

Finding a Way to Stay: Making a Path for Sustainable Teaching

Four National Writing Project teachers reflected on the nagging exhaustion they witnessed in their ELA colleagues and responded by developing a theory of change that they call “sustainable teaching.”

After a long day at school, the Colorado State University Writing Project (CSUWP) leadership team sat in a busy campus coffee shop, shoring up the will to finalize our professional development programs for the summer. Kelly, a district literacy coordinator and coauthor of this article, observed: “What I’m seeing every single day is that teachers are *exhausted*. They need time and space to sit together and read and write. They need time to *just be*.”

Questions unfurled: *What would professional development that allowed teachers to “just be” look like? Was it OK to foreground the “development” part, even if it took time away from what normally constitutes the “professional”?*

As career educators fiercely dedicated to the profession, even we had to admit that our earnest teaching aspirations were being gnawed away by external demands. Quietly, wearily, angrily, we wondered if the dedicated teacher and the whole-hearted human being could coexist. Like Parker Palmer, we considered, “How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our students, ourselves, and educational reform?” (19).

In this article, we contend that the prerequisite for teaching courageously is developing staying power. As fewer enter the profession and attrition rises, a teacher shortage looms (Sutcher et al.). Yet we feel it’s still possible to share our passion for learning with students. We are confident that Paulo Freire’s promise still holds: reading the world and the word critically can help them rewrite it to challenge systemic

inequities. We stubbornly believe that “teaching to transgress” is the key to social change (hooks).

Consequently, we worked with a group of educators in 2017–18 to develop a theory of change we refer to as “sustainable teaching.” In the following sections, we describe our work in the Institute for Sustainable Teaching (IST). Cindy provides an overview of the program model and our working theory. Kelly then describes mindfulness strategies from her IST workshops, and Molly focuses on the embodied teaching practices she facilitated in the IST and is currently using with her own students. Emily concludes by describing how our sustainable teaching framework has profoundly shaped her classroom practice.

DEVELOPING A THEORY OF SUSTAINABLE TEACHING: CINDY’S PERSPECTIVE

As CSUWP director, I began recruiting educators for the yearlong IST in spring 2017. In recruiting materials, I explained that the IST was devoted to “helping teachers ‘fill the well’ by providing them space and time for personal restoration and professional renewal.” Our goals were to “explore the concept of *sustainable teaching* and develop the resiliency practices needed to stay in teaching for the long haul.” We borrowed the phrase *sustainable teaching* from a chapter title in Mary Rose O’Reilly’s book, *The Garden at Night: Burnout and Breakdown in the Teaching Life*, which we also read during the IST.

We determined to keep the IST small because of its intensive nature and ultimately selected fifteen

participants: teachers across disciplines and grade levels; instructional coaches; and coordinators in curriculum and in migrant education. Racial and gender diversity were also present among IST participants, who spanned the gamut of public and charter schools in rural, urban, and suburban contexts. Participants worked with students from diverse and homogenous populations, as well as undocumented students and nonnative English speakers.

The IST structure consisted of a weeklong summer workshop, followed by four Saturday seminars during the school year. In the summer workshop, we developed a working theory of sustainable teaching, discussed professional texts, learned mindfulness practices, and participated in workshops led by a local psychologist and a creative nonfiction professor. Mornings were devoted to writing, discussion of shared readings, and workshops. Afternoons included ninety minutes of independent “restoration time,” when participants were free to read and write whatever they wanted, walk, listen to podcasts, meditate, do yoga, or make art. Each day ended with an “intentional closing” to synthesize and reflect on our learning.

Our process for conceptualizing *sustainable teaching* was informed by Karen Lang and Liz Todd’s “theory of change framework” (2). They describe the framework as “a theory-based approach to planning, implementing or evaluating change at an individual, organizational or community level” (3). Theories of change “[privilege] the knowledge and experiences of stakeholders, who have their own ideas about how things work” (4).

Drawing from the wealth of our IST experiences in the summer workshop, participants constructed the following theory of change:

Sustainable teaching is fostering compassion for self while supporting the growth and development of our students. The goal of sustainable teaching is to create a collaborative community that values a balanced approach to education and enables all participants to thrive. Components of sustainable teaching include

- Cultivating a gracious mindset toward self and others
- Embracing our vulnerability
- Setting boundaries so that we don’t exhaust our resources
- Developing practices that will build resilience
- Establishing a repertoire of mindfulness practices and actually using them
- Reserving space for self-care, play, and laughter
- Creating and actively participating in a support system that fosters personal and professional growth
- Modeling for our students how to live and work sustainably

To test the validity of our theory and make refinements, we collected data from our teaching practice and personal lives to analyze together during our Saturday seminars, which followed the same basic daily structure from the summer. We also compiled a “living literature review” of print and online resources to sustain our practice (available at csuwritingproject.net). Finally, we used an online forum between Saturday seminars to discuss teaching experiences and Parker Palmer’s book, *The Courage to Teach*. In the following sections, we offer a closer look at elements of the IST that have helped to sustain our teaching.

MOVING PERSONAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICES INTO THE CLASSROOM: KELLY’S PERSPECTIVE

Formerly a high school English teacher, I now serve as secondary literacy coordinator in a large suburban school district. In both contexts, I have seen teachers exercising courage daily by doing a lot of “in spite of” work; that is, no matter how effectively they teach, they are expected to do more in the face of school safety concerns, shifting curricular expectations, ever-increasing mandates, and parental demands, not to mention persistent inequities related to race, class, and gender identity. Even though they can be skilled allies for students amid these challenges, teachers themselves may not have the resources and habits of mind needed to sustain their own teaching practice and personal well-being.

The goal of most professional development is to learn instructional strategies for the classroom,

which have definitely been byproducts of the IST, but as Cindy's description makes clear, our emphasis in the IST was as much on the personal as the professional. In addition to building a theory of action, we gave IST participants time to "just be" every day and helped them develop daily mindfulness practices to relieve stress and manage potent emotions that can derail teachers' work and growth both in and outside of the classroom.

Our work was framed by two definitions of mindfulness. The first, from Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (*Mindfulness for Beginners* 1). The second definition is from a podcast interview with Emily Bennington, a teacher of contemplative practices: "Mindfulness is the ownership of the space between stimulus and response." Combined, these definitions helped us learn that by pausing and non-judgmentally observing whatever is happening in the moment in the classroom, we can build a generative space that allows us to respond with intention rather than merely react.

I facilitated several mindfulness workshops during the IST with the goals of deepening teachers' understanding of mindfulness, sharing the science and tradition behind mindfulness practices in secular settings, including schools (Jennings; Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*; Nhat Hanh), and then *actually practicing* being mindful. I led the group in varied mindfulness practices, such as guided "body scan" meditations that develop awareness of the physical sensations experienced in the body from head to toe. (See tarabrach.com for an extensive library of guided meditations.)

We also engaged in role-playing exercises to simulate the application of mindfulness practices during stressful teaching moments. These exercises helped excavate the habitual emotional reactions and often harmful narratives that run through our heads in our daily interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and administrators. The simple mindfulness practice of recognizing when we are being hijacked by our emotions or knee-jerk reactions reminded us to instead pause and take a breath before responding to the situation at hand.

To cultivate the practice of being present in the moment, we also created art. For instance, we made "self-care wheels," like Emily's example, to serve as reminders of our commitment to maintain concrete daily mindfulness practices. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

Pinpointing the "knowing and doing" in classroom life is part of our official jobs, but we are far less

- DRAW or paint a circle on a piece of paper. The wheel will serve as a daily visual reminder, so take care to create something that you will enjoy seeing. Consider using special materials, such as colored pencils or watercolor paper.
- DIVIDE the circle into sections, like the spokes of a wheel, to represent different aspects of your life (e.g., physical, creative, emotional, professional, etc.). (Optional: Choose a word to serve as a guidepost for your year, and write it in the center of your wheel, or use it as a title.)
- WRITE specific intentions or practices in each of the sections. For example, writing "sit quietly" in a section labeled "teaching" might serve as a reminder to pause before students enter your room. "Play the piano" might belong in a section labeled "creative."
- POST the wheel in a visible location, and check it daily.
- UPDATE the wheel, as needed. Especially when you are struggling, it is a place to come back home to and land.

FIGURE 1
How to Create a Wheel of Self-Care

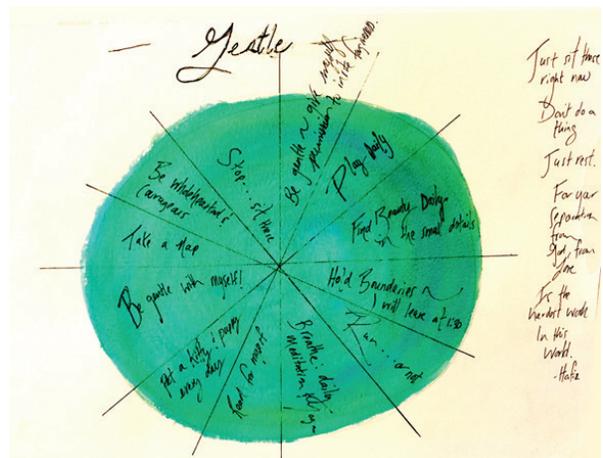


FIGURE 2
Emily's self-care wheel offers her reminders to rest and to play.

experienced at simply *being*. Mindfulness practices allow us to raise nonjudgmental awareness of the body's physical, mental, and emotional experiences so that we can build stores of resilience to access in and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, when we incorporate these practices in the classroom, we also model what mindfulness looks like for our students. As Jack Martin, a high school English teacher in the IST, put it: "The mindfulness strategies we've learned have allowed me to return to my better self, and my reaction to whatever hubbub the world has flung before me is more likely to be a response worth emulating rather than a reaction that may be regretted."

EMBODYING SUSTAINABLE TEACHING: MOLLY'S PERSPECTIVE

At first glance, our sustainable teaching theory may seem to apply only to the emotional, social, and pedagogical aspects of teaching. Throughout our IST workshops, however, I incorporated strategies based on scientific research regarding the positive impact of mindfulness practices on psychological and physical health. (See, for example, Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, which provides a comprehensive review of mindfulness practices such as meditation, yoga, and breathwork, accompanied by detailed research support, step-by-step instructions, and illustrations.)

In the IST, yoga and breathwork exercises, in particular, helped us to literally embody sustainable teaching. They also directly reflect the components of our sustainable teaching theory related to building resilience strategies and avoiding exhaustion so that we can exercise the courage necessary to remain in the profession. We initially began using these practices to support our own well-being; however, we soon found them to be so valuable that most of us began incorporating them into our work with students.

Teachers are subconsciously aware that the daily demands of our jobs cause physical reactions. With every inevitable student confrontation, set of essays, parent phone call, district mandate, and meeting we attend, we may feel our stress intensify, our blood pressure rise, and our fatigue levels increase. That's because these stressors activate our sympathetic

nervous system, the one responsible for our "fight, flight, freeze" response. If left unchecked over time, these reactions can result in emotional burnout and lasting physical harm. But there is an antidote—the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, also known as the "rest-and-digest" system, which cultivates feelings of well-being and relaxation.

Becoming aware of our breath, then "checking in" with our bodies (i.e., noting where we are physically holding tension, such as in the jaw or shoulders) is the easiest way to activate our parasympathetic system. This is why we devoted time to physical movement and breathwork at every IST meeting. Breath exercises are as useful for students as they are for us. In fact, I use breathing exercises in my classroom that are identical to those we used in the IST. (See Figure 3 for a "breathing practice script.")

Take for example, my "puppy class," as I refer to the twenty-four boys and three girls in my third-period ninth-grade English. They enter my classroom each day, tails wagging, energy flying: "Ms. Robbins, can I turn this in? Can I tell you about my new video game? Can I tell you why I'm mad at my friend?" The breathing exercises we engage in at the start of each class allow students a moment to channel their energy, shut down the chatter, regulate their impulsivity, and to simply "be" with themselves.

When we first began this practice, students giggled and made faces at one another as they settled

Take everything off your desk, no distractions.
Place your hands either in your lap, on your chair, or folded on your desk.
Close your eyes or find a spot four inches in front of you to focus on. Take a moment to notice how you feel before we begin.
Let go of your last breath so you can inhale.
Inhale deeply to my count: 5-4-3-2-1.
Hold your breath at the top: 3-2-1.
Open your mouth and exhale: 5-4-3-2-1.
Hold at the bottom: 3-2-1.
(After 3 cycles): Notice how you feel now compared to how you felt when you walked into class today.

FIGURE 3
Breathing Practice Script

in, but now that we engage in breathwork every class period, students come in expecting it. No more faces. The giggling has stopped. The practice takes only minutes, yet the shift in energy is palpable, allowing students to regroup and channel their cognitive energy toward the serious work of becoming better readers and writers. The feedback from my most energetic students has been especially positive: they feel more focused and connected to each other, and they report having better behavior in my class compared with others. Furthermore, breathwork also helps *me* settle into the class period every bit as much as it helps my students.

Along with other embodiment practices like yoga, the breathwork exercises we learned in the IST reminded us that developing resilience is as close as our next breath. By checking in with our bodies in moments of stress and high energy, we and our students can regroup ourselves. Doing so can alter how we choose to move through our lives, spinning at each request, or cultivating the ongoing groundedness and resilience it takes to teach and learn.

MAKING SPACE FOR SUSTAINABLE LEARNING: EMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

I teach English to both mainstream and International Baccalaureate (IB) students. Recently, one of my tenth-grade Latina students delivered a persuasive speech about her fear for several family members due to threats to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Afterward, I asked her to reflect on what she learned about herself; she looked up, eyes holding in proud tears, and stated that she found hope in her words for her family's safety as they pursue their dream of citizenship.

Nearly two decades into my career, moments like these remind me to stop and consider: What good are lessons from *The Lord of the Flies* or *Fahrenheit 451* if they do not also cultivate compassion and courage? The sustainable teaching model we have developed in the IST depends on pausing to recognize these moments and to act with the same authentic courage we expect of our students—despite the adversity and fear we sometimes experience as teachers.

To bring sustainable teaching into my classroom, I made a deliberate commitment to “cultivating

a gracious mindset.” I started simply: before class one day, I boiled two pots of water, and students brought in packets of hot chocolate and tea. We carried garage-sale vintage mugs into the classroom, and students chatted about this luxury as they filled their cups. I soon discovered that simple acts of hospitality like this one welcomed vulnerability into my classroom. Then the unexpected happened: students wanted more, and not just tea.

As the semester progressed, and I shared what I was learning about sustainable teaching practices with my students, they asked me to incorporate short yoga videos to address their stress and anxiety from homework and extracurricular responsibilities. On any given day, we moved in-between the rows of desks and stretched out on all fours in “downward dog” pose. We giggled and embraced awkwardness, then got back to our persuasive research unit. At their request, I created a sign-up for students who wanted to provide snacks and a brief de-stressor, a routine we called “Friday Flow.” Students began sharing meditation apps like Headspace, “brain” music, and breathing exercises. Over time, we began to see how mindfulness practices—or simply stopping to breathe and play—were also informing the “mind” work in our classroom of analyzing and responding to literature.

My student Bailey described how our practices helped her balance the pressure and stress accompanying her busy schedule as an IB student and an athlete, but also surprisingly supported her work with literature:

I often tell my parents that I feel like I just do not have the time to breathe. I remember explaining to [my mom] that the confusing dystopian book *Fahrenheit 451* was finally starting to make sense after a much-needed break of hot chocolate followed by some yoga. [It] was so helpful for me to then be able to shift focus back to the book. English class is now something to look forward to during my day rather than just another class. It is my time to sit and take a breath.

Yes, these practices take time, some might even argue “time away” from required content. Thus, embedding them within and around our curriculum can feel risky—or courageous—depending on how we frame the larger purpose of our teaching. Nevertheless, I find a way to squeeze in a bit of play and

joy, both components of the definition of sustainable teaching. When our classroom pace becomes hectic, a student inevitably asks, “When are we going to pause, Ms. Richards? I need a break.” The first time this happened, I answered, “We are behind schedule!” Then I realized that if the theory of sustainable teaching is truly informing my work, it is no longer acceptable for me, or my students, to race frantically through the curriculum—or through life outside the classroom, for that matter.

My students are leading me to be the most courageous version of my teaching self by teaching me that the emotional risks required to live and work sustainably correlate with the intellectual risks inherent in learning about literature and writing. Even when it feels risky, my students remind me that they are why I teach and that there is always sanctuary in our classroom, if they—and I—are willing to be vulnerable.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As we weave it into our professional and personal lives, we continue to revise our theory of sustainable teaching. Experiences such as those described in this article have affirmed our hypothesis that our ongoing work in the IST is more than traditional professional development wherein the ultimate end goal is to develop best practices for teaching. While it is undeniably important for us to teach our students well, if we are to stay in this profession we so dearly love, we must also model for them what it looks like to live mindful, courageous lives. As we do so, O’Reilly’s question from *Radical Presence* compels

us to ponder: “How, given the noise of our lives, can we listen to our deepest call?” (40). [EJ](#)

NOTE

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Through haiku, students learn to slow down and become mindful of their natural surroundings, enabling them to capture experiences vividly through description. In this unit, students read and listen to examples of haiku, and learn about the history and structure behind this Japanese poetic form. They engage in both outdoor and classroom activities that encourage mindfulness and the exploration of sensory imagery. After writing, illustrating, and pairing their haiku with instrumental music, students collaborate with classmates in creating movements to their poems. The final project is a student compilation of choreographed haiku performances put to movement and music. <http://bit.ly/1RM1Bmv>



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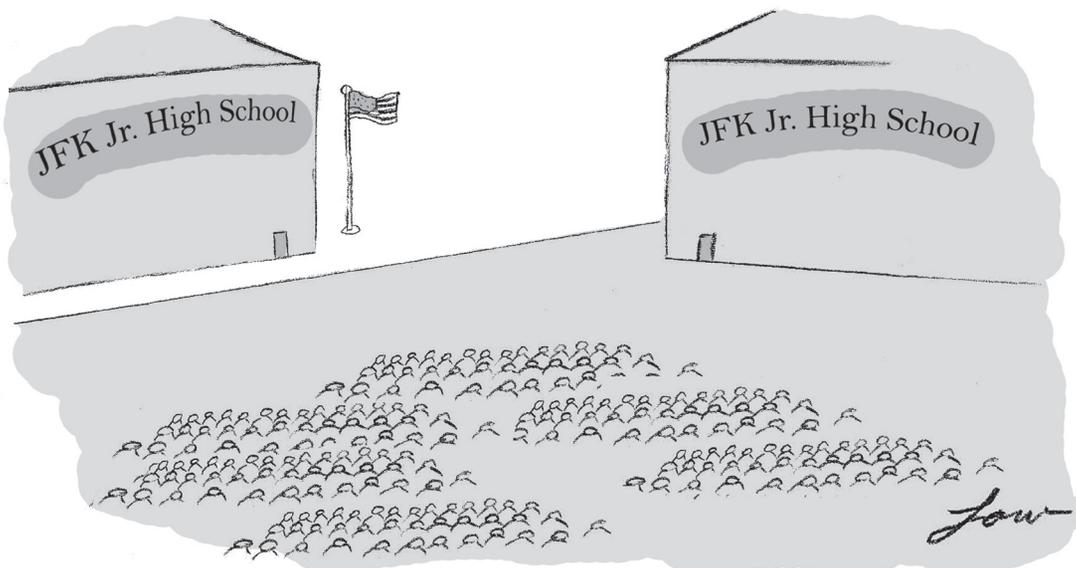
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The junior high school named for JFK and the high school named for JFK Jr. always make for a confusing first day.

David Low