

Cultivating Emotional Wellness and Self-Care through Mindful Mentorship in the Writing Center

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The practice of mindfulness is growing both in higher education (Wenger) and in writing centers (Johnson; Kervin and Barrett). Because mindfulness involves being attuned to what's happening in a given moment and maintaining a purposeful awareness of what one feels, thinks, and does, we argue that writing center administrators can utilize principles of mindfulness for mentoring writing center tutors. We adopt Jennifer Clary-Lemon and Duane Roen's definition of mentoring as an "activity that is both reciprocal and transformational" (181), whereby "the mentor is learning by monitoring and evaluating his or her mentoring activities and their effects on the mentee" (179). Their definition incorporates elements of mindfulness: self-awareness, reflection, and presence.

We approach mindfulness from the premise that emotions and affect are always already shaping our encounters, whether or not we are conscious of their presence. Through emotions we come "to know things, to develop connections and attachments to others, and to function in the world" (Micciche xii). Becoming mindful of how affect and emotion impact our well-being is a crucial part of making sense of our experiences and practicing self-care. In this article, we suggest that setting in motion mindfulness practices *with* writing center tutors cultivates more effective working relationships in the center. Our work is inspired by Elizabeth Mack and Katie Hupp's strategies of "being present and listening," as well as "paying thoughtful attention to understanding and articulating [one's] needs" (13).

In this article we expand Mack and Hupp's definition of mindfulness as a "deliberate practice" and describe how we implemented a semester-long commitment to creating conditions of mindfulness

and self-care. We also suggest how administrators can implement mindfulness practices. We believe that incorporating mindfulness into mentoring relationships can allow us to prioritize and value the emotional and affective dimensions of our work—particularly since both administrators and tutors are often in positions where they are the recipients of others' emotions and must learn to carefully navigate this terrain (Grouling and Buck; Johnson). Mindfulness and self-care, when practiced together, can positively impact our professional relationships and well-being.

SETTING MINDFULNESS IN MOTION

Nova Southeastern University's Writing and Communication Center (WCC) serves 20,000 graduate and undergraduate students and faculty. The WCC is run by an Executive Director and three faculty administrators (including Janine and Kelly); includes 7 Graduate Assistant Coordinators (GACs) (including Nicole and Veronica); and has a staff of approximately 17 graduate and 37 undergraduate tutors. GACs work closely with WCC leadership on initiatives as well as with the tutors to host professional development workshops, maintain social media platforms, conduct research, and implement tutor training. Our leadership structure in the WCC is meant to be empowering. Each tutor is part of a 7-8 person group that has a GAC and faculty administrator. Within the groups, GACs consistently check in with and support their teams as well as act as liaisons between the tutors and the faculty administrators.

Like many writing and communication centers, we maintain a commitment to professional and personal development. Each semester, tutors attend a day-long orientation, complete online training modules, and attend at least three 60-minute professional development workshops (totalling approximately 25 hours). At the beginning of the fall 2018 tutor orientation, Janine and Kelly offered an overview of mindfulness, emotions, and affect and situated those terms within scholarship and the work of the WCC. We introduced these topics to make it clear to tutors that these are present, yet often undiscussed, elements of our work. We believed that having conversations on mindfulness and emotions early on would set the stage for tutors to identify strategies to navigate the emotional and affective terrain of their work. After conducting mindfulness workshops, the four of us continued talking about stress, mindfulness, and our roles as mentors. To better understand how stress-related emotions affect relationships in the mentor groups, we spent four weeks implementing mindfulness and self-care practices in our daily lives.

WEEKLY MINDFULNESS AND SELF-CARE PRACTICES

Inspired by Mack and Hupp's mindfulness project, we implemented

weekly mindfulness exercises, such as practicing acceptance and being aware of feelings and experiences. While Mack and Hupp asked all tutors to engage in weekly mindfulness exercises, we wanted to focus on how mindfulness related to our experiences as leaders, hoping that this would positively affect our engagement with the mentor groups. In what follows, we detail the four weeks of activities with reflections from Nicole and Veronica. The following reflections are excerpts of our more extensive written reflections.

WEEK 1: SETTING THE TONE

We began by defining and describing how we practice self-care. We also defined mentorship and identified characteristics of strong mentors we've had in the past. Along with creating shared definitions, we engaged in daily self-check-ins where, each morning, we outlined self-care intentions and kept track of how we succeeded or were limited in achieving those goals. During Week 1, we focused on observing our behaviors without placing value on them.

Nicole: During Week 1, I defined “self-care” as actions done for my own benefit, either mentally or physically, and being mindful of my emotions. I defined a “mentor” as someone who has experience in the field and provides wisdom and support while maintaining authority and fostering honest communication. I noticed during Week 1 that I often neglected many of my self-care goals (like eating regularly, drinking three bottles of water, and breathing deeply). Additional personal self-care goals included journaling each day, practicing yoga twice a week, doing my nails, and spending time with my family. Prior to beginning the exercise, I felt I would have more success with these at-home self-care rituals (journaling, yoga, etc.). However, because I often take on more professional projects than I can handle, my at-home commitments proved just as difficult to maintain.

Veronica: To me, “self-care” is understanding the importance of striking a balance between professional/academic work and time for yourself, as well as acting to ensure the latter does not get put on the back burner. I define a “mentor” as someone who provides guidance and makes themselves available to others. Mentors should be well-versed in work policy as well as compassionate/understanding and accessible/approachable. Throughout Week 1, I tried my best to spend time away from things that added to my stress, but the intention of self-care often became procrastination in practice, which led to stress and guilt for the lack of productivity. I kept intended self-care activities manageable—making time for music and TV, reaching out to at least one friend each day, being present with family, etc. Despite these activities’ seeming low intensity, I only successfully engaged in them three out of the five days of the work week. My

academic and personal obligations prevented me from achieving even the simplest of self-care tasks.

WEEK 2: KEEPING TRACK

We met at the beginning of Week 2 to report back and share our struggles and successes. We used this discussion to talk about the personal and professional tasks we wanted to complete that week. In Week 2, we focused on understanding how we split our time between our personal and professional commitments, examining when and how often we say yes. Significantly, we found that what we set out to do did not always correspond to what we actually accomplished.

Nicole: During Week 2, I worked to achieve my self-care goals while meeting academic and professional deadlines. I also reminded myself to not punish myself when I didn't complete one of my self-care goals. The goals I completed were those that I actively incorporated into my schedule (like spending time with family and doing homework), as opposed to those I wanted to complete "if I had time" (like eating regularly, practicing yoga, and doing my nails).

Veronica: For Week 2, I classified meeting several professional and academic deadlines as "self-care." As these were responsible for the majority of my personal stress, completing them not only alleviated said stress, but allowed me to make time for the more conventional self-care goals I had set the week prior. Upon incorporating these self-care-adjacent tasks, I worked to better pace myself both in and out of the center. As a result, I successfully met all of my personal and academic self-care goals that week, and only occasionally succumbed to "self-sabotage" (e.g., sending work emails off the clock).

WEEKS 3 & 4: ENGAGING IN SELF-CARE

During Weeks 3 and 4 we decided to purposefully schedule daily time for self-care (such as exercising, breathing, or meditating) that brought us personal fulfillment. As we completed self-care tasks, we reflected on how attention to and barriers to self-care affected our interactions, experiences, and relationships with others in the WCC. Coming out of the Week 1 and 2 discussions, we wanted to focus on setting boundaries, saying no, protecting our time, and offering tips/strategies to others.

Nicole: I found that practicing mindfulness allowed me to remain calm in situations of high stress, which I think affected my relationship with my mentees. Mindfulness for me was linked to my self-care. Once I realized that each assignment or task would be done one way or another, I was more *present* with those around me. When I had conversations with colleagues and mentees, I truly listened. On the days that I diligently practiced

and documented simple self-care tasks (like eating regularly, drinking water, and meditating for 5 minutes), I noticed my mood improved significantly. When I was in a better mood, I interacted more with my mentees, in both a professional and social way.

Practicing mindfulness in the writing center made me more aware of both my own and my peers' stressors, which fostered more communication and relationship-building with my mentees. By honestly expressing moments when I felt overwhelmed or stretched too thin with my faculty mentors and Veronica, I realized that I was not alone in my stress. As a result, I felt validation in my experience as a working grad student, as well as an enhanced sense of community with my colleagues. By learning and adopting self-care practices from my faculty mentors, I felt empowered to take what I learned and provide a calming presence to my mentees when they felt overwhelmed, which in turn gave me a renewed sense of purpose in my position as a mentor.

Veronica: In the last two weeks, while the intention to engage in self-care was in the back of my mind, I did little to no activity of that nature. Given that I was swamped with work for the two courses I was taking, as well as with initial research for my thesis, I gave myself only one free day to spend time with friends, and even that was prefaced with a shift at the WCC. My commute to and from campus—an hour each way—left me exhausted and rendered me unproductive once I made it back home. Because I felt that way myself, I was reluctant to burden my mentees with any extra work, and my interactions with them and other tutors reflected this reluctance. Quite a bit of apologizing and checking-in happened in-person and through text message.

Being both a mentor (to other tutors) and a mentee (of a faculty advisor), I felt obligated to keep my stressors to myself and present as "ready to go" in the WCC. Despite juggling several personal matters, being at work provided me an alternate, stress-free space in which to engage with others. This did not erase my stressors entirely, of course, but neutralized them temporarily as I shifted my focus to my interactions within the WCC. However, once in the WCC, the listening went both ways—I provided support to my mentees, and both they and my mentor offered a listening ear in return. Because of this, I felt more present in these interactions and the relationships were more open, resulting in a communicative, honest environment.

As faculty administrators, this four-week experience of mindfulness was eye-opening for us (Janine and Kelly). Because mindfulness involves a presence and awareness of our bodies and actions, mindfulness and self-care are inextricably linked. Like Nicole and Veronica, we also struggled with making self-care a goal and often talked about how mindfulness and self-care are *practices* that need

to be cultivated and are not something that automatically happens just because we say we're being mindful. As faculty administrators in a center with many tutors, we don't always spend as much one-on-one time with tutors as we'd like. Working alongside Nicole and Veronica on mindfulness and self-care reminded us of the significance of their leadership roles and helped us be more purposeful in what we asked of them.

From our perspective as leaders, this experience also made us think critically about what we ask of our tutors. As mentors ourselves, what does it mean when the practices we model go against the mindfulness message we preach? We recognize that the line between professional life and personal life can be blurred, insofar as when we work harder to alleviate stress, it can potentially cause more stress. Self-care work in a paid job context can add to writing center administrators' labor. However, we believe in the value of doing this work and recognize that these practices take work and will not resonate with or look the same for everyone. While self-care for Janine and Kelly might mean yoga, for Veronica it might mean avoiding procrastination and accomplishing work-related tasks. And that's ok! As each institutional context and each writing center community differs, some of what we outline might not be the most appropriate model to use.

As practicing yogis embedded in affect and embodiment scholarship, we believe that there are benefits to practicing mindfulness and that self-awareness can positively impact the relationships we have with others. By remaining attuned to mindfulness and our mentor relationships during this four-week period, we realized how much work it is to create space for these practices and to actually practice what we set out to accomplish. This work asks us to be fully present and allows us to be vulnerable alongside tutors.

STRATEGIES FOR BRINGING MINDFUL MENTORSHIP INTO WRITING CENTERS

Our work with mindfulness as “deliberate practice” in the WCC has taught us the importance of being aware—of our feelings, of our levels of stress, of what we're choosing to do or not do—and that recognizing our emotions can allow us to be more present in the moment. We acknowledge that this work is uncomfortable and requires willingness on behalf of faculty and tutors. However, we also recognize the fact that we're disrupting institutional structures. Any time we engage and disrupt those structures, things will be uncomfortable. Through this article, our aim is to set in motion different kinds of practices. People may not be used to doing this kind of work. Given that, as we experienced, these conversations

and practices are difficult, we conclude this article with strategies that, as leaders, we can share with those we mentor:

- Remember that mindfulness is a practice—something that takes time, effort, and attention.
- Establish healthy limits for personal and professional commitments, which includes prioritizing tasks and mindfully engaging with them. By being present, we can set small and realistic goals that can be accomplished on a daily and weekly level. Celebrate small successes and continue to modify *how* goals are accomplished—being flexible and resilient when things do not go as planned—rather than altering the actual goals.
- Encourage communication with tutors. If tutors feel comfortable expressing when they're overwhelmed, it is easier to more evenly distribute a center's workload.
- Share self-care goals with tutors and colleagues—both for support and to keep one another accountable. Rather than limiting mentee interactions to task assignments, take time in the day to ask others about their personal self-care dynamic, offering them a safe space to express their own joys and frustrations.
- Recognize that self-care and wellness work might not be appealing to all staff or center members; try to create a culture around these interventions that allows people options to opt-in and out.
- Schedule time for self-care. Remember that self-care looks different from person to person. Utilize downtime in the center or between sessions to practice meditation, desk yoga, or journaling.

Because mentorship is a crucial component of professional development (Clary-Lemon and Roen), we believe that as writing center leaders we have a responsibility to help our tutors cultivate a range of skills they can use in their professional and personal lives. Practicing mindfulness together has given us the opportunity to learn from one another and help keep each other accountable to our goals and supported through our struggles. As mentors, sustained mindfulness practice has helped us become more present when we listen, aware of what we're asking others to do, and understanding of the different ways that stress manifests and affects us all. Just as emotions "stick" as they move between bodies (Micciche), our intention is that by incorporating mindfulness in different ways in our centers, the practices (though they may look different for everyone) will also "stick," positively affecting the relationships we build with each other.



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