

Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, And Learning

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ABSTRACT

Education is one of the most rewarding professions, but it can also be one of the most stressful. Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, and Learning is a professional development model designed to support teachers, administrators, and students reduce stress by promoting self-care and an inner awareness. The model promotes the strategies and dispositions educators need to create and maintain healthy learning environments. Educators can generate these environments by focusing on remaining in the present moment. This provides an internal state of equanimity, which nurtures and maintains a positive learning climate for students. It is a model intended to hone attention and awareness, nurturing a culture in which teachers and leaders thrive professionally, and students flourish emotionally.

KEYWORDS: coaching, presence, mindfulness, compassion, meditation

INTRODUCTION

Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, and Learning is a model for teachers, leaders, and students to hone attention and awareness. Strategies are shared that help nurture a culture in which teachers and leaders thrive professionally and students flourish emotionally. The over-arching goal is to become more present. This provides an internal state of equanimity in the teacher, which in turn helps nurture and maintain a positive learning environment for students.

The simple act of being present has the power to change how we approach our challenges, our relationships, our communities, and ourselves. Being present is simplistic, yet difficult. It's available to us at any moment and it goes by many names. Athletes refer to it as being in the zone. For soldiers and first responders, it's situational awareness. Artists see it as spontaneity, thinkers as contemplation, and Buddhists call it mindfulness. The name doesn't matter; it's the feeling of peace and stillness that is important. It's what is needed today in education to foster healthier learning environments. Educators can achieve these environments by attending to their own self-care through focusing on remaining in the present moment.

According to UNICEF, the children of the United States are the second least happy children in the world, after the United Kingdom. It is imperative that we do something about this now. Cultivating presence and resilience in schools is one step towards reversing this statistic. A popular theory in America today is that a better education will create more happiness for our children. In an effort to provide a better education, policy makers have implemented increased testing of students, from preschoolers to seniors in high school. This author would argue that testing and assessing children can have detrimental effects on children's emotional and mental health and that we need to pay greater attention to their emotional well-being. One of the discrepancies prevalent in education is the gap between those who make policy and those who suffer the consequences. How to create an environment for a better education is a national debate. This paper will focus on a professional development model that began with the instructional coaches in a school system. Instructional coaches are teachers that influence teachers, who in turn influence students each day. The goal of the model is to cultivate presence and resilience, and to make schools happier places to work and be.

Cutting edge research in neuroscience confirms that practicing presence-based strategies facilitates awareness and self-regulation which helps to cultivate a calm, focused mind. This internal state allows for optimal teaching and learning. As a result, educators are present and more emotionally responsive. Attention and awareness are dynamic, and this means that you can sharpen and enhance them. One of the most powerful ways to do this is by being

present. By learning simple focusing techniques educators can decrease stress and increase equanimity and well-being.

We all have stressors in our lives. We may not be able to change the circumstances or events that take place, but we can change how we experience those immutable aspects of life. The more present you are to the triggers in your life, the more choices you have about how to intentionally respond. This paper is the first stage of what could be a multi-tiered approach to developing a culture of presence in a suburban school district. The first tier begins with instructional coaches and administrators who are influencing teachers, who in turn influence students each day.

STUDY:

This paper will describe the professional development that is taking place in a suburban public school district. The participants are eight instructional coaches who serve in grades K-12 in four different schools within the district. Guided by the author of this paper, the coaches participate in monthly workshops on the topic Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, and Learning. Each workshop is followed by thirty minutes of individual coaching. The Assistant Superintendent of the district is present for the workshop but does not receive formal individual coaching. The training is investigating the impact that presence-based strategies and coaching have on the instructional coaches' focus, well-being, and ability to remain present with the teachers they coach. The participants began the year with somewhat of a low trust threshold. They had never been coached themselves and were somewhat perplexed as to how a focus on presence, self-care, and stress reduction would impact them professionally. For this reason, instead of beginning with a survey or a formal tool to gauge their stress level, time was invested in building relationships with the participants. The intent by the author was to foster a culture of trust and collaboration in order to better coach the coaches throughout the school year.

The goals of the professional development included:

- Support stress management and reduction.
- Identify triggers that lead to reactivity and promote skillful ways to respond to difficult emotions.
- Learn to reframe and recover equilibrium and maintain presence.
- Manage ambiguity.
- Identify and work towards professional goals using tools such as affirmations, visualization, and the power of intention.

The author's role was to mentor and foster the long-term development of competence, self-generation, and presence in the instructional coaches. Silsbee (2008) defined self-generation as the capacity to be present and a learned in all of life in order to make choices from the inner state of greatest possible awareness and resourcefulness. Self-generation produces resilience, creativity, self-awareness, authenticity, and a passion for learning. The difference between first order and second order change was discussed, and all agreed that the overarching purpose of the professional development would be to impact change in a long-lasting sustainable manner, which is why coaching the coaches was essential.

Monthly, a presence-based strategy was presented to the instructional coaches in a workshop format, followed by individual coaching. Described below are the strategies to foster Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, and Learning that have been presented to the coaches in the workshops, followed by a brief research synopsis of the validity of the strategies.

Identification of "Fuels and Drains" and Time Spent

The year began by e-mailing the coaches a process to determine "the fuels and drains" in their personal life. Silsbee (2008) advocated becoming familiar with our habits and the underlying attachments and aversions in order to free ourselves from the grip of habits that are not serving us. Many of us are unconscious about how our mental energy is being used throughout our day. If we become clear about where our energy is being directed, we can choose to focus our energy on what fuels us to be our best self. When we truly take care of ourselves, it becomes possible to care more profoundly for other people. The more alert and sensitive we are to our own needs, the more loving and generous we can be toward others.

The identification of fuels and drains in the instructional coaches' personal lives was an entry point to begin exploring the fuels and drains in their professional lives. Many of the coaches have the enviable opportunity to make choices about how they spend their time at work based on their priorities. The analysis of how they spent their time helped them become aware of what gets their attention and focus on a daily basis. By analyzing how they spent their time, the coaches began to see clearly how they had prioritized their time. They then began to reexamine their priorities during the individual coaching sessions.

Focus on Living with Intentionality

The next steps were to refine priorities and goals, then set intentions to support those goals. An intention is essentially the capacity to stay in touch with the fundamental values that you wish to live by. If you are clear and grounded in your intention, your mind will literally perceive various situations through the lens of your intention. This affects how you act and respond to daily situations. Your intentions will support you in making choices and decisions that align with your goals, even when difficulties arise. Consciously setting an intention allows you to notice what is happening in each moment.

Developing an intention is similar to visualizing, but in addition to a visual image, you develop a mental and emotional construct of what you would like to experience. An intention affects your mindset, which allows you to focus on what you want to experience. Intentions can encompass behaviors, attitudes, thoughts and feelings. An intention grounds your heart, mind, and soul in a way that reinforces your focused attention.

Intentions can encompass behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. It's best to work with intentions one at a time, moment by moment. Being present helps you remember your intention. It's important to curb the temptation to look at the product or the end result. Instead take it moment by moment, notice the incremental progress, and celebrate that progress. Intentions should be stated in the present, not future focused.

The instructional coaches were asked to establish a goal for the year that would increase their effectiveness as instructional coaches. They were then asked to describe what it would look and feel like when they achieved their goal and what new skills, attitudes, and dispositions they would develop. Next, they were asked to identify what the impact of achieving their goals would have on the teachers they coach. They were instructed to write two intentions to support their goal and to share their goal and intentions with an "intention buddy". Finally, they were asked to identify how the author of this paper could best coach them to support their goal.

Using the Enneagram: Understanding ourselves and how we relate to others

The Enneagram is a comprehensive system that uses a diagnostic tool to determine one's emotional outlook on life. It is a useful guide to begin to understand how we all perceive the world differently. The Enneagram portrays the strengths and limitations of our inner habits of attention and response.

The instructional coaches were introduced to the Enneagram as a tool that would benefit first themselves and, additionally, their work with teachers. It also provided the author of this paper the ability to focus on each participant's Enneagram style in order to coach the instructional coaches effectively. The Enneagram, a typing system composed of nine distinct types, profiles the primary psychological defense systems and how they function when we are experiencing stress. The value of self-identification of one's type is to enable honest self-inquiry that eventually can lead to a relaxing or releasing of the patterns so that they are less self-defeating. Murphy (2007) stated that the significant benefit of using the Enneagram is that, through shining the light of awareness on type-specific patterns, the user gains clarity on what his or her automatic patterns are and can become more attuned to how those patterns impact the quality of his or her own life, as well as the impact that one has on others. This awareness provides the foundation for recognizing alternative behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional responses that previously were not transparent, and thus leads to a deeper dimension of choice.

For example, a coach may encounter a challenging colleague. Instead of letting a cascade of aggravations build momentum, which could cause overreaction to a minor issue and later regret, the Enneagram can help one learn to identify emotional states and reframe a situation.

The identification of each coach's Enneagram style was used during the individual coaching session and by the coaches in their work with teachers.

Focus on Gratitude

Gratitude is the feeling of thankfulness and joy we experience in response to something we've received, whether tangible or intangible. Simply focusing for a few minutes on what we have to be grateful for shifts our thinking to a calmer, more content perspective which can immediately uplift and comfort us. Making a daily practice of gratitude helps train our brain to shift to a more positive mind-set and helps develop optimism. Gratitude is a way for people to appreciate what they have instead of always dwelling on what is missing. It focuses on what is present instead of what is lacking. This mental state, with practice, can grow stronger.

Promoting gratitude in schools should be a system-wide effort. I began working with the instructional coaches on experiencing and incorporating a few simple practices. My intent is to cultivate a school culture in which gratitude contributes to student well-being and a more positive school climate.

As a way to focus on gratitude, one of the first activities for the eight instructional coaches was the Gratitude Game. This activity was adapted from Holden (2009), author of *Be Happy*. Holden titled the activity "Ten Blessings". The activity required the eight instructional coaches in eight minutes to circulate around the room, introduce themselves to one another, and share one thing they were grateful for that happened within the last week. They could share something they had received or a precious moment or simply something that had made them smile. The initial response to this activity was certainly not joy; if anything the instructional coaches looked perplexed. Physically, they seemed to be breathing shallowly or holding their breath. Most commented that they couldn't remember yesterday, let alone last week. Then slowly, faces relaxed and they seemed to become more conscious of the multitude of events, small moments, and positive experiences they had to be grateful for. At the conclusion of the activity, all were smiling and remarking that they seldom get time to really connect and to focus on the positive. In eight minutes, there was a significant change in their demeanor. Imagine if teachers and students could start each day with a similar exercise. This could help students and teachers begin the day with a feeling of happiness rather than lack.

The research on gratitude is extensive. For centuries, thinkers from various disciplines have believed this emotion to be essential for building and preserving social relationships, so much so that gratitude has been labeled "not only the best, but the parent of all other virtues" (Cicero, 1851). Hawn (2011) stated that psychologists have discovered that the experience of being thankful or appreciative of someone or something is one of the best ways to increase happiness. Miller (2009) defined gratitude as either a virtue or an emotional state. In addition to teaching students a variety of academic skills, a primary goal of public education is to develop character and civic virtue in students. One way to enhance character development among students is to foster their experience and expression of gratitude. Possessing a capacity for gratitude not only can strengthen students' positive life outlook and appreciation for others but also can support a positive school experience. Gratitude is an attribute that can be developed and strengthened. Students in schools could keep a gratitude journal, meditate on what they are grateful for, write thank you notes on a regular basis. The opportunities to express gratitude are endless, and it begins with the adults in the school modeling this behavior.

Focus on Attention using Breath Awareness

It is estimated that the average person has fifteen to sixty thousand separate thoughts each day; the problem is, as many as ninety-eight percent of those thoughts are exactly the same as we had the day before. Even more significant, eighty percent of our thoughts are negative. This is important because of what we know about the mind-body connection, psychoneuroimmunology. If we are physically tired, it's hard to think clearly. On the other hand, if your mind is tired, you are likely to feel the effects physically as well. It is more important than ever to teach ourselves and students how to concentrate, so that we can become aware when we've lost focus and so we can maintain our attention for longer periods of time, which is essentially a way to remain in the present moment. One technique to help focus attention is breath awareness. The concept of intentionally focusing on the breath was new to the instructional coaches.

In an effort to ease into mindful breathing and mediation, the author began with a strategy titled “Four Focused Breaths”. Focusing on the breath helps calm the body by slowing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and sharpening focus. Paying attention to breathing also supports strong functioning in the higher brain. Controlling breathing reduces anxiety by overriding the “fight, flight, or freeze” response set off by the amygdala and by giving control to conscious thought, which takes place in the prefrontal cortex. When breathing is deliberately regulated, the brain is primed to think first and then plan a response thoughtfully.

In a landmark study, Kabat-Zinn (2011) took two groups of healthy people and taught one group mindful awareness practices in which they focused mainly on their breathing. After three months, the mindful awareness group showed a forty-four percent decrease in psychological distress, a forty-six percent decrease in illnesses such as colds and headaches, and a twenty-four percent decrease in the stress response to everyday challenges. The control group, who had no interventions, showed no changes. Some of the powerful effects of mindful breathing and awareness discovered in over a thousand studies are: calming the stress response, strengthening attention, promoting brain integration, fostering better sleep, and strengthening self-awareness.

Brown and Gerbarg (2009) found that for most people, quality of life is even more important than longevity. The quality of one’s life depends upon the quality of one’s mind. Stress, overstimulation, excess expectations, and mental turmoil drain our energy and our capacity to enjoy life. Mind-body and spiritual practices offer the sense of peace, joy, and relatedness that sweeten our lives and the lives of those closest to us.

Yoga breathing (pranayama) can rapidly bring the mind to the present moment and reduce stress. Breath work is a tool to modulate the various forms of suffering. Feuerstein (1998) found that when the mind is 100% in the present, we experience the calmness, peace, and joy that minimize the effects of stress. Most people agree that being in the present moment is desirable, but they cannot find the way to get there. Yoga breathing rapidly quiets the fluctuations of the mind, bringing us back into the present moment.

Greeson (2009) suggested that the ability to skillfully regulate one’s internal emotional experience in the present moment may translate into good mental health in the long term. His research suggests that people with higher levels of mindfulness are better able to regulate their sense of well-being by virtue of greater emotional awareness, understanding, acceptance, and the ability to correct or repair unpleasant mood states.

Beginning with breath practices provides immediate benefits that can prepare the mind for meditation. Both yoga breathing and meditation can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and induce altered states of consciousness.

Focus on Meditation

The introduction of meditation to the instructional coaches was met with some initial discomfort. Only two of the participants had prior experience meditating. The author defined meditation during the workshop as sustained attention and awareness of breath.

Sebelis (2011) defined meditation as “simply ‘being in the here and now’, totally absorbed in the moment, practicing what is known as ‘awareness’ or ‘mindfulness’. It involves the establishment of a ‘watcher’ or ‘witness’ through whom we observe our own internal thoughts and processes. Meditation brings about inner peace and calmness, which is important, for if we as individuals do not ourselves know peace, how can we help others? Inner peace comes from the practice of self-awareness, concentration, relation, perseverance, patience, and meditation.”

A vast and growing body of research shows that mediating can reduce stress, alleviate anxiety and depression, increase attention span and deepen compassion for others. Davidson (2012) one of the world’s leading brain scientists has shown that compassion meditation, even in short-term practitioners, induces significant changes in patterns of functional activity in the brain. Davidson believes that, in time, mental exercise will be accepted as something that is as important to general well-being as physical exercise. Schoeberlein (2009) asserted that attention and awareness are dynamic, which means that they can be sharpened. Learning and practicing brief mental training techniques and teaching methodologies can benefit everyone in the school system.

Each workshop with the instructional coaches has incorporated some type of meditation such as, visualization, guided meditation, binaural beats audiotapes, or breath awareness. The intent is to introduce and practice a variety of methods so that each instructional coach would find what resonates for them.

Focus on Presence-Based Communication

A skillful coach uses certain well-crafted verbal and nonverbal tools to facilitate cognitive growth in others. Coaches who encourage teachers to elaborate on and explain their thinking with thoughtful, curious, open-ended questions promote learning. Sincere listening is a mechanism to bring our attention back to the present moment. Asking questions is an extension of listening.

Language molds our sense of who we are. Our words can shape identities. What we say to others can deeply affect their sense of who they are and who they might become. Our words and tone of voice play a critical role in establishing the nature of our relationships. A by-product of a teacher's skillful use of language is that students begin using language more skillfully themselves.

Denton (2007) described language as one of the most powerful tools available to teachers. According to Denton, "language permeates every aspect of teaching and learning. We cannot give a lesson, welcome a child into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words. And what they hear and interpret—the message they get from their teacher—has a huge impact on how they think and act, and ultimately how they learn."

To increase awareness of language, the workshop began with an overview of Presence-Based Communication, followed by instructions to spend the next hour in "a complaining fast". The instructional coaches were asked to tally every verbal and nonverbal complaint; the intent was to raise awareness of their inner and outer language. The complaining fast was followed by introducing tools to turn complaints into solutions derived from Gordon's (2008) *The No Complaining Rule: Positive Ways to Deal with Negativity at Work*. The intent was to recognize that every complaint represents an opportunity to turn a negative thought into a positive.

A heightened awareness of the paralinguage that is used provides a lens to examine the nonverbal gestures that exist alongside the words we speak. Research has proven that adults find more meaning in nonverbal cues than verbal cues. Approximately two thirds of meaning in any social situation is derived from nonverbal clues. Important to the instructional coaches was the understanding of the theory of entrainment, that when two people oscillate at nearly the same rate we observe entrainment. The entrainment theory was formulated in 1665 after a Dutch scientist noted that two pendulous clocks mounted side by side on a wall would swing together in a precise rhythm.

CONCLUSION

This paper is being presented mid-year, and four sessions are still remaining with the instructional coaches. Presence-Based Teaching, Leading, and Learning is a journey. The next steps will be determined based on the instructional coaches' feedback.

A mid-year evaluation was administered to the eight instructional coaches after the fall 2012 semester to determine if the quality and topics of the workshops and coaching were beneficial and worth continuing in the spring. The overall feedback was positive. Three coaches felt the workshops and coaching were excellent, five felt the experience was good, and no average or below average responses were reported. This establishes that the workshops and the coaching will continue during the spring 2013 semester.

All of the strategies described in this paper are simply pointers towards presence. Individuals find that different techniques and strategies resonate differently. In the English language, the word "present" has three distinct meanings: here, now, and a gift. My intention for the workshops is to give the gift of identifying presence to the instructional coaches who will in turn promote the instructional practices in the schools with the teachers they support. This would then transmit to the students, which would begin to reverse the statistic stating that American children are the second least happy children in the world, after the United Kingdom.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Lisa J. Lucas is currently an Assistant Professor at West Chester University where she works in the College of Education, teaching, advising, coaching and supervising pre-service teachers. She has worked extensively with adult learners, both as a faculty member and as a former Director of Organizational and Professional Development in a suburban school district. In addition, Dr. Lucas provides consultation and coaching in numerous school districts. Her areas of expertise include: literacy, student engagement, differentiated instruction, instructional coaching, and presence based teaching, leading and learning strategies.

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