

Embracing the Lone Wolf

Incorporating the Solo Experience into the Collaborative Classroom

by Julia Tandy & Meredith Pentzien

Abstract: In this article, we share our successes with utilizing “solo walks” at an outdoor residential learning center. A solo walk is a carefully planned walk with cards laid out by an instructor to lead students down a trail, encouraging them to think deeply, interact with the environment, and reflect on their attitudes, experiences, and emotions. Evidence of the positive effects of these experiences, gathered from students’ written and illustrated reflections after their solo experience, is included in this article. We connect these findings with other ideas about why mindfulness, defined as focusing one’s attention on the present, is an effective practice specifically in the classroom. We also share several benefits to the science classroom specifically. In addition, we have developed five strategies for incorporating solo experiences into the traditional classroom. These strategies can be used for developing scientific thinking skills, reflection on general learning, and as classroom management tools. Studies show these practices can increase student engagement, emotional self-regulation, and metacognition.

Introduction

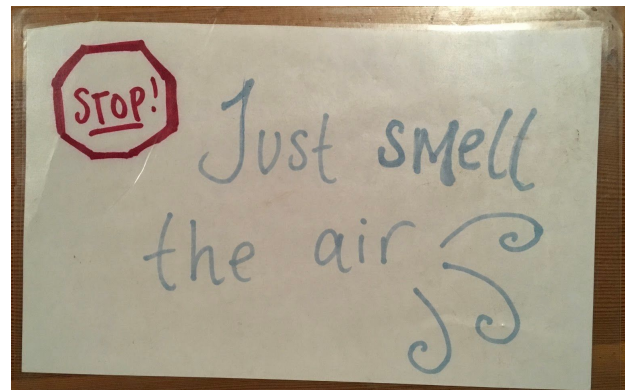
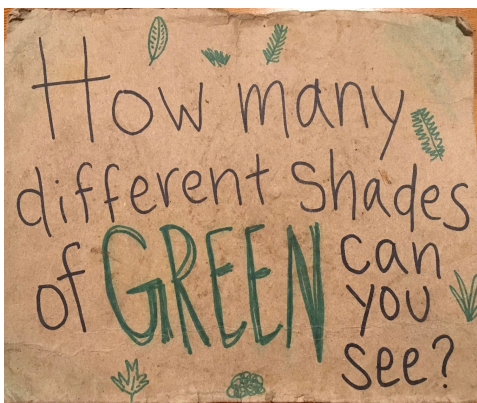
A collective exhale escapes an open-doored classroom after students begin honing in on their writing assignment. A few sighs linger on along with some giggles, but the majority of students took advantage of that moment to reset after the busy transition that had just occurred in the hallway moments before. Mindfulness exercises are becoming a trend in classrooms across the country, taking an Eastern religious idea and adapting it to fit the needs of Western students. Mindfulness is defined as “bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis” (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999, p. 68) and as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). These practices, research shows, have positive effects on a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development (Flook et al., 2010). As delineated in Helen Quinn’s chapter of *NGSS for All*, addressing social and emotional capacity is a matter of equity within schools. Quinn (2015) states, “[Literacy, symbol recognition, and mathematics skills] are more readily developed by students who possess certain important social and emotional skills of self-regulation, persistence, and belief in self efficacy in learning these skills” (p. 12). Appearing in various forms such as students tracing their finger up and down the shape of their hand while slowly breathing, lowering the lights in the classroom, or the ringing of a bell followed by silence, the only apparent downside to these

moments is that they are just that, small moments throughout a lengthy, intensive day. Maybe, in this effort to bring students together through collaborative work, we are failing to provide enough opportunities for solo experiences focused on cultivating mindfulness within the classroom.

In our current experience in outdoor education, we have seen solo experiences, usually in the form of a solo walk, have noticeable positive impacts on students' attitudes. In this article, we will discuss the importance of the solo experience as a scientific practice and a classroom management tool, and share some specific strategies to assist in incorporating mindful solo time into the classroom.

Why solo walks?

Solo walks are an important aspect of many outdoor environmental education facilities across the United States. Generally, cards are set out along a trail by the instructor and consist of a variety of meaningful quotes, reflective questions, and cards suggesting specific actions, such as "crawl to the next card" or "hug a tree". Students are asked to pause at each card and read and do what it asks if they would like. One of the



tenants of a solo walk is the idea of "challenge by choice," or letting the students know that it is up to them if they want to participate in a card's suggested action. Each card can vary in distance from one another sometimes being as close as a few feet apart and sometimes stretching hundreds of feet apart. Instructors can vary the distance between cards depending on the trail and the readiness of the group for the activity. After waiting a few minutes, a chaperone or other instructor at the back of the group will send students down the trail in equal increments giving each member of the class plenty of space to be alone along the trail. We find two to three minutes is perfect for older elementary students. Given variation in walking speeds, some students will inevitably catch up with one another, but they are told at the start of the activity to pause if this happens, giving the person ahead of them the space they may need for the activity. This problem can also be easily remedied by mindfully ordering students based on their walking speeds, allowing fast walkers to go first so they do not encroach on the experience of a slower walker. Occasionally, students decide to walk in

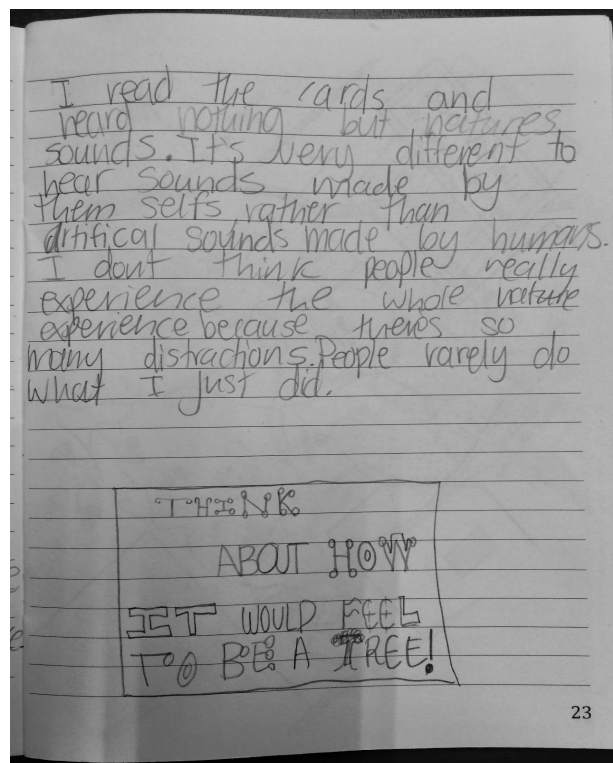
pairs or bunch up together. We acknowledge this is going to happen when sending fourth- and fifth-graders on a solo experience. We find students tend to take advantage of this unique experience as one of the few times they have to themselves during their week at our program.

After students are done with the walk, they are invited to find a quiet place away from their fellow classmates to journal about their solo walk experience in their field journals. Sometimes we provide specific prompts for the students depending on their comfort with writing - asking questions like, "How did you feel on your solo walk?" or "If you could design a solo walk card, what would it look like and what would it say?". It is not uncommon to see students writing ferociously for longer



than we typically saw students engaged in writing in the classroom -- I have had some groups journal silently for as long as twenty-five minutes. Commonly, we will also invite students to draw images about their solo walk and add labels. This is an especially important modification for students who prefer expressing their

ideas in other ways besides writing, or are less comfortable with English. We want to ensure that students feel there is no wrong way to express their feelings about this experience, or feel as though they are being assessed.



Why mindfulness for the science classroom?

After experimenting with incorporating solo experiences in the field classroom, we began to think about other possible applications of this activity. Witnessing the many observed benefits of the solo walk, mainly its ability to reduce physical and emotional stress in our students, its success in giving them time to connect with both new and familiar places, and stronger questioning and reasoning skills, we felt it was essential that this tool be brought into the science classroom.

Many students experience stress for a variety of reasons. These feelings often impede a student's ability to fully engage in the lessons each day. In the book *Research-based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning*, Judy Willis (2006) states "When teachers use strategies to reduce stress and build a positive emotional environment, students gain emotional resilience and learn more efficiently and at higher levels of cognition" (p. 57). One fifth-grade student reflected on her experience saying, "the solo walk was relaxing because I got rid of the stress of missing my family and I felt nice." We consistently hear students express similar sentiments about the power of walking alone on a path with the knowledge that they are safe yet still exploring.

Solo experiences can also be an excellent way to connect with the true process of the scientific method - specifically the acts of observing and questioning. Allowing students time to sit and observe an object, a space, or a phenomena activates the scientific mind. Jon Young speaks to the importance of watching and wondering about the natural world in his book, *What the Robin Knows*. Young states, "For the deepest learning and achievement to happen, the deepest visceral connection with the ,subject is necessary. In education, sparking this connection is the primary goal; the learning follows" (Young, 2012, p.48). Students were prompted during the solo walk to notice, wonder, and make connections as they participated in their solo walk experience, which led to

richer observations following this experience, as well as a more personal connection to the questions they asked.

Solo Strategies for the Upper Elementary Classroom

Solo time for transitions

At the beginning of a class, especially one following recess, gym, or a similarly energetic activity, consider incorporating solo time to "ground-in" the student to the classroom environment. This allows students to shift their energy to a more appropriate level for class, and clear their minds. Commonly, higher energy activities can leave students anxious about unresolved drama between friends - for example, a game that ended in an argument - and this mindful transition time can allow them to leave the stress of that experience behind and be ready to learn. You could play some relaxing instrumental music and go through a few breathing exercises with students as they are spread out around the room in a comfortable spot, or read a poem or quote followed by a silent moment of reflection or journaling.

Starting a lesson with a solo sit to increase wondering

Many educators utilize KWL charts (I know, I wonder/want to know, I learned) in their lessons as a form of pre- and post-assessment. In order to refine the 'wonder' or 'want to know' section, have students take silent solo time (with or without a journal, depending on your plan) to wonder about this new topic

before sharing, or to create their own personal KWL chart. You can also incorporate a solo sit after a hook activity has piqued their curiosity - they can take some time to write down anything they found exciting as well as something they have more questions about. Students can utilize this solo time to personally explore what interests them.

Developing a solo place in the classroom for self-regulation

Schools can bring about sensory overload for many students resulting in a variety of student behaviors. One suggestion is to develop a space where students can self-regulate by taking some time to step away from the group or activity. Provide a space that is comfortable and relatively secluded from the rest of the class, equipped with sensory objects, puzzles, and perhaps a few mindfulness exercises written down for students to de-escalate their emotions. Complete the space with a small hourglass as a timepiece so students know when to return to the group. Be sure to go over procedures for utilizing this space when it is introduced. This strategy is especially useful for children with sensory processing disorders, autism, difficulty regulating their emotions or anxiety, or are experiencing change in home environment.

Personal tracking of learning in a journal

Provide students five minutes at the end of a lesson, topic, or unit to reflect on their learning. They can jot down

questions they still have, opinions they've developed about what they are learning, or something that especially stood out to them. Consider using the "3-2-1" method to provide a framework for this - for example, 3 things you learned, 2 questions you still have, and 1 opinion you have about something you learned. When students find the answer to past questions or change their opinion on a subject, have them add this to their journal as a visual reminder of their progress. Allow this to be an ungraded activity solely for the personal benefit of your students and your teaching.

Re-explore a familiar place by using a sit spot

Consider taking a class of students out to a place they know well such as the playground or a park near school. Have them spread out in this space with a journal and record their observations, or just sit and experience the space in a new way. You can also provide some framework for this observation, noting specific things you want them to notice or look for. They can practice using their senses to rediscover a place that is familiar to them. This is especially effective in getting students to expand their definition of what makes something part of nature.

Conclusion

We have experienced major attitude shifts in students after just a singular solo experience in our outdoor classroom. Incorporating these ideas over an entire school year has the potential to yield incredible results with

regards to students' emotional self-regulation, ownership of learning, engagement, and metacognitive reflection, and can be especially helpful for students who are differently abled. These ideas can be adapted to fit any classroom or subject area and refined over time to fit your specific needs. The possibilities are endless - try making a solo walk around your school hallways or playground.

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