
Lessons in mindfulness

Sarah Meader, teacher of art and design at St Aidan's Church of England High School, Harrogate, discovers how taking risks in class by encouraging 'mindless doodling' can create exciting and surprising results

What creates good mindfulness and an atmosphere of wellbeing? At home it is a comfortable environment with good music and a pad of paper with a pen. It's a simple way to manage my own wellbeing as a busy and tired art and design teacher.

At school, however, a sense of pressure and gloominess was emerging. Increasing moans about the number of assessments being set and the importance of hitting target grades filled the air. Sound familiar? But these were not teachers talking in our staffrooms, but the pupils, the same young people in whom we strive to promote a love of learning and provide a safe and stimulating learning environment.

And I too was feeling the pressure to complete a scheme of learning for year 8 (ages 12–13), assess it, feedback and begin the cycle again. It was time for a change.

The next, already planned, scheme of learning was scrapped. Instead, with the class, we discussed alternatives to improve



our mindfulness and our wellbeing. Much like myself and, I am sure many of you, pupils shared that music, background videos and mindless doodling often helps.

Initially this began as a one-off lesson, an hour to simply unwind and forget the assessments set for the week. We put on some pop music we could all sing along to, had a general chat about things we enjoy in our own time, as well as current news and events from around the world, and before we knew it our pages were full of exciting shapes and marks and, for some, wonderful creatures and characters.

By the end of the lesson the class reminded me of the very reason I had chosen to teach art, and I experienced the invaluable impact that art can have on our young people. By simply doodling away without set expectations or outcomes, singing along to music and having a good chinwag, the gloomy atmosphere had turned into a buzz of happy laughs and smiles.

Instead of planning a scheme of learning ahead of time, it was clear that the class should guide the next steps. Their desire and need for 'down time' was too prominent to ignore. As a teacher I often talk to pupils about taking risks in their own work, so it was time for me to lead by example. I took away the focus of learning specific techniques and skills, and the focus of a specific outcome, and focussed on promoting a safe atmosphere to investigate the ways in which pupils could step back and find calm. I wanted my pupils to engage in their own love of learning, and to identify areas of art and design that they enjoy as individuals.

The next lesson arrived and I had a group of beaming pupils standing at my door bombarding me with questions: 'Miss, are we doodling again today? Miss, can we listen to music again? Miss, can we watch some doodle videos that I found?' The enthusiasm was overwhelming.

As a class we began to explore the value of doodling, discussing how it can help each of us in different ways. For some

it meant quiet-down time, for others it was a way of expressing things that are difficult to do so verbally, and for some it was simply a fun way of exploring art to suit their personalities.

Pupils were encouraged to consider a range of backgrounds and surfaces, such as spraying inks, splatting paint, marbling, dying fabric and more. There was little emphasis on learning the 'correct processes'; I simply wanted them to enjoy playing with new materials. Each pupil explored a range of different doodle artists: Jon Burgerman, Kerby Rosanes, Pic Candle and Zentangles, who could help if pupils found it difficult to put pen to page. Each individual produced exciting, imaginative and personal responses.

A lasting highlight was the moment a young pupil approached me with the first smile he had worn in my classroom all year. It was a smile that confirmed my risks were successful. This young man had spent every art lesson

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previously stating 'I'm no good at art, there's no point, I can't draw', and now here he was, bouncing across the classroom, artwork clutched in his hands expressing how proud he was what he had created - he actually wanted take his work home! I am lucky enough that he agreed to let me borrow it for my display for a little longer. That even bigger grin is the very reason that doodling should be encouraged more frequently.

The power of the doodle should not be overlooked. ■

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