

Five Ways to Restore Humanity to the Classroom

By [Vicki Zakrzewski](#) | November 23, 2015 | [3 Comments](#)

The emphasis on testing can squeeze the feeling out of today's classrooms. Here is one teacher's journey to re-connect with herself and her students.

When I look back on the great teachers who shaped my life, what I

remember isn't the way they prepared me to take a standardized test. What I remember is the way they taught me to believe in myself. To be curious about the world. To take charge of my own learning so that I could reach my full potential. They inspired me to open up a window into parts of the world I'd never thought of before. — President Obama, "[An Open Letter to America's Parents and Teachers](#)," October 26, 2015

Obama's statement describes the heart and soul of teaching. Yet for many educators, the testing paradigm has removed the joy of teaching, leaving little time for connecting deeply with students. This sense of connection isn't a luxury. According to research, it can [increase the success and well-being](#) of students and teachers alike.

Throughout the country, teachers are resisting the testing paradigm by putting those person-to-person bonds first. In a New York City high school classroom of newly arrived immigrant students, one educator is using simple mindfulness and social-emotional practices to relate to her students as human beings—profoundly transforming her work as a teacher and, at the same time, deepening her students' learning.

Summer school for teacher happiness

Julie Mann, a 21-year teaching veteran, spent the summer immersed in the science of social-emotional well-being and mindfulness and its application for the classroom. She started with the Greater Good Science Center's [Summer Institute for Educators](#) and then moved on to the GGSC [Science of Happiness MOOC](#), [Mindful Schools'](#) training, Meena Srinivasan's [Teach, Breathe, Learn](#) workshop, and Barbara Fredrickson's [Positive Psychology MOOC](#).

Armed with a lot of knowledge, ideas, and determination to stay mindfully present and grounded, Julie started the school year with the goal of creating a safe, connected classroom—similar to what she had experienced at the Summer Institute.

"The Institute was the catalyst because it's an embodiment of everything that is promoted on the GGSC website," says Julie. "After six days of being treated with such respect and care, I came away feeling amazing and I wanted my students to experience this as well."

Using a combination of stand-alone lessons and activities, pedagogical methods, and curriculum integration, Julie has done just this. Here's how.

Step one: Mellow the hippocampus

Julie starts every class with a mindfulness exercise to help the students—and herself—focus and relax. But that's not all she does, especially with classes that last for two or more hours.

"I have an alarm on my phone that goes off on the hour," explains Julie, "and we get up and do yoga—no matter what." Even though there are days when both she and her students grumble about the hourly movement break, she never regrets it and neither do the kids. "They're all smiling by the end," says Julie.



Summer Institute for Educators 2014

She also uses mindfulness to reduce students' anxiety before a test and explain how the practice is benefiting their brains. "One time I told them that if you're stressed out, it's hard to access the hippocampus, the part of your brain where you recall information," relates Julie. "But taking slow deep breaths helps get your brain back online. At the

end of class, they all said, "We need more information about our hippocampus!"



Students practicing yoga
Julie Mann

The effort to stay calm and focused paid off. The students reported at the end of the semester that the mindfulness and yoga practices lowered their stress and helped them stay more focused. One student said it was easier for him to sleep at night, while another wrote, "I feel like I can sense peace when I do the mindful minute."

Julie, too, sees the benefit. "In the past, my survival technique has been to check out or get really controlling or annoyed at the kids. But this is a very different way of teaching. It's slower, so I feel like it protects me by getting me into a

physical and mental state to do what I need to do."

In addition to the personal benefits, mindfulness has also changed how Julie approaches her curriculum. "I go in with a different intention," explains Julie. "Instead of thinking that I've got to get through my whole agenda, I now know that if we don't cover everything, it's okay—as long as the students are engaged and getting something out of it. It's a simple, but profound shift."

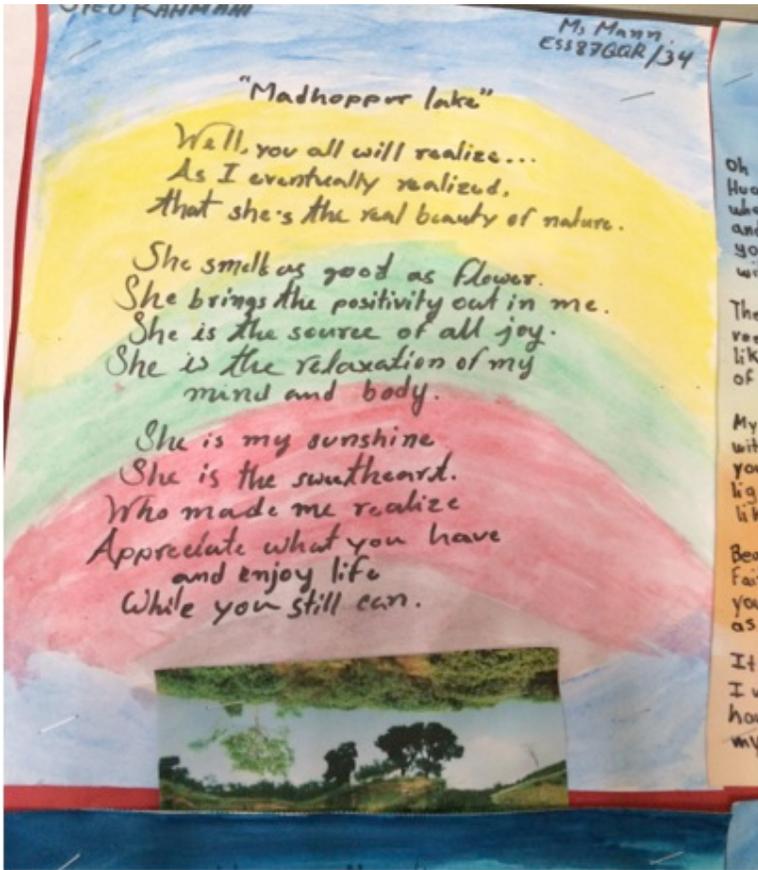
Step two: Feel awe together

Given that a [sense of connection amongst peers](#) has been shown by researchers to improve academic success and lower risky behavior, Julie started the school year with awe—an emotion that scientists suggest may [inspire us to connect with others](#).

She began by asking them to consider the meaning of the Marcus Aurelius quote, "Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them" and talked about what science has discovered about awe.

She then took students through a guided imagery practice, remembering a place in their native countries that made them feel awe. Students journaled about this place, talked about it with

each other, and brought in photos. They wrote poems and then made paintings of their special place.



Madhopper Lake
Julie Mann

While you still can.

Finally, they created a Museum of Awe and did a gallery walk. "The students decided that it was the most 'awesome' museum in the world," says Julie.

Madhopper Lake
Well, you all will realize...
As I eventually realized,
That she's the real beauty
of nature.

She smells as good as
flower.
She brings the positivity
out in me.
She is the source of all
joy.
She is the relaxation of
my
mind and body.

She is my sunshine
She is the sweetheart.
Who made me realize
Appreciate what you have
and enjoy life

Step three: Think of three good things

Having learned over the summer that kindness can induce positive **emotions**, which improve a **student's learning, motivation, and well-being**, Julie had students reflect on their own kind acts with the Greater Good in Action practice "Three Good Things".

One student wrote about a time he and his friends helped a stranger on a New York City street get his car out of the snow. "We spent two hours, sweating in the cold with our hands frozen and very tired as we had been working a whole day already," he wrote. "That day I felt a joy inside my heart that almost goes out of my body. It was an amazing feeling and I won't ever forget it."

Another student wrote about being asked by her hungry brother to bring him food at his job at the airport. At first she hesitated, but then decided that he was her brother and she loved him, so she took a bus and brought him food.

Afterwards, she reflected, "Sometimes you feel like you don't want to help anyone because you need more help. But the thing that you don't know is that when you help others, you will prosper and feel really good."

Step four: Take a compassionate approach to homework

Julie herself has also taken a more empathetic and compassionate approach towards her homework policy. Realizing that most of her students are dealing with very difficult

circumstances outside of class and also seeing the stress that her own daughter's homework load was causing, Julie lessened the amount of assigned homework.

"I have one student who comes to class in a waiter uniform so he can run to his job afterwards and work until 2 a.m. When is he supposed to do his homework?" asks Julie. "So I told them that I wasn't going to give them a ton of homework, but when I do, I want it done respectfully. And they do."

Step five: Cultivate confidence

Julie's students face many challenges—moving to a new country, learning a new language, separation from family, just to name a few—and helping them to regain their confidence is a key part of Julie's teaching.

In addition to teaching them about growth [mindset](#), she also uses writing assignments to help them reflect on times when they used their [strengths](#). Here's a particularly moving example of a student who considers kindness to be a strength:

As I was walking home yesterday after work, I stopped by a

McDonald's for a coffee. While I was waiting in line, this man started talking to me. I know I shouldn't talk to strangers, but for some reason this man seemed to be a good person. He nicely asked me where I was from and what grade I was in. I kindly replied, "I'm from Ecuador and I'm a senior." He said he was from Jamaica and that he works all day for MTA, and that he barely goes out.

As I was talking to this man I remembered a video that I saw a long time ago. It was a short film about people in New York who often give up in life because monotony has consumed them. A story of how a kind smile can light up the day for somebody, of how a simple word can save the life of somebody who thinks nobody any longer cares about them. See, my father was this man who always loved to see people smile. He squinted his eyes to see the inner beauty of things and I deeply wanted to be like him when I grew up.

So I remembered all this stuff while this man was talking to me and I was wondering, "What if this man is like one of those guys in the movie? What if he is just trying to find somebody that will talk to him, in his whole day? What if he was lost in the monotony of life? Like me..." I kindly talked to him for around 10 minutes. He gave me advice for college, which is a thing I'm really struggling with. He asked me how was I doing in school, which is a thing that not even my mother asks me. He was so happy when I started a conversation with him without being rude. Finally I had to leave, but he was happy and I was glad to give a touch of humanity to somebody. When you feel that you have a quality of being sociable and kind with people, it makes you feel powerful and fierce. Also the strength of your emotions and confidence are enhanced. That experience brought positivity to my life.

Reconnecting to our own and others' humanity

Ultimately, integrating mindfulness and other social-emotional exercises into the classroom has allowed Julie and her students to connect with each other on a deeply human level—something that often gets lost in the urgency for high test-scores.

"These practices have made me more mindful and grounded and composed when I'm with my students, which changes how they are," explains Julie. "I'm laughing with them. I see their goodness more of the time. I get to enjoy them more because I'm less affected by the stress of what has to get done in a day." She continues:

I went into this thinking this would be so good for my students

because they need it so much, but I think what's becoming more apparent is that I needed this so much. I've been teaching for a long time and it's easy to get tired. But I'm so energized and it all feels so new. It's giving me the sense that I can have as much longevity as I need in this profession.

About The Author

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