
ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PRESENT - MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

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Unleash students's potential by teaching mindfully

In living mindfully, it is presence that truly matters. How, then, might our presence as educators transform the classroom? If we are present to ourselves, if we insist on the value of that standpoint, what might we discover? While words like "wholeness," "holistic" and "presence" continue to be undermined in our culture due to the fear of their intangible essence, we know when we encounter educators who possess presence because they have a radical impact on their students. More often than not, we can see that such educators inspire great success in their students, and yet, radical presence is not something that can be easily taught. It's a lived reality and the fruit of a deep commitment to life in process.

Currently, our educational system has aggressively embraced the ethos of the corporate world—accountability. There is no doubt that accountability, responsibility and discipline are essential teachings for both life and an academic journey. But what happens when we surrender our own faith and trust in our own and each other's accountability to ourselves and our community to the point that accountability can only be found through conforming to external standards that feel as though they have little to do with our true reality as human beings? What happens is that the classroom becomes a rigid, controlled and fearful space where true creativity and discovery are not nurtured. What happens is that we are no longer accountable to our own truth, but to an external truth that imposes its ruthless gaze on our own joyful encounters with teaching and learning.

Are there essentials that students in each level of education need exposure to and practice in? Absolutely. Are we, as educators, accountable for fostering literacy, critical thinking, skills development in a wide variety of areas, and active participation in civic life? Absolutely. But is there one correct way that that these goals should be achieved or measured? Is there an absolute list that covers all the possible permutations and situations that one could possibly experience or create in the classroom that we must measure ourselves against? Absolutely not.

Our greatest strength as educators lies in our ability to be flexible and mindful—to see and respond, with immediacy and care, to the souls in our classrooms. Learning is as much a process of nurturing as it is of challenging and stretching. It's an embrace of the yin and the yang that must find its balance in the heart and mind of each educator. I know from personal experience that when I've tried to meet the needs of the phantom "curriculum police," I am less present to my students, less joyful and less agile in the classroom. I assign far too much homework because I'm worried we not cover what we're supposed to cover, and I fall short of that external gaze's relentless assessment of my ability to prepare students for the next grade, rather than valuing my ability to prepare them for life, for opening doors and windows to their minds, souls and hearts, for working to inspire them and mirroring them as they come to know themselves as learners, creators, thinkers and citizens, for being present to their struggles and successes each and every day and for holding them accountable when they haven't respected our classroom covenants, or failed to honor themselves or one another.

When I allow myself to think deeply about what I'm doing, and more importantly, when I have a strong and clear vision of why I'm doing what I'm doing, I find that my teaching is pedagogically deeper, richer, and far more meaningful for both myself and my students. In the end, I find that I've covered the core expectations for that grade with far more power and significance than if I'd obsessed with covering "Expectation L2.2" in period two on Monday, April 14, 2008. Heaven forbid that the curriculum police come into my classroom and note that I am not, in fact, creating travel brochures with my students on a place they want to visit, but in fact, we have decided to open up the discussion on whether water should be considered a human right or a commodity. Which expectation will serve as more important in their lives as thoughtful, informed members of our society?

The more I am present to the beauty of each member of my classroom, the more I want to get out of the way. Yes, I want to help lead and inspire. Yes, I recognize that I need to set the tone and provide clear expectations. But I want to get out of the way of students discovering themselves. I don't want the most important thing they learn from my class to be that I'm a "competent teacher." This sounds absurd, yet I feel that it is exactly the kind of situation we create when accountability dominates the space. The teacher becomes obsessed with covering material the right way, the best way, and less concerned with the actual students in the class. I don't want what we learn to be the entire point of the class, but rather how we learn and, most importantly, who we are when we learn.

These "airy" & "touchy-feely" calls for a valuation of process are anathema to the curriculum police. How on earth do you measure that? It seems too messy, too chaotic, and too nebulous for the serious business of education.

So how do you measure the process of soul-making—of finding presence within one's own being—in the classroom? The secret is something the curriculum police cannot possibly fathom, as it seems far, far too simple: You look into the eyes of a child. Where you see joy, self-esteem, pride, awareness and creative fires, you have succeeded. All expectations have been met, and you have made your contribution to a healthier future for the larger community.

Here is our paradox: to achieve this level of simplicity requires tremendous work, dedication and discipline from the educator. It requires a transcendence of your own ego, a jettisoning of many of the external dictates that have little to do with the truth of your soul or the souls in your classroom, and a high level of pedagogical and emotional skill to achieve your ultimate outcome. It is to live with risk and to make a leap of faith every day. It is to be exhilarated and satisfied. It is to feel at home in your own classroom, and to surrender to the creative possibility that today might be the day you discover together, just how it is that we might be able to achieve peace, justice, sustainability and love.

When will we be accountable for achieving these outcomes? For the educator who aspires to be present each day, the answer comes easily —now.

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