

Tutoring Begins with Breath: Guided Meditation and its Effects on Writing Consultant Training

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Preparing undergraduates for the role of writing center consultant must include more than writing center histories, theories, and flexible approaches. It's also important to recognize these students' and their peers' wellbeing and wellness needs. I learned this when I first taught a required tutor training course for undergraduates. The students became so intent on learning the 'right way' to tutor that their stress over other assignments increased. I witnessed this as I worked one-to-one with these students on their writing and keenly felt each student's writing anxieties.

This experience led me to consider mindfulness as a pedagogical resource. A regular meditator, I developed this practice during yoga teacher training. Mindfulness, I believed, would help me answer a key question: how could I best prepare consultants to help their peers in the writing center when they also experienced similar insecurities about their writing?

Mindfulness and wellness practices now provide the pedagogical foundations to my teaching and training of writing consultants. Helping writing consultants develop an awareness of their wellness needs will prepare them to help students with theirs. As Sarah Johnson describes, the common "multifaceted nature" of most writing center encounters demands that consultants learn strategies for handling the "multiple layers of stress and anxiety" that both consultant and client may bring to a session. Specifically, in two sections of the training course (spring and fall 2018), I incorporated guided meditation practices to help bring awareness to each student's need for wellness support. This type of mediation, Johnson notes, involves directed "observation [and] a nonjudgmental acknowledgment of one's internal or external surroundings" (28). Both observation and nonjudgmental attitudes are necessary abilities when working with others and their writing but are also valuable in establishing personal wellness. Writing consultant training, then, should help consultants develop strategies

to cope with stress to provide a more complete preparation for the work they will ultimately perform.

In this article, I will provide a review of literature that supports bridging writing center work with wellness and mindfulness practices. I'll discuss how I incorporated such practices into my training course. Finally, reflections written by students enrolled in the tutor training course, completed at the course's end, and published on their public blogs will demonstrate the personal benefits students perceived from participating in guided meditations and mindfulness practices. Meditative practices as a means to help with wellness initiatives have increased in a variety of realms, including government, corporate, and academic environments (Mack and Hupp). Despite this, I was hesitant to incorporate such practices into the training class, as I worried students would take the course less seriously. However, students report that a regular meditation practice has, overall, had a positive effect not only on them but also on the class's environment. As the students' course reflections will show, meditations are now a vital part of the class, an asset to student engagement and learning. Most importantly, these meditations have provided opportunities for students to consider their own wellness needs.

Mindfulness and wellness are practices an individual can use to improve their quality of life. Nicole Albrecht notes that mindfulness is understood as "'wellness-oriented' and a 'wellness intervention,'" and commonly focuses on "social, emotional, physical, spiritual and cognitive outcomes" (22). While mindfulness generally suggests "a way of 'being'" (21), and can be cultivated through a variety of practices, wellness more specifically encapsulates a series of unified behaviors that brings in the "whole being of the person—his body, mind, and his spirit" to expand an individual's potential (Halbert L. Dunn qtd. in Albrecht 23). In other words, mindfulness allows an individual to attend to their current state of being and asks them to develop an awareness of what they need in order to best meet their potential. Developing such self-awareness helps individuals to better achieve a state of wellness because they learn to consciously direct attention to their physical, mental, and/or spiritual needs and to address them. In the writing consultant training course, practicing wellness and meditation becomes beneficial for all students, even those who choose not to work in the writing center.

One of the more common ways for individuals to begin mindfulness practices is meditation. As Jared Featherstone et al. discuss in "The Mindful Tutor," instructors who wish to incorporate meditation into their classes should receive formal mindfulness training and have

a regular meditation practice. Training prepares the instructor for leading others in meditation and also provides ways for adapting mindfulness to a variety of needs and recognizing that not all mindfulness practices are appropriate for everyone. My training to run meditation with a group comes from my 200-hour yoga teacher training, in which I learned a variety of meditative and breathwork practices. In my training courses, I use a type of guided meditation in which practitioners sit comfortably, close their eyes, focus on their breathing, and direct their attention as noted by the meditation leader. A benefit of this type of meditation is that it's simple to perform for new practitioners. The verbal cues and directions, such as paying attention to what Featherstone calls an "anchor," like the breath, also keep a novice meditator focused.

In writing center studies, several examples demonstrate the ongoing relevance of contemplative practices to the field. Paul Gamache suggests focusing on the "deeper philosophical issues of tutoring" writing rather than just focusing on writing tutoring technique (2). Gamache draws on the Buddhist concept of the Eightfold Path and suggests that through personal reflections, writing center practitioners can develop the "right mind," which is "the first step toward developing 'right action'" (2). Though Gamache's methods of "critical self-examination" may help writing consultants form new knowledge about their own "motives, assumptions, purposes, and actions" (2), Jesse Kavadlo questions additional potential outcomes. Kavadlo believes that such "critical self-examination" can lead instead to "self-consciousness" that comes from "reticence and embarrassment" (10). Kavadlo offers an alternative: practice. Both the act of writing and the act of tutoring involve not only "exercise and performance, but also a whole way of living. [...] The obstacle to tutoring is tutoring. The path to tutoring [is] tutoring" (11). Viewed in this way, the practice of tutoring becomes thoughtful, contemplative. As an individual practices tutoring writing, that person builds more trust in themselves and their abilities. According to Kavadlo, this trust in one's abilities lessens doubts they may have. And when doubt lessens and belief in one's abilities increases, performance improves.

Gamache and Kavadlo establish the usefulness of understanding writing center work through a contemplative lens. Developing this lens should begin with consultants' training and preparation. The scholarship on such training is growing. Writing center coordinators like Katie Hupp have facilitated voluntary mindfulness training with meditation to great success, as she and consultant Elizabeth Mack discuss. Others, including Claire Kervin and Heather Barrett, have examined how mindfulness practices may help consultants work

with students who struggle with procrastination. Finally, Sarah Johnson believes that mindful meditation practices could be successfully incorporated into writing tutoring sessions themselves, thus “expand[ing] tutors’ affective roles by giving them the tools they need to use in a session to reduce students’ stress levels and then create the room that students need to write.” These scholars detail effective strategies for bringing mindfulness into writing center work. Featherstone et al. discuss the benefits of beginning that contemplative training into a classroom context. Featherstone and two consultants not only present how to make silent meditation part of a class, but they also discuss the metacognitive benefits these practices can have on both students’ writing and the tutoring of writing.

Not all writing centers, of course, have the opportunity to train their staff before they begin work, though many do offer on-the-job training or continued training, such as Mack and Hupp discuss. As these scholars demonstrate, though, all writing center practitioners could potentially benefit from bringing such practices into their centers’ daily operations or continued training. With this in mind, what follows is a brief description of how I incorporated guided mindfulness meditation into a 15-week consultant training course. This course is open to any student who meets the prerequisites, and many students take it to fulfill the required writing-intensive credit. Not all students who take it, then, work in the writing center. Despite this, incorporating formal mindfulness meditation is still a valuable exercise for these students as it develops a range of beneficial skills.

During the first class, I explain that each day will begin with five minutes of guided meditation. On the syllabus students see that one week is dedicated to reading scholars’ works that explore this issue. Most recently, I’ve assigned Gamache’s and Kavado’s essays. Additionally, I explain that mindfulness is an appropriate way of learning to be more patient, accepting, and understanding of oneself, and those same qualities are important for writing consultants as they will use them when working with their peers. I further explain that this meditation will not be a religious practice and will be voluntary, but if students choose not to participate, they will need to sit quietly during the meditation. As a means of further credentialing myself, I let students know that I have completed a 200-hour yoga teacher training and am trained to run guided meditations.

Next, I teach the students how we will meditate. Each class in which I’ve incorporated meditation has been different, but usually about a

third have meditated before. Few, less than five students total across two classes, have acknowledged practicing meditation regularly. The rest have never meditated. I explain that though there are many approaches to meditation, including walking meditation and transcendental meditation, we will use a form of guided meditation that I will lead them through. The first meditation lesson consists of the following:

1. *Demonstration of posture:* Sitting in a chair, I place my feet flat on the floor, underneath the knees, back straight, shoulders relaxed, and hands in a comfortable position on the knees. Students get into a similar position, and close their eyes, if comfortable.
2. *Focus on breathing:* I ask students to focus on the sensation of breathing.
3. *Disengaging with thoughts:* Finally, I prompt students to consciously return their attention to their breath instead of engaging with thoughts. Doing so keeps them focused on the present moment.

The first few weeks of class help students who are meditation novices learn to sit quietly and focus on the breath. Being able to do this is foundational for meditation, so starting slowly is vital to the success of their practice. I vary the prompts used to draw attention to their breathing, which may include:

- Guiding students to become aware of where their breath enters and exits the body. Do they feel the air around their nostrils or the top of their lips? Can they feel the breath expand the lungs and even the belly? This conscious breathing not only helps some students keep attention on this basic life function but also brings some into a deeper awareness of their body in the present moment.
- Controlling the breath through counting: inhaling for four counts, holding for two counts, exhaling for eight counts, and repeating.

I prefer to start with a focus on breath because, as renowned yoga teacher Donna Farhi explains, “the breath is always present, [and] we can use it as a means of anchoring the mind in that which is constant” (78). This is an effective way of bringing students into the practice with an easy-to-replicate model they can follow anywhere. In fact, I close such meditations by encouraging students to find time throughout their day to come back to their breath, like when they are standing in line for coffee. All these types of breath meditations help students begin to develop stamina for the practice.

After students learn to meditate with breath focus, the meditations

then ask them to concentrate on wellness-centered concepts. For example, one meditation asks students to learn to accept themselves for who they are at that present moment. Students repeat the mantra “I am” silently to themselves. I guide students by asking them to think “I” on the inhale and “am” on the exhale. By asking students to repeat, but not add to, this mantra, the guided meditation prompts them to consider who is seated in that chair. This meditation aims to help students develop acceptance of themselves, and prompts them, for the duration of the meditation at least, to drop expectations they may have of themselves. Another meditation that focuses on relieving anxiety directs students to imagine something causing them stress, like an upcoming test, as a cloud floating in the sky of their mind. As students exhale, the cloud/anxiety floats away, out of the students’ attention.

Regular meditation not only builds students’ abilities to sit silently and accept themselves but also allows them to take on the role of objective observer. Students observe but do not engage with certain experiences like their thoughts, the room’s temperature, the chairs in which they sit. Being an observer provides students first-hand experience of gaining a “moment-by-moment awareness” that allows them to develop both a sense for the “nature of things” and a “critical distance” needed for effective writing tutoring (Kavadlo 11). This will help them learn to identify issues pertaining to their own wellness needs and help them assist others in learning to recognize similar wellness concerns. And like Kavadlo says of writing tutoring, the more students meditate, the easier and more natural both practices become, as do the associated observations and reflections.

At the semester’s end, students write a reflection in their publicly-available class blogs. The reflection prompt reads: “Reflect on your semester of learning about tutoring: where you were at the beginning, where you are now, how you’ll apply what you’ve learned, etc.” Many students elect to discuss their experiences with meditation. Students earn points by completing the reflection post and are not graded on the post’s content, which is why I believe that those who discuss the meditations can present valuable evidence of the practice’s usefulness. Feedback from the fall 2018 class was overwhelmingly positive: out of twelve reflections completed, eight students discussed the meditations, and all eight not only enjoyed the meditations but also wrote about their perceived benefits. Several respondents discussed how the five minutes of guided meditations were a welcome break in their day. One student wrote:

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were my busiest days. [...] Most days, meditation was the first time in the day that I would

just sit down, relax, and take a breath. [...] I felt as though it was so beneficial for me and my mental health. It forced me to take a few minutes to myself and just focus on my breathing.

Other students also mentioned the perceived mental health benefits. One wrote that “I found myself to be more relaxed and less anxious. I was also able to calm myself down when I felt myself becoming stressed.” Another student explained, “There were some days where I personally felt overwhelmed and stressed with the upcoming due dates and other responsibilities where I wanted to throw in the towel. I was able to successfully use the mindfulness [...] to calm myself down so I could truly focus on what was ahead of me in a timely and chill fashion.” One student who had meditated frequently before class admitted that while at first they were skeptical of the in-class meditations, they came to appreciate this practice because the meditations “did a good job grounding the class each day and keeping the energy levels manageable.” Finally, another student simply said, “The guided meditations were always exactly what I didn’t know I needed.”

This last reflection is especially telling. As Gamache admits, he tries to give students “what they need, not what they *want*” (emphasis in original 3). The results from the meditations have been encouraging enough that my next step is to establish more regular practices for those students who work in the writing center, as part of continued training. Regular meditation has potential to be an appropriate complement to other practical and theoretical training for writing center work. What I discuss here are the preliminary results from a small study with limited participants. However, the results are promising and align with what other writing center practitioners have already discovered: meditation and mindfulness allow consultants to develop personal wellness. This, I believe, provides a foundation to improve their abilities to work with peer writers. When consultants learn to accept themselves as they are, they in turn may learn to accept their peers as they come to them. This state of mind will support wellness for both consultants and peers.



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