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# On the Value of Being in the Moment in Honors Education

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**Abstract:** Recent scholarship demonstrates a direct correlation between the body and brain in academic performance and general wellbeing. This essay considers mindfulness practice as an integrative discipline in honors education. While exercise offers many benefits to college students, the authors maintain that the mindfulness practices of yoga, qi gong, and meditation are uniquely suited to mediate stresses on mental health and improve focus, presence, and cognitive ability. Honors practitioners are encouraged to incorporate mindfulness practice into curricula and classrooms. A review of literature in mindful awareness and meditation practice is presented.

**Keywords:** college students—health behavior; mindfulness; wellbeing; Southeastern Oklahoma State University (OK)—Honors Program; Johnson County Community College (KS)—Honors Program

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People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

In his beautiful and candid essay, Suketu P. Bhavsar makes a case for “the importance of wholeness in our professional lives as academics” and for the value of cultivating empathy in our students. When we read the touching narratives he offers in support of his contentions, we interpreted his examples

as moments of being, shared and compelling experiences expressive of the intense connection that can exist between teachers and their students when we take the time truly to be with them. The two of us, Lisa Coleman and Anne Dotter, have wrestled with this process of reconciling the life of the mind (academia) with the mindful life, and here we will share the means by which we have successfully made ourselves more present to others and to ourselves through our personal mindful practices of yoga, qi gong, and meditation.

Lisa L. Coleman, former faculty member and honors program director at Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SE), retired in 2016 to teach yoga. In her last years at SE, her pedagogy and scholarship took a turn toward mindfulness, which involves paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, nonjudgmentally. Prior to this turn, she had experienced a rift between her yogic self and her academic self; now she began teaching her academic subjects more mindfully and inclusively in her fervent desire to offer up the yogic experience of openness, nonjudgment, compassion, and freedom from pain to her students. As a result of these practices of inclusion, she and three of her SE honors students co-wrote the chapter "Occupying Native America" that was published in the NCHC monograph *Occupy Honors Education* in 2017. This publication was her first with student co-authors.

Anne Dotter is on the faculty at Johnson County Community College (JCCC), where she currently directs the honors program and teaches introductory courses in American Studies. The personal enrichment she has experienced through her mindfulness practices (qi gong and yoga) has encouraged her to incorporate them in honors classrooms and programming. Being fully present for our learning and teaching may increase the likelihood of students (and faculty) achieving self-efficacy, accomplishing academic success, and living their best lives. The completion of a teaching certification in qi gong will allow her to program moving meditation practices at JCCC to help students combat stress and promote presence, attention, and open-mindedness. She will systematically study the impact of steady mindfulness practices on academic performance.

We contend that mindfulness practices can enhance students' performance and wellbeing, and that higher education generally and honors in particular will be more inclusive if educators are able to bring their whole selves to their profession and recognize their students' whole, complex selves in the process. Welcoming students and their diverse experiences may mean allowing for alternative ways of thinking about the world and the life of the mind: having the humility not to dismiss these other views as erroneous out of hand might open us to new ways of knowing. Approaching our students

with empathy instead of judgment, with openness instead of limiting filters, may pave the way for the more just society we aspire to inhabit.

The mindful practices that have inspired our honors classrooms and programming belong to what Samuel Schuman calls “integrative disciplines” (8) in his 2013 NCHC monograph on holistic honors education. As Schuman explains, “involving both an exercise component and a meditative element” embraces “a core belief that through activities designed to heighten attention and focus on one’s body, mind, and spirit in the undistracted here and now, one achieves internal balance that leads to personal peace” (89). We concur that mindfulness practices can bring individuals this sense of balance and peace.

While in 2013 Schuman found little verifiable laboratory research to support the value of these disciplines to academic learning (131), in 2020 we can make supported claims about the benefits of mindfulness practices. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who in 1979 founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Boston, was introduced to the non-medical world by Bill Moyers in a TV interview printed in his 1995 book, *Healing and the Mind*. Here Kabat-Zinn refers to the mind/body connection and suggests that “how we live our lives, and . . . how we think and feel over a lifetime can influence the kinds of illnesses we have” (Kabat-Zinn qtd. in Moyers 130). In 2020 Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness is still going strong, and 80% of reporting medical schools in the United States offer some version of mindfulness training (Buchholz). Honors and higher education would do well to follow their lead for the health and well-being of faculty and students alike.

In the last ten years, EEG and functional MRI brain studies on expert, novice, and untrained meditators have offered evidence of the brain’s neuroplasticity and suggest that the brain, like a muscle, can be shaped and toned (Hölzel et al.). Mindful awareness and meditation practices can interrupt the stress-induced fight or flight response common in citizens of most Western countries and can tap into the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body and better engaging the mind. These practices can also increase the ability to focus, decrease unproductive mind wandering, and thus, according to Mrazek et al., yield significantly better GRE performance, a benefit of great value to honors students (776). According to a number of studies, stress hinders academic performance and induces many physical ailments; it affects memory performance (Nelissen, Prickaerts, and Blokland 9), our ability to sleep, and our mental health, to mention only a few examples. Researchers are testing coping mechanisms, such as exercise (Wunsch, Kasten, and Fuchs 125) or mindfulness (Snippe et al. 730), and their findings are promising.

A review of the literature on meditation practices by Farias et al., published in August of 2020, analyzed adverse events induced by meditation for participants in a wide range of practices between 1979 and 2019. Given this review, students new to meditation practice should choose guided meditations, preferably in the presence of a teacher, for a safe introduction to the discipline. The same review reported, however, that two other recent studies (Wong et al.; Hirshberg et al.)—pertaining specifically to the style of MBSR-influenced mindfulness meditation Lisa L. Coleman teaches—found that “these meditation interventions were no more likely to lead to harm than a wait-list control, or they identified an overall very low rate of adverse events (1% across 36 randomized controlled trials)” (Farias et al. 3)

The value of framing an honors education around the whole student and not just their cognitive abilities is supported by decades of research published in the past five years. John Ratey, among others, has demonstrated the interconnected benefits of exercise and brain function. He maintains that the brain will absorb more and retain more for longer if it is appropriately nourished, exercised, and practiced (Ratey 55). Several chapters of *The New Science of Learning*, by Terry Doyle and Todd Zakrajsek, point to the importance of body maintenance as a key factor in successful learning. According to these authors, eating, sleeping, exercising, and meditating are central to fostering the brain’s optimal function. They explain that “exercise increases the production of . . . serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine” and that “these three neurochemicals help your brain to be alert, attentive, motivated for learning, and positive toward learning” (Doyle and Zakrajsek 55). They further argue that mindfulness practices, and meditation in particular, “enhance mental agility and attention by changing brain structure and function so that brain processes are more efficient” (Doyle and Zakrajsek 155).

Since the regular practice of either exercise or meditation would alleviate our students’ mental stress, we should consider integrating such practices in our classrooms to benefit students who may not have the cultural capital to recognize the benefits of exercise, let alone mindfulness practices, or who may not have time to fit such practices in their daily routines. A mere five minutes of abdominal breathing, a short guided meditation, or a few minutes of qi gong warm-ups, such as the shaking that Olympic athletes do before performing, will help our students’ ability to give their full attention to our class or test, unencumbered by the various sources of stress that ail them and that undoubtedly impede their performance.

We recommend that at minimum honors educators encourage their students to engage in exercise, to the degree that they are able, in order to

enhance their academic performance, lower their stress, and increase their ability to be in the moment. Incorporating meditation, qi gong, or yoga in the honors classroom and in honors programming would support student success more equitably and open new avenues for our students to live more balanced and present lives. Our personal mindful practices have provided us with the ability to thrive in spite of stressful situations and have improved our performance by allowing us to be fully present when our thinking would otherwise have been clouded by work induced stress. Our own enhanced abilities to be fully present for our students and colleagues in our professional lives set us on track to embrace Maya Angelou's wisdom. We have accepted that our students may forget what we said and did (anathema for academics), but our commitment to be in the moment with our students will endure.

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