
Typesetting queries

1. The journal has a policy to include a competing interest statement in all published articles, to ensure transparency. Please could you provide a competing interest statement, or confirm that all authors of this article have no competing interests. Further information is available here: <https://www.openlibhums.org/site/competing-interests/>



Open Library of Humanities

Mindfulness in the College Classroom

Wendy Williams, Texas Christian University, w.s.williams@tcu.edu

This article reflects on my experience of studying the tea ceremony in Japan and how that experience has informed my teaching mindfulness to college students in the TCU Honors College.



“Otemae chōdai itashimasu” — “Thank you for making me tea.”

This was the first phrase I learned in Japanese after moving to Japan in 1996 to teach English at a private all-girls college. My neighbor Jill invited me to participate in a traditional tea ceremony just days upon my arrival, and I was eager to learn all I could about Japanese customs and traditions. The woman leading the ceremony was dressed in kimono with her jet-black hair fastened back with delicate ornaments. She welcomed Jill and me into the room, bowing repeatedly as she guided us to the bamboo tatami mat where she demonstrated the formal style of sitting on the floor in *seiza*, on one’s knees and heels. Once she settled us, she glided over to the tea setup and conducted a series of rituals. Using a long bamboo ladle, she poured boiling water into a beautiful ceramic bowl, emptied and wiped the bowl, added bright green powder and more hot water, and whisked the mixture. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She gracefully scooted over to me on her knees with the bowl of frothy green tea. She turned the bowl so the design faced me, put it on the floor between us, and bowed deeply. I bowed in return, took the tea, and recited the words I had memorized for the occasion: “Otemae chōdai itashimasu.” I drank the tea in three long, slow slurps and then turned the bowl back so that the design faced my host. She took the empty bowl and repeated the ritual for Jill and then for herself. The tea was thick, grassy, and bitter. My crumpled legs developed pins and needles after the hour-long ceremony. I didn’t understand a word. And I loved it. I returned weekly.

The tea ceremony provided my first experience of true stillness. As a raging extrovert who had begun her collection of graduate degrees amid an active social life, I was always busy with lists, appointments, meetings, happy hours, exams. Things to do. Things to do. More things to do. Once in Japan, learning a new language and culture were added to the already lengthy to-do list. But for one hour a week, I sat still, drank tea, and repeated the words I didn’t understand: “Otemae chōdai itashimasu.” After a few weeks, I noticed subtle shifts in awareness in my daily routines. I became aware of mundane activities I had done perfunctorily for years. When I washed my hands, I felt the warm water rush through my fingers. I felt my hands. My shoulders relaxed. My breathing slowed. I didn’t rush to the next thing on my list. I took longer than necessary to wash, to turn the soap over in my hands, to listen to the flowing water. I didn’t understand what I was experiencing at the time but later would realize I was experiencing mindfulness—living in the present moment.

I came to mindfulness as a practice during the pandemic. I was teaching an honors course on empathy to Texas Christian University (TCU) students in spring 2020. During spring break, the administration announced that we would not be returning to campus

but would hold classes for the rest of the semester via Zoom. Soon after class shifted to an online format, students began to struggle. A major component of the course involved service learning, and students were partnering with a local organization serving asylum seekers. Students expressed a sense of loss and guilt at not being able to meet their community partners in person. Since the community partners didn't have computers and most of us were new to Zoom, the service project and the relationships moved to the occasional phone call and eventually fizzled. Week by week, students seemed to disconnect from one another and disengage from the course content. We continued to discuss the assigned readings, but our tight-knit community and enthusiasm for learning and growing were no longer present in the same way.

I had more than the usual number of one-on-one conversations with students who were suffering from anxiety. One student explained that she had to turn off her webcam during class periodically because she was embarrassed for her peers to see her compulsive hair plucking. Another student sobbed for an hour about a B he had earned on a paper. One young man, I later learned, had a falling out with his father and ended up living in his car. I was used to responding to typical complaints about too much reading, fears about not getting the all-too-important A, and requests for accommodations. But it was clear that something more serious was going on. Without access to the students' lives beyond our class conversations, I wasn't sure how to help. The semester ended with a collective sigh, and students packed up their lives to live in lockdown for the unforeseeable future.

Over the summer, I considered ways to adapt the empathy class to address the students' changing needs. We were planning for another online semester in the fall, and I didn't feel that sending college students into the community was safe or ethical. To replace the service-learning assignment, I added a unit on self-compassion. I realized I would have to justify focusing a quarter of class on self-compassion in a course that was by definition supposed to be about thinking about other people, but I realized students couldn't consider other people when they were struggling with their own anxiety and personal COVID-19-related frustrations. Many had retreated into self-pity, perceiving their college experiences as ruined. Some were depressed. Others were living recklessly, going to COVID parties and refusing to wear masks even around their own at-risk relatives. Empathy sure was needed, and so was self-healing.

We read the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu's (2016) *The Book of Joy* and Kristin Neff's (2011) *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* in the fall 2020 empathy class. We did self-compassion and mindfulness exercises and discussed ways to achieve inner peace and joy. We were still, and we focused on ourselves in ways that were healing. We discovered that when we were able to give ourselves compassion,

we achieved a greater ability to feel compassion for others. The students reported a better sense of well-being as a result of this work, much of which involved mindfulness practice. I also felt better, calmer, more at peace.

The students' response and my own experience struck me as significant, and I considered how to include additional mindfulness content into my classes in a more formal way. After researching mindfulness certifications, I settled on Koru, a research-based mindfulness program developed at Duke University that was specifically created for college students.¹ Koru's structured curriculum, which includes introductory and advanced levels, provides a practical foundation for mindfulness education in higher education (Rogers 2016). Studies indicate that Koru is an effective intervention for reducing stress and enhancing well-being among college-aged adults, making it a viable option for student counseling centers and classroom implementation (Greeson et al. 2014).

In 2021, I began the year-long process of certification. The program was expensive and time-consuming, but the content and training were excellent. While learning how to practice and teach mindfulness that summer and fall, I created a course for the Honors College entitled Mindfulness for College Students and jumped through the many obligatory, bureaucratic hoops to get the course officially approved for teaching at the university.

I taught two sections of Mindfulness for College Students in spring 2022 to twenty-three students who responded enthusiastically. The community feeling and excitement for learning and personal growth returned to the classroom. The course balanced practice and theory. The course description read as follows:

In Mindfulness for College Students, students will learn about the mindfulness movement in America, differences between American and Asian approaches, the science of mindfulness, and the benefits of mindfulness for college students. Students will practice mindfulness skills through Koru Mindfulness, the evidence-based mindfulness curriculum designed specifically for college-aged adults. Through the study and practice of Koru, students will learn to develop a non-judgmental, accepting, and curious attitude about their moment-to-moment experiences thereby feeling less overwhelmed by the challenges of life.

¹ Editor's note: Since the article was submitted, Koru changed its name to the Mindfulness Institute for Emerging Adults (MIEA). See: <https://mindfulnessinstituteforemergingadults.com>.

Class was held on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We devoted Tuesdays to practicing mindfulness with Koru Basic and Koru 2.0, the introductory and advanced classes. On Thursdays, we studied the theory of mindfulness. We read Holly Rogers's (2016) *The Mindful Twenty-Something*, Sharon Salzberg's (2011) *Real Happiness*, and Jeff Wilson's (2014) *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, and we learned key concepts such as judging thoughts, observing mind versus thinking mind, finding balance, and acceptance as a means of reducing suffering. We practiced a variety of meditation techniques such as breath awareness, belly breathing, dynamic breathing (active breathing to energize the body), body scan, walking meditation, *gatha* (meditation poem), guided imagery, labeling thoughts, labeling feelings, eating meditation, and loving-kindness.

I conducted an anonymous Google Forms survey midway through the semester, after completing Koru Basic and before beginning Koru 2.0, to see how students were responding to the mindfulness practice. I asked three questions: "What part of the class was most meaningful to you?" "As a result of this class, what will you do differently in your life?" and "Is there anything you would have changed or added?" All twenty-three students responded to the survey. In response to the third question, students offered some minor suggestions such as more reminders, shorter readings, and changes to the Koru app. However, the majority (thirteen respondents) said they would not change the course. Some responses were: "I don't think there's anything I would have changed or added. I enjoyed how it was set up," "No, I think it was structured perfectly!" and "No. Keep this class the exact same; it's amazing." Therefore, I will focus on students' responses to the first two questions: "What part of the class was most meaningful to you?" and "As a result of this class, what will you do differently in your life?"

In response to the question "What part of the class was most meaningful to you?" students responded that they enjoyed slowing down, being open about thoughts and feelings, sharing stories, the positive impact the class has made on their lives, discussing and applying readings, encouragement to practice, the nonjudgmental aspect of class, and learning the content of the course.

Two responses were repeated a number of times. One related to increased awareness of thoughts and feelings. One student said the most meaningful aspect of class was "being open and honest about our thoughts and feelings. I feel like I really needed a class like this with all the events that are happening and have happened in the past." Another commented, "Koru Basic increased my awareness and allowed me to better understand myself and my feelings." Another stated, "I really like how this class has shown me how to slow down and be in tune with how I am feeling and being able to label those feelings. It has been fun to try all the different kinds (Walking, Dynamic

Breathing, Gatha, Body Scan). I feel like these are kinds of meditation I never would have tried on my own. Having a whole class dedicated to actually practicing meditation has been really useful to being able to understand the benefits.” One said, “The parts where the reading focused on emotions and feelings was most meaningful to me. Though I struggle with the actual meditations, I thought there [were] valuable personal skills being discussed that could be easily applied to one’s life once brought to their awareness.” Another student said, “Learning more about myself and learning how to better manage my thoughts and emotions when they become overwhelming.”

Another response that was repeated related to the community aspect of practicing mindfulness in class. One student wrote, “I liked talking about the meditations and then practicing them all together, then discussing how each of us felt. It was nice to hear that some people would experience their meditations similar to myself.” Another explained, “I also really enjoyed hearing how everyone related to the reading and how their life experiences and background [have] shaped their view of meditation and other topics discussed.” One said, “The in-class meditations where I could [hear] the feedback and advice from the students around me.” Finally, one student wrote, “Practicing in the group setting made it easier for me to meditate on my own. Knowing that everyone in my class [was] also doing it and hearing about their struggles made my journey more valid in my mind.”

The second question on the survey was, “As a result of this class, what will you do differently in your life?” The responses were noteworthy enough to relay them in full:

I will be more mindful with everyday things that I do.

Open up [about] my feelings because sometimes I feel like I cannot talk about them, but this is a good way to talk to myself about my feelings.

I will be able to approach tough situations in life more mindfully and handle stress/ anxiety in a better way.

I definitely find the meditations helpful when I find myself getting worked up about things. Especially before a test, realizing that there’s nothing else I can do except be present.

I will definitely continue to meditate more often after this course and remember to approach situations and others in a mindful manner. Even already I feel way more calm even [though] I do not log [time meditating] as much [as I would like,] I find it easier to let things go and just enjoy the good things.

I will try to put the skills we talked about and learned through Koru into my everyday life. Labeling feelings and thoughts would be helpful whenever my mind is going a million miles per hour.

As a result, I have recommended mindfulness practices to my friends, and, now, if I am feeling stressed and full of judgement, I can become mindful, label those thoughts, and become a more positive person.

I am more mindful of my emotions/aware of how I am feeling. This is helpful in life because I am less likely to explode in rage if I am constantly in tune with my emotions. This varies from driving/parking [situations] to being stressed out about an assignment and not even realizing I am stressed and accidentally taking it out on friends. After being in this class for half a semester almost I have noticed changes how I feel internally which affects my actions externally.

I learn to slow down when I am feeling extremely anxious and stressed. It has helped me to not be as hard on myself academically and focus more on my growth as a person.

I think one thing I will try to do that I learned from Koru is just to be more mindful in [the] present in my daily life. Simple things like walking to class or driving around can often be 'busy' activities because I'm listening to music or talking on the phone or on social media. I think by being more present and aware of my surroundings I'll generate more happiness and feel like my life is more fulfilling.

I think I will incorporate some type of mindfulness into my life after this class. I really like it to help me go to sleep, so I could see myself meditating going forward before bed.

Practice mindfulness on the go: driving, working out, eating, etc.

I have a more positive outlook on life. I take more moments to enjoy the little things.

I am using imagery meditation to help me fall asleep.

I want to continue practicing mindfulness! I also want to continue writing down things I am grateful for.

I will incorporate mindfulness into my daily routine (meditating in my car before class).

One thing I will do is give new activities or experiences more tries. One thing this book emphasizes is to try the techniques a few times to truly learn how you feel about them. I think that is important.

I will make an effort to more mindfully and thoughtfully engage in the activities I do every day.

I definitely want to make meditation a habit from now on and commit myself to at least doing a few minutes daily.

I consider things a lot differently now. I am more open minded and less judgmental with myself and others.

Think more positively. Instead of learning from criticizing yourself [for] what you do wrong, think of what you've done right and try to keep doing it.

I have noticed that I'm more present, and I have also started getting up to go for a walking meditation in the early mornings. I look forward to waking up to walk instead of dreading getting out of bed in the morning :)

I may not meditate every day, but when I am feeling stressed out or need a refreshing moment or need to center myself, I will definitely rely on these practices.

These survey results collectively indicate that a significant number of students who had been feeling disconnected and anxious were increasingly feeling more aware of their thoughts and feelings, more connected to others, more fulfilled and optimistic, and more intentional with their mind states and actions as a result of mindfulness practice. Clearly, mindfulness was making a positive difference in the classroom.

To determine whether students continued to see results, I surveyed them again five months after the class ended. I asked two questions: "In what ways have you continued to implement the mindfulness skills/knowledge you acquired in our class?" and "What challenges/barriers have you encountered regarding your mindfulness practice?" Predictably, students said they struggled with busy schedules. Finding time to meditate without regular reminders in the classroom made keeping a regular practice more challenging. Several said they practiced less than they had during the semester but still did find time. One student remarked, "I have tried to never carry shame or guilt about sometimes not finding or making the time, and that's actually created space for me to invest more time in mindfulness."

Despite these challenges, several students noted that they had successfully incorporated mindfulness into their daily routines. One used the mindfulness feature on their watch to remind them to apply the exercises learned in class "to keep myself mentally healthy." Another noted, "I have continued to make an effort to be mindful about my breath as I go throughout my day. Deep breaths have helped me so much when I need to focus or am feeling stressed or overwhelmed. I also use mindfulness skills when I am working out. Some of the techniques we learned in class . . . have helped me clear my mind and have helped me run for longer amounts of time."

Others found mindfulness particularly useful for managing stress, test anxiety, and strong emotions, with one student remarking, "I also feel like I have a new perspective on how to react to stressors in my life." Another described finding "peace in the midst

of college craziness.” A student who struggled with test anxiety reported a newfound ability to stay calm and perform well: “Before tests, I used to get very nervous and would fill my mind with negative thoughts. However, I now have tools such as mindful walking, breath awareness, and body scans to help me calm my nerves and perform better. I have applied these learning tools to various aspects of my life and I am grateful that I was able to develop these skills.” Collectively, students reported less stress, less anxiety, greater focus, better sleep, and improved mood with continued practice.

Beyond stress reduction, student responses also demonstrated a growing capacity for metacognition—the ability to observe and reflect on thoughts without immediately reacting to them. One student described the most meaningful aspect of the class as “being open and honest about our thoughts and feelings. I feel like I really needed a class like this with all the events that are happening and have happened in the past.” Another noted, “Koru Basic increased my awareness and allowed me to better understand myself and my feelings.” These reflections align with research demonstrating that structured programs like Koru support stress reduction and overall well-being among college students. A 2014 randomized controlled trial conducted by researchers at Duke University assessed Koru’s effectiveness in improving mental health in college-aged adults. Their findings, published in the *Journal of American College Health*, concluded that Koru is a “viable intervention for student counseling centers and other agencies that seek to provide cost-effective, low-stigma interventions for students suffering from unmanageable levels of stress” (Greeson et al. 2014, 231).

These findings also align with student reflections, suggesting that structured mindfulness programs equip college students with effective tools for managing academic and personal challenges. Indeed, psychological research on mindfulness indicates that regular meditation enhances emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility, allowing individuals to respond to stress with greater awareness rather than automatic reactions (Zou et al. 2020). Through mindfulness exercises, students were not only engaging in self-reflection but also developing tools to navigate challenges more effectively. Additional studies on mindfulness-based interventions in education reinforce these conclusions, showing that such programs contribute to improved mental health and overall student well-being (Pan et al. 2024).

As noted elsewhere in this special issue, the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, in partnership with the University of Virginia and Pennsylvania State University, developed The Art and Science of Human Flourishing (ASHF), a course now offered at TCU. Designed for first-year students, ASHF is part of the University of Wisconsin’s Student Flourishing Initiative, which addresses rising mental health concerns in higher education, noting that “between a quarter and a third of students

will experience a mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression” (CHM, n.d.). The course integrates scientific research on well-being with contemplative practices, providing students with both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies for cultivating mental health and resilience so that they can flourish throughout college and beyond. Research has shown that courses like ASHF, which blend academic study with experiential learning, contribute to measurable improvements in student flourishing (Hirshberg et al. 2022). Collectively, mindfulness programs and college courses such as Koru and ASHF offer effective approaches for incorporating mindfulness into higher education, equipping students with skills to support academic success, emotional regulation, and personal growth.

These findings also suggest that while structured programs like my class help students develop mindfulness habits, long-term engagement depends on integrating mindfulness into daily life. The research noted above suggests that adaptability is a key factor—students who incorporate mindfulness seamlessly into everyday activities, such as mindful breathing, eating, walking, or pausing to check in with their emotions, are more likely to sustain their practice. The reflections from my students reinforce this point: those who had internalized mindfulness as a flexible, on-the-go practice were better able to maintain it over time.

Like my students, I find it difficult to carve out time from my busy day to meditate. I am teaching three courses, raising two children, carpooling, cooking, grocery shopping, maintaining social connections, exercising, and writing. I do not have time to sit on a pillow on the floor to meditate for an hour every day. I am cooking dinner, grading essays, and chasing my kids to get them to do chores or homework or go to bed. In this regard, I relate well to the students who are overwhelmed by their daily to-do list. Like them, I also find regular moments in the blur of the daily rush to pause, to breathe, and to sink into a mindful minute. When I recognize my teeth are clenched, I take a deep breath and release the tension with the exhale. When I’m lying on my yoga mat in the final resting position, I sink into the floor, and I observe thoughts pass by like ripples in a flowing river. These moments are fortifying.

As I write this essay, I am sipping a cup of tea. My right shoulder is tense from typing, and the action of reaching for my cup, sipping, and noticing the taste of the tea and the feel of the hot liquid reminds me to release my right shoulder and pause. This tea-drinking ritual that began in 1996 at the tea ceremony I attended weekly in Japan serves as a daily reminder of the benefit and joy that come with noticing. I’m grateful for the tea ceremony experience that served as the catalyst for a journey that has brought me an opportunity to learn and practice mindfulness with my students. I look forward to continuing the journey and discovering where the path leads next.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

CHM (Center for Healthy Minds). n.d. "The Student Flourishing Initiative." University of Wisconsin-Madison. Accessed May 13, 2025. <https://centerhealthyinds.org/science/studies/contemplative-universities-alliance>.

Dalai Lama [Tenzin Gyatso] and Desmond Tutu. 2016. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. Avery.

Greeson, Jeffrey M., Michael K. Juberg, Margaret Maytan, Kiera James, and Holly Rogers. 2014. "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Koru: A Mindfulness Program for College Students and Other Emerging Adults." *Journal of American College Health* 62 (4): 222–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2014.887571>.

Hirshberg, Matthew J., Blake A. Colaianne, Mark T. Greenberg, et al. 2022. "Can the Academic and Experiential Study of Flourishing Improve Flourishing in College Students? A Multi-University Study." *Mindfulness* 13:2243–56.

Neff, Kristin. 2011. *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. HarperCollins.

Pan, Yuanqing, Fusen Li, Haiqian Liang, et al. 2024. "Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on Mental Health and Psychological Quality of Life among University Students: A GRADE-Assessed Systematic Review." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2024:8872685.

Rogers, Holly B. 2016. *The Mindful Twenty-Something: Life Skills to Handle Stress . . . and Everything Else*. New Harbinger Publications.

Salzberg, Sharon. 2011. *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*. Workman Publishing.

Wilson, Jeff. 2014. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. Oxford University Press.

Zou, Yinming, Ping Li, Stefan G. Hoffman, and Xinghua Liu. 2020. "The Mediating Role of Non-Reactivity in Mindfulness Training and Its Effect on Cognitive Flexibility: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Frontiers in Psychology* 11:1053. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01053>.

