

MINDFULNESS AND CREATIVITY

by Peggy Bochun

In an art class at King George Secondary in Vancouver, the teacher, Allison Kerr, invites students to listen to a resonant chime. When the sound fades and they can no longer hear it, she asks them to follow awareness of their own breathing. The room drops into stillness. The soft sound of the rain becomes audible on the windowpane. The teacher says students can also listen to the rain as part of their mindful-awareness practice. The students comply. Within five minutes, the chime is sounded again, signalling the end of this activity. The students begin to stir and the art class begins.

This listening and breathing practice is only one of the resources that the teacher uses with her class to foster *mindful awareness*—the practice of selectively focussing attention. At other times the students engage in exercises designed to engender a sense of personal inquiry, openness, and reflection, and enter into dialogue about how mindfulness can be used to create wellness and to create art. Recently, for example, these students were guided to sharpen their awareness by focussing inward to cultivate a state of openness before interacting with the art installations of the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale. Consequently, they were inspired to create imaginative and thought-provoking responses to the city's public art forms.

What does mindfulness have to do with art? Mindfulness reduces reactivity and promotes a state of calm. In this state, students become more receptive to ideas and develop their ability to engage with their surroundings in a more focussed and vibrant way. The receptivity and calm states result from the removal of internal and external distractions.

In daily life, we are often bombarded with sensory stimuli that keep us from being fully present with ourselves, others and our surroundings. These distractions can result from our five senses, our feelings, perceptions, memories, thoughts and desires to name a few. During mindfulness we actually sharpen our awareness and become more attuned to our inner state and what is happening around us. In an age where there is a chronic need to multi-task, people seldom get a chance to slow down their brain processes enough to

really experience the information their senses are giving them. For example, how often do we take the time to actually listen to and hear what someone is saying to us or to hear the sounds of the ocean or a bird's song? How often do we take the time to really see and experience a sunset?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus and developer of "Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction" at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, says mindfulness involves "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." To this end, mindfulness causes us to experience things in a more profound way. In essence, the ordinary can become non-ordinary—like Van Gogh's painting of the sunflowers.

In addition, current brain research supports the idea that creativity can be an outgrowth of mindfulness. According to Harvard neuroscientist Dr. Daniel Siegel, mindfulness helps fine-tune brain connections and creates integration by developing new neural pathways. In his work, Siegel has specifically identified nine areas of integration in the brain that form the basis for both living life more creatively and for enhancing artistic endeavours and pursuits. Some of these areas involve the integration of consciousness, the whole of the body, both hemispheres of the brain, and memory. As such, teachers of the arts are using various forms of mindfulness practice to enhance students' creative output and performance.

While Siegel cites mindfulness as one of the essential factors leading to positive brain changes, he also notes that the key lies in establishing the consistency of a daily practice. The good news from current brain research, as evidenced by MRI scans, is that it takes as little as five minutes a day to build these new neural linkages that can lead to profound and lasting benefits emotionally, educationally and creatively.

A mindfulness practice can be as diverse as doing yoga or petting an animal or walking in the woods. But in classrooms, it usually involves conscious attention to the breath while sitting and/or engaging students in experiential learning opportunities that focus awareness on their physical senses, emotions and thoughts. The

goal is to help them to develop the resources to cope more effectively with others and in stressful situations. Creativity is actually an added benefit!

At Magee Secondary, choral teacher Greg Quan uses his own approach to mindfulness to enhance not only creativity, but also confidence, group dynamics, and focus on craft.

Quan says, "A great portion of what we do as a choir family has to do with mindfulness, of not only the task at hand, but more importantly, of each other. It is much more and much deeper than a focus on breathing or other physical attributes—it has more to do with things like a positive affirmation of each other to start the day off with a positive mindset. The theory is that, if you believe that you are going to have a good day, you will. We begin each day standing in a circle, arms around each other's shoulders, proclaiming that we will have a good day and cherish each moment. Then we give each other positive reinforcement, and through that grow together as people—"one choir, one sound."

"It has a lot to do with learning to be vulnerable together to enable each student to freely give of their whole self—mind, body, and spirit—using music as their vehicle of expression. It is a holistic approach to teaching life through music and giving students something valuable to take forward and use throughout their lives. More than just being able to read music, they will be enabled to cherish each other and to live each day with appreciation and passion."

Quan also supplements his already "soulful" classes by frequently enlisting internationally renowned clinicians to help guide students in mindfulness activities that involve awareness of physical alignment and breathing. These activities enhance vocal production and choral singing, as well as "invoking the spirit." The Magee choirs are known for their exemplary performances: the Chamber Choir recently won the BC Provincial Festival, which earned them an invitation to the National Festival (Federation of Canadian Music Festivals). There all of the top choirs from across Canada meet and are adjudicated. At the most recent Festival, the Magee Chamber Choir was named one of the top two choirs in their age category in all of Canada.

But mindfulness practices are not limited to Fine Arts classrooms. All curriculum areas can be enriched through mindfulness which forms the basis for receptive learning as well as encourages a sense of mutual respect and cooperation. The secondary math teacher in Windermere's Athena program, Maggie Przyborowska, guides her students in a breathing practice with a chime before tackling math problems or when the class has gotten unfocused. Przyborowska uses this practice with her grade 8, 9 and 10 classes.

While this may seem like a strange practice for a math class to an outsider, Przyborowska says, "The chime and the associated breathing exercise help to redirect our attention from whatever tangents we have taken back to the task at hand." She also feels that when students are focussed on their breathing and the sound "it is not just that they are quiet but that they are redirecting their attention and that everyone is coming together." When asked whether she feels that her students have become more creative, Przyborowska says that while she has not yet gathered enough evidence to answer this question, the practice undeniably makes students calmer and helps them attune to themselves and others in the room.

At this time, there are hundreds of Vancouver teachers that have already been trained to teach mindfulness techniques and awareness. These teachers, mostly elementary, have been trained in the Hawn Foundation curriculum *MindUp*—a social emotional learning (SEL) program administered through the Vancouver School Board's Social Responsibility Department. *MindUp* fosters self-regulation through a core breathing practice and mindful awareness activities involving the five senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and movement. In addition, there are lessons on SEL; positive psychology such as expressing gratitude; optimism training; and the concept of mindful action in the world from a place of kindness and compassion for others. All lessons are grounded in scientific research and promote positive bio-chemical and neural changes. The *MindUp* program itself has been the subject of two research studies led by the University of British Columbia's Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl. As a result of the success of the Hawn Foundation program, there is a grass roots-movement and growing body of secondary teachers who are using their own adaptation of the program to enrich learning in the classroom with particular reference to the arts.

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