

Embody your Intention: Using Somatic Practices to Enhance Student and Teachers' Creativity and Engagement

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Abstract

In contemporary higher education, there is a critical need to reimagine pedagogical practices through holistic mind-body approaches. The author explores the transformative potential of integrating mindfulness, yogic principles, and somatic practices into academic teaching methodologies. By focusing on lecturers' intentional reconnection with both their pedagogical purpose and their own personal intention, this work examines how targeted physiological interventions—including vestibulo-ocular reflex (VOR) stimulation, proprioceptive exercises, and coherent breathing techniques—can serve as powerful intro to a vast array of creative classes.

Somatic practices, such as visual detoxification and mindful breathing, and embodied learning strategies can be proposed in the classroom through a series of practical exercises and act as a resource to help improving educators' cognitive presence and students' engagement. The author proposes a comprehensive approach to turning traditional lecture formats into meaningful, transformative learning experiences, promoting a paradigm shift in curriculum design that prioritizes holistic well-being and intentional teaching.

Key Words

Intention, Wellbeing, Design Education, Mindful Movement, Mindfulness, Somatic Practice

Introduction

Simon Sinek's *Golden Circle theory* (Sinek, 2009) posits that successful individuals and organizations inspire action by clearly articulating *why* they do what they do, followed by *how* they do it, and ultimately *what* they offer. He provides compelling examples to demonstrate how reversing the traditional order of information makes messages more engaging by stimulating the limbic brain, which controls behavior through feelings.

Revisiting Simon Sinek's renowned *Golden Circle*, (Sinek, 2009) it's evident that lecturers typically possess strong expertise in the 'What', their specific field of study, and have been trained in pedagogy to excel in the 'How'. However, it is the 'Why'—the purpose behind their teaching—that can create a significant impact by adding depth and meaningfulness to their work.

The convergence of scholarly insights from neuroscience, psychology, and educational theory provides a compelling argument for reimagining higher education as a more integrated, intentional, and holistic learning experience.

This approach challenges traditional educational models by positioning intentional practices as core rather than peripheral elements of learning. It suggests a paradigm shift from information transmission to comprehensive human development, where personal awareness and emotional intelligence are considered as critical as academic knowledge. It draws from multiple theoretical perspectives, such as somatic awareness, as explored by Eugene Gendlin's focusing techniques (Gendlin, 2003); mindfulness-based cognitive strategies, as explained by Kabat-Zinn (1994); neuroplasticity and

embodied learning principles; holistic approaches to personal and professional development.

Focusing on the intention

A background as a Yogini enriched the author's perspective plan with a new focal point: the *Sankalpa* is its name in Sanskrit. *San* stands for the idea, while *Kalpa* is 'the way of proceeding' (Iyengar, 2012). It can be translated as a will, an intention, a conviction, a vow, a resolution that reflects one's highest aspirations. A declarative statement in which one commits to fulfill their goal. Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar, in his commentary to the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali* (Iyengar, 2012) discussed *Sankalpa* in relation to the power of intention to direct mental energy and aid in the practice of self-discipline and transformation. A *Sankalpa* can be set at the beginning of every Yoga session and provide precious support, along with the focus on breath, in the avoidance of several forms of distraction. That widely acclaimed "feeling of the present moment" (Iyengar, 2012) can be extremely hard to achieve in daily life and in a career as a creative professional. This impacts the performance of both teachers and students.

As a provocation, the audience was asked if they had ever achieved this sense of "absence of thoughts" (Hari, 2022) that is intended as a reward in Yoga. It's common to admit that the mind wandering is a much more popular feeling. It can be so rewarding but it may lead to deep discomfort. Johann Hari, in his text *Stolen Focus* (2022), describes this feeling:

In situations of limited stress and of safety, the mind-wandering will be a gift, a pleasure, a creative power. In scenarios of high stress or danger, on the other hand, it will be a torture. (Hari, 2022)

Creativity, flow and the present moment

Students who have been introduced to yoga sequences (series of poses known as *asanas* in Sanskrit) and to the underlying philosophy, may be familiar with the *Exercises of Patanjali*. The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Patanjali, trans. Iyengar, 1993) are ancient texts of wisdom that guide us towards our source, the essence of existence, through the development and management of consciousness. Today, they are referred to as “Mind Training” (Hari, 2022). These *Sutras* teach us about the causes of suffering and offer paths to liberation. The body-mind dichotomy is also addressed in these texts, with the Buddha distinguishing between the ailments of the body (*kāya*) and the four types of ailments of the mind (*cetasa*), emphasizing the severity of the latter (Rogasutta cited in Squarcini, 2023, p. 25).

Emma Seppälä, author of *The Happiness Track* (2016), estimates that our minds wander approximately 50% of the time and connects mind wandering with happiness. She asserts that we are happier when our minds are present and focused (Big Think, 2020). Seppälä also highlights the relationship between mindfulness and focus, noting that a settled mind enables us to perceive and register more (Big Think, 2020).

Artist Rod Judkins, in his work *The Art of Creative Thinking* (2015), emphasizes the power of doubts. While doubts can be frustrating, Judkins (2015) highlights their potential as “a key to unlock new ideas” and “move things forward” (p. 41). He cites Voltaire’s quote, “Doubt is not a pleasant activity, but certainty is absurd” (Voltaire cited in Judkins, 2015, p. 41).

For students aspiring to unleash their creative power and pursue inventive careers, practices that help them navigate uncertainty and transition from a stressful fight-or-flight mode to a restorative rest-and-digest mode are essential. Protocols like

Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) can provide valuable support in this regard.

In the search of the lived experience

Marco Dallari, a Lecturer in Pedagogy and Didactics of Artistic Education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, has focused his research on how to foster pleasure within the pedagogical journey. In his work *The Raft of Beauty* (Dallari, 2021, p. 17) he recalls the concept of *Erlebnis* and describes the “lived experience”, once deprived by any “cold derivations”, as follows:

Lived experience cannot be reduced to its empirical or logical dimension: what is perceived, whether object or living being, is comprehended (taken into oneself) and recognized as existing because it becomes, in that moment, part of the ‘lifeworld’ of the perceiver. (Dallari, 2021, p. 17, translation added)

Dallari explores the dimension of lived experiences and how they arise from the interaction or relationship between an individual and the external world. It is not about describing or explaining phenomena but about achieving understanding and internalization, where rational and cognitive elements interplay with emotional and affective aspects. Therefore, both the individual’s subjective characteristics and external contextual factors shape and structure this understanding.

Navigating sensory overload

There are plenty of exercises that can be proposed at the beginning of a class, to restore the mind-body connection and feeling more responsive and awake. For example, Vestibular Ocular Reflex (VOR) training can stimulate the reaction capacity

and can be practiced easily while staring at an object but also at a screen. Moving the head in different directions while keeping the gaze stuck on a precise point and then doing the opposite will stimulate the VOR and enhance the proprioception, which allows the body to better determine its position without checking it with eyes. A VOR activity was proposed by the author to her audience during her pitch at Ulster University in 2024 and the level of curiosity that arose was truly remarkable.

In *The Body in Movement: Dance and Somatic Practices*, Katarzyna Krenz (2016) defines proprioception as the body's ability to perceive its position and movement in space, relying on sensory receptors within muscles, joints, and tendons. She explains that proprioception is essential for body awareness, coordination, and balance, helping individuals navigate their environment and execute precise movements.

Krenz (2016) outlines several pros of training to enhance proprioception, including improved body awareness, increased coordination and balance, better prevention of injuries and improved motor control. Her text (Krenz, 2016, pp. 45-67) highlights that, through somatic practices like dance, yoga, and physical therapy, the enhancement of proprioception leads to more efficient and mindful movement patterns, contributing to overall physical and psychological well-being.

The ocular exercises, that contributes to the enhancing of proprioception, are easy to be proposed in the classroom, as they do not require any skills nor props.

Fogel (2009) described ocular exercises proposed in the Feldenkreis protocol. By gently moving the eyes in different directions—left to right, up and down, or in circular patterns—one can begin to sense how these movements and the tension patterns in the extraocular muscles are connected to muscle tension in other areas, such as the head, face, tongue, mouth, neck, chest, abdomen, and pelvis. This connection exists partly because turning the head, often linked to visual searching, engages neck muscles like the scalene and sternomastoid. These muscles, through their attachments to the

upper ribs, sternum, and clavicle, are connected to the breathing muscles. The respiratory muscles, in turn, are linked to the autonomic nervous system and work in coordination with the diaphragm and abdominal and pelvic muscles. Since these muscles attach to bones in the rib cage, spine, and pelvis, which also serve as attachment points for pelvic and leg muscles, eye movements can influence or trigger pain, tension, or relaxation throughout the body (Fogel, 2009).

In the realm of art and design education, visual stimuli are paramount. However, it can be challenging to comprehend the sheer volume of information our brains receive and the extent to which we effectively process it. Marine Tanguy, in her work *The Visual Detox* (2024), discusses the concept of saliency as a “natural filter that protects us from sensual overload” and warns of potential biases in perception and information processing (Tanguy, 2024, p. 46, emphasis added). Research from the University of Pennsylvania indicates that the retina transmits approximately 11 million bits of information to the brain per second, while only about 40 bits per second reach consciousness (Zimmermann, 1986, cited in Tanguy, 2024, p. 47).

Tanguy (2024) explores how emotions can influence our interpretation of visual messages in daily life, asserting that, “Everything you see will be viewed through your emotional state at that time” (p. 71). She investigates the role of the amygdala, the brain’s centre for emotions, emotional behaviour, and motivation, in this process.

Albert Reed, in his work *The Imagination Muscle* (2023), focuses on elements worth observing amidst the “rush of sensory information” and references the concept of *Turner Subtraction*, which involves observing the core value of something and peeling back layers of distraction to reveal its intrinsic worth (Reed, 2023, p. 63, emphasis added). Reed warns of the impact of the hectic pace of life on conscious decision-making and identifies the ‘unthinking habit’ as a process that can gradually suffocate

the curious soul through the weight of routine. This habit allows our attention to wander into the fog of daily distractions (Reed, 2023, p. 72).

To engage students in experiences that reduce visual stimuli, teachers can invite them to close their eyes and embark on an inward journey. This unexpected prompt can stimulate curiosity.

Exercises focusing on the energetic field and breathing techniques can also be beneficial. James Nestor's book *Breath* (2020) provides valuable insights into the nuances of energy, its connection to basic body functions, and its association with various forms of illness when blocked. Practices aimed at maintaining a steady flow of prana, such as acupuncture to open prana channels and Yoga postures to awaken and distribute energy, are essential. Regarding the concept of prana, Nestor remarks:

...[It] was first documented around the same time in India and China, some 3,000 years ago, and became the bedrock of medicine. The Chinese called it ch'i and believed the body contained channels that functioned like prana power lines connecting organs and tissues. The Japanese had their own name for prana, ki, as did the Greeks (pneuma), Hebrews (ruah), Iroquois (orenda), and so on. (Nestor, 2020, p. 188)

The concept of prana as 'senses' is also mentioned in *Higher Creativity*, where authors Harman and Rheingold, while bridging creativity with mysticism, cite a paramount text of Vedanta philosophy, the Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad, dating back to 100 BCE, that emphasizes the power of dream experiences (Harman and Rheingold, 1984).

Training on energy can unfortunately still sound unconventional in Western cultures. Education should bridge this gap by offering hands-on activities that help students recognize the direct impact of energy on life, creativity, performance, and relationships.

Questioning well-being

The growing interest among faculties in implementing protocols that can enhance the well-being of students and lecturers is more than ever justified by recent surveys such as the one by WGSN, a company that provides trend forecasts to brands, highlights the “Great Exhaustion” as a major trend for 2026. WGSN’s survey showed that the phenomenon is “disproportionately affecting Gen Z, younger Millennials and women: globally, 48% of people under 30 said they felt drained at work” (WGSN, 2024).

Gendlin in his work *Focusing* (2023) introduces the concept of *felt sense*. It is described as “the broader, at first unclear, unrecognizable discomfort, which the whole problem (all that) makes in your body”. To let it form, you must stand back a little from your familiar emotion. The felt sense is wider, less intense, easier to have, and much more broadly inclusive. It is how your body carries the whole problem.

Gabor Maté (2019) describes the field of *psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology* to indicate that “the endocrine, or hormonal, apparatus is also a part of our system of whole-body response. Innovative research is uncovering just how these links function all the way down to the cellular level”. He also provides further research that involves students of medicine, overwhelmed by the stress of their exams:

[...] The immune defenses that normally function in healthy young people have been shown to be suppressed in medical students under the pressure of final examinations. Of even greater implication for their future health and well-being, the loneliest students suffered the greatest negative impact on their immune systems. (Maté, 2019)

In 2021, a pilot study conducted by Martínez-Rubio, Navarrete, and Montero-Marin at the Faculty of Psychology at the Catholic University of Valencia, Spain, revealed that, “Psychological distress is a prevalent mental health issue among university students”

(Martínez-Rubio *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). The study highlighted the association between psychological distress and academic underperformance, substance use, and suicide (Martínez-Rubio *et al.*, 2021, p. 1).

Despite the prevalence of psychological distress, the researchers found that only a small proportion of university undergraduate students were receiving adequate psychological treatment, a trend that predated the COVID-19 pandemic (Auerbach *et al.*, 2016; Ebert *et al.*, 2019; Herbst *et al.*, 2016).

Among various psychological interventions for students, *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) and *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy* (MBCT) emerged as the most promising approaches based on robust evidence (Martínez-Rubio *et al.*, 2021, p. 1).

In March 2024, a study conducted at Roma Tre University in Italy demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions in enhancing student outcomes and well-being, including a reduction in rumination, a condition often linked to depression, lack of focus and attention (Barcaccia *et al.*, 2024, p. 841).

The practice of yoga has been successfully integrated into pedagogy, but especially in primary schools, while it remains primarily outside the faculty context. One of the most valuable aspects of Yoga is its focus on breath and the present moment. This theme was central to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, where he emphasized that the present moment is the only thing we can truly possess and lose. Pierre Hadot (2002), in his work *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, highlights a fundamental concept of Stoicism: the problems that personal interpretation can introduce to every object or event (Hadot, 2002, p. 125).

Awareness and Denial

Africa Brooke, in her work *The Third Perspective* (2024), points out denial as “your mind's sneaky way of shielding you from unsettling truths about yourself”. The effects of denial include the push “to move forward, bypassing the unpleasant moments, [...] while simultaneously robbing you of seeing your authentic self” (Brooke, 2024). She describes the feeling of discomfort and gives personal hints on how to befriend inner mobs:

When we encounter parts of ourselves that cause discomfort - our fears, insecurities or negative thoughts - our instinct is to eliminate or suppress them. It's a natural response. These parts make us feel anxious, and who wants to feel that way? Trying to suppress or ignore these parts rarely works; in fact, it often gives them more power. Going forward, I want you to think of these negative voices like the monsters under your childhood bed. (Brooke, 2024)

Brooke reflects on how, when one ignores them, they just seem to grow, with their shadows looming larger each night. But when one gathers your courage, turns on the lights and looks under the bed, you see that the monstrous shadows were cast by ordinary objects. The anxiety existed in the mind (Brooke, 2024).

Alan Fogel, in his work *Body Sense* (2009) matched the mental denial with the body awareness: “The problem with fear, and any type of threat to the self, is that awareness of the body becomes lost and replaced by the need to protect the self or to collapse” (Fogel, 2009).

He remarks the role of *Suppression* in defending denial and its effects as the loss of our ability to feel ourselves. Suppression can often become functional. Fogel (2009) notes how “A state of psychological and physical well-being requires us to suppress our

feelings when needed but then to find safe opportunities to access them more freely”.

It's right when suppression continues without respite, that problems start arising.

Fogel (2009) describes some experimental studies of suppression, where people are shown emotionally arousing videos, and then asked to behave so that someone else could not know that they are feeling something, and their effects: “This request invariably results in increased internal arousal as measured by activation of the sympathetic nervous system, that part of the autonomic nervous system (ANS)” (Fogel, 2009).

The dopamine plays a paramount role in regulating our responses. Anna Lembke in her work *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (2021) reflects on how one's experience of pain and pleasure is deeply shaped by the meaning one attributes to it. By continually seeking and indulging in repeated pleasures, one raises the neural set point, making it harder to feel satisfied. This constant striving explains the common, perpetually impulse of “wanting more” (Lembke, 2021). The issue lies in how humans, as natural seekers, have excelled in the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. In doing so, society has turned a world once defined by scarcity into one of overwhelming abundance—a reality brains are not biologically equipped to handle.

Breathing as the perfect trick

How to practically start fighting overthinking and feeling better? Techniques such as *Coherent Breathing* (Nestor, 2020, p. 83) can significantly improve one's outlook when practiced regularly. The technique, described by Nestor in his work *Breath* (2020), is based on a specific breathing rhythm: inhaling counting 5.5, exhaling counting 5.5. If one manages to sync counting with seconds, there will be 5.5 breaths per minute and approximately 5.5 liters of air exchanged. Nestor highlights the importance of coherent

breathing in the switch from a “fight or fly” mode to a “rest and digest” one, i.e. a switch from the sympathetic system activation to the parasympathetic one:

As molecules of breath descend deeper, they switch on parasympathetic nerves, which send more messages for the organs to rest and digest. As air ascends through the lungs during exhalation, the molecules stimulate an even more powerful parasympathetic response. The deeper and more softly we breathe in, and the longer we exhale, the more slowly the heart beats and the calmer we become. People have evolved to spend the majority of waking hours—and all of our sleeping hours—in this state of recovery and relaxation. Chilling out helped make us human. (Nestor, 2020, p. 144)

The opposite role is covered by the second half of the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic, that sends stimulating signals to our organs, telling them to get ready for action. Nestor (2020) describes it as “A profusion of the nerves to this system are spread out at the top of the lungs. When we take short, hasty breaths, the molecules of air switch on the sympathetic nerves”.

If Nestor’s approach sounds too technical, a good reminder comes from a great Yogi. “The yogi’s life is not measured by the number of his days, but the number of his breaths”, wrote B. K. S. Iyengar (2012), an Indian yoga teacher who had spent years in bed as a sickly child until He learned yoga and breathed himself back to health. He died in 2014, aged 95.

Grounding techniques, such as simple stretching or tapping one’s feet on the ground, can serve as gentle reminders of one’s physical presence in the world and help anchor oneself in the present.

Testing the experience within the Art and Design Higher

Education domain

The author presented her work at the *Gathering Pace* Conference at Ulster University in Belfast on September 6th, 2024. The focus of the short presentation was to stimulate a reflection on a more holistic and meaningful approach to teaching, while proposing a quick test of some VOR exercises to break the ice on the topic.

Quick visualization exercises were proposed. In mindfulness protocols, one is invited to become fully aware of their thoughts, before letting them disappear as soap bubbles (Big Think, 2020). The suggested, challenging option was to mentally invite one's demons for a cup of tea and leave them a moment for speaking out. The audience at Ulster University was asked to embody their thoughts, worries and negative emotions as a mosquito and to visualize it carefully before letting it fly away.

In her previous experience, the author has led specific workshops on the same topics both within and outside university settings, gathering positive feedback via short qualitative interviews.

In 2018, an institutional intervention was implemented at the *Istituto Europeo di Design* in Rome, where she was invited by Director Prof. Nerina Di Nunzio to facilitate weekly yoga sessions for Art and Design lecturers and faculty members within the Photography Laboratory space. This initiative aligned with what hooks (1994, p. 139) describes as "engaged pedagogy," which "emphasizes well-being" and recognizes that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being" in order to effectively teach. The ten participants, mostly of Italian origins and aged 30 to 50, reported unexpected challenges with equilibrium-based exercises conducted at day's end yet documented significant improvement across the ten-session

intervention. Among the exercises proposed, the “Tree Pose” included standing on one foot, with an extra cue of “closing the eyes”, in order to train proprioception.

Doidge explains this neuroplastic phenomenon noting that “when we learn to balance, complex circuits in our vestibular system in the ear, cerebellum, visual system, prefrontal cortex and motor centers of the brain all begin working together more efficiently. Because the same circuits are involved in regulating anxiety, the anxiety decreases when the balance improves” (2015, p. 83).

Qualitative feedback indicated these sessions functioned as spaces for stress reduction, interpersonal connection, and community formation. This observation resonates with Michelson's (1998, p. 226) assertion that “the body is not incidental to intellectual work but is the very condition of its possibility”, suggesting that embodied practices may serve as critical interventions in academic settings dominated by disembodied conceptual work.

All the participants appreciated setting an intention (*Sankalpa*) at the beginning of each session, and evaluated it as a ‘great strategy to switch off and restart’.

The integration of somatic practice within institutional structures represents a potential pathway for addressing what hooks (1994, p. 193) identifies as the “mind/body split” that characterizes traditional academic environments and undermines holistic educational approaches.

On 11 May, 2023, the author was invited to lead a structured mind-body intervention workshop at the University of the Arts in Évora, Portugal. The session incorporated elements from mindfulness protocols, Yoga philosophy, and bioenergetics in a pedagogical framework designed to enhance creative cognition. Participant response suggests potential applications for embodied learning approaches within higher arts education. The participant cohort consisted of over twenty individuals, primarily faculty members representing various artistic disciplines (music, dance, performance, applied

arts, design) and a smaller number of students. The intervention was structured in two distinct phases.

The initial segment, intended as a short theoretical framework, was conducted in a spacious interior room overlooking the university's courtyard. This phase featured a multimedia presentation introducing foundational literature on mindfulness protocols, Yoga philosophy, movement science, and bioenergetic principles. A primary objective was addressing and counteracting prevalent biases regarding meditative and holistic practices among academic practitioners.

Academic environments often foster conditions of overthinking that significantly impair experiential learning. Harris (2014) argues that when individuals become lost in thought, they “miss out on the nuances of their experiences”, with emotions and thoughts arising and passing away while overthinking can recursively reintroduce them (Harris, 2014, pp. 34-36).

The presentation specifically addressed the common misconception that mindfulness practices serve merely as relaxation techniques or stress-reduction protocols—perceptions that often lead both students and faculty to dismiss such approaches as incompatible with the intensive time constraints and deadlines characteristic of academic environments. Counter to these assumptions, evidence was presented demonstrating the capacity of these disciplines to enhance deep focus and stimulate creative processes.

The second phase, intended as an embodied experience, implemented a methodically developed warm-up session integrating mind-body practices specifically designed to prepare participants for subsequent creative and cognitive activities. This segment incorporated a strategic synthesis of breathing techniques, balance exercises, and vestibular training, demonstrating the potential for rapid physiological and psychological transformation.

Diaphragmatic breathing techniques proved particularly effective, consistently producing observable effects within approximately three minutes. These exercises exemplified how targeted somatic interventions can rapidly modulate physiological states and enhance cognitive readiness.

The intervention utilized embodied documentation strategies through customized material artifacts. Each participant received a specially designed matchbox containing blank cards intended for personal sketches. The instructional framework centered on temporal awareness, specifically guiding participants through structured reflection on past, present and future timeframes to better experience the challenge of “living the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2015, p. 163).

As Varela *et al.* (2016) argue, “Mindfulness means that the mind is present in embodied everyday experience; mindfulness techniques are designed to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations [...] to the situation of one's experience itself” (p. 22).

These matchbox materials functioned as “boundary objects” (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393) or physical anchors facilitating experiential learning components, enabling participants to document insights and embodied experiences throughout the session. The methodology was designed on purpose by the author and incorporated embodied expression through mimic techniques and sketching exercises conducted in dyadic formations. This approach strategically leveraged the participants' disciplinary expertise in artistic practices while simultaneously challenging them to explore affective dimensions through non-verbal communication modalities. As Johnson (2007) notes, “Meaning grows from our visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life [...] meaning is not just what we think about, but how we are situated in relation to things and how we inhabit the world” (p. 17). The participants' preexisting proficiency in artistic disciplines enhanced engagement with these embodied documentation

techniques, facilitating deeper exploration of interoceptive awareness and interpersonal connection through non-linguistic modalities.

The pedagogical approach was intentionally playful and experiential, designed to illustrate the intrinsic value inherent in mind-body practices. By framing these techniques as engaging and immediately rewarding, the session aimed to transform participants' perceptions of embodied learning, presenting such practices as accessible pathways to enhanced creativity and cognitive performance.

The author's experience included an intervention that was conducted during the 2022-2023 academic years at Link Campus University in Rome, Italy. Participants consisted of two cohorts of study abroad students (N=20 per group) who were concurrently members of the Rome Campus university soccer team. The demographic profile of participants included an age range of 18-22 years, with a substantial representation of students enrolled in Design major programs. All participants were of American origin and engaged in daily soccer training as part of their university experience abroad.

The workshops were conducted in outdoor settings within Villa Pamphili Park in Rome, providing a naturalistic environment distinct from conventional training facilities. This setting was selected to facilitate novel environmental stimuli and promote cognitive disengagement from familiar training contexts. The intervention framework deliberately employed a playful initial approach, designed to contrast with the participants' typical performance-oriented training regimens. Activities progressively increased in complexity, incorporating balance challenges, proprioceptive awareness exercises, and coordination tasks calibrated to reveal unexpected performance limitations. E.g. most of the student could not keep a table-top position while simultaneously detaching both knees, their left hand and right foot from the ground.

Early phases of the intervention revealed notable patterns of distraction and attentional fragmentation among participants. Observable behaviors included diminished eye

contact, delayed response to verbal cues, and inconsistent engagement with preliminary exercises. This initial disengagement had been already reported by the coaches at the start of an athletic training and could state the need of some decompression activities in order to stimulate a sort of *re-centering* moment, that the group of practitioners at IED had widely appreciated in the set of a *Sankalpa* at the beginning of the activity.

Despite maintaining athletic conditioning consistent with collegiate soccer training standards, participants demonstrated unexpected limitations in several domains balance maintenance during unilateral stance exercises, proprioceptive awareness during novel movement patterns, coordination during cross-lateral movement sequences, general flexibility and mobility beyond sport-specific ranges.

As a qualitative feedback, post-intervention dialogues with participants and their coaching staff revealed consistent themes regarding the student-athletes' experiential states during normal training and competition. When asked to reveal their difficulties, in a comprehensive analysis around the training and their college lives, students reported a significant lack of chances to challenge themselves with balance, both literally and metaphorically. Many articulated feeling chronically out of balance and distracted during their normal training routines, but also while attending lectures into the college.

A recurring theme emerged regarding the tension between performance-oriented training – “they train in order to compete and win” - and experiential presence – “often can't really feel situated in the present moment”.

The introduction of structured breathing protocols, specifically coherent breathing techniques and diaphragmatic breathing exercises, produced observable physiological responses. Participants engaged in self-assessment of pre-and post-intervention breathing patterns, with nearly all reporting significantly extended breath duration

following the guided practice. Multiple participants described “a deep feeling of release” following the breathing exercises.

This case study highlights the potential disconnect between physical conditioning and embodied awareness among collegiate student-athletes, particularly those experiencing the additional cognitive demands of international study. The findings suggest that despite maintaining high levels of sport-specific fitness, also students engaged in sports at a competitive level may experience significant limitations in broader domains of somatic awareness and attentional regulation.

Doidge emphasizes that ‘exercise increases the production of neurons in the brain’ and specifically notes that “Yoga and meditation, which put the body through unusual postures and breathing patterns, also help exercise different parts of the brain” (2007, p. 249).

Conclusion

The research presented here illuminates a transformative approach to pedagogical practice in higher education, emphasizing the critical importance of intentional, holistic teaching methodologies. By prioritizing the educator's well-being and cultivating a purposeful learning environment, institutions can transcend traditional instructional paradigms and create meaningful educational experiences. The findings underscore the necessity of a multidimensional approach to teaching that integrates personal awareness, intentional communication, and somatic practices. Key to this transformation is the educator's commitment to self-reflection and personal growth, which directly influences the quality of student engagement and learning outcomes.

Practical interventions such as grounding techniques, breathwork, and mindfulness practices—as explored by scholars like Gabor Maté, Johann Hari, and Anna Lembke—

provide concrete strategies for educators to enhance their pedagogical presence. These approaches are not merely supplementary but fundamental to creating a conscious, purpose-driven learning ecosystem.

Each lecturer should take advantage of their creative skills to conduct their own research and design integrated activities tailored on the class and on its actual vibe. Meaningful teaching extends beyond content delivery, representing a profound mission of empowering students to discover their potential and pursue purposeful life trajectories. By integrating practices that address psychological, physiological, and emotional dimensions, educators can create transformative learning environments that cultivate self-awareness and emotional intelligence while developing resilience and adaptive cognitive strategies. It should foster a holistic understanding of personal and professional development while encourage students to connect their academic pursuits with broader life goals.

Recognizing and addressing personal and collective denial, implementing targeted somatic interventions, and maintaining a consistent practice of intentional communication emerge as critical components of this educational approach. There is a rising need of exploring methodologies that can significantly enhance student engagement, mental well-being, and long-term personal and professional success. As higher education continues to evolve, this holistic paradigm offers a promising framework for reimagining teaching as a deeply transformative, purpose-driven practice. It calls for a fundamental shift from information transmission to meaningful human development, positioning educators as facilitators of comprehensive personal and intellectual growth.

Successful curriculum integration would require dedicated time for mind-body practices; training for educators in somatic awareness; developing assessment methods that

recognize holistic learning outcomes; creating flexible, adaptable frameworks for different disciplinary contexts.

Future research should continue to explore and validate these integrated approaches, creating robust methodological frameworks that can be systematically implemented across diverse educational contexts.

Disclosure Statement

The author confirms that all materials incorporated within this article are original and represent her own work. Furthermore, she confirms that the content has not been previously published, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. Additionally, she declares that there are no potential conflicts of interest associated with this work.

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