

## **Faculty Development: Exploring Well-Being of Educators**

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### **Abstract**

This pre-post study explored mindfulness and presence among college educators as part of a faculty book club. The intent was to encourage and support faculty to implement strategies from the book to reduce stress by fostering self-care and work-life balance, both inside and outside of the classroom. Reading, discussing, and practicing presence impacted faculty members' personal and professional state and helped them be more present with themselves, their students, and their colleagues, and more effective, overall, as educators.

### **Introduction**

While being a professor is a rewarding career, individuals outside of academia do not realize it can be a stressful profession. The professor's job entails teaching, researching, advising students, and serving his or her university and community at large. As a result, evidence suggests that faculty members in higher education experience high levels of stress and occupational burnout (Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2021; Fowler, 2015; McMurtrie, 2020). In addition, growing workloads with limited time, shrinking budgets, high psychological demands, mental overload, and the recent emergence of COVID-19 have caused a substantial change in university teaching (Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2021; Roos & Borkoski, 2021; Schmidt-Crawford et al., 2021; Tugend, 2020) leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal fulfillment (Fernandez-Suaraz et al., 2021). Institutions of higher education must focus on promoting and maintaining overall wellness (Melnik et al., 2021). Training for this occupation requires expertise in one's field without recognizing that additional coping skills are needed to handle the multiple expectations and responsibilities required to be an effective professor. This paper shares a faculty development initiative that supported professors to handle their stressful work environment through connection, and self-care practices designed to increase presence and enhance their teaching abilities.

### **Literature Review**

Tenure-track professors often place work-life balance and self-care at the bottom of their priorities. Millera et al. (2018) conducted a study that informs the development of self-care to offset the deleterious effects of academia. Practitioners in modern higher education settings must adopt a commitment to self-care that focuses on the body, mind, and emotions, along with a healthy work-life balance (King-White & Rogers, 2018). One step in the right direction toward prioritizing self-care can occur at a faculty's institution, by including self-care-focused faculty development opportunities (Millera et al, 2018). Most professions require continual learning, yet it is neither a workplace requirement nor a professional obligation for most collegiate faculty to regularly participate in faculty development. It is common for faculty to equate continued learning with research in their discipline, but not their teaching pedagogy, nor their well-being. Jennings (2015) suggests that it's critical to embed an intentional, integrated focus on mindfulness and social-emotional learning into professional faculty development programs.

This article shares how one university's center for teaching and learning hosted a book club to explore the topic of self-care and presence for faculty. The intent was to create learning conditions that not only foster more collaborative colleagues and more engaged students but also support work-life balance for both populations. The text chosen was, *Practicing Presence: Simple Self Care for Teachers* (Lucas, 2017). This unique text was designed to help educators reduce stress by promoting self-care and inner awareness. Welch (2020) equates presence with a calm, clear, open, receptive state of mind that can also be called mindful awareness. Practicing presence facilitates awareness and self-regulation which helps cultivate and maintain a calm, focused mind. This provides the space for optimal teaching and learning. As a result, educators become present, and more emotionally responsive, which positively impacts student engagement and achievement. In the past decade, research to assess the efficacy of integrating contemplative practices, such as mindfulness into the field of education has surged (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Several models describing how contemplative practices are incorporated into colleges and universities have been outlined by Wall (2014), but most models focus on integrating mindfulness into the classroom to support students.

There is somewhat of a gap in the research on the implications for the well-being of faculty in higher education. Parker Palmer who addresses issues in education stated, "The only gift we have to give to our students is ourselves" (Palmer, 2009, p12). He also notes that when teachers feel pressure, they cannot give students this gift of themselves, as they will not feel open and relaxed to fully relate to students. Personal practices that help develop mindful teaching emphasize the importance of building and maintaining good personal interactions between students and educators and help educators create a rapport with their students (Gruber et al., 2010). Kahane (2011) discussed that when he began an approach to "presence" in teaching, he experienced, "An ability to be present to the nuances of the classroom in each moment, a sense of fundamental adequacy rather than lack, an open non-judgmental curiosity about my own experience, and skilled ways of supporting others in this kind of learning" (Kahane, 2011, p. 20).

This article shares preliminary results from surveys that were collected after book club participants finished the text, incorporated some of the practices in the book, and participated in virtual book discussions. The intent is to determine if reading, discussing, and practicing presence impacted faculty members' personal and professional climate and helped them be more present with themselves, their students, and their colleagues, and more effective, overall, as educators.

## **Methodology**

The university's *Committee for Excellence in Learning and Teaching* sponsored a book club for faculty for a fifteen-week semester that included three scheduled meetings. All university faculty received notification of the book club using a faculty-wide e-mail communication, to reserve a copy of the book, *Practicing Presence: Simple Self-Care Strategies for Teachers* (Lucas, 2017). Fifty faculty signed up for the book club meetings and received a complimentary copy of the book. Participants received an e-mail from the book club coordinator with the "Fuels and Drains" instrument that they were encouraged to complete before the first book club meeting. This instrument was created by Lucas (2017) and utilized the theory of increasing the positive aspects of one's life while reducing the negative aspects by working to eliminate things that are personally draining and fueling up with more positive practices; referred to as "Fuels and Drains" categorized by relationships, environment, body-mind-spirit, work, and finances (Rath, 2004). Participants were also invited to complete a survey that included the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) [1] at the first book club meeting. After the third and last meeting, participants who attended at least two of the three sessions and completed the initial survey were invited to take the follow-up survey that included the MAAS and "Fuels and Drains," with three additional questions that included the rating of the following from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. Having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club helped me to increase my mindfulness.

2. I have increased my fuels and decreased my drains regarding: Relationships, Environment, Body-Mind-Spirit, Work, o Finances since having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club.
3. Having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club helped me to be more present and effective as an educator, in the classroom, and for my students.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 [2] was used for quantitative analysis of these survey questions using a paired *t*-test and descriptive statistics. An additional open-ended question, “Elaborate on skills that you gained by practicing presence in your personal life and as an educator” was qualitatively analyzed and coded by the three researchers to generate categories and themes. Institutional Review Board approval was provided by the university to conduct this study and only participants who signed the informed consent completed the survey.

## Results

Of the fifty participants who signed up for the book club in the fall semester of 2021, the average attendance for the three meetings in September, October, and November was 28. Twenty-five participants finished the pre-survey, and fifteen participants completed the post-survey. Of those, seven completed all the questions and were matched with the initial survey. Twenty-one participants answered all the follow-up questions.

No statistical significance was found between pre-and post-survey results ( $n=7$ ), for improvement in mindfulness, increasing their “fuels” and decreasing their “drains.” In response to the additional questions ( $n=21$ ), 90.5% of participants agreed to strongly agree that having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club helped them increase their mindfulness (mean score of 4.33); 71.4% of participants agreed to strongly agree that they increased their fuels and decreased their drains since having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club (mean score of 4.05); and 76.2% of participants agreed to strongly agree that having read *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club helped me to be more present, and effective as an educator, in the classroom, and for my students (mean score of 4.05); see Figure 1.

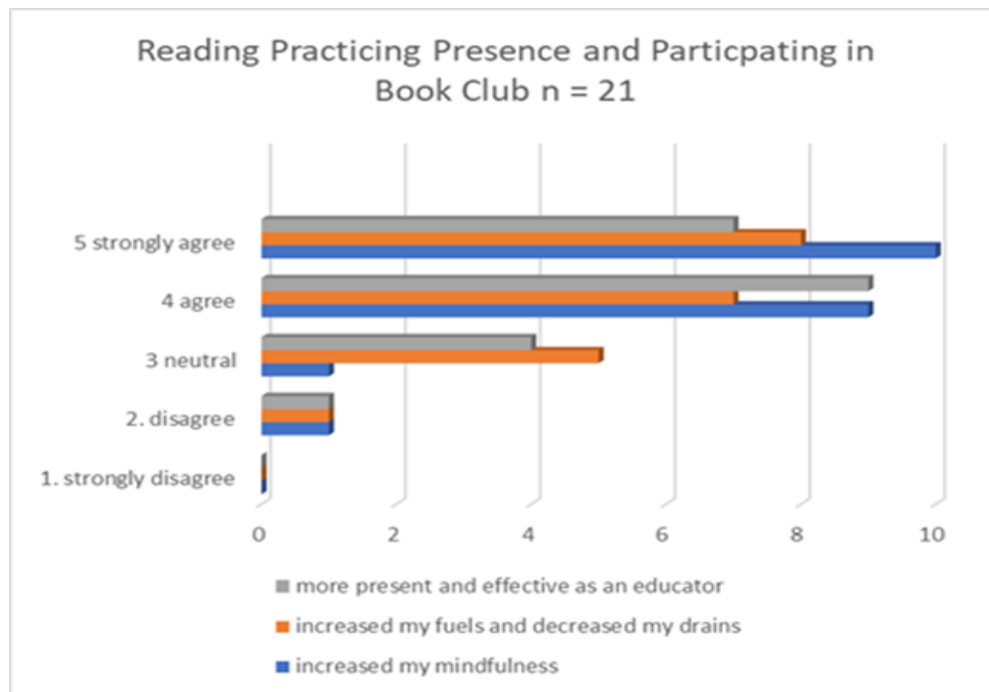


Figure 1: Outcome of reading practicing presence and participating in the book club.

Table 1 summarizes the categories and themes derived from the question, “Elaborate on skills that you gained by practicing presence in your personal life and as an educator.”

**Table 1**

*Core Constructs of Educators’ Practicing Presence in their Personal Life and as Educators*

Category reflective of the core constructs of educators’ practicing presence	Themes	Frequency
Practicing personal presence	● Practicing mindful activities and self-care	9
	● Having a more positive perspective	5
	● Taking small steps to decrease “drains”	4
	● Feeling more present and reflective	2
	● Maintaining greater work-life balance	2
	● Handling stressors better in all areas of life	2
	● Gaining more control over personal health	1
Practicing presence in the classroom	● Incorporating mindful techniques as an educator in the classroom	4
	● Utilizing mindful strategies with students	4
	● Modeling presence for students	1
Collaborating in a book club	● Sharing challenges and strategies of teaching with colleagues	3
	● Reading the book created positive life changes	3
	● Creating an opportunity to get together with people from many disciplines	2
	● Hearing how others are incorporating presence into their classroom and personal lives	2
	● Sharing mindful strategies from the book with friends, family, and colleagues	1

The most common construct derived from this survey question was “Practicing Personal Presence” followed by “Collaborating in a Book Club” and “Practicing Presence in the Classroom.” The most frequent theme was practicing mindful activities and self-care:

*“Skills I have gained are consciously establishing ways to incorporate the recommended techniques in my personal life that include “seeing with fresh eyes,” quiet reflection, gratitude journal, and being more aware of how I begin and end my day.”*

followed by having a more positive perspective:

*“I practice presence every day now and start every day on a more positive note. I appreciate simple things more now, like the beautiful trees behind my house. It’s helped me to control how stressed I get about certain things.”*

and incorporating mindful techniques as an educator in the classroom and utilizing mindful strategies with students:

*“I think I am a more thoughtful teacher.” and “I utilize breathing and stretching and other mindful activities before class and notice better participation from students.”*

## **Discussion**

Researchers are beginning to explore how mindfulness might provide the skills educators need to manage their stress and create socially and emotionally supportive learning environments (Jennings, 2015). The concept of practicing strategies to be more mindful teachers to be better equipped to meet the needs of their students is supported by Palmer (2009) and Gruber et al. (2010). Kahane (2011) noted that having an approach to being present in teaching helps support others in their learning. Most participants felt that reading *Practicing Presence* and participating in the book club helped them increase their mindfulness, increase their fuels and decrease their drains, and helped them to be more present and effective as an educator.

Practicing mindful activities and self-care was the most common skill that participants reported after participating in the book club. Educators have many demands placed on them that can influence their ability to teach effectively (Blymire & Yacapsin, 2020), and practicing self-care can improve their morale and offset the deleterious effects of academia to create a healthy work-life balance (King-White et al., 2018; Millera et al., 2018). Practicing presence in the classroom by incorporating mindful techniques as an educator and utilizing mindful strategies with students were additional themes derived from participants. Shapiro et al. (2011) supports the use of mindful strategies in the classroom as helping the overall well-being of students. Collaborating in a book club by sharing challenges and strategies of teaching with colleagues and hearing how others incorporated presence into their classrooms and personal lives was another theme generated from the data. McMurtrie (2021) highlighted the importance of creating networks with colleagues and holding forums for faculty to talk freely about teaching, particularly during stressful times. The timing of this topic is paramount due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators and students (Fernandez-Suarez et al., 2021; Tugend, 2020) highlighting the importance of collaboration, flexibility, and self-care (Cicco, 2020).

## **Limitations and Further Directions**

The most significant limitation of the study is the sample size, as is sometimes the case in pilot studies of mindfulness with unique groups (Bluth, et al., 2015). Approximately one-quarter of participants in the book club completed the MAAS and “Fuels” and “Drains” component of the survey, which was likely a contributing factor in the lack of any significant change. This low completion could be due to having to score 50-items on each “Fuels” and “Drains” instrument, which was a time-consuming task. Another limitation is that the results cannot generalize to all higher education institutions; every institution has a unique structure and culture. Last, there is noticeably something missing when faculty meet online in a virtual format. A face-to-face comfortable relaxed setting would most likely be more appealing to some participants.

## **Conclusion**

The completed study along with existing literature demonstrates that student experiences in the classroom and with faculty are one of the most important factors in student outcomes, ranging from timely graduation, sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy, to other important psychosocial outcomes associated with learning and graduation. Incorporating presence and mindfulness both personally and in the classroom on behalf of faculty, helps to create a classroom environment of support, trust, and good rapport between faculty and students. Creating this type of classroom and institutional environment requires a great deal of support from the institution, but when prioritized and cultivated, leads to teaching excellence. The Committee for Excellence

in Teaching and Learning, through this book club, provided this support for faculty at the institution where this study took place. The positive outcomes of this study showed this endeavor helped participants increase their mindfulness, increase their fuels and decrease their drains, and aided them to be more present and effective as an educator, in the classroom, and for their students. In addition, participants reported practicing mindful activities and self-care, incorporating more mindful techniques as an educator in the classroom, and sharing challenges and strategies of teaching with colleagues. Faculty development can be perceived as another task for overwhelmed college educators; however, an intentional focus on presence and self-care can help balance the multiple demands of the profession and enhance the ability to provide optimal teaching and learning experiences for both students and faculty.

## Endnotes

[1] Brown & Ryan (2003). Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), a 15-item scale designed to assess a core characteristic of mindfulness.

[https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/The\\_Mindful\\_Attention\\_Awareness\\_Scale\\_-\\_Trait\\_\(1\).pdf](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/The_Mindful_Attention_Awareness_Scale_-_Trait_(1).pdf)

[2] Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), is a versatile and responsive program designed to undertake a range of statistical procedures.

<https://lo.unisa.edu.au/mod/book/view.php?id=646443&chapterid=106605>

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