

# Bringing Mindfulness into the Classroom: A Personal Journey

Richard C. Reuben

I have to confess that I was not a very good teacher when I began my career, at least not in my mind. Oh, I wanted to be, very much so, in some respects to honor the many teachers who so profoundly influenced my life. But while I was good enough to pass muster for tenure purposes, as hard as I tried, I simply wasn't as good as I wanted to be.

Then, about halfway through my first decade of teaching, I had the good fortune of meeting Paula Franzese, a professor of property at Seton Hall Law School, at an Association of American Law Schools conference in San Francisco. I was immediately struck by her warmth, kindness and genuine sense of interest in me, a total stranger. Even though we came from different scholarly traditions—she writes about property and I write about conflict and conflict resolution—we bonded over experiential learning and decided to eat together at the AALS luncheon the next day to talk about it.

I later mentioned how impressed I was with Paula to a colleague of mine who teaches property, and he told me just who she is: she is a respected property casebook author and scholar, a leader in the AALS Section on Teaching Methods, a star on the Bar Bri circuit, and, at the time, a seven-time winner of Seton Hall's teaching award. She is now up to nine.<sup>1</sup> All I could think was “wow.”

So at lunch the next day I asked her what makes her such a decorated teacher. “I try to make it meaningful to them,” she said, in words that continue to resonate with me to this day. While the advice wasn't particularly novel

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1. See [http://law.shu.edu/Faculty/fulltime\\_faculty/Paula-Franzese.cfm](http://law.shu.edu/Faculty/fulltime_faculty/Paula-Franzese.cfm).

or profound, there was something about the way she said it that was deeply moving.

Looking back, I can see that Paula's gifts also include great awareness of the present moment, as well as an open and caring heart and a sense of receptivity that allows her to learn something from others, including her students. These are qualities that I sought in my teaching, because they facilitate a unique connection between teacher and student(s) that allows for intense transmission of knowledge, experience, values and—for lack of a better term—humanity.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, you don't need this kind of connection with students to be an effective, well-respected teacher (think Kingsfield from *The Paper Chase*). But I was looking for something different in my teaching than that, something richer and more fulfilling.

These qualities are innate in some, perhaps in Paula, but certainly not in me. Yet as I thought about it after meeting her, I came to realize that they were consistent with some of the virtues of my daily mindfulness meditation practice, and I resolved to explore this connection. Now, about three years into my personal experiment, I can say with great confidence that bringing mindfulness into the classroom cultivated these qualities of openness and receptivity, clarity, courage and compassion—and wholly transformed my teaching.

Before discussing each of these qualities, I want to take just a moment to be clear about what I mean by mindfulness. While there are many approaches,<sup>3</sup> most would agree that it is essentially a form of non-judgmental awareness of what is happening in the present that in turn fosters insight into how we relate to it and, ultimately, improves our ability to live our lives more effectively, happily, and authentically. This is challenging for many of us, since it seems much easier to think about the past or the future than what is happening in the present.<sup>4</sup>

Mindfulness is often cultivated through meditation. Like many others, my practice uses the breath as the object of meditation, providing a baseline from which to observe the external and internal distractions that lead my mind to wander away from the breath. When I recognize it has wandered, I simply let

2. For a discussion of this connection, see Deborah Schoeberlein, *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness* 71–80 (Wisdom Publ. 2009).
3. Compare, e.g., Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness in Everyday Life* 3–7 (Hyperion 1994) with Venerable Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* 149–58 (Wisdom Pub. 1992). See generally Ellen J. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning* 111 (Addison-Wesley 1997) (describing characteristics of mindfulness that Professor Riskin has described as reflecting a “thinking” approach rather than the observational approach that both Kabat-Zinn and Gunaratana suggest). See Leonard L. Riskin, *Further Beyond Reason: Emotions, the Core Concerns, and Mindfulness in Negotiation*, 10 Nev. L. J. 289, 308 n.90 (2010).
4. For a neurological explanation of the power of the past to control the mind, see Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight* 147–55 (Bantam Books 2010).

go of the distraction and focus again on my breath, without judgment, blame or criticism.

This, of course, is easier said than done. But when practiced again and again, it opens the door to a lifetime of learning, especially about our inner landscapes. Among other things, mindfulness teaches us how to work with distractions, and how to be open to whatever comes up in meditation—good or bad—with non-judgment and equanimity. Remarkably, as we engage in the practice, our minds subtly develop the capacity to be more aware of what is going on in the present instead of resisting it, or being captured by thoughts of the past or future, cravings or aversions, or other unhealthy states of mind. As this capacity increases, both within formal meditation and out in our daily lives, so does our ability to work effectively with what is going on in the moment, whatever that may be. It is these skills and capacities that made possible my own personal transformation in the classroom through greater openness, receptivity, courage, and compassion.

### **Openness and Receptivity**

In the classroom, I have found that mindfulness gives me the ability to let go of myself and the chatter in my head so that I can communicate with students where they are, rather than from where I am.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, perhaps, it allows me to direct my energy outward rather than inward, in turn permitting me to open up to my students and connect with them deeply and sincerely in the present moment.

In this way, mindfulness creates a transcendent presence in the classroom that facilitates more than mere pedagogy. Words are important but by themselves are inadequate to establish the kind of relationship with the class that I sought as a vehicle for better teaching and learning. Indeed, it is this deep connection that allows the teacher to choose words that will be most effective in communicating substantive content—words that will resonate with the students because they are meaningful to them.

Let me give you an example. In Administrative Law, I teach separation of powers issues as a foundation for statutory issues. One of the challenges students have with administrative law material is that it blends these different sources of authority, and the relationship between them can be flummoxing.

Facing this problem in a recent class, I carefully explained that the separation of powers and other constitutional issues were crucial to any understanding of administrative law, but that in the real world of law practice the focus tends to be on statutory issues. I could feel them wondering why we had just spent three weeks on constitutional issues so I explained that statutory issues can give rise to constitutional issues. It didn't help. Confusion—perhaps terror—dominated the mood of the classroom. The students really weren't getting it. In the past in these circumstances, I might have told them that they would see what I meant sooner or later and bulled ahead. But this time, I paused in the

5. For a general discussion of the benefits for teachers, see Schoeberlein, *supra* note 2, at 9.

moment and, remembering Paula's advice, tried to conjure up some other way to explain it in words and concepts they would understand.

Then it came to me: *Family Guy*! Surely they watched *Family Guy*, a popular animated TV show featuring a family that includes a 'tween boy, Chris, who believes there is an Evil Monkey in his closet. As any regular watcher of the show knows, whenever the Evil Monkey is mentioned in an episode, it will immediately emerge from Chris's closet with a toothy, fearsome expression, pointing a menacing finger at its object of wrath. The students were perfectly attuned to the analogy. They erupted in laughter as I teased it out. Just as most of *Family Guy* takes place without any thought of the Evil Monkey, we all know it's there and can come out to bite you whenever its name is called. So too with separation of powers and related constitutional issues in administrative law. Most of the practice takes place without much consideration of constitutional issues, although we all need to know they are there and that they can come out and bite you if you don't take due care. We all laughed heartily. Many of them pointed fingers and did the Evil Monkey grimace. Every one of them got it, probably for good.

This quick and creative thinking was only possible because I was working with what was happening in the present moment rather than fighting it.<sup>6</sup> In that crucial moment, I could feel their confusion, their concern, their fear. Because I had let go of myself and directed my energy outward to them rather than inward to myself, I did not take their confusion with defensiveness, frustration or exasperation. Rather, I took it as a teaching challenge for that moment. It was about them, not about me.

Importantly too, the mindfulness practice had trained me to be comfortable with silence and intense emotions so I was able to take a moment to think creatively about what might get the point across. With that presence and clarity of mind, I was able to scan my memory and identify an analogy that would work. Finally, I cast aside any pretense of scholarly polish and conveyed the idea in a way that was meaningful to them. There is nothing scholarly or polished about *Family Guy*, to be sure.

This was a great learning moment for them and for me. Not only did they come to understand a difficult and important concept but they connected with me and with each other in a way that facilitated better teaching and learning throughout the rest of the semester. They began to work harder in the course, in part because they knew that they could understand difficult concepts and that I was committed to helping them do that. By my actions in the moment, they could see that I cared about their learning and that made them care more about their learning, too. Mindfulness in the classroom is contagious.

6. You might say, any good and nimble teacher could have done that. And that is precisely my point: For those of us who may not be "natural teachers," mindfulness can be extraordinarily helpful in opening the door to effectiveness.

### Clarity

While mindfulness can create this kind of magic in the classroom, it also can be helpful in preparing for class.

First, mindfulness gives a teacher the focus to set the intention to be clear in class presentations. This may not seem like much at first, but the power of intention is as strong as it is subtle. By affirmatively intending to be clear, we commit to the task of really thinking about how to present class materials, to the honesty necessary to assess whether it is working and to the flexibility necessary to make changes in the middle of the course, as I did with the *Family Guy* analogy.

Beyond this basic intention, however, mindfulness brings a different dimension to preparation because it compels us to look at the material through our students' eyes and ask what is required of the teacher. What questions, analogies, social context references, personal stories and other teaching techniques will make the material meaningful to them? How much detail is really necessary to get students to understand what we most want them to know? How necessary is it, really, to slay the beast of coverage to give them a deep, meaningful, and lasting understanding of the material? Clear intention forces us to ask ourselves such questions, and reminds us that the purpose of teaching is to help students learn, not to demonstrate our brilliance in triumphant mastery of the material and all of its many nuances, as fun as that may be.

I recently taught Conflict and Conflict Management to a relatively large class of 30 students. The class was chatty but in a focused rather than distracted way. The students seemed to delight in exploring the intricacies that other classes would just blow through. For example, one critical distinction is between conflict and disputes. As I teach it, conflict is the underlying clash of interests and aspirations, real or perceived, between parties and disputes are the immediate manifestations of those conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the distinction is clear, other times less so. A dispute between two spouses over where to go to dinner may indeed reflect transient preferences for steak or fish, but it also might be the immediate manifestation of conflict over power and role in the relationship.<sup>8</sup>

The distinction intrigued the class, as many students spoke, examining it in light of their own experiences. The questions they raised were stimulating for all of us and we ended up running well past a scheduled break, which was especially remarkable because it was a night class. This happened frequently, as the class explored similar issues. We soon ended up well behind our

7. See Dean G. Pruitt, Jeffrey Z. Rubin & Sung Hee Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement* 7-9 (McGraw Hill, 3d ed. 2004).

8. For further exploration of this distinction, see Leonard L. Riskin, Chris Guthrie, Jennifer K. Robbenolt, Richard C. Reuben & Nancy A. Welsh, *Dispute Resolution and Lawyers* 9-13 (West, 4th ed. 2009); Richard C. Reuben, *The Impact of News Coverage on Conflict: Toward Greater Understanding*, 93 Marq. L. Rev. 45, 49-50 (2009).

schedule and I found myself looking the beast of coverage in the eye. The choice was simple: Do I cut off discussion and cover everything I had planned or do I continue at a slower pace and allow the class to absorb the material more intensely? I chose the latter option on the theory that the students had a better chance of actually internalizing the teachings if they had less material but understood it more deeply. Sometimes less is more.

I admit I had the luxury of making this choice because it was not a “bar course.” But bar courses, such as Administrative Law in Missouri, also present similar questions and opportunities. Some areas can be plumbed to seemingly infinite depth but is that really necessary for students to understand what they need to know about it? Indeed, are there times that depth can actually hinder rather than foster student understanding? Mindfulness may not answer such questions for us but the clarity it brings to our task and intentions compels us to consider such questions and helps answer them by putting us in closer touch with where these students are at a particular moment and illuminating what is most appropriate in that moment.

### Courage

*Family Guy* moments and wrestling with course coverage require more than clarity, though. They also require courage—the courage to be open to the moment from the start, plus the courage (and honesty) to acknowledge what is not working, as well as the courage to reach far outside even our mindful preparation to achieve real teaching.<sup>9</sup>

Like many law professors, I relied heavily on notes during my first years in teaching. I believed this was necessary to make sure I got everything right, yet felt frustrated about it because I knew the classroom teachers I most admired taught free-style—without notes. Their understanding of the material seemed to emanate from their very being.

As I worked on integrating mindfulness into my teaching, I finally resolved to peel back my grip on the security of my notes and to go free-style.<sup>10</sup> Rather than intensely reviewing notes before class, I began to simply look over the assigned materials casually, and to think about where the students were and what points I really wanted them to understand and how to make the material meaningful to them. This was difficult at first and I would mindfully watch my panic rising as I deliberately refused to print out my notes and saw the clock moving with all deliberate speed toward class time. But I also watched the fear disappear as I let go of my panic, brought my attention back to my

9. For a classic discussion of the role of courage and self-awareness in teaching, see Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass 1998).

10. Professor Riskin demonstrates how mindfulness can be used similarly to let go of emotions and other obstacles to working with Fisher and Shapiro's “core concerns” in negotiation: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and role. See Riskin, *supra* note 3, at 308–25. See also Roger Fisher & Daniel Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* 15–18 (Viking Adult, 1st ed. 2005).



breath for a few moments, and returned to the task of thinking about the class. Walking to class, too, I observed my feet as they touched the floor one step at a time, allowing me to let go even of this form of preparation and grounding me further in the present moment.<sup>11</sup> By the time I entered the room, I would be pretty open to whatever was there—student banter to join, technology to manhandle, materials to distribute and so on.

What before had seemed distant and frightful, now seemed close, tangible and, well, fun. Having let go of fear and opened to the moment, I was finally connecting with students in the deep and meaningful way that I had been seeking.<sup>12</sup>

The whole feel of the classroom was different. Rather than bringing all of my material and plans and expectations into the room, I was working with what was already there, shaping the discussion and supplementing it with what my students needed to know from the course materials and my own experience, working with their questions to clarify and elaborate and helping them to identify and grapple honestly and rigorously with difficult issues.

This strong connection began to extend my teaching beyond the classroom in unexpected ways. Students felt more comfortable stopping by to ask for help—with difficult class material as well as life issues—and I felt more comfortable giving advice, as well as more courageous giving criticism when necessary. In my Election Law class, for example, I had a very bright female student who had a terrific knack for the material, but a bad habit of lowering the volume of her voice as she spoke so that I often had to ask her to repeat what she was saying. After much consideration, I decided to talk to her about it.

Standing in the hall one day after class, I told her that I thought she was doing great in the class but that she really needed to be more forceful and confident in her speech or she was going to undermine her own credibility when she went into practice. And I also told her that she was going to be too good a lawyer to let that happen. When she admitted feeling a little uncomfortable talking in class, I told her that probably reflected a story she was telling herself and that she really needed to let go of that story. I also suggested that she use her time in my class to notice that feeling of fear or awkwardness as it arose while she was talking and to simply let it go and keep on talking. She worked on it for the rest of the course. By the time she was in my Administrative Law class the next semester, she was speaking fully, clearly, confidently and effectively.

In earlier years, I never would have had the courage for this kind of conversation with a student. I probably would have dismissed the idea as beyond my role as a teacher. Through mindfulness, however, I have come to

11. This is a form of walking meditation. For more on this practice, see Jean Smith, *Breath Sweeps Mind: A First Guide to Meditation Practice* 166–76 (Riverhead Trade 1998).

12. For a detailed and eloquent treatment of the experience of letting go of fear, see Jan Frazier, *When Fear Falls Away* (Weiser Books 2007).

realize that engaging in such a conversation sometimes is the essence of my role as a teacher—with the right student, in the right circumstance, with the right intention, in the right way, in the right moment. If this student did not hear this from a law school professor, who would she hear it from? If she did not work on this problem during law school, where the stakes are relatively low, when would she work on it? If she did not address the issue, what would be the consequences for her career, her life and all of those it touched? It was the right thing to do, but doing it took courage, care and compassion.

### **Compassion**

Feelings like compassion are rarely discussed in the cold confines of law school. Yet the important words I spoke to my election law student would be hard to hear coming from anyone, much less a law professor. And those words needed to be delivered with understanding and compassion.

Mindfulness fosters a sense of compassion that can help us strike a balance between the toughness and tenderness that the law requires on a daily basis.<sup>13</sup> In formal mindfulness practice, we learn that we are not alone in being besieged by judgments, attributions, criticisms and other forms of grasping aversion, and this understanding helps open the heart's endless reserve of compassion for ourselves and for others. As we bring mindfulness to our teaching, we begin to see students as people—not just names and faces on a seating chart—people in the middle of what may be the most wrenching, demanding and maybe exciting times of their lives. We see their efforts and struggles, their successes and failures, their hopes and reality.

Observing this mindfully opens the heart and gives us the capacity to see, accept and be with our students where they are, as they are. Like snowflakes, they are all different and most will have only a transient presence in our lives. For some professors, this is reason alone not to get “too involved” with students. Mindfulness leads us the other way, though, and allows us to relate to the student as a human being, and to take the incredibly precious opportunity we have to work with students, one on one, and in doing so, to help shape the next generation of lawyers, one lawyer at a time.

### **Conclusion**

Some people are “born teachers.” Then there are the rest of us. Being blessed with good teachers and mentors during my life, I entered the academy with a strong desire to be a teacher who not only communicated but also engaged, challenged and inspired. I learned all too quickly how far I had to go. And despite the deployment of a wide variety of teaching strategies, methods and tricks, it wasn't until I brought my mindfulness practice into the classroom that I began to feel the connection with my students that would allow me

13. For a more detailed understanding of compassion from a Western perspective, see Richard Lazarus & Bernice Lazarus, *Passion and Reason* 116–38 (Oxford Univ. Press 1994). For an Eastern Perspective, see Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* 102–18 (Shambhala 1997).



to grow into the teacher I always wanted to be. I do not think I am fully there yet, but I am well on my way. More importantly, my students seem to be learning more and I seem to be more fulfilled as a teacher. This is the gift that mindfulness can bring to all of us in the classroom.