

Introduction: Making a Difference

[Your calling to purpose] is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

—Frederick Buechner (1973)

I felt a deep, clear calling to the vocation of teaching. It felt attached to my own life's purpose, directing me when I made a career change from the corporate arena to education. The larger world seemed to be calling out to me with the message. *Making a difference* is the reason I chose to teach. It could be the reason you did, too. Not only to "do no harm," but actually to promote something good and of value. We want to make a positive difference—in the lives of our students, colleagues, teams, our personal lives, society, and beyond. Sometimes, it's hard to know what effect we've had in the classroom because we're always "on," and the pace of the year can seem too rapid for reflection.

This is how it used to feel for me in the beginning: frantic, frenetic, always receiving multiple inputs and demands on one channel with not nearly enough bandwidth. Between the annual 120+ students, parents, and school community, I knew I could always give more, but my inner resources were sapped. In my first year of teaching, I was intimidated by my own lack of experience. I was confident in my intellectual ability and command of materials, yet I felt it would take a miracle to reach a level of comfort standing in front of a group of teenagers.

Though helpful and positive, it wasn't curriculum planning models that got me through those first days of school; nor was it advice (which I received from more than one person) to *make sure not to smile* (at least, not before the end of the first term!). For me, not smiling was nearly impossible. No, it was a different resource that saved me: Parker J. Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1997) echoed my own beliefs about authenticity and wholeness in the classroom, and gave me the strength to act on those convictions.

Tempting as it was to play superhero with my newly appointed authority, I knew in my heart that this form of leadership would be empty and short-lived. In essence, I knew I needed to keep it real in order to be true to myself and teach with integrity. I wanted my students to bloom in their learning, and I had to gain their trust, first, in order for that to happen. My answer was to acknowledge my own fears of being seen as incompetent in my authority. As soon as I did that, I didn't cling so hard—I lost my inhibitions, and began to put myself in the shoes of the learner.

This was a process in empathy, and was the beginning of my use of mindfulness in teaching. I was aware of myself, and my students, choosing openness. I showed them my own learning process, my own passions and joy, favoring a positive, proactive

community that could learn together and could understand ourselves even better in the process.

And, guess what? A miracle happened.

During those years, I was teaching in a high school in Providence, Rhode Island. It was a beautiful place to learn and seemed to me right out of a film—rolling green lawns, red brick historic architecture, Latin motto on the façade.

In that school community, miraculous events happened every day because I embraced my own joy of learning and absorbed the fear of failure, letting it become a form of curiosity. I began to understand that students had fears, too, and part of my job was to flip those fears into opportunities. I presented students with choices, offering up all sorts of ways to learn with creativity and confidence. You'll see those opportunities reflected in the exercises in this book, which all stem from values of awareness, empathy, community, and insight.

Starting out, operating on my own convictions about teaching with mindfulness, I had no idea if I would be making a positive difference. I couldn't yet see the results—all I could see was that I was following what felt true, what felt like my calling to merge my own joy in my heart with the world's deep need, just like the Buechner epigraph. Seven years later, on a rainy Thanksgiving holiday during the first year that I was teaching abroad in Belgium, I was surprised and delighted to receive an email from a former student. Part of it read:

In light of Thanksgiving, I wanted to express my gratitude to you for everything you have done for me. You took a subject that I always found boring and made it my favorite class I have ever taken. Beyond the do's and don'ts of writing, you encouraged us to be free thinkers. From your friendly and engaged approach, I felt more comfortable than ever discussing during class. . . .

So, thank you for all of that, but most of all, thank you for being unique and not just teaching. You did more than taught, you inspired us. I will never quit writing and will always love English because of you, and for that I am grateful.

I felt grateful and humbled, too, to receive such a note. I once read a quote that said, "Teaching is a work of heart," and I believe it. Each day, as educators, we put our full hearts into the process, and our classrooms are such powerful environments, with the capacity literally to change lives. And we can never fully imagine the immensity of the impact we make. It travels.

The email made me think about my own authenticity, as a teacher and human. What I bring each day to the classroom is my true self, with my own set of joys, fears, hopes, and desires. I was happy I had made a difference in this former student's experience, and I knew the impact I was making was beyond the curriculum content, allowing students to recognize broader connections, and to engage with themselves in the process of learning.

I knew, then, that the key variable in my teaching is the presence of mindfulness.

Helping others make meaning out of mindfulness, applying it to everything from tech to storytelling, curriculum design to writing, innovation to empathy and compassion, is where my passion lies. This is what “makes me come alive,” in a sense.

Since those early days in that New England high school, I have used mindfulness as part of the core of my teaching (actually, the core of my *being*, since it’s undivided), applying it in all sorts of ways, reflecting best practices in a wide arena of interdisciplinary learning. I’ve taught in middle schools and high schools worldwide, directing programs in international schools, serving as a curriculum coordinator, coaching sports, co-leading Model United Nations, founding creative writing clubs and mentoring student leadership programs, and traveling to present workshops and teach other leaders and educators around the globe. As founder of the organization MindWise, I build bridges and connect ecosystems, as we are entering a new phase of immersive tech that hinges on using mindful awareness and emotional intelligence. It’s an exciting time to be human.

I’ve studied an array of forms and interpretations of mindfulness (see Chapter 1, “Beyond the Buzzword”), including the popular MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy). I’ve also studied emotional intelligence, SEL (social and emotional learning), PBL (project-based learning), blended learning, visible learning, design thinking, and more. I’m a “curriculum mapper” (learning from Heidi Hayes Jacobs and Marie Hubley Alcock [2017]), “understanding by design” (thanks to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe [2005]), and I want students to “own the learning” (Alan November [2008]) and adopt a “growth mindset” (Carol Dweck [2006]). Many positive inspirations and influences inform these mindful practices, driven by constant curiosity. I’m up on the various learning styles and colors; I’m down with what it’s like to be a TCK (third culture kid) with a TFK (thirst for knowledge). I’m fascinated with the rapid rate of developments in neuroscience, revealing more to us about “the way things work” in the brain, beyond the machinery of David Macaulay’s wildest dreams. This could all be freestyle poetry right here, all lightness with a core message to be mindfully adaptive, receptive, reflective, and open.

Underneath it all, true mindfulness is the glue that makes all of the methods above stick; it’s the lens of nonjudgment that allows us to see more clearly, invent with abandon, and make better rational sense of things; it’s the anticloak of authenticity (a cloak that reveals instead of disguises) that allows us to be real; to be understood; to seek to understand others.

This book invites each reader to try out various ways to involve mindfulness in daily life, in and out of the classroom. It’s personal, real, approachable, and fun, making sense of a term that, while trendy, can seem

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abstract and elusive. With practical, accessible explanations and applications, this book demystifies mindfulness and allows readers to use it in many ways, to spark powerful learning environments and improve personal well being.

Overview of the Book

We'll dive more deeply into mindfulness and its myriad applications in the following chapters of this book, exploring concepts related to mindful teaching and learning. This collection of mindfulness exercises can be used in different ways: as a professional support tool, as a classroom lesson planning guide, a toolbox for the classroom, and even a way in which to consider some bigger questions and recent educational research and advancements. The questions are often bigger than the answers, pointing us in new directions. It's an ongoing dialogue with ourselves and with the world.

This book is an invitation, giving readers the chance to learn about the concept of mindfulness and to apply mindful learning techniques to their personal lives and learning environments, *if they wish to*. It's not a mandate—it's simply one option that has many benefits, including increasing focus, resilience, empathy, compassion, health, and overall happiness. I can't imagine a better set of motivations; for me, incorporating mindfulness into my daily practices was intuitive, engaging, and the most rewarding step of my multidimensional career.

While this book is written with learning communities and education experiences in mind, it serves everyone, as its intention is to reframe the way in which we think about thinking and learn about learning in regard to our relationship with ourselves and with others in community.

Part I

Chapter 1, "Mindfulness: Beyond the Buzzword," defines mindfulness in clear terms, highlighting problems and pain points that mindfulness helps to solve. This introduction shares some of the inspiration behind the mindfulness movement in education, also addressing mindsets, misconceptions, scientific research, and connections to education, including standards and models.

Chapter 2 gives an understanding of the architecture of a mindful learning environment, looking at the classroom setup and planning design in three key arenas: classroom physical structures, tools, and routines that teachers can use when envisioning their own classroom spaces and dynamic mindful learning experiences. It all starts here, with planning and vision. This chapter illuminates the intentional choices involved in structuring mindful classroom settings, with the focus simply on how to design a mindful learning space.

Part II

Chapter 3 includes detailed examples of mindful exercises that teachers can practice on their own, in and out of the classroom. It builds the base, and offers fresh takes on mindfulness, so that even those who are familiar with the practices and traditions will find something new to appreciate.

Chapter 4 is all about what mindfulness looks like when it's actively embedded in curriculum. There are sixteen detailed classroom lessons that incorporate mindfulness, applying it to all curriculum areas. With step-by-step guidance, and also examples of ways that students engage with the exercises, this chapter breaks concepts down and makes them approachable, practical, and engaging.

Part III

In conclusion, we'll address "The Future of Mindfulness" in **Chapter 5**, which points the way toward innovative learning, which is co-evolving alongside our deeper understanding of collaborative education environments that hinge on emotional intelligence, adaptation, and relational trust. We'll take a brief look at some of the ways in which the modern learning landscape can embrace digital revolutions and stay focused on mindful connection, inside and out.

Interspersed throughout the book are direct quotes from students about their experiences and reactions to mindfulness in the classroom.

There are also additional resources, tips and tricks, quotes and poetry included along the way. This book provides ideas for continuing to build mindful learning, extending to a global network of additional resources, including helpful websites and community groups that will broaden the scope of mindful learning. As Howard Rheingold (2000) says, it's a "virtual community."

Feel free to jump around this book, using it as a workbook, a toolkit, a place for reflections and discoveries, and an interwoven set of personal stories. In some sections, there are quotes, reflections, and exercises, which serve to sustain and motivate teachers and students alike.

I'm wishing each reader (you!) an enjoyable journey through the book, discovering along the way certain aspects of mindful practices that resonate with you. It's personal rather than prescriptive, and I think you'll see that my own stories and pathways are anything but ordinary! It's with openness and joy that I share my journey and my students' journeys with you. I have great respect for the impact that mindfulness can have, and I honor each individual learner, and the trust they place in collective, collaborative communities. They are the true voices of mindfulness, helping to share ways in which personal connection and mindful learning environments ignite.