

The Importance of Mindfulness Strategies

We know the challenges to students' learning from the headlines: *"Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshmen," "Student Addiction to Technology Similar to Drug Cravings,"* and *"The Myth of Multi-tasking."** College students benefit from the practice of mindfulness; it enhances their ability to pay attention and to listen nonjudgmentally, it helps to alleviate stress, it helps students become self-regulated learners, and it can improve academic performance. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School defines '*mindfulness*' as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

How can instructors facilitate the practice of mindfulness with their students so that their students can better focus in class, thoughtfully attend to their work and each other, and reduce stress? Here are some suggestions:

- Begin class with a brief "Where Are You Now?" activity. Ask students to take 2 to 3 deep, cleansing breaths while tuning into the present moment. Ask: Are you thinking about the day ahead? Are you focusing on something that's happened recently? Are you still foggy from a late night? Notice where you are and how it feels. Now ask them to create a clean slate as if erasing a white board, and then picture their minds as a white board ready for the workings of class. Finish with a cleansing breath.
- Ask students to journal for one minute as they enter class, responding to a prompt on the board or screen: Why am I here right now? What can I do to get the most out of this moment?
- When taking attendance, ask students to respond orally with "Present and _____," filling in the blank. (For example, "Present and anxious," or "Present and expectant.") Have students reflect on their answer and those of their peers for one minute.
- After 10 to 15 minutes of lecture or an exercise or activity, ask students to respond to a prompt about where their level of attention and focus is. This can be a picture of a thermometer (hot to cold), or a drawing of a continuum (engaged to asleep), or any creative measure. Ask students to mentally move themselves to "hot," or "fully engaged."
- If the energy level in class is low, use movement to re-awaken students. Have them move to different sides or corners of the room based on their answer to a question or belief about an issue. Have them engage 2-3 different people in one-word answers to a question that relates to the class content.
- When using PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, insert a slide that has a unique picture or phrase that will re-focus students' attention. Ask several students to share their reactions.

- When taking notes, encourage students to write a word, acronym, or phrase (or draw a symbol) at the top of each page as a reminder of attention and intention: “Focus” or a drawing of an eye; “Think” or a light bulb.

Resources:

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Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for Beginners – reclaiming the present moment and your life*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Langer, E.J. (1997). *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

Lewin, T. (2011). Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshmen. *The New York Times*, January 26, 2011 available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/education/27colleges.html?_r=0

Rosen, C. (2008). The Myth of Multitasking. *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2008 available at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking>

Saltzman, A. (2009). *Mindfulness: A Guide for Teachers*. Public Broadcasting Service available at: <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/teachers-guide/>

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