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Citation

Gilbert, Francis. 2019. 'Improving your results without teaching to the test'. In: Improving Results without teaching to the test: four key lessons. Cambridge, United Kingdom 27 March 2019. [Conference or Workshop Item]

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IMPROVING YOUR EXAM RESULTS WITHOUT TEACHING TO THE TEST: 4 KEY LESSONS, F. GILBERT

INTRODUCTION

Watch the video on the PP.

Question:

What are the similarities with Basil Fawlty and a teacher who is obsessed with teaching to the test?

LESSON 1: BE MINDFUL

What's the point? Why and how can mindfulness improve test results?

Mindfulness is all about learning to live in the present moment; it is a “learning process”, a pedagogy where you learn to become more aware of what is happening right now. There is some evidence that mindfulness can improve test scores, but more importantly, mindfulness has been shown to improve cognitive functioning, stress levels and memory retention, and it reduces stress amongst teachers in particular. There is also strong evidence it helps students’ mental health when they are taking exams, improving their well-being (Galante et al. 2018).

Definitions

There is often confusion about what exactly mindfulness is. Having practised mindfulness for several years now, attended training sessions and read widely about it, I believe one of the best ways of thinking about mindfulness is to divide it into both formal and informal practices:

- **Formal mindfulness** involves deliberately set aside time to meditate or focus upon sensations in your body and mind. It is probably what most people associate mindfulness with: sitting in a chair or lying on the floor and focusing on your breathing, becoming aware of the river of thoughts and feelings within you (Hinley et al. 2015).
- **Informal mindfulness** is about learning to live as fully as you can in the moment, becoming aware of the sensations in your body; the smells, textures, temperatures, tastes, sounds, sights, thoughts and feelings both within and outside. Informal mindfulness can be practised anywhere; as soon as you “switch on” to the present moment in an accepting and non-judgemental way you are practising this form of mindfulness (Hanley et al. 2015).

How?

1. Practise formal and informal mindfulness yourself, both formally and informally.
2. Promote mindful writing: students mindfully copy out a favourite poem or song, really living with the words.
3. Do the raisin meditation with your students. https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/raisin_meditation
4. Only encourage meditation with your students if you do it yourself.
5. Promote mindful reading (see Lesson 3).

TASK: Now devise either a visual organiser, summary, poem or any other type of note to summarise the content; your views; ask questions.

THE THREE-STEP MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

OK, let's have a go at brief mindfulness meditation: adopt a relaxed but upright position in your chair, bringing your back away from the chair and sitting up straight in a relaxed way. Now shut or lower your eyes, putting away all distracting things (definitely phones!) and just take a minute to see how you are feeling in your body and your mind. What feelings are in your legs, your arms, your chest, your throat, your head?

Now, take a few minutes and concentrate upon your breath, follow your breath as you breathe in, and follow it in your mind as your breathe out. If necessary, say:

I am breathing in (as you breathe in)

I am breathing out (as you breathe out)

Variations on this might be:

I am breathing in and calming myself

I am breathing out and smiling

Or:

Each in-breath is a new beginning

Each out-breath is a letting-go

Don't worry if you become distracted by thoughts or feelings, just accept them as they are, and then return to concentrating upon the breath. The whole point of the mindfulness practice is to learn to bring your attention back to your focus. This is why it is so helpful for developing your practice because once you get used to returning back to the focus of your breath, you will also learn to return to other things you have to focus upon such as dealing with the challenges of the job.

Once you have done this for two or three minutes, imagine that your breath is going through your whole body, that your in-breath is soothing and calming your throat, your chest, your arms, your legs and going right down to your feet. And then as you breathe out, imagine the breath soothing and calming your body like a warm bath as it rises through your feet, your legs, your abdomen, your chest, your throat and head.

Take a moment to notice the sensations in your body: how are you feeling in your stomach, in your legs, arms, feet, and the surface of the skin?

Now open your eyes. Remember to do this practice as much as you can, learning to do it with your eyes open if necessary. Do it before you get into every chapter of the book, learning after you have concentrated upon your breath and body to mindfully reflect upon the topic in hand. This means not thinking about the topic, but rather seeing what images, thoughts or feelings the topic throws up at you as you pay attention to it. It's a tricky process which takes a bit of practice to do, but once you get the hang of it, you'll understand why it's so useful: it enables you to discover your underlying thoughts and feelings about a topic, rather than 'thinking it logically through'. This can be a liberating thing.

What I have just outlined is what is called a '[3 step mindfulness](#)' meditation (Williams and Penman, 2014) . To recap it involves these 3 things:

BEING AWARE

Becoming aware of your thoughts, feelings and sensations in your body (about 30 seconds)

CONCENTRATING UPON YOUR BREATHING

Concentrating upon your breathing in and breathing out, and if distracted by thoughts/feelings returning to concentrating upon the breath by saying in your head 'breathing in, breathing out', or 'In...Out'.

BECOMING AWARE OF YOUR BODY

Expanding your awareness to become aware of the sensations in your body.

Mark Williams provides a guided example of it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8&t=3s>

LESSON 2: ADOPT A LEARNING ORIENTATION

What's the point?

'For nearly 25 years it has been known that students with more elaborated conceptions of learning perform better in public examinations at age 16-19. Lower attainment at that age is correlated with perceived pressure from adults, while higher attainment is positively related to independence, competence and a meaning-oriented approach to learning. The more students are supported as autonomous learners, the higher their school performance...' (Watkins, 2010: p. 9)

What is a learning orientation? Discuss with a partner & work it out from this chart (Watkins, 2010: p. 3), adding your own notes.

Learning Orientation	Performance orientation	What have you learnt? Implications for teaching?
We believe that effort can lead to success	We believe that ability leads to success	
We believe in our ability to improve and learn, and not be fixed or stuck	We are concerned to be seen as able, and to perform well in others' eyes	
We prefer challenging tasks, whose outcome reflects our approach	We seek satisfaction from doing better than others	
We get satisfaction from personally-defined success at difficult tasks	We emphasise competition, public evaluation	
We talk to ourselves: when engaged in a task we talk ourselves through when the task is difficult	We display helplessness: "I can't do X"	
A concern for improving one's competence	A concern for proving one's competence	

How?

Learning journal	Exam exercise book	What have you learnt? Implications for teaching?
<p>It's like Blake's notebook: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-notebook-of-william-blake</p> <p>Includes 'rough work': crossings out, corrections, reflections upon mistakes.</p>	<p>Has to be 'best' more or less immediately</p>	
<p>Personal responses: thoughts and feeling about tasks and texts. These personal responses are developed, improved, peer and self-assessed.</p>	<p>Personal response are marginalised in favour addressing 'marking criteria', the 'correct' answer.</p>	
<p>Students are given choices about what they can do, working out what activities help them learn the best.</p>	<p>There are very few choices; everyone has to do the exam question, the teacher-set task.</p>	
<p>It is meta-cognitive and self-regulatory: reflections upon what is interesting about texts/topics/activities, e.g. What I learnt, and What I would like to learn more about.</p>	<p>No room for meta-cognition except in highly regulated ways, e.g. EBI/WWW</p>	

Watkins writes:

Strategies may play a role, but some may be more important than others. Distinguishing:

- *metacognitive study strategies (e.g. monitoring)*
- *deep strategies (e.g. meaning-making)*
- *surface strategies (e.g. rehearsal)*
- *resource management strategies (e.g. time)*

Evidence from university students shows that metacognitive study strategies are more important for achieving high exam scores. And these strategies strongly link to a learning orientation... (Watkins, 2010)

TASK: write a reflection or discuss with a partner your own experiences of teaching to the test or not. What do you think of the research findings cited by Watkins? Why do you think learning-oriented students do better in exams and yet do less formal exam preparation than many other students?

LESSON 3: PROMOTE READING FOR ENJOYMENT

What's the point?

The Department for Education (2012) write:

There is a growing body of evidence which illustrates the importance of reading for pleasure for both educational purposes as well as personal development (cited in Clark and Rumbold, 2006).

- *Evidence suggests that there is a positive relationship between reading frequency, reading enjoyment and attainment (Clark 2011; Clark and Douglas 2011).*
- *Reading enjoyment has been reported as more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002).*

There is a positive link between positive attitudes towards reading and scoring well on reading assessments (Twist et al, 2007).

- *Regularly reading stories or novels outside of school is associated with higher scores in reading assessments (PIRLS, 2006; PISA, 2009).*
- *International evidence supports these findings; US research reports that independent reading is the best predictor of reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, 1988).*
- *Evidence suggests that reading for pleasure is an activity that has emotional and social consequences (Clark and Rumbold, 2006).*
- *Other benefits to reading for pleasure include: text comprehension and grammar, positive reading attitudes, pleasure in reading in later life, increased general knowledge (Clark and Rumbold, 2006)*

What is reading for pleasure?

Reading for pleasure is about learners becoming aware that reading is a social act, and that it can take many different forms in our modern society: it can be about reading online, 'reading' films, shopping lists, text messages as much as reading 'real books' or reading in an exam. It is about finding texts which are meaningful for young people, and nurturing discussion about them. (FG summary of Cremin & Moss, 2018).

It is also about promoting a RfP across **all subjects**:

Initially uninterested and worryingly negative about potentially reading science books, the young people clearly became hooked over the project. The key influencing factors appeared to be the very high quality of the books selected, the optional activities linked to them and the opportunities that were afforded to talk about these engaging texts and to share them with friends and family. (Cremin & Moss, 2018, p. 2)

How?

Reading for Pleasure	Exam reading	What have you learnt? Implications for teaching?
Teachers share all the texts they are reading, including multi-modal texts: films, posters, receipts, articles, books, poems	Reading is restricted to what might come up in an exam	
Reading has a purpose: informational, motivating, pleasurable, meaningful, manageable	Reading only has meaning because it is related to the exam	
Reading is social: students perform texts to each other, they read in pairs/groups, they form book groups	Reading is solitary, individual, competitive, fear-filled.	

PLANNING

Planning and preparing for a RfP curriculum is important:

Amelia Hempel Jorgensen and colleagues at the Open University report on a research project that used a case study design to investigate what happens when schools teaching in areas of high social disadvantage champion reading for pleasure. Using the concept of “pedagogies of poverty” (Hayes et al., 2009), they were aware that those schools under greatest pressure from a high accountability system often retreat into the least imaginative and most restrictive pedagogy, focused on drilling students into mastering basic competences. They hoped that a commitment to reading for pleasure might open up new possibilities for pupils to express a sense of agency in the classroom and thus take more control over their own learning. (Cremin & Moss, 2018, p. 3)

Reading for Pleasure	Exam prep list	My learning? Implications for practice?
Year 7: <i>Sputnik's Guide to Life on Earth</i> (2016) by Frank Coterell Boyce + Reading for Pleasure project	Year 7: Thomas Hardy's <i>The Withered Arm</i>	
Year 8: <i>One</i> by Sarah Crossan + Reading for Pleasure project	Year 8: Charlotte Bronte's <i>Jane Eyre</i>	
Year 9: <i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas + Reading for Pleasure project	Year 9: Sherlock Holmes' short stories	
Year 10: A selection of horror stories by Philip Pullman, Joan Aitken, M.R. James, Stephen King and other modern authors + Reading for Pleasure project	Year 10: Dr Jekyll	
Year 11: <i>The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>	Year 11: Dr Jekyll	

MINDFUL READING

Mindful reading involves being fully present with what you are reading. There are many ways to read mindfully, but as a start I would recommend these steps.

1. Take a moment to focus on your breathing and your bodily sensations before embarking on your reading session.
2. Notice the textures of the device you are reading on. Is it a book or a screen? Notice the way the light plays on the page; feel the weight, smell and covering of your reading device.
3. Now, being conscious of your breathing, start reading your material slowly. If you want, read the words aloud, or use your finger to follow the text. Stop every few sentences and shut your eyes, considering the meaning of what you have read, returning to concentrating upon your breathing if you lose focus.
4. Take your time. Read and re-read if necessary. If you are repeatedly distracted, be patient and kind with yourself, telling yourself it's OK to feel confused, impatient, stupid etc. The point is that you accept the way your reading material makes you feel, whatever those feelings are.
5. When you have finished reading, take a moment to shut your eyes and just be with the words you have read.

MINDFUL READING AND MOVEMENT

1. The teacher reads a line expressively/mindfully, the whole class repeat it together
2. The teacher reads it again, and this time does some mindful movement to accompany it; the class copy this.
3. The teacher does the above two or three more times, and then the class work in pairs/groups to devise their own reading of the poem or to each other with mindful movement.
4. Students present their poems, and then write/reflect upon why they pronounced the poem in this way, and moved in the way they did.
5. Students mindfully memorise the poem, working in groups.

Now mindfully read this poem and *Reflect upon how you found the process. What effect did it have on you?*

The Trees by Philip Larkin

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

LESSON 4: USE MULTI-MODAL APPROACHES

What's the point?

In a classroom experiment, Shoemaker (2013) successfully used film versions of Shakespeare within the classroom. They taught five acts from Hamlet, using a different approach for each act. The approaches were traditional close-reading of the text, a parallel reading of the text using No Fear Shakespeare, a film adaptation, graphic novel and a drama approach. Shoemaker (2013) reports on the results, 'comprehension was highest when they had viewed the film adaptation of *Hamlet* [...] The two lowest scores were the close reading of act 1 and the parallel reading in act 2, with 75% and 74% respectively.' (Shoemaker, 2013, p.113).

Important point: There is a great deal of evidence that many learners need 'concrete' input before they move on to looking at more abstract issues.

What is multi-modalism?

Using a variety of different 'modes' (audio, video, pictures, objects) to stimulate learning. (Anderson & Macleroy, 2018)

How?

Mode	When? Why?	How?
Photographs and pictures	Stimulate interest in themes with challenging topics, such as poetry.	Get students to sequence pictures and then write a poem, story, playscript based on the sequencing.
Collages	Get students to devise rivers of reading posters.	Students bring in postcards, receipts, leaflets etc that they have read in the past week, and stick them onto a poster.
Video	To help develop storytelling (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016) To understand different interpretations of plays, novels, poems etc.	Learners make their own digital stories, narrating them; puppet shows, animations. Show different versions of Shakespeare plays to scaffold understanding
Objects	Objects are imbued with emotion, stories, and are context rich (Pahl et al, 2010)	Students tell stories about their lives, made up stories by sequencing objects. Blindfolded students learn about the senses by touching objects.

TASK: how might you bring some texts/topics you text by using multi-modal approaches strategically? Consider how you might teach 'The Trees' with pictures, or by taking students outside etc.

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- Watkins, Chris. (2010). Learning, Performance and Improvement. Research Matters series No. 34. Accessed at [here](#).

WEBSITES

- For reading for pleasure: <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/reading-for-pleasure-pedagogy>
- For 'evidence-based' teaching: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit>
- Digital storytelling: <https://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com/>