the interests and passions of the individual (again what he/she values). Integrating mindfulness into classes will open pathways for students to create because they will be present and open to their own experience. Writing, and all creative acts asked of students in college, requires presence and mindfulness if we are to understand our experience and process how we learn best. Creating, being critiqued, and revising our practices gives us a sense of positive worth. Through meditation and writing practice we learn a process and we learn to trust ourselves. Students benefit greatly from this process because they are invested in their intellectual work when they see the value in it. In the context of writing courses, a focus on meditative creativity builds confidence and skills for student writers that are transferable to other courses (and life).

VALUE OF SABBATICAL PROJECT TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Working on this project and the process of my own creative potential through writing and mindfulness practice will help to make me a stronger and more confident person as an instructor (this will translate into effectiveness, retention and success). With this project, I will have more opportunities to engage in a deeper meditation practice to experience writing as a creative act; one that can be enjoyed and valued as I learn to continue to trust the process. I can help show students this process which they can apply in any course that requires writing. Additionally, this project will give me time and opportunity to research current scholarship in mindfulness education as I refine my approach to teaching writing. Also, focusing on writing practice and meditation will help to further my writing foundation by putting me in the presence of two professional writers and will push my creative potential. I am greatly looking forward to nurturing my own writing practice and seeing how doing so benefits others.

With gratitude,

Jaclyn Walker
Professor of English