Finding Quiet within the Noise
How Japanese Traditions Can Help Today’s Students

By Linda Ensor

Mindfulness has become trendy around the world in recent years—but in Japan, it’s been ingrained into the culture for centuries.

—BBC Travel

Contemporary society is beset with physical and digital noise. News media supply a never-ending stream of sensational stories. Cellphones, computers, and video games distract teens and adults constantly, and almost unlimited access to one another through social media sites only increases tensions between and among individuals. It is almost impossible to quell the noise, and the effects of it are detrimental to individuals and societies.

In 2015, CNN conducted a study with researchers at the University of California at Davis and the University of Texas at Dallas to analyze the use of social media among thirteen-year-old students. The researchers determined that “there is no firm line between their real and online worlds.” Moreover, students’ parents are not immune to the effects of technology, as many adopt their children’s digital habits and fall prey to the same tensions and anxieties that teens do. Families are talking less and texting more. People use technology, especially cellphones, to maintain distances between them and others. Digital hyperconnections undermine interpersonal relationships, and, ironically, through these connections, people have become more personally isolated. One result of this hyperconnectedness is an alarming increase in the number of young people and adults who suffer from depression and anxiety.

To combat this situation, many schools have begun to include “mindfulness training” in the classroom, either as distinct instructional units or as specific classroom practices. Since some parents view such instruction as “teaching religion,” some schools have abandoned their “mindfulness” approach, either discontinuing established programs or refusing to implement them. Fortunately, however, teaching about traditional Japanese culture allows schools to avoid such concerns, as mindfulness practices and techniques can be incorporated into instructional units without any connection to “religious instruction.” By introducing students to haiku, the tea ceremony, and Zen gardening, teachers can expose students to Japanese history and teach about Buddhism by infusing mindfulness instruction into lessons focused on Japanese literature and traditions. It is important to reiterate to students that although learning techniques to foster mindfulness can be taught as part of understanding Zen Buddhism, similar techniques also have a rich heritage in contemplative Christianity dating back to the early followers of the faith. Also, many Japanese who don’t practice Buddhism or aren’t even Buddhists learned mindfulness techniques that are, in a secular sense, virtually embedded in Japanese culture. Additionally, such topics lend themselves to interdisciplinary studies, and classroom instruction is easily differentiated based on the ages and readiness levels of the students. In fact, these concepts and topics can be delivered to students on all grade levels, with age-appropriate modifications. A list of suggested teaching resources appears at the end of the paper.

Haiku

As soon as students understand the concept of “syllable” and can count, they can begin to compose haiku. That this type of poem has a regular form makes it more accessible to budding writers. More importantly, though, the tradition of haiku includes attention to the present while going beyond it. As Thomas Hills explains in Psychology Today, “A good haiku captures something that transcends the moment, but which at the same time can only be expressed ‘in the moment.’ It is both inside and outside the mind of the author and the reader.”

Writing haiku appeals to students because of its length (three lines, seventeen syllables), and teachers generally find it easy to teach. Notably, although the form is revered in Japan and has become popular throughout the world, there are only a few well-known haiku masters: Bashō, Issa, Buson, and Shiki. To introduce this form of poetry to students, then, teachers can direct them to locate information on the history of haiku and the works of Bashō, Issa, Buson, and Shiki.

After students complete their research, they can write haiku of their own. In connecting mindfulness and haiku, the teacher might direct students to focus on the writing process as it occurs so that students can count to their feelings and their environments. Their oral and/or written reflections can address questions such as these:

- What were you thinking while you were writing your haiku?
- How did you feel when you completed your poem?
Zen Gardening
Like the tea ceremony, Zen gardening is rooted in Japanese culture and the Buddhist tradition. The purposes of this exercise are to evoke feelings of tranquility and peace, and foster a strong sense of connection to nature and other people. Rocks and sand or gravel are used to represent the essence of nature, and the swirling lines have a calming effect on the mind. As students learn about Zen gardening, they can create their own in shoeboxes or other small containers. Once they finish their gardens, they can share them with their classmates and reflect on how they felt and what they learned in the process. Throughout the school year, students will be able to look at their gardens and, if they need to relieve stress, rake the sand or gravel and experience a sense of tranquility again.

Conclusion
Learning about other cultures helps students of all ages. As they explore the traditions of other countries, they grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Moreover, they benefit personally from participation in activities that foster tolerance, patience, and calmness. Such is the goal of using lessons rooted in the Japanese traditions of haiku, the tea ceremony, and Zen gardening to support mindfulness in the classroom. These lessons also address nationwide educational standards in English/language arts, world history, and the arts. Additionally, they accommodate the different learning modalities of the students and allow for differentiated instruction. Kinesthetic learners will enjoy the hands-on nature of creating small gardens, illustrating haiku, and participating in the tea ceremony. Visual learners will respond to the aesthetics of the gardens, the balanced staging of the tea ceremony, and the arrangement of the syllables and lines in their haikus. Auditory learners will appreciate the class discussions related to each topic, the power of the short poems being read aloud, and the quiet sounds associated with the tea ceremony. Regardless of their individual learning styles, as students participate in activities that require them to focus on the present and work deliberately, they become more connected to the world around them. They also learn how to cope more effectively with stress and noise as they find tranquility within their frantic, hyperconnected digital worlds and discover within themselves the strength required to address difficult situations. This may prove to be one of the most meaningful and profound learning outcomes that students realize in their school careers. ■
LINDA ENSOR is an English Teacher at Shore Regional High School in West Long Branch, New Jersey. An avid reader, she particularly enjoys East Asian literature, and she includes works by Japanese authors in her classroom instruction. When she is not working with her high school students, she can be found on a local river, rowing a single scull or coaching young rowers in larger boats. For her, these rowing sessions provide her with “moments of Zen” and allow her to practice mindful behavior.

What Should We Know About Asia?

NCTA TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAY

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


GENERAL TEACHING RESOURCES


Goral, Tim. “Schools are Teaching, not Preaching: Studying World Religions Can Foster Tolerance, but Public Schools Must Also Respect Students’ Rights.” District Administration 53, no. 11 (2017): 39-.


NOTES


HAiku

“Women are trying to identify a ‘hidden’ meaning behind the haiku, which can be found only when one is in a state of’ mind.” ReadWriteThink.org. https://tinyurl.com/mpz5juc.


TEA CEREMONY


ZEN GARDENING


