

MINDFUL TUTORS, EMBODIED WRITERS: POSITIONING MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AS A WRITING STRATEGY TO OPTIMIZE COGNITIVE LOAD AND POTENTIALIZE WRITING CENTER TUTORS' SUPPORTIVE ROLES

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the potential that mindfulness meditation has to re-frame and expand the affective, supportive roles of writing center tutors. I argue that those of us working in writing centers can fully potentialize a tutor's affective, supportive role and optimize a student's cognitive load by incorporating mindfulness meditation as a stress-reducing strategy into writing center practices. Using Cognitive Load Theory as a lens, I establish how we might expand our understanding of the available mental space that tutors and tutees have to work, write, and learn in writing center sessions. Because mindfulness meditation has numerous cognitive benefits, I position that practice as a writing and stress-reducing strategy that both tutors and tutees can use during and after their writing center sessions.

Introduction

As a graduate writing center tutor, you enter the writing center two weeks before the end of the semester and see that you have three sessions in the next three hours. Even though it's only 1 p.m., you feel like it's close to midnight because of all the work you've already done—you had two meetings this morning, started one of the two scholarly articles due in one week, and only had time to eat an energy bar for lunch. Your first student walks into the center, and she seems distraught—her eyebrows are furrowed and her smile is uneasy. As you start the session with her, you dive right into her paper because she wants to get through as much of the ten pages she's written as possible. In addition, her paper is due tomorrow, and she explains that she is nervous about submitting a paper this large (she discloses that she's a freshman and has never written anything longer than five pages). Halfway through the session, she says that she can see how she might revise this paper, but she's feeling a lot of pressure with all of her other projects, and she's not confident that this paper will even earn a C. As she adds this last detail, her eyes start to water. She quickly regains her composure, however, and while you manage to finish the session, you leave it even more stressed than before.

Although I have edited some of the details above, I have experienced the majority of the interactions and pressure(s) in this scenario as a writing center tutor. Whether we, as tutors, scholars, or directors in writing centers, have experienced this scenario firsthand or heard about it from other tutors, we cannot deny the multifaceted nature of this encounter as we situate it within writing center scholarship. This interaction is

filled with multiple layers of stress and anxiety that both tutor and tutee brought with them into the session. In their article about student stress and mindfulness meditation, Annie Shearer et al. claim that academic pressure coupled with the perception of inadequate time for study, leisure activities, and rest are significant stressors that contribute substantially to subjective stress (tension, anxiety, autonomic arousal) and strain, such as psychological symptoms of anxiety and depression among college students. (233)

These stressors create higher cognitive loads; put simply, cognitive load is the amount of mental effort one expends. As Paul A. Kirschner et al. explain in their article "Contemporary Cognitive Load Theory Research: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," cognitive load is affected by numerous factors:

Cognitive load is caused by, or maybe we should say dependent upon, the number of novel elements in learning materials that need to be kept in working (i.e., short-term) memory and the degree of interaction between those novel elements. The problem or task has a certain amount of cognitive load that is intrinsic to the task itself and which is affected by the expertise of the learner. In addition to the load intrinsic to the task, the way the learning task is presented and thus the way one learns and/or carries out the task also brings along a certain amount of cognitive load with it. If that load is facilitative of an/or functional for learning, then the load is considered to be *germane* for learning; if that load does not promote or advance learning, then the load is considered to be *extraneous* for learning. (102-103)

There are multiple novel elements in both the tutor and tutee's working memories that are creating high cognitive loads. Part of the work I want to do here is expand our understanding of the mental space that tutors and students have to work, write, and learn in

writing center sessions by looking to cognitive psychology and cognitive load theory.

Some writing center scholars have already advocated for an increased focus on this stressful dimension of tutoring and writing, although they have not yet connected that dimension to cognitive load. Richard Leahy claims that in his years of experience writing, teaching, and overseeing a writing center, [he has] become more and more convinced of the importance of paying attention to how writers feel about their writing—the affective dimension—as well as what they think about it. (152)

In addition, Christina Murphy posits that a tutor's role "is primarily supporting and affective, secondarily instructional, and always directed to each student as an individual in a unique, one-to-one interpersonal relationship" (13). In this unique relationship between tutor and tutee, a tutor negotiates his or her role(s) and focuses singularly on that student, although that negotiation is often affected by other implicit elements.

There are, indeed, multiple factors that influence what takes precedence in tutoring sessions. Although I would suggest that the affective dimension of the above student's work is being elided by the tutor's drive to focus on her paper's progress, I am not claiming that the tutor is purposefully ignoring the student's affective concerns. Each tutor's approach to a session is often framed by implicit rules. For example, Jennifer Nicklay found that some writing center consultants "felt guilt following consultations" because they "perceived that there were acceptable and unacceptable ways to approach certain situations, rather than a range of flexible choices" (15). Nicklay also found that that "guilt originates in how the writing center community is situated within the larger university and how an individual writing center community is structured" (15). So, even though tutors often take on multiple roles, their ability to be flexible is often informed (and then complicated) by other implicit rules.

In addition to this inflexibility, tutors and their tutees—especially the ones in the above scenario—often bring varying amounts of stress that add to their already high cognitive loads. What is being lost in this article's opening session without a focus on the high cognitive loads that both students are experiencing? The tutor certainly did focus on the student's paper, but by missing the opportunity to take on a more supportive, affective role, the tutor has not focused enough on the writer. In her article "The Roles a Tutor Plays: Effective Tutoring Techniques" Muriel Harris claims that we should "think carefully about how to tutor well" and then offers this insight: "I might add

that part of the success—and the exhaustion—one feels from tutoring is the need to change hats in mid-sentence" (63). This context-based, negotiable role is one that we have examined in writing center scholarship, but we haven't fully explored the possibilities that a tutor's affective role holds. Although some might argue that we have not explored these possibilities because it is not our responsibility to act as therapists, I am advocating for an expansion of tutors' toolboxes by expanding and re-envisioning our domain of practice. Specifically, I argue that by looking to cognitive psychology and mindfulness meditation, we can expand 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.

Expanding Our Domain

In some ways, I am building on the work that Elizabeth Mack and Katie Hupp did in their recent *Praxis* article titled "Mindfulness in the Writing Center: A Total Encounter" in which they discuss their "writing center's efforts to join the mindfulness-in-education movement" (8). Mack and Hupp explain that in an eight-week project, consultants (whose participation was voluntary and anonymous) were given mindfulness exercises to complete at home and in the writing center; the authors found that "100 percent of the consultants who participated in the poll claimed that incorporating mindfulness practices into the writing center had a positive effect on student consultations" (13). Although Mack and Hupp focused on the benefits of mindfulness for consultants, I advocate that we should offer mindfulness techniques to both consultants and the students they see. These mindfulness practices would act as both writing and stress-reducing strategies that consultants and students could use both in and outside of the writing center.

Looking to cognitive psychology for mindfulness techniques and cognitive load theory would also allow writing center scholarship to continue to branch out to other related fields. In his article "The Unpromising Present of Writing Center Studies: Author and Citation Patterns in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980 to 2009," Neal Lerner claims that "writing center scholarship can no longer afford primarily to be read by writing center scholars; we can no longer afford to embrace marginality" (70). This insularity that he examines in *The Writing Center Journal* is marked by a reliance on "citations that are not taken up by subsequent authors" or "a set of 'insider readings that function largely to affirm established beliefs and run the risk of casting the field as largely talking to itself, not to be taken seriously

by related and affiliated fields” (68). Lerner is arguing that we should consult other disciplines’ scholarship within our own field of writing center work, and I am adding to his argument by proposing that we expand and re-envision our domain of practice. We should look to related fields, like cognitive psychology, in order to expand our understanding of the writing center tutor’s affective role and then build on that understanding by incorporating mindfulness meditation into sessions between tutor and tutee.

Branching out to cognitive psychology, however, does not mean that writing centers should confuse the work they do with the work that counselors do. Although tutoring sessions do share some similarities with counseling sessions, I want to be careful about any parallels I draw between the two. In his article “Bringing Tutorials to a Close: Counseling’s Termination Process and the Writing Tutor,” Michael Steven Marx similarly acknowledges that this metaphor “of writing tutorials as psychological counseling sessions frequently occurs in composition literature,” and

in writing centers we regularly invoke the language and methods of counseling to discuss initiating tutor-writer relationships, a tutor’s ‘intervention’ in the writer’s work, and the length of a tutorial partnership: “walk-in,” “short term,” or “long term.” (51)

However, he does caution that we must be careful about not drawing too many “direct parallels between the counseling session and the writing conference” (44-45). Tutors are not counselors, and by advocating for the practice of mindfulness meditation in writing center sessions, I am not trying to position tutors as counselors or burden them with that extra role and responsibility. Rather, by positioning mindfulness meditation as a strategy, I am arguing that both tutors and tutees can benefit from it and continue using it long after a session ends. A writing center session would then act as an introduction to mindfulness meditation.

This introduction to mindfulness, however, is one that should be given with some caution. In his article “Neoliberal Meditations: How Mindfulness Training Medicalizes Education and Responsibilizes Young People,” James Reveley criticizes mindfulness techniques. He prefaces his claim about mindfulness meditation by explaining that in order “for neoliberal ideology to be strongly embraced, it must be reinforced by practices in the everyday lifeworld” (498). He then argues that “mindfulness meditation fulfills this function; it is a practical technique that transmits the neoliberal self-responsibilizing impulse down to young people” (498). Ultimately, Reveley posits that

mindfulness “functions as a neoliberal self-technology” (499). The danger here is that when we incorporate this practice into our classrooms, we shift the responsibility for student health and wellbeing from ourselves to students (499). Although I agree that introducing mindfulness meditation to students could potentially affect their sense of responsibility for their mental health, I would position that practice as a tool that students *could* use. As an instructor, I frequently practice mindfulness meditation with my students in the classroom, making time both for them and me to de-stress and focus on the present. I make it clear that this practice isn’t something they have to do, and they will not be penalized for not trying it. In the same way, tutors in the writing center can offer these practices as de-stressing techniques to their tutees while making it clear that these techniques are optional tools that they can practice alone, with others, or not at all.

I argue here that we can fully potentialize a tutor’s affective, supportive role and optimize a student’s cognitive load (i.e., mental effort) by incorporating mindfulness meditation as a writing and stress-reducing strategy into writing center practices. Mindfulness meditation can optimize a student’s cognitive load for learning and writing; put another way, this meditative practice has the capacity to create the metaphorical space a stressed student needs to write. We need to offer tutors the strategy of mindfulness meditation to add to their toolboxes because this meditative practice has the capacity to significantly improve sessions; furthermore, this practice can benefit not only students but also tutors both during and after those sessions. Using Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) as a lens, I aim to establish how we might expand our understanding of the available time that tutors and tutees have to work, write, and learn in writing center sessions. I am not suggesting that writing center staff learn about CLT; rather, I use CLT to explain how mindfulness meditation’s benefits can alleviate high cognitive loads for tutors and tutees. Because of its numerous cognitive benefits, I then position mindfulness as a writing and stress-reducing strategy that both tutors and tutees can use during and after their writing center sessions.

Branching Out to Cognitive Load

In the opening scene I constructed, both tutor and tutee are experiencing excessive amounts of stress. That stress thereby increases their cognitive loads. Paul A. Kirschner et al. explain that

cognitive load—the amount of *mental effort* [a] learner expends—is based upon human cognitive architecture which consists of a

severely limited working memory with partly independent processing unites for visual/spatial and auditory/verbal information, which interacts with a comparatively unlimited long-term memory. (102)

Generally speaking, then, our working memory is severely limited, even when our cognitive loads are not high. In my opening scenario, however, both tutor and tutee are expending certain amounts of mental effort to finish the session, but other outside factors are increasing their cognitive loads. As Kirschner et al. explain, one's cognitive load is affected by numerous factors; as I explained earlier, those factors include the problem or task, the way "the learning task is presented," and "the way one learns and/or carries out the task" (102-103). In addition, if that cognitive load "is facilitative of and/or functional for learning, then the load is considered to be *germane* for learning; if that load does not promote or advance learning, then the load is considered to be *extraneous* for learning" (103). The task here, for the student/tutee, is the ten-page paper due tomorrow, and that task contains its own cognitive load, such as the writing of the paper. The student also carries her own level of expertise, and that then affects her intrinsic load; for example, the student above is a freshman who has not written anything over five pages, so her level of expertise in relation to this writing task is low and might negatively affect her ability to write her paper. There may also be additional extraneous loads that are not visible to the tutor, such as poor assignment design or an uncomfortable instructor-student relationship; these extraneous loads would also influence that student's ability to perform and complete her task. For those of us working in writing centers, an awareness of students' extraneous cognitive loads can re-frame our understanding of the contexts in which students write and learn. Put another way, if we can become aware of the extraneous loads that students bring with them into writing centers, then we can become better attuned to their concerns, especially affective ones.

In addition to being aware of students' extraneous loads, we can use Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) to better understand how their learning has been compromised. Paul Ayres and Fred Paas claim in their article "Cognitive Load Theory: New Directions and Challenges" that "over the last 30 years, CLT has become a very successful instructional theory that has identified a number of strategies to facilitate learning" and that

critical to the theory is the working memory load (i.e. cognitive load) placed on the learner when processing instructional information or problem solving. If too much cognitive load is

created through poor instructional design, or dealing with complex materials, then learning is compromised because insufficient working memory resources are available to be devoted to the processes required to learn. (827)

I would theorize that the student in my opening anecdote is dealing with complex materials because she has produced a ten-page paper, and as a freshman, she admitted that she has never written anything longer than five pages. Her increased extraneous load is compromising her ability to learn and complete the task, which at this point consists of revising her paper and perhaps completely re-writing it. The high cognitive load and stress she is experiencing are cyclic in nature; that is, her high cognitive load creates excess stress, and that stress then hinders her from adequately dealing with her cognitive load. How often have we seen students—and tutors—come into writing centers in this context? As a tutor, I remember working with several students who were dealing with complex materials; using CLT as a lens, I would argue that those students had fewer working memory resources available to actually write and learn, and that lack of resources contributed to their already high stress levels.

Considering the high cognitive load and compromised learning that students bring with them into writing centers, how can CLT help us understand how to approach their learning and writing in those sessions? Kirschner et al. assert that the "goal of research on cognitive load is not necessarily minimizing cognitive load during learning, but optimizing it for learning;" they explain that we optimize cognitive load by

making sure that [1] instructional design keeps extraneous load to a minimum, [2] any load incurred by an instructional design is *germane* in nature, and [3] the correlation between total cognitive load and learning is optimized. (103)

Sunawan and Junmei Xiong similarly contend and add that to "optimize learning performance, the instruction should reduce extraneous load, manage intrinsic load and promote *germane* load" (178). There is, of course, learning taking place in this article's opening scenario, and while we cannot control the assignment design or the student's instructor, we can influence the design of that session between student and tutor. Writing centers can help ensure that the correlation between total cognitive load and learning is, as Kirschner et al. explain, optimized. That is, by re-focusing our attention on the stress and emotions that students reveal and share with tutors in their sessions, we can begin to help those students deal with their cognitive loads.

What kind of support can writing centers specifically offer, then? By using mindfulness meditation as strategy for writing and stress reduction, writing tutors can optimize students' cognitive load and thereby create the mental space that those students need to write or complete their learning tasks. First, however, I want to define mindfulness meditation and its benefits in order to concretize its connections to student stress and learning. Mindfulness meditation's cognitive and affective benefits have the capacity to expand a tutor's affective, supportive role in fruitful ways.

Mindfulness Meditation

There are many definitions of mindfulness meditation, so I want to focus on some that coalesce. Hayley A. Rahl et al explain that mindfulness meditation "can take a variety of forms, but core to each form is an experiential, comparatively non-discursive observation of internal and/or external perceptual stimuli as they unfold in real time" (225). Two examples they illustrate are found in the forms of mindfulness:

in the attention-monitoring form of mindfulness commonly taught in mindfulness training programs, attention is concentrated upon a stimulus object (e.g., bodily sensations associated with breathing) while meta-awareness, an apprehension of the current state of mind, serves to monitor or regulate attention to sustain it. (225)

The key here is the word "observation," because mindfulness meditation involves a nonjudgmental acknowledgement of one's internal or external surroundings. More simply, Angela C. Rowe et al explain, "[. . .] mindfulness is the ability to focus attention in the present whilst acknowledging that thoughts and emotions that spring to mind are fleeting and changeable" (642).

Mindfulness meditation has numerous cognitive and affective benefits. Hayley A. Rahl et al. explain that "mindfulness meditation training has been linked to a broad range of cognitive, affective, and health outcomes" and that some "of the most robust findings in the cognitive domain pertain to how mindfulness meditation training can foster on-task, sustained attention and reduce mind wandering" (224). Angela C. Rowe et al. also discuss these cognitive and affective benefits, claiming that "mindfulness-based interventions have also been found to result in fewer negative automatic thoughts, diminished anxiety, improved attention, and enhanced self-esteem" (643). There are numerous ways in which these benefits would transfer

to my introductory narrative: by fostering sustained attention and reducing mind wandering, mindfulness meditation would not only help the student stay on task but also the tutor, especially because the student's paper is ten pages long; by diminishing anxiety, this practice of mindfulness would help reduce or alleviate both the tutor's and the student's stress; in enhancing self-esteem and producing fewer negative thoughts, mindfulness meditation would have the capacity to improve the student's low level of confidence and perhaps reduce the negative thoughts she has about her paper receiving a low grade. As Mack and Hupp claim in their article, incorporating mindfulness into writing center practices has benefits that are "two-fold: the students receive focused attention and assistance, and consultants experience reduced stress and anxiety. Thus, the quality of the interaction necessarily improves" (14). The benefits of mindfulness meditation translate as a strategy for student learning and writing in writing center sessions. As I discuss next, some writing centers already practice the tenets of mindfulness.

Mindful Writing Centers

Mack and Hupp acknowledge that "mindfulness as a deliberate practice has found its way into our philosophy and way of being in the writing center on a larger scale" (13). Hupp has introduced mindfulness to each new hire since she and Mack completed their study, and she promotes

mindfulness as a way of dealing with difficult and disruptive students in a healthy way. In the moment, this means being present and listening rather than reacting and judging. Before and after these consultations, being mindful involves paying thoughtful attention to understanding and articulating the student's needs. (13)

Hupp and Mack further claim that so far, "this act of deliberately staying in the moment rather than recalling the last time we worked with the same student or assignment has been successful" (13). Mindfulness techniques give a name to some of the work that I already did as a consultant; as a tutor, I would sometimes give students time to write on their own if they needed that quiet time.

Other writing center scholars are making more implicit connections to mindfulness in their centers. In her article "Understanding 'Spirit' in the Writing Center," Lynn Briggs offers a story of healing in the writing center by narrating "a writing center story in which the writer's text served as a vehicle for a transformation of the people involved" (87). The

writing center, Briggs claims, is a space that facilitates transformative connections, and “the healing provided by such connections in the writing center is essential for learning, since learners can be thwarted by a wounded spirit” (88). This healing is vital to the work done in writing center sessions because college is quite stressful. Briggs claims that

while I did not meditate before, during, or after my session with Diane, our session had meditative qualities for me, chief among them my ability to focus and block out my other concerns, concerns, perhaps along with preconceptions, the assumptions each of us bring to a session. (92)

Although Briggs focuses on the healing properties that a writing center session can have, her claim that that session had meditative qualities reveals the connections already available between mindfulness meditation and writing center sessions.

Steve Sherwood similarly explores a writing center session’s enlightened, collaborative environment in “Humor and the Serious Tutor.” Sherwood claims that even though he agrees “that we need to encourage an enlightened, collaborative environment in writing centers, [he] believe[s] we can achieve this goal [. . .] through the intelligent and humane use of humor” (3). For Sherwood, humor “can build a bridge between tutor and student, can distance students from their fears, soften any necessary criticisms, and [. . .] free students to do their best work” (4). Although I am not necessarily advocating for more humor in the writing center, I do agree that an enlightened, collaborative environment should be encouraged. I approach this collaborative environment with caution, though, because as Andrea Lunsford claims, “creating a collaborative environment and truly collaborative tasks is damnably difficult” (6). As Lunsford explains, “students, tutors, teachers must really need one another to carry out common goals” (6). At the outset of a tutoring session, then, I would advocate for transparency on the part of the tutor when offering to practice mindfulness techniques with the tutee. It is important for both tutee and tutor to consent to practicing any of these techniques, so the tutor should always ask the student if he/she would feel comfortable practicing a few minutes of mindfulness.

Beth Godbee et al claim that as a writing center community, we have the mandate to explore how the embodied dimensions of our practice facilitate or frustrate learning; consolidate or share power; and open or close possibilities for learning, change, and revision. (63-64)

This call to explore our embodied practices in writing centers connects to what I am doing here; my introductory scenario revealed the affective and embodied concerns both tutor and tutee share, such as anxiety, exhaustion, low self-esteem, hunger, etc. The writing process is an embodied one; by paying closer attention to our bodies, we can begin to see how it is that we write *with* our bodies. However, the tutor has not offered the tutee other strategies that could open those possibilities for learning and change or optimize that student’s cognitive load. As an embodied practice, mindfulness meditation has the potential to create the space a student needs to write by re-directing his or her focus to the body and its affective concerns.

Mindful Writing

Writing centers are a natural next step for the work that compositionists have already done in their mindful classrooms. Keith Kroll claims that “mindfulness and its role in the teaching of English, including the teaching of writing, is not a new one” (73). Composition scholars like Sondra Perl, Donald R. Gallehr, and Mary Rose O’Reilly (to name a few) have explored the practices of contemplative pedagogy and embodied writing. In her book *The Garden at Night: Burnout & Breakdown in the Teaching Life*, O’Reilly claims, “calm reflection is the *radix* of contemplative practice. In a literature classroom, silence makes us face the consequences of our texts” (xiv). Silence is indeed a part of mindfulness meditation, and in my own experience teaching freshman composition at my university, I have incorporated mindfulness in my classroom and witnessed, as O’Reilly encourages us to see, “how everything changes—everything is up for grabs, your whole life” (xiv). When I spoke with Don Gallehr recently, he stated that “meditation brings us to words that nothing else can bring us to.” In the collection *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner’s Whole Potential*, Gallehr claims in his article that he included koans in his teaching but did not use the word koan because the “mind-clearing, concentration, and holistic or intuitive thinking exercises that form the core of my writing classes seem to be essential habits of mind in any field” (101). Gallehr and I agreed that the notion that we are *all* writers often pervades writing center sessions.

Mindful Tutoring

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced in numerous ways, but it is important that tutor and tutee see this meditation as an option when they need the space to write. Gallehr mentioned that the goal of a meditation practice is to clear a space in the mind for

writing. For some writers, that clearing might involve physical activity; for others, it might involve sitting in silence for ten minutes. In my own classroom, I have used an abbreviated version of Sondra Perl's Guidelines for Composing. In her book *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*, Perl offers a transcript of her guidelines in Chapter Two; those guidelines are meant to "help writers locate a felt sense and to guide them in selecting, exploring, and developing topics that interest them" (15). Felt sense, as Perl explains, "is the physical place where we locate what the body knows," and we can use this felt sense in our writing process if we "can use our body as a touchstone, a guide, that can inform us if the work we are creating makes sense in the ways we want it to" (4). It is not necessary for tutees to be introduced to the concept felt sense for them to practice some of the guidelines with their tutor. (There often isn't enough time in a session to do this.) Tutor and tutee can still practice these guidelines because, as Perl states, they "are a set of questions that build on each other and are designed to help writers move their thinking and their discourse forward" (16). To slow the tutee down in the introductory scenario, I would recommend that the tutor offer to lead the tutee through one revised portion of Perl's guidelines as soon as the tutee began to lose her composure. That practice would entail the tutor saying the following to the tutee:

Find a way to get comfortable. Stretch your body; put your feet on the floor, and begin to notice what is going on within you. If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes. If you prefer to keep your eyes open, [then you might] look down or away from any distractions and attempt to create your own private space [right here]—knowing that [we] will just sit quietly for a minute or two. . . Now. . . focus on your breathing. As you inhale, see if you can feel yourself sitting in the chair. And as you exhale, let go of any tension or discomfort you might be feeling. Inhale again and bring your attention back to yourself. . . As you exhale, get a sense of what it is like for you to just sit here, breathing quietly and slowly. (26-27)

What is important here is that both tutor and tutee practice this breathing and silence. In that scenario I described, the tutor and tutee were both experiencing high levels of stress, and so this breathing would have several benefits: it would slow down the session enough to give both students involved time to breath for a few minutes; it would give both students a few minutes to de-stress; and, finally, it would establish a

practice that they could use later outside of the writing center.

Another mindfulness practice—the body scan—can be an integral part of practicing mindfulness, and neither tutor nor tutee needs to be an expert in this practice. According to Samuel J. Dreeben et al, the body scan is a somatically oriented, attention-focusing practice first introduced into clinical practice as part of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the MBSR program brings together a range of techniques and practices unified by a common theme—that of cultivating mindfulness. (394)

The authors go on to say that when practicing the body scan, "participants begin [. . .] by sitting or lying in a comfortable position. The instructor [. . .] slowly guides the participants' attention through the various regions of the body" (394). The body scan, they note, "can be practiced at various speeds and levels of precision," so I would adapt this practice and integrate it into writing center sessions with stressed students (394). Because the body scan can be practiced either sitting or lying down, tutors and tutees would already be in those seated positions to begin practicing it. The body scan is another strategy that tutors can introduce to students to help them become more attuned to their bodies and begin dealing with the many affective and embodied concerns that are getting in the way of their writing. By dealing with those embodied concerns, students might then optimize their cognitive loads. That is, instead of expending their energies on those concerns, students might be able to devote more mental effort to writing and learning.

The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley offers a recording and transcript of their "Body Scan Meditation," so at the beginning of writing center sessions, tutors might ask their tutees if they would feel comfortable practicing this version of a body scan with them:

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.

You can close your eyes if that's comfortable for you.

You can notice your body seated wherever you're seated, feeling the weight of your body on the chair, on the floor.

Take a few deep breaths.

And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen enlivening the body. And as you exhale, have a sense of relaxing more deeply.

You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor.

The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.

You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.

Notice your back against the chair.

Bring your attention into your stomach area.

If your stomach is tense or tight, let it soften. Take a breath.

Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight[?]? See if you can allow them to soften.

Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Let your shoulders be soft.

Notice your neck and throat. Let them be soft. Relax.

Soften your jaw. Let your face and facial muscles be soft.

Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.

Be aware of your whole body as best you can.

Take a breath. And then when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

The above script can be modified as needed; because tutors and tutees are likely new to mindfulness meditation, it might be helpful (if the noise level in that center allows it) to use the recording if that feels more comfortable. As tutors practice the body scan with their tutees, they will begin to offer students support for their writing in ways that they may not have experienced before. By practicing the body scan, tutors can expand their affective, supportive roles not just by talking to students about their paper but also by focusing on those students as embodied individuals who often have concerns getting in the way of their writing that are not visible on the physical papers they bring in.

Finally, sitting meditations are a simpler technique that tutor and tutee can practice with little effort. Jon Kabat-Zinn states that when

established in a sitting posture, we give ourselves over to the present moment. The options are the same as for lying down meditations, and as with them, we can work with the eyes closed or open in any of these sitting practices as well. (1442)

He goes on to explain that

perhaps hearing is the most basic door into sitting meditation, since we have nothing to do other than to be aware of the sounds already arriving at our ears. Since everything is already happening, since we are already hearing, there is actually nothing to do other than to know it. (1442)

He suggests that if our mind wanders, we recognize those thoughts without judgment and then, “we bring the mind back to hearing, over and over again, when it is carried off, distracted, or diverted away from hearing” (1442). The guidelines that Kabat-Zinn offers are a helpful extension of the body scan practice; tutors might offer his imagery-based example as a way to guide their tutees through a sitting meditation:

certain images may be helpful in supporting your practice as long as you don't cling to them or take them too literally. For instance, if we imagine our thoughts and emotions as a ceaseless river that is flowing endlessly, whether we are meditating or not, whether we are observing it or not, it can be helpful at times to think of the practice as an invitation to sit by the bank and listen to its endless bubbles, gurgles, and eddies, its voices, images, and stories, rather than be caught up in them and carried downstream by the river. We can sit on the bank of our own mindstream, and by listening, come to know that stream and what it consists of in ways we never could if we are perpetually caught up in it. This is a direct and effective way to investigate the nature of the mind using your own mind as both the tool and the object of the investigation. (1443)

This image of the flowing river might be particularly helpful to stressed students in the writing center because of their position in a busy and sometimes overwhelming academic context. As a graduate tutor, I often felt as though my thoughts were flowing at a torrential speed, so to know that I could treat my thoughts as a kind of river would have helped me visualize what was already happening in my head.

Conclusion

Mindful tutors have the capacity to expand writing center practices in numerous ways. First, by positioning mindfulness as a stress-reducing and writing strategy, tutors can have one more tool in their toolboxes to offer highly stressed students. Second, whether practicing the body scan, sitting meditations, or Perl's Guidelines, both tutor and tutee can experience the numerous benefits afforded by these practices. Third, by addressing students' embodied concerns, tutors can expand their affective, supportive roles by focusing on those students as embodied individuals, not just students with papers to turn in. Fourth, because tutors and tutees are not expected to become experts in mindfulness meditation practices immediately, they can use these practices when they need to and continue to experience those benefits. Fifth, by optimizing their cognitive loads--that is, by making room for writing--tutees can devote more mental effort towards writing and learning.

I have offered here only the start of the potential that mindfulness meditation practices have to expand and transform writing center practices and knowledge. By looking to cognitive psychology, writing centers can expand their understanding of the amount of mental effort students have available to complete the projects they bring with them into sessions; often, overly stressed students may be experiencing higher levels of extraneous cognitive load than intrinsic or germane cognitive load, and that extraneous load could be compromising their ability to learn and write. When mindfulness meditation is positioned as a kind of writing and de-stressing strategy in writing center sessions, tutors can then have another tool to add to their toolbox when working with highly stressed students or students with high cognitive loads. Furthermore, because mindfulness meditation has been shown to offer numerous benefits, such as reduced stress and anxiety, improved attention, and enhanced self-esteem, if tutors practice mindfulness with their tutees, then both students have the chance to experience those benefits. Because tutor and tutee are not expected, furthermore, to be experts in mindfulness meditation, this allows them to practice mindfulness outside of the writing center and experience those benefits continuously. Finally, the practice of mindfulness meditation has the ability to optimize student writers' cognitive loads by creating the space they need to write--by focusing on their bodies and letting their thoughts flow by without judgment, students then create the mental space they lacked and generate the mental effort they need to finally write.

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