

"Who I Am Is How I Teach": The Mindful Teacher

By Thomas S.C. Farrell

The general purpose of engaging in reflection for all teachers is to get some kind of awareness of who we are as teachers, what we do, and why we do it. Becoming more aware of who we are as teachers means exploring our own inner-worlds through contemplation. In my previous article, I suggested that engaging in contemplative practice means consciously observing yourself in the present moment without any intervention ("letting go") so that we can become more aware of who we are as human beings ("letting come"). I asked you to try it. In this article, I will give some detailed ideas about how teachers can bring this one step further by practicing mindfulness through four meditative techniques: insight meditation, mantra, visualization, and movement meditation. All these can be practiced alone or in combination as they are all very much

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connected. Research has indicated that when teachers contemplate while teaching, they not only became more mindful of their own attitudes towards their classroom practices, but also became more mindful of their students' emotions and experiences.

Mindfulness

Contemplation can help us reach this state of mindfulness where we can experience an enhanced awareness of our thoughts,

feelings, emotions, and perceptions. It is important for us to become aware of our perceptual experiences as a detached observer so that we can also begin to examine them in light of our conscious experiences as teachers. I now present four meditative techniques: insight meditation, mantra, visualization, and movement meditation for the mindful teacher.

Insight meditation (or *vipassanā*, which means to "see" things as they really are) allows us to focus on what happens in each moment as it happens. We can accomplish this by just focusing on our breathing: when we breathe in and out, we just concentrate on this act and nothing else. Then, as we focus on our breathing, we can gain insight into the "self" as we watch various thoughts and emotions come and go because we do not react to any of them. Eventually, these thoughts and emotions get weaker and finally disappear. In this way, we are practicing insight meditation.

Mantra means "word" and the meditative activity is to use a "word" repeatedly (out loud or internally), either while sitting or in motion, as we continue with our normal daily activities. Singing out loud could also be a form of mantra meditation as the act of singing can lead to an inner calmness and also be a way of relaxing the mind (and even the body before teaching a class). Sing your favorite song out loud ten minutes before entering your next class. After you sing the song, note any physical or mental changes before and after singing. You could even get your students to sing out loud as well and see if their disposition towards learning has changed.

Visualization is a meditative technique where the practitioner visualizes a place (new or old) or a task, and remains in a general

state of openness while using this place as a type of sanctuary where you feel safe because this sanctuary is unique to you. As you see yourself inside this sanctuary, you become calm and just sit there and totally relax. Because this sanctuary is unique to you, it reflects who you are as a person as you "see" yourself relax, and then you begin to notice your personal visualization. We gain knowledge of the self as a result of meditating on our visualizations because these, too, are unique to the person who is meditating. You can try this before class and see if your attitudes (to your teaching, your students, and learning) change. You could also get your students to try it through English as it is all learning.



Movement meditation includes any body movement as meditation. The most popular types of movement meditation include yoga and its many different forms, tai-chi, but even a simple routine such as walking or jogging can also be considered movement meditation. My own preference for movement meditation is my practice of the discipline of *taekwondo*, a Korean martial art. I studied this wonderful art when I was in Korea for 18 years, and for me, the calming nature of the pre-stretching routine, along with the practice of kicking and other body movements and postures, allows for enhanced awareness of self through attention to mind, body, and spirit while in action. Apart from the physical benefits of feeling "high" after intense movement (the effect increased endorphins in the brain), I also have noticed that any negative pre-practice thoughts and energy have been fully transformed into positive thoughts and

energy as I go through the movements. Teachers can do simple stretching exercises or whatever body movements that relaxes the body and mind before they enter a class, or they can take a walk/jog during lunch hour and experience meditation through movement. Try some movement activities before you enter your next class, and note any physical and mental changes before and after your movements. You can also have your students move during class as a way to get them focused, and this is especially useful for teachers of young learners.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is the opposite of mindlessness, and unfortunately, much of our world gives us too many examples of the latter rather than the former. Mindful teachers have a different attitude than mindless teachers, and in this article, I have outlined and discussed four different meditative techniques that can help you be a mindful teacher. I hope at least one (if not more) of these appeals to you and helps you contemplate on who you are as a teacher. My favorite is movement meditation and my mantra is "Who I am is how I teach" (Farrell, 2015).

Reference

Farrell, T.S.C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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