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# Teaching About Race, Racism, and Social Justice with Mindfulness: A Pedagogical Tool That Keeps Us All Engaged

**Marisela B. Gomez**

Social Health Concepts and Practices

*Teaching about race, racism, and social justice requires both instructor and student or participant to stay engaged. A public health pedagogy that includes mindfulness can help to ensure this engagement. This reflective piece will highlight the effects of mindfulness in general and specifically in helping to remain calm during education on potentially activating material. A description of the use of nature slides as bells of mindfulness to remind teacher and participants, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color/Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic, to pause and become aware of the breath, relax, and renew themselves will be discussed. This calm is necessary to assure that a pedagogy that moves us toward racial justice is accomplished with clarity and insight, while minimizing harm.*

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It's been about 10 years since I began using this pedagogical approach—using mindfulness—in teaching about structural racism and its effect on rebuilding abandoned communities. This came about as I began giving talks about the book *Race, Class, Power and Organizing in East Baltimore*, a book about uneven development and the community organizing to resist displacement of low-income Black families yet again (Gomez, 2012). I found myself getting angry and rageful, despairing all over again as I relived my involvement with some of the subject matter of the book. I was directly involved in the organizing and struggle against gentrification and displacement—1960s Urban Renewal style—in East Baltimore as the Johns Hopkins institutions continued to expand into predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods. Talking about it was activating, and I recognized that I needed to remain clear. Being

clear helped me deliver more thoughtful information, invited in openness, and didn't allow my anger and pain to overwhelm me. Coming only from a place of anger, disconnect, and shutdown was not helpful in inviting in conversation, co-learning, and engagement. As a mindfulness practitioner and a preventive medicine and public health practitioner of color, I recognized the re-activation into deeper traumas of racism each time I talked about the project. And, I also knew what helps us in recognizing and taking back our control, so we can speak from clarity and remain hopeful, while acknowledging our anger and pain as African descendant people. I also recognized the activation in other African descendant and Indigenous people in the audience, other people of color, and non-BIPOC people. Teaching about racism in general—particularly for African descendent and Indigenous people and other people of color—and the effects on our health requires pedagogical tools that helps us to stay present and insightful for this work of healing justice.

### **Mindfulness and its Effect**

Mindfulness, as a contemplative practice, is the practice of staying aware of what is happening in the present moment (Nhat Hanh, 1999). Instead of being overcome by an emotion, such as anger, one can remain aware that they are angry. This recognition allows other emotions to be present as well. Breathing in awareness, following the breath coming into the body and leaving the body, helps to bring us back to this present moment, helps us to notice what emotions or feelings we are experiencing (Analayo, 2020; Evans, 2018; Magee, 2017; Nhat Hanh, 2002). This awareness of the present feeling prevents us from being carried away by one emotion and losing our awareness of what else is in front of us. This awareness of breathing helps to calm our minds, relax our bodies, renew ourselves, notice sensations that are experienced in the body, and increase clarity and openness.

Continuing research affirms that practicing mindfulness is an effective coping strategy for anxiety, anger, depression, trauma and other social emotional and physical challenges (Black & Slavich, 2016; Boyd et al., 2018; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chopko & Schwartz, 2013; Hilton et al., 2017; Hoffmann & Gomez, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 1993). Staying in

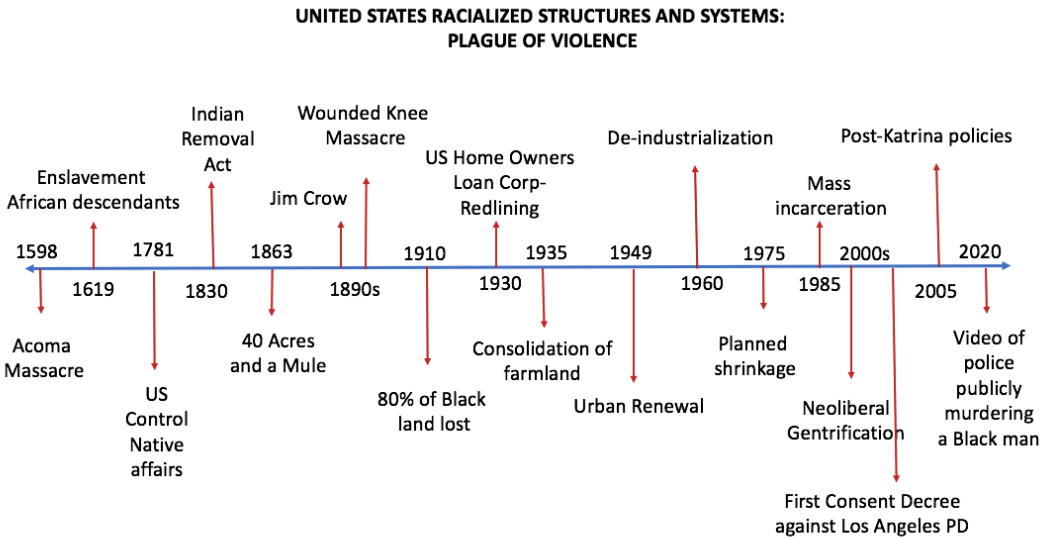
awareness of the breath triggers a physiological response termed the “relaxation response” (Benson & Proctor, 2011). It builds neurological pathways that promote presence, attention, social-emotional functions, cognitive functioning, and self-regulation. Mindfulness practices have been introduced in different educational settings from K-12 and higher education (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Suárez-García et al., 2020). In general, these practices are often introduced as experiential learning exercises separate from other subject matter. In particular, the discipline of social work, for example (Gockel & Deng, 2016), has integrated mindfulness training as part of education within the broader pedagogical movement of contemplative practices (Eppert, 2013).

### **Mindfulness as a Learning Tool in Teaching about Racism and Health**

I began using a slide of nature after every 5-6 slides of the lecture material. Imagine a series of slides on violent historical and present-day land exploitation, defining how uneven development is our history of development in the U.S. (see Figure 1). Heavy stuff! Then, imagine a slide of an expansive water scene, perhaps an egret soaring against a blue sky, perhaps a flower, a mountain vista, a sunset, interspersed throughout such a lecture. At the beginning of the presentation, I tell the audience that they will see a slide of nature interwoven in the presentation, and this is an invitation to take a deep breath in and out and become mindful of their breath; to release what they just heard and saw, because we would continue on in the same vein with the very next slide. The slides of nature became mindfulness bells inviting them back to the present moment, to reground in the here and now through awareness of the breath coming in and leaving the body. In a slide presentation of 30-40 slides, there would be 6-9 slides of nature. I immediately found the calming effect of these slides. We all know how we become deeply involved with the material we are talking about. When the slides of nature came up, I would stop and breathe. Becoming mindful of my breath, I immediately reconnected to the present moment again, felt grounded in the location I was standing, didn't feel overwhelm or controlled by anger, and remembered the larger picture.

Figure 1

*History of land exploitation: Plague of violence*



MBGomez

The audiences I presented to included academic settings of various subject matter (urban planning, community art, public health, medicine, community nursing, history, peace studies, political science, law, etc.), general public events, and community association meetings. Initially, participants would stop by on their way out and mention that they appreciated the slides of nature, some almost whispering. As the years continued, my talks have stayed relevant to this history of racialized land exploitation as a social determinant of health and alternative ways of development for housing and health equity. The nature slides remain and the comments back from participants are more explicit. Some report during the comment/question and answer period that the nature slides helped them stay engaged, kept them calm, helped their anger, kept them in hope, kept them open, kept them from shutting down. Some say that the nature slides were the best part of the presentation.

**Figure 2***Nature slide*

Because of this consistent feedback, I continued to explore the effect of this pedagogical approach to teaching about racism that appeared to prevent alienation and shut-down in participants. For example, I developed a one-page document with two columns labeled “Before” and “After” (see Table 1). I introduced an additional blank slide before and sometimes after the nature slides and asked participants to draw or write the feeling/sensation they had before and after the nature slide. If there was a blank slide before the nature slide, participants were invited to take a deep breath in awareness and note the feelings they were experiencing in that moment before viewing the nature image. Time spent on the blank and nature slides varied from approximately 10-30 seconds each. Figure 3 shows a typical sequence of slides presented in a lecture on the history of uneven community development in racially marginalized communities. The slide used for the ‘before and after experience’ would be discussed at the beginning of the lecture

**Table 1**

*Note (writing/drawing) sensation in body before/after nature image and deep breath*

Nature slide	Blank slide (before image)	Blank slide (after image)
1		
2		
3		
4		

(showed here within the lecture, for example). I gathered feedback from about 250 participants in different academic subjects (social justice, community engagement, history) during lectures on different aspects of my area of scholar activism. In general, the “Before” responses included activated and heightened feelings, or shutting down, while the “After” responses reflected more calm and hopeful feelings, or reconnection—both in writing and drawings.

A recent exploration has been to introduce a 30-second to 1-minute moment of awareness of breathing—with each image—in workshops about racism and policing after different segments. These in-person presentations resulted in participants reporting staying present to the difficult material of undue police force. Lastly, in the age of COVID-19 and more virtual learning, I ask participants to write their feelings into the chat before and after the slide of nature. The results are similar to in-person presentations: participants move from feelings of being absorbed, ashamed, and heavy to free, calm, and inspired.

**Figure 3**

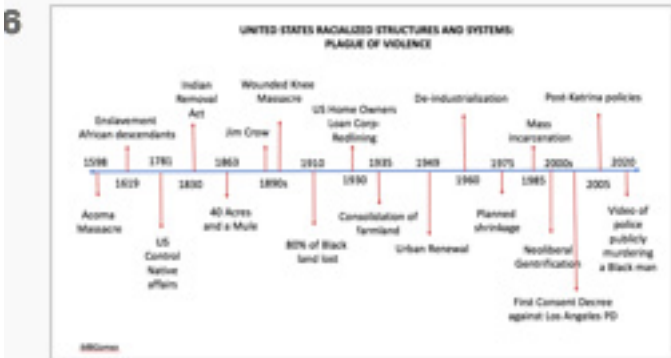
Sequence of slides in a lecture on uneven community development and its outcomes in racially marginalized communities.

**5**

Write (or think/feel) sensation in body before/after nature image and deep breath

Before nature image      After nature image

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.



**7**



*Note.*  
Slide 5: Instructions to note (by writing/drawing feeling sensations) in body after taking a deep breath and viewing image;  
Slide 6: Content of talk;  
Slide 7: Blank slide to note present feeling;  
Slide 8: Nature slide, deep breath.



### **Why Calm is Necessary**

Some in the public health discipline are finally acknowledging that racism is a public health issue (Devakumar et al., 2020; Yearby et al., 2020). This is a big “first” step. The next step will be to deliver consistent curriculums that include the history of racism and how it affects the public’s health and the path toward racial and social justice (Berila, 2015). Discussing racism can activate both Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and non-BIPOC. It can re-traumatize BIPOC and can lead to shut-down, denial, and shame for non-BIPOC. We as BIPOC must find skillful ways to take care of ourselves so that we are not re-traumatized as we continue to heal from the legacy and daily effects of white supremacy and racism. As teachers and students, curriculum teaching about the effects of racism on health, and all other aspects of life, is necessary and also difficult. Mindfulness can help us be present to the difficult emotions we feel while we take care of ourselves in the moment: knowing when it’s too much and knowing when we can continue on with the subject matter. For non-BIPOC teachers and students, discussing the effect of racism on BIPOC and non-BIPOC can also lead to difficult emotions. Mindfulness can help to take care of these emotions and help to maintain awareness of what is being experienced. Mindfulness helps us to not be overwhelmed with one or two difficult emotions. We can remain in awareness of what is happening through awareness of our breathing. Staying aware of our breath in these moments of difficult emotions can begin to bring calm to our minds and bodies. This opens us to remember the other emotions that are also present, beginning to bring us back to balance and clarity. By being fully present to the subject matter we begin to notice how we are affected; we learn about ourselves and the subject matter. We develop insight into ourselves through mindfulness and this focused attention.

Engaging with challenging subject matters like racism requires consideration of how to keep teachers and participants, especially Black and other people of color, present to the discussion. This is necessary if we want to educate for knowledge and understanding, minimize harm, and assure that all learners acquire the understanding required to be an active and effective agent of change for racial justice. Staying clear

leads to better understanding which in turn leads to an openness to stay engaged. Clarity results in insight of what our role will be in change. Therefore, a pedagogy that assures an openness to staying engaged during challenging racial histories is critical for change to occur. Integrating mindfulness practices in public health education is one way that public health educators can themselves stay calm and remain engaged so as to keep participants and students engaged with the education of racism. This learning is essential in the steps toward our collective recovery from more than 400 years of white supremacy and racialized capitalism. More research is invited into this area of mindful pedagogy in general, and specifically to address difficult topics necessary to understand and forge a path of equity and healing for all.

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