



F. Gilbert

### Finding your inspiration: using mindfulness and action research to nurture creative writing

The use of blindfolds is not that common in adult creative writing workshops, but I decided to take a risk and use them at the NAWE conference. I'm pleased I did because the experience of blindfolded people walking slowly and vulnerably in the conference room has become a powerful moment of learning for me and, I think, other participants.

Perhaps, I better explain before I go on any further.

I am a creative writer who has been practising mindfulness for some years now. I have recently sought ways of integrating mindfulness more fully into my life as a writer and teacher. I'm very lucky to be able to use NAWE conferences as a testing ground for my adventurous ideas! In previous years, I have included elements of mindfulness, but have felt that I never quite managed to show the links between mindfulness and creative writing, despite my best efforts to do so.

Mindfulness is both simple and complex. Put plainly, it means being aware of the riches of the present moment in an 'accepting' fashion: being conscious of the sensations in your body, cognizant of your thoughts and feelings, and accepting them however you are, whether you're in pain, feeling irritable, or extremely happy. In recent years, a huge industry has developed – stress-reduction and pain-management courses, professional development courses, self-help guides, websites, research, retreats – which mainly aim to help people nurture mindful practices. In some ways, the sheer ubiquity of mindfulness can be off-putting to creative people, who can prefer to 'go against the grain'.

In some quarters, mindfulness has been commodified and presented as a universal cure for stress in many spheres of life: some courses promise the earth but also cost it as well! Similarly, creative

writing courses have been marketized to boost the coffers of organisations like publishers, newspapers and universities. Seasoned mindfulness practitioner, conference presenter and participant in my workshop, the poet Claire Collison, reflected upon both of these issues via email and said:

Mindfulness has been given a bit of a mainstream profile, but I think once you practise, you realise it can't be a bolt-on, quick-fix. As for teaching, I took voluntary redundancy from teaching Creative Writing at a university because of the way students were being encouraged to treat the course as if they were customers, and I could give them a formula for a best seller. I choose to only teach now in the kind of settings (adult education, or as a visiting artist/writer in schools, etc.) where I don't have to sublimate my own beliefs, or even where it won't make me ill! So, the need for Mindfulness in our teaching and in our own writing is precisely because of the current educational climate, and the current publishing culture.

I have already written about some ways in which mindfulness can stimulate creative writing (Gilbert 2018). I've got better at doing this over time. I have basically used a simple 'Action Research' model to improve my practice which has included these elements:

- Planning a mindfulness practice such as breathing or sounds meditation, where people concentrate upon their breathing or the sounds around them respectively, and a writing activity to follow that, such as free writing, or a more structured writing task. This could include writing about a character who finds the sounds around them unacceptable and learns to accept them.
- Developing resources (PowerPoints, worksheets, instructions) and teaching the above activities.
- Collecting feedback and reflecting upon what went well, and what could be improved.
- Re-planning based on my own observations and the feedback received.

For the NAWA 2019 conference, I 're-planned' things to include more time for 'learners' to reflect upon their writing processes; how they felt about the mindful movement exercises, and a role-play which aimed to suggest and possibly symbolise what mindfulness can be.

For my session, I told the story of my adventures with mindfulness. I began by talking about how I was originally drawn to it in 2015 as a method for managing my own anxiety. I had picked up a copy of *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world* (Williams: Penman 2011) in a library in Whitechapel, London. It was a grey, gloomy afternoon for me. I'd read many self-help books, done my fair share of therapy, and was quite sceptical about some of the claims of mindfulness -- without fully knowing what it was. I had tried Buddhist meditation as a student and found it both painful (in terms of sitting cross-legged) and upsetting: shutting my eyes made me see and feel the cascade of anxious thoughts and feelings in my head and body. This is, of course, the point, but I didn't know that: I thought I was supposed to feel calm and relaxed. I wanted desperately to block out those unpleasant sensations. Reading Williams and Penman's book made me realise that I'd got meditation all wrong: you don't have to sit cross-legged, you don't have to sit for long periods of time, you aren't supposed to block out unpleasant sensations but rather come to accept them in a kindly, compassionate way.

I started meditating using the CD at the back of the book. I really connected with Mark Williams' voice, which I found and still find very soothing. Williams' intonation and meditations make me want to cry in a lovely, mindful way: his voice has a fatherly, compassionate quality which makes me feel very safe – a safety I think I have rarely felt around my biological parents. I found that meditating just a few minutes a day, using the three-minute breathing space (see below for an explanation) had a big effect within a few weeks. Suddenly, I was less irritable and anxious. I discovered that I stopped

losing my temper at things which used to make me boil over: for instance, my teenage son never tidying his bedroom!

I explained these points to the delegates in my NAWE conference workshop, and then we all did a three-minute breathing space meditation (Penman Williams 2011). This is where you spend a few minutes following your natural breathing, counting breaths, becoming aware of your thoughts and feelings, bringing acceptance to them, and then in the final minute or so becoming conscious of the sensations in the whole of your body. One of the delegates explained in their feedback afterwards that they felt this was a vital thing to do, to ground people, to relax them.

After this, I asked people to work out privately what inspired them to write, their 'inspirations'; I also asked them to think about what kills off the desire to write, what I called their 'expirations'. I pointed out that the root of the word 'inspire' is 'spire' which is *to breathe* in Latin. Together everyone wrote down a list of these things.

This is the chart I wrote:

Inspirations	Expirations
People saying positive things about my work	People saying negative, even slightly negative things about my work
Reading an inspiring poem or story etc which I want to emulate	Feeling I am just wasting my time; it's all been said before; I'm unimportant
Having a disturbing experience which I want to write about, 'get out of my system'	Being tired, feeling overworked
Feeling that I am creating a new world, escaping into an alternative reality	Feeling like I don't have a right to write; that I should be doing better things with my time

One participant, drama educator and actor, Emily Capstick, was happy for me to share her responses to this task. She wrote:

Inspirations are: places (that inspire settings); admiration (more of endeavour than work as this can make me feel intimidated by comparisons between my writing); need/hunger to write; joy of process; how it makes me feel; opportunities; calm.

Expirations: being patronised; other demands on my time, energy and thoughts; thinking about the size of the task; lack of ambition; lack of hope; judgement.

Another workshop member, Duncan Dicks, Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucester said:

- The inspirations/expirations list exercise. It gave me the chance to remind myself why I write – feelings of satisfaction and completeness when it goes well, the need to explore ideas and feelings, art in other domains especially sound, visual art, tactile sculpture (but also other sensory experiences such as smell and taste). And the things that make me not want to write – anxiety, low self-esteem, extrinsic things such as others' opinions, tiredness, and distraction. It was interesting to reflect that a lot of things on this second list can be directly addressed with mindfulness!

Following this exercise, I asked everyone to choose a familiar object they had in their possession and to meditate upon it, imagining that all their inspirations were entering that object; their confidence, the nice positive comments of people etc. I have been increasingly inspired to use objects in workshops because of the research of Kate Pahl whose book with Jennifer Rowswell, *Artefactual*

*Literacies* (2010) has transformed my thinking. It's made me see that objects can genuinely nurture both critical and creative thinking.

After the object exercise, I split people up into groups of three, and asked one of them to place their object in a particular place in the room and be blindfolded, and the other two to mindfully guide the blindfolded person around the room and enable them to re-discover the object. The blindfolded person, I explained, represented the 'ego', and had to enter this role fully, desperately wanting the object, saying to themselves, 'I want fame! I want success! I want prizes etc!' while the guides were there to embody mindfulness; to gently, compassionately guide the ego to their object, helping them to let go, in part, of their desires. It was a strange exercise, but I asked delegates to enact it in order to help them understand how mindfulness works. It was both an embodied and symbolic journey.

Emily Capstick wrote this dialogue as a creative response to the exercise after the workshop:

Ego: I need you  
Mindfulness: I'm here  
E: I trust you  
M: I am here  
E: Am I too passive? I need to do more.  
M: No, this is my time. This is who I am  
E: I won't get where I need to.  
M: There's time for that  
E: Are you sure?  
M: Yes  
E: Really sure?  
M: Yes.

Using Action Research principles, I asked everyone at the end about whether they felt any of the exercises could be improved. Duncan wrote:

I'm not sure whether the blindfold walk needs changing. I thought the sense of feeling constrained and wanting to stride out was a useful moment of self-awareness, especially in later discussion with others who didn't feel that way. Reflecting, I felt that although I hadn't roleplayed the ego, nevertheless this was still an ego-driven impulse not to let others control or constrain me. As the exercise continued and I felt the benefit of their support and guidance then I could recognise the value of having restrained this ego-impulse.

As regards projecting into the role of ego, and putting inspirations into the object. For me (not a natural role-player!), this would have taken more time and energy and imagination, I think. Maybe a minute or two of more guided process to get to that point would have helped me (something along the lines of deep breaths, feel your fingers around your object, take each inspirational thought separately and imagine it flowing around your body, down your arms into your fingers and into the object). I needed time to get to the point where I felt this object as a source, a totem, of power for me. Similarly, with role playing the ego. I'm sure this isn't the same for everyone, so I'm just giving these as personal observations.

Claire Collison presented at the conference on the creative practices she nurtured amongst the community for Walthamstow's London Borough of Culture 2019 and co-incidentally (or maybe it's part of the zeitgeist?) used blindfolds in her workshop as well. She said:

The blindfold exercise was very calm, mindful, trusting and also moving. I was almost in tears at the end of my time blindfold, and the two participants I worked with were equally touched.

This sort of feedback is very valuable. It shows why the 'Action Research' (AR) model is so useful for mindful teachers because AR builds in the notion of feedback and 're-planning'.

Above all, these responses make realise that the task was both very worthwhile but also risky in the sense that it needed to be explained, observed and reflected upon in a spirit of compassion and

humility. When a teacher asks their 'students' to do these kinds of intense, emotional exercises and they take them seriously, they should feel humbled by the extent to which their students, usually people you don't know, are willing to be vulnerable. The feedback I received makes me feel very connected to the participants in quite a haunting and poignant way, and to perceive our 'common' humanity.

Duncan's feedback makes me perceive that as a teacher I could dwell more on making people really project their inspirations into the object, and get them to role-play being the 'ego' more fully and/or reflect more deeply on the ways in which the ego can pull writers away from their inspirations.

I had a moment of the 'uncanny' with the exercise. I managed to project my inspirations into my phone – my chosen object. Meditating on my phone, I saw all my desires contracting into it. Suddenly, I felt free of all of my 'egotistical' desires for success, approbation, for status, perceiving the curious fictional nature of success. It only lasted a few minutes, but I saw quite clearly that a version of this exercise happens on a massive cultural level in our society. We project our desires into objects, both physical and psychic, and embark on our own blindfolded journeys seeking after success, usually without mindful guides to compassionately direct us. In this moment of the uncanny, I saw this clearly as I watched the blindfolded egos grope towards their objects in the class, and felt a great compassion towards all of us!

I shared this thought with Duncan by email, and he wrote back:

I like your moment of uncanny reflection! In my creativity course we talk about Amabile's conceptual model, and especially her analysis of motivation as extrinsic or intrinsic (1985). All those writer-ego things are very extrinsic, but also very much part of what we need to keep us going as writers, which gives a strange dichotomy: we need the extrinsic in the longer term, I think, but relying on it in the shorter term inhibits our creativity.

Other delegates responded positively to the session via email. One of them found the session useful because it helped them consider ways of being mindful as a parent. The psycho-therapist and poet, Jess Curtis, enjoyed the chance to 'be' – not to think too deeply and just be with themselves. She also pointed out that there are critics of mindfulness because it has its roots in Buddhism, but without the religious underpinning it can foster self-regard rather than compassionate awareness. Emily noted the links between the exercise and some drama exercises using blindfolds, where people are blindfolded and guided through metaphorical mazes or labyrinths.

Treating this session as Action Research has helped me be more mindful about it. Previously, I might have worried about not having given delegates the 'right' experience. Their comments were mostly positive, but even so it was clear that I did need to sharpen my pedagogy in order to get more of them to really feel that their object contained their inspirations and to dramatically occupy the role of the 'ego' and the mindful guides.

Other sessions during the conference gave me plenty of other inspirations for my work as a mindful creative educator. Emily led a fantastic session on drama techniques that can assist creative writers, showing us by enacting her ideas out immediately. So, we did things like adopt 'The Mantle of the Expert' (MoE 2019), perform 'Choral Reading' (Paige 2013), and enter 'Thought Tunnels' (The Drama Toolkit 2019). These techniques are too complex to explain here in depth (the references do explain them thoroughly), but suffice to say they all require people to imaginatively project themselves into different characters and situations by becoming that person, that situation (Needlands 2000). This approach strikes me as a very mindful because it is embodied; Emily both implicitly and explicitly encouraged us to notice how your body feels as you read certain words, act out a role, improvise another person's thoughts and feelings.

In another session, Alex Melville, a former student of mine on the MA in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths shared the fantastic unit of work on teaching creative writing for teenagers who are taking exams on the topic for their GCSEs (Melville 2019) in a 'slant' or unusual fashion. Again, I could see the links between what she was saying and mindfulness because she was arguing that students need to think deeply and imaginatively about the pictures that they are required to respond to creatively in their exams. Another former student of our MA, Eve Ellis, presented her pedagogical ideas for 'Tinkering with Texts'. Eve encourages her teenage students 'to tinker with pre-existing texts as well as to transform their own texts'. For me, her work enables her students to be genuinely mindful about the creative implications of poems by getting them to cut them up, to find objects that embody or represent these texts, to consider ways in which snippets of lines can be good starting points for their own poems. Both Alex and Eve have found innovative ways of getting their students to find inspirations in existing texts. In particular, their teaching makes learners feel free to manipulate canonical texts so that they create their own creative pieces. This is particularly important work to do in secondary schools – where both Alex and Eve work – as the curriculum has become increasingly moribund: the overt and covert message which is imparted to teenagers is that the literary canon is sacrosanct, 'great', not to be 'tinkered with', but to be analysed for its literary techniques with subdued reverence. Fortunately, there are still wonderful teachers like Eve and Alex around who are contesting these specious notions and encouraging their students to see the literary canon can be an exciting starting point for their own creative adventures.

To sum up, I've aimed to show here that creative educators can use both mindfulness and Action Research to inspire their teaching and their writing. Both practices have striking similarities in that they aim to create virtuous circles of planning, practising and trying again. The moment-by-moment experience of the journey is central to both.

*NOTE: Everyone named in this article gave their permission to be either quoted and/or named.*

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## Biography

Francis Gilbert is a senior lecturer in education at Goldsmiths, University of London. Having taught in various secondary schools for over twenty years, he was appointed course leader of the PGCE English programme at Goldsmiths in 2015. In 2016, he was appointed head of the MA in Creative Writing and Education. He has published many books, mainly focused upon educational themes, including 'I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out of Here' (Short Books 2004) and 'The Last Day of Term' (Short Books 2011). Most recently he published a novel, 'Snow on the Danube' (Blue Door Press 2019). He is a member of the NAWE Higher Education Committee and has presented at NAWE conferences for a number of years as well as publishing his research in NAWE's Writing in Education magazine and its academic journal Writing in Practice.