

The **MINDFUL** **STUDIO:** Breath



Jane E. Dalton

In the Mindful Studio, both mindfulness and art cultivate present-moment awareness of the breath, body, thoughts, emotions, and creative impulse. The aim of the Mindful Studio is to provide purposeful experiences to enhance self-awareness, imagination, and the creative process by participating in mindful making, without judgment.

How can I encourage my students to breathe with awareness? In our fast-moving world, the importance of noticing our steady and constant movement of breathing can be overlooked. One of my first experiences

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with breath awareness came in a high-school choir class. The choir teacher explained that correct breathing was diaphragmatic (or “belly breathing”). As we sang, we were invited to relax our abdomen and notice the rise as we inhaled and the fall on the exhale.

This experience of breathing with awareness was a valuable lesson. Over the years, my awareness of the value of breath to connect me to the present moment has grown and expanded, and it now extends into my art room and studio practice.

Mindful Breathing

Mindfulness can redirect attention away from the restless and wandering mind by sustaining attention on the neutral breath that provides awareness and connection to the present moment. This shift in attention can cultivate emotional regulatory processes essential to well-being and help students to stay on task,

focus, and be present. In fact, recent medical research has shown that deep breathing can have a positive impact on the physiology and can increase energy levels, promote muscle relaxation, and decrease feelings of stress.

Studio Exploration: Breathing

Having students draw their breath mindfully allows them to artistically cultivate awareness of the subtle sensations of inhaling and exhaling. Furthermore, the movement of their hands reinforces the movement of their lungs.

Begin by asking students to close their eyes and pay attention to the rise and fall of the chest. Students are invited to place their drawing tool on the paper, keeping their eyes closed at all times, and with awareness, draw the lines that represent their breathing. This also becomes a great exercise in expressive drawing and mark-making.

Procedures

1. Place a sheet of white drawing paper in front of each student, along with a black pastel, charcoal, or ebony pencil. Have them hold the drawing tool before beginning the exercise and ask them to pay attention to the tool and become familiar with how it feels in their hands.
2. Invite students to close their eyes, place their feet firmly on the ground, and sit comfortably in their chair. If students are uncomfortable with closing their eyes, ask them to gaze on something in front of them with “soft eyes.”
3. As students sit in silence, ask them to become aware of their breathing and notice how their breath flows in and out and rises and falls without effort. If students have difficulty connecting with their breath, ask them to place one hand on their abdomen, noticing the rise and fall as they breathe.

4. Next, ask students to begin drawing (with their eyes closed) the movement of their breath using the charcoal to visually describe how the breath feels: heavy, light, short, long, short, slow, steady, erratic, etc.
5. Continue with guided instructions: Do not make any effort to change your breathing in any way. Simply notice how your body feels as you breathe. When your attention wanders (as it will), just focus again on your breathing, the slow and steady rise and fall of the abdomen and the steady in and out of the breath.
6. After three minutes, ask students to put down their charcoal and stop drawing, and to keep their eyes closed.
7. Ask students to sit still for a few seconds more to notice how their body feels now.
8. Invite students to open their eyes slowly to let in the light of the room.
9. Optional: Hold a “gallery walk.” Students walk around the tables (silently) and notice the “visual” breath of each of their peers. End with a short discussion of the experience. 🌀

Jane E. Dalton is an associate professor of art education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. jane.dalton@uncc.edu, janedalton24@gmail.com

NATIONAL STANDARD

Connecting: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

WEB LINK

How Mindfulness Promotes Well-Being: bit.ly/mindfulwellbeing

RESOURCE

The Compassionate Classroom: Lessons that Nurture Empathy and Wisdom (2004). Jane Dalton and Lyn Fairchild.