Mindfulness and Observational Drawing

Corinne Christopherson Sonderegger
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/9471

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Mindfulness and Observational Drawing

Corinne Christopherson Sonderegger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

Mark Graham, Chair
Daniel T. Barney
Tara Carpenter Estrada

Department of Art
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2022 Corinne Christopherson Sonderegger
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

Mindfulness and Observational Drawing

Corinne Christopherson Sonderegger
Department of Art, BYU
Master of Arts

Observational drawing has many benefits, yet it can be a difficult and frustrating curriculum for students and teachers alike. As I was teaching elementary and college art classes simultaneously, I noticed a significant discrepancy between my younger and older students. Students in my elementary art classes loved to draw and often expressed how excited they were to make art. However, students in my college art classes were more hesitant and self-conscious about drawing and did not believe they could progress artistically. Many of these students had abandoned drawing in elementary or middle school. This pattern evokes the U curve of artistic development as discussed in Harvard’s Project Zero (Davis, 1997). Because of this lack of skill and confidence, many of the students in my college classes could not fully apply themselves to reap the benefits of observational drawing. How can educators help college students reclaim their confidence as visual artists after years of avoidance and fear? In an attempt to help college students overcome these anxieties and improve their art skills, I created and implemented a mindfulness intervention in a traditional drawing curriculum. Using case study methodology, I conducted a qualitative study throughout the winter semester of 2019 at Brigham Young University to examine the affordances or limitations of implementing mindfulness in an undergraduate drawing curriculum.

Keywords: mindfulness, observational drawing, drawing confidence, mindful intervention
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to first acknowledge and thank Dr. Mark Graham. His warm, encouraging demeanor has always inspired me to keep going in times of self-doubt, and I hope to become an educator like him one day. He is unabashedly passionate about helping all of his students and truly cares about them as creative individuals; his love of learning is contagious and felt by all around him. Dr. Graham inspired me to extend myself, study art abroad for the first time, give a presentation at a national art conference, and unapologetically explore all my artistic passions. Without his contributions and inspiration, I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

I also want to thank Dr. Dan Barney and Tara Carpenter Estrada. Both have inspired me in a plethora of ways during my time in the art education program. Dr. Dan Barney is wonderfully enthusiastic about everything he does, and I am consistently amazed by his creative energies. I thank Tara Carpenter Estrada for always giving thoughtful, caring feedback and for showing/inspiring me that you really can be a mother, artist, and educator all at once!

I want to thank Dr. Philipp Malzl, whose brilliant approach to art history and art education completely changed my outlook and approach to pedagogy. He helped me fall in love with art history all over again. I am forever grateful for his guidance and mentorship. I am also grateful to Randy Baker, one of the kindest people I know, who taught me all I know about painting.

I am especially grateful to my husband, Mike, for his persistent encouragement and for pushing me to be a better version of myself and to take on seemingly daunting but rewarding tasks such as finishing this thesis.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE .............................................................................................................................................. i

ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................... viii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................... 1

Learning Through Drawing ........................................................................................................ 1

Observational Drawing and Art: A Rationale ............................................................................. 6

Problems ......................................................................................................................................... 6

Response ......................................................................................................................................... 7

A Brief Chapter Outline .............................................................................................................. 8

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................... 10

Background of Mindfulness ......................................................................................................... 10

Mindfulness in Scientific Discourse ............................................................................................ 10

Schools of Buddhism .................................................................................................................. 11

Mindfulness in Educational Settings .......................................................................................... 12

Pedagogy, Mindfulness, and Issues ............................................................................................ 14

Mindfulness in Art ....................................................................................................................... 15

Bob Ross, the Pop Culture Master of the Mindfulness Trend ...................................................... 17

Drawing and Mindfulness............................................................................................................ 17
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................ 28

Research Questions ................................................................................................................... 28

Research Methodology ............................................................................................................. 29

Case Study Research ................................................................................................................ 30

Autobiographical Research .................................................................................................... 31

Action Research .................................................................................................................... 32

Application to the Site, Context, and Data Collection ............................................................. 33

Personal Observations and Other Collection Methods ......................................................... 34

Mindfulness Activity Sources ............................................................................................... 37

Limitations ............................................................................................................................ 38

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................ 39
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Sainte-Chapelle ............................................................................................................ 2
Figure 1.2: Mindful drawing in sketchbook ................................................................................... 3
Figures 4.1 and 4.2: Landscape drawings..................................................................................... 41
Figures 4.3 and 4.4: Egg drawings................................................................................................ 44
Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7: Observed landscape and student drawings......................................... 52
Figures 4.8 and 4.9: Mindful body drawings................................................................................ 57
Figure 4.10: Student Watercolor Observation .............................................................................. 59
Figures 4.11, 4.12, and 4.13: Blind contour and observational portraits.......................................... 62
Figure 4.14, 4.15, and 4.16: Pumpkin charcoal drawings............................................................... 65
Figure 4.17 and 4.18: Jessica’s drawings...................................................................................... 68
Figures 4.19 and 4.20: Texture drawings...................................................................................... 70
Figure 4.21 and 4.22: Drawings from Emma and Haley ............................................................... 72
Figure 4.23 and Figure 4.24: Arianna and Emma’s tissue paper paintings................................. 80
Figure 4.25 and 4.26: Anabella’s chairs ....................................................................................... 83
Figures 4.27, and 4.28: Student Mandalas .................................................................................... 86
Figure 4.29 and Figure 4.30: Fabric drawings and responses........................................................... 87
Figures 4.31 and 4.32: Student self-reflection meditation............................................................... 90
Figure 4.33 and Figure 4.34: Louvre Museum and pencil drawing.............................................. 92
Figure 4.35, 4.36, and 4.37: Kirsten, Eva, and Anabella’s drawings............................................. 94
Figures 4.38, 4.39, 4.40, and 4.41: Copied drawings ................................................................. 97
Figure 4.42, 4.43, 4.44, 4.45, and 4.46: Final observational drawings................................. 100
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Art reflects the environment in which it is made, echoing in its condensed facets and symbolic traces the ethos and outlook of an age and its people. Through art, unconscious processes can be elicited and some of the values and wonders of a people can be discovered.

—Jeffery Rian

Drawing is a fundamental and cognitive activity of the human mind, one that stretches across many and diverse subject domains…Lines and marks on surfaces are ways of having and constructing ideas equally as they constitute ways of expressing them

—Judith Burton

Learning Through Drawing

Inside a musky French cathedral, I hunched over my sketchbook. The midday light streamed in from the delicately colored stained glass. My eyes squinted close to the page as I held my pencil tight to draw; the left edge of my left hand was covered in lead.

I was attempting to capture the ceiling and walls of the richly decorated Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. I was a student studying abroad, and the Sainte-Chapelle was one of our class stops for the day. I was told I had 45 minutes to roam around and look freely. Although this 13th-century building was an awe-inspiring sight, it was small (compared to other cathedrals I had previously visited), and after 10 minutes of walking around, I felt like I had seen everything in its entirety. I had 35 minutes left and no phone service, so I took out my sketchbook and started drawing the cathedral to pass the time.

As I observed my surroundings, the craftsmanship of the building became overwhelming. So much detail was packed into such a small space that I had not noticed before! Did I even want to draw this? It seemed like an overwhelming task. I kept making mistakes—the perspective was
off, the lines were incorrect, and forms were not accurate. I started my drawing over and over again as my frustration grew.

Figure 1.1: Sainte-Chapelle

I paused, took a deep breath, and started my drawing one last time, changing my method by breaking down the detailed cathedral walls and drawing basic elements first (straight lines, squares, ovals, rectangles) to make the drawing easier. With this shift, my drawing was soon starting to look like the space it was trying to represent.

As time went on, I became less concerned with my drawing being perfect and more intrigued with the building I was in. I drew the quatrefoils of the arcade, painted with scenes of saints and martyrs. I drew a few of the 12 large, sculpted stone figures, representing the 12
apostles, that were mounted on the clustered shafts that separate the great windows. I drew the
long, delicate-looking stained-glass windows that filled the nave and apse, and the large rose
window with flamboyant tracery that dominated the western wall.

I entered a meditative-like state as I observed. I thought about the symbolism of these
elements and the history and stories behind the details I was drawing. Despite some damage, the
windows displayed a clear iconographic programme. There were stories from the New
Testament, including the infancy of Christ, and from the Old Testament, such as Joseph being
sold by his brothers, King Saul being made King among the 12 Israelite tribes, David slaying
Goliath, Nebuchadnezzar leading the Hebrew people into captivity, and many other Old

Figure 1.2: Mindful drawing in sketchbook
Testament kings and queens. I thought about the detailed work and long hours it must have taken the people of the 13th century to build the cathedral. I thought about what it would have been like to attend mass when the cathedral was new, what I would have worn, and what it must have smelled like in a time before deodorant was invented. My mind was curious, lost in thought, and I wanted to learn more.

I snapped out of my trance as my study abroad professor, Paul, rounded up the class to walk to our next tourist destination. Thirty-five minutes had gone by in what seemed like seconds. As I walked the streets of Paris, I reflected on the transformative experience I had. The observational drawing I did to merely pass the time had turned into a valuable mindful learning experience. For the rest of my study abroad, I drew more—museum findings, landscapes, architecture, and animals. Especially when drawing nature, I found myself relaxed and engaged in the present moment. I was very aware of the colors, smells, and textures around me; I felt personally connected to the places I was in.

Although I enjoyed taking pictures along my journey, I realized I learned about and understood a new place the most when I was observing and drawing it. I spent more time looking, picking up on details I normally would have missed. Through the practice of observational drawing, I was able to engage with my surroundings in a deeper way than I normally would have, allowing me to observe greater detail and connect with a place, the people, and its culture in new ways. Through this practice, I noticed that I was also becoming more mindful, as my attention was focused on the experiences occurring in the present moment, transforming my observational drawing into a meditative practice. Additionally, I felt that my drawing technique improved because it became more meditative and was done in a relaxed state. Overall, observational drawing enriched my experience as a tourist and not only allowed me to
“see” things that I never would have noticed before but also improved my drawing technique and ultimately improved my drawing confidence.

My thoughts soon turned to pedagogy. How could I share this valuable and enriching observational drawing experience with my students? I knew the answer wouldn’t be easy; from past experiences and observations, I knew many people struggled with observational drawing, including myself.

As a little girl, I often drew with my dad, and I always admired his talent. Yet I would get so frustrated and give up because my drawings didn’t turn out like his. In a high school art class, I remember drawing a still life. I was determined to be the best artist and create the most impressive still life in the class because I wanted to be voted “most artistic” in the school yearbook. However, my efforts lead to frustration because the accuracy and realism I desired required a very slow, time-consuming process.

Once when I was teaching an elementary art class, a 5th-grade student gave me her unfinished drawing and put down her head in frustration, saying, “Drawing and being creative is for little kids. I am too old to do that!” Even at an art education conference, I overheard fellow art teachers express that “observational drawing is very difficult to teach and very difficult to grade. Overall, it is a frustrating process that requires much patience.”

It seemed like teachers and students alike were frustrated with observational drawing and often avoided observational drawing because of the uncomfortable challenges and frustration associated with it. For students, observational drawing can easily become tedious and tiresome. For teachers, it can be difficult to assess, to break down the observational drawing process in a way that students understand, and it is often difficult to keep students engaged and motivated. However, observational drawing had led me to new and profound insights during my travels. It
allowed me to slow down and become more mindful, present, and observant. These contrasting dimensions of observational drawing made me curious about approaching observational drawing differently.

**Observational Drawing and Art: A Rationale**

Observational drawing holds potential for student progression and development. Many teachers believe observational drawing is a fundamental, foundational art skill that can benefit students no matter their age or stage of development or their interests, talents, and background. Drawing is an activity that can be an interdisciplinary bridge, enabling students to cultivate valuable skills through art that will help them throughout their lives, no matter what career or area of study they choose.

Drawing may also have the potential to improve students’ mindfulness, and vice versa. In the practice of observational drawing, being mindful and aware of the subject helps the artist create a more successful drawing. Even beyond drawing, mindfulness is a way of connecting to present-moment experiences. The practice of mindfulness encompasses focusing the attention on the experience of thoughts, emotions, feelings, and body sensations as they arise and pass from moment to moment. Mindfulness can support attention, focus, and awareness, can enhance cognitive control and present-moment orientation, and can prevent thought distortion (Young, 2016).

**Problems**

Observational drawing has many benefits, yet it can be difficult and frustrating for students and teachers. As I continued to teach elementary and college art classes, I noticed a significant discrepancy between my younger students and my older students. Generally speaking, students in my elementary classes love to draw and consistently tell me how excited they are to
make art. However, as students become older and enter fifth grade, sixth grade, and beyond, their enthusiasm quickly burns out after starting a project. They get bored, don’t apply themselves, and don’t want to draw for more than five minutes at a time. This pattern evokes the U curve of artistic development as discussed in Harvard’s Project Zero (Davis, 1997).

I wondered how I could teach observational drawing in ways that would allow students to be successful and continue to progress artistically. How could I help my older students reclaim their confidence as visual artists? Although incorporating mindfulness and observational drawing into an art curriculum has positive potential, observational drawing can be difficult to teach. My response to this problem was to combine mindfulness with observational drawing and artmaking.

Although the college students in my Art for Elementary Educators class have a longer attention span and can apply themselves more easily, most of them don’t fully apply themselves to their observational drawing projects because they have low confidence in their drawing skills. They set themselves up for failure with comments like “This is going to be so bad” or “Don’t judge if this looks like a kindergartener drew it.” Many of my students have put themselves into two camps: “creative and artistic” and “non-creative and artistically challenged.” A handful of my students apply themselves to their work and feel good about the outcome of their projects. However, because of a lack of confidence, most of my students cannot fully apply themselves to reap the benefits of observational drawing. My problem was figuring out how to successfully teach drawing, build observation and mindfulness skills, and build student confidence.

Response

In response to this problem, I created and carried out an experimental, observational drawing and art curriculum to implement and effectively teach observational
drawing skills by incorporating mindfulness. The goal of this study was to increase students’
drawing and artistic confidence, drawing skill, and engagement and hopefully improve their
ability to bring art, observation, and mindfulness into their own elementary classrooms. I taught
this curriculum in the Art for Elementary Educators class (ARTED 326) at Brigham Young
University in the fall semester of 2019.

This study endeavors to discover a) how to effectively incorporate observational drawing,
with an emphasis on mindfulness, into a college-level art class, and b) how to help students gain
artistic confidence and fully engage in the process of art-making. Although representation in
drawing is important, I also wanted to use the act of drawing as a way to cultivate awareness and
being in the present moment, hopefully making students more aware of the process and less
concerned about the final product. I wanted my students to have a better relationship with
artmaking and with drawing.

A Brief Chapter Outline

The rest of this thesis is broken into four chapters that include a literature review,
description of methodology, analysis of the study, and a summary discussion of the study with a
list of implications for the field of art education.

In Chapter 2, I further discuss the literature surrounding the themes I introduced earlier in
the paper. I describe the rich history of mindfulness and its ancient roots in Buddhism; how
mindfulness is being used in contemporary scientific discourse and educational settings; the
relationship between art and mindfulness; current mindfulness trends and needs among college
students; the relationship between drawing and mindfulness; connections among observational
drawing, perception, and interdisciplinary practice; and the influence of mindfulness on artistic
confidence. Chapter 2 provides a background and framework to contextualize the research I completed.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my unique application of case study research methodology to this study and explain the rationale and context I used to select case study research. Afterward, I present more details about my research process, including the research protocol, what data is in the study, the methods I used to collect data, and how the data was analyzed.

In Chapter 4, I share the findings of my research, which were pulled from the analysis of the data I collected. I share the research framework I used and an explanation of the context in which I conducted my research. The rest of the chapter presents the results of the study and the analysis of the findings. The findings are chronologically organized by class day, with the earliest findings presented first and the latest findings presented last. The last section looks at the larger themes that emerged across the entire study duration.

In Chapter 5, I summarize the findings of the research and discuss the implications of these findings. The findings have been broken down into larger themes, and each theme is discussed based on the limitations or affordances I discovered regarding my goals for the study. The chapter concludes with implications for further research and contributions that can be made to the larger conversation surrounding mindfulness within an observational drawing curriculum.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of three parts. Part 1 breaks down the history and practices associated with mindfulness and discusses its contemporary applications, its relationships to art and observational drawing, and the benefits of mindfulness for students. Understanding the philosophies that drive mindfulness is important because the implications and purposes directly affect students within my curriculum. Part 2 explores the existing research that demonstrates how observational drawing can improve observation skills, discusses the importance of representing knowledge in a different way, and considers the successful transfer of these skills. Part 3 discusses issues found within a drawing curriculum and potential solutions to apply to my own study. This includes the U curve of artistic development discussed in Harvard’s Project Zero (Davis, 1997).

Background of Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness has become popular in the past several decades, but its roots reach 2,500 years into the past in Eastern philosophical traditions. While mindfulness has assumed different forms over the past millennia, its purpose remains constant: to end suffering. Mindfulness stems from schools of Buddhism (Olendzki, 2011) as well as from a developing scientific discourse in which mindfulness is rendered as a measurable scientific construct (Baer, 2011; Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003). These two quite distinct sources have become manifest in diverse curricular-pedagogical orientations in teacher development and education programs in recent years.

Mindfulness in Scientific Discourse

A number of the mindfulness techniques we use today were created by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994), a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts. Dr. Kabat-Zinn
developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) method to treat occupational health issues, such as stress reduction, burnout, and overall well-being. The widespread application of MBSR and other mindfulness practices has been studied with successful results in numerous areas beyond healthcare settings, including prisons, professional sports, and education, in which it has been used to cultivate teachers’ social emotional classroom skills (Flook et al., 2013; Lomas et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2012).

Dr. Kabat-Zinn (2003) saw mindfulness as the practice of “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (p. 144). Mindfulness is a method of contemplative inquiry, in which students “examine their own experience in relationship to the material they study, transforming their understanding of how their learning can affect their actions in the world” (Barbezat & Bergman, 2014, p. 21). The practice is based on developing a “critical first-person perspective” (Barbezat & Bergman) by which one learns to treat one’s own present-moment flux of embodied experience as one’s object of research. This can sometimes be a challenging practice, especially for people who don’t regularly meditate or who get distracted easily.

**Schools of Buddhism**

Although mindfulness practices are often taught secularly in contemporary scientific discourse, its roots go back to the early teachings of the Buddha. Dr. Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program is based on a type of Buddhist meditation called Vipassana. This ancient word from the Pali Indian language translates in English as “clear awareness” or “insight” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). This meditation technique is based directly on the teaching of the Buddha, who used it to attain nirvana, a profound insight resulting in the end of suffering.
In the ancient text known as the Satyabhama Sutta (The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness), the connection between Buddhism and mindfulness is clear. Here, the Buddha lays out mindfulness instructions, guiding the reader in four different foundations of experience: the body, sensations or feelings, the mind/consciousness, and mental contents.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2017) stated:

The Dhammapada, or a collection of the Buddha’s teachings, is one of the greatest psychological works ever written, and certainly one of the greatest before 1900. It is masterful in its understanding of the nature of consciousness, and in particular the way we are always striving and never satisfied. You can turn to it—and people have turned to it throughout the ages—at times of trouble, at times of disappointment, at times of loss, and it takes you out of yourself. It shows you that your problems, your feelings, are just timeless manifestations of the human condition. It also gives specific recommendations for how to deal with those problems, which is to let go, to accept, and to work on yourself. So I think this is a kind of tonic that we ambitious Westerners often need to hear. (p. 143)

**Mindfulness in Educational Settings**

The goals of mindfulness in education are to help students learn self-awareness, empathy, and techniques to calm and focus the mind; to understand effective communication; and to reduce anxiety and stress. These skills are not limited to helping students perform academically but are also useful in everyday life.

From kindergarten through 12th grade, students experience high degrees of stress (American College Health Association, 2012; Bell, 2013), and this stress often increases in college. Being a postsecondary student presents new experiences, responsibilities, and demands,
“consequently, mental and emotional support systems play a crucial role in fostering student well-being” (Bell, 2013, p. 1). Especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic, college students are experiencing many educational disparities (fewer learning opportunities/resources, feeling a lack of community and connection with others, dealing with disruptions in academic standards and requirements etc.) that impede their academic success and affect their personal well-being. According to the US Department of Education, 80% of college students said that COVID-19 has negatively affected their mental health (qtd. in Goldberg, 2021). According to Bell (2013), “More than a year of ‘staggering’ loss, grief, isolation, and uncertainty has taken a toll on many students’ mental health, compounding the challenges students face in the classroom, whether online or in person.” In a 2021 Gallup poll, several parents surveyed said their children were ‘experiencing harm to [their] emotional or mental health’” (p. 2). Additionally, 45% of parents cited the separation from teachers and classmates as a “major challenge” for their children (p. 2). Academia is currently consistently unstable, and students have less social and emotional support due to quarantine and isolation. Brief mindfulness meditations and compassionate self-love reflections are two mindfulness practices that have the potential to decrease students’ feelings of anxiety and stress and increase their sense of well-being and their capacity for compassion (Jansa, 2017).

Many educators are incorporating mindfulness into educational settings with successful results. For example, for almost three decades, holistic educator Jack Miller of the University of Toronto has offered a course that requires students to practice mindfulness. Many of Miller’s students have since written academic papers on the positive, impactful, and successful experiences they had in his class (Irwin & Miller, 2015; Miller & Nozawa, 2002). World-renowned medical neuroscientist Dan Siegel has studied the positive impact of mindfulness
practice on the human brain, especially the developing adolescent brain. He has found that mindfulness practices support the brain’s neural integration and cognitive processing in emerging young adults (Siegel, 2007, 2013). These findings offer further support for including mindfulness practices in educational settings for young adults as they enter higher education.

In addition, many research results have shown a positive correlation between mindfulness and a teacher’s ability to manage classroom behavior and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students. According to Meiklejohn (2012), “Studies of programs that directly train students in mindfulness have collectively demonstrated a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits to students. These include improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue” (p. 291).

**Pedagogy, Mindfulness, and Issues**

In contemporary culture, many view mindfulness as “hippie” and “spiritual,” which may seem to conflict with common or traditional ideas about educational practice, especially in public school settings. Because education is a communal way for arriving at a better way of living (Ergas, 2017), stepping outside of traditional education might give rise to new forms of educational practice that initially seem antithetical to our normal school practices but that can bring positive benefits. The pedagogical space formed when practicing mindfulness can be nonconventional for many people. A mindful practice is usually silent, interrupted only by brief reminders of the guidelines of mindfulness practice (Ergas, 2017). A person can deeply explore their inner selves—their thoughts, sensations, and emotions experienced moment by moment. Because of this inner focus, students may have a hard time understanding mindfulness and its place in school and might feel unsure, vulnerable, or nervous at first. Ergas (2017) explained that
students often express these thoughts with questions like “Ok. Here we are standing, paying attention. But, what now? What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to feel? Is this it?” (p. 203). It is important to encourage students to at least give the practice of mindfulness the benefit of the doubt. The worst that could happen is that they will feel like they have been wasting their time (Ergas, 2017).

**Mindfulness in Art**

Art and creative practices can be naturally and instinctively mindful. Drawing, painting, and other artistic media have the power to draw us into the present moment, to bring our focus to the relationship between the pen/brush and the surface, to search for ways to convey visually what is in our minds. Laura Constantinescu (2012) stated that “fully immersing ourselves in a creative project activates a different part of our brain. It’s very much an exercise in mindfulness.” She explained, “I didn’t know it at the time, but painting in my high school art class was my first taste of meditation, impermanence and being in the moment” (para. 2).

Creating a work of art requires the artist to turn inward, contemplate, reflect, and plan before expressing that work in the external world. An example of mindfulness in contemporary art is the American performance artist Marina Abramovic, who performed *The Artist Is Present* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2010. Abramovic sat in the museum every day, from the time the museum opened until it closed every night, for months on end. Visitors to the museum would line up for a chance to sit across from her. There was no dialogue, just sitting, observing, and reflecting. Some people would sit for a few minutes; others would linger for a while. One man came to sit with Abramovic 21 times over the course of the exhibition. When asked why he did this, he responded, “Sitting with her is a transforming experience. It’s luminous, uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being
present, breathing, maintaining eye contact” (2010, MoMA, paras. 4-6) For viewers, sitting across from Abramovic stirred up a range of emotions, but their experiences were similar: sitting with Abramovic was a mindful experience, allowing them to dwell fully in the present moment. It was, after all, New York: a city where nobody has time for anything. People are always running around, moving on to the next thing, and here is this woman in a museum, and she’s just sitting quietly.

A study completed by Kalmanowitz from the American Psychological Association sought to understand how mindfulness meditation could be integrated with art to aid students suffering from trauma. Results showed that participants found the skills they learned helpful in times of stress, pointing to how this combination of art and mindfulness can contribute to building resilience (Kalmanowitz, 2016). In the field of art therapy, mindfulness-based art was tested on women with a variety of cancer diagnoses. Results showed that patients demonstrated “a significant decrease in symptoms of distress, and significant improvement in key aspects of health-related quality of life” (Wiley, 2005, p. 363).

In the field of design education, a field that lies under the umbrella of art education, research shows that mindfulness can foster valuable human qualities that support wider social views (Rojas, English, Young, Spencer, 2001). In a design curriculum, mindfulness was used as a “catalyst to foster meaningful design” (Rojas, English, Young, Spencer, 2001, p. 7). The study illustrated the benefits of implementing four teachings from the Buddha: loving kindness, compassion, joy, and acceptance toward both oneself and others. It also explained that mindfulness practices can allow design students to become more cooperative as empathy increases. This increased empathy can lead to socially responsible action and also complements a
new breed of creative professionals who can “rise to the challenges of designing better schools, better democracies and better ways of living” (Young, 2001, p. 9).

**Bob Ross, the Pop Culture Master of the Mindfulness Trend**

I have noticed a considerable trend in current pop culture: Bob Ross. Robert Norman “Bob” Ross was an American painter, art instructor, and creator and host of the television show *The Joy of Painting* (Gotthardt, 2018). Like many college students, BYU students love Bob Ross, and a part of his popularity may be due to the growing need for mindfulness practices in college, even when many do not consider painting along with or listening to Bob Ross as a mindfulness practice. In the art classes I teach at BYU, my students constantly ask to paint along with Bob Ross. There are local Bob Ross painting nights, Bob Ross merchandise, and a Bob Ross board game titled “The Art of Chill.” Many students have said that Ross’s soothing voice demeanor in his guided art videos help them relax and escape their stressful college life. Other students I have talked to attribute this trend to Ross’s positive outlook and philosophical sayings like “There are no mistakes, just happy accidents” or “It’s your world. We just show you how, but you make the decisions.” Whether students realize it or not, following along with these kitschy Bob Ross videos is a mindfulness practice, providing continual positive encouragement and drawing focus to the present moment.

**Drawing and Mindfulness**

Many artists believe that drawing is the foundation of art. Through drawing, people can express an idea, an observation, a feeling, or an emotion (Wilson, 1987). Drawing can be considered a mindfulness practice as the artist reflects on what they are creating in the present moment. Scholar Christian Montarou (2013) described a specific “flow” of mindfulness that comes with observational drawing. A crucial difference in drawing compared to traditional
meditation techniques lies in the fact that this “experience of flow is not explicitly formulated as a goal at the outset but becomes a natural and spontaneous consequence of the necessary focus of attention throughout the act of drawing” (p. 6). Rather than a technique, drawing, according to Montarou, is more about an attitude that can help disengage routine thinking and thus allow a person to be more present in registering the subject in the moment.

An important similarity between meditation and drawing is control of attention. When drawing, the artist must be fully focused on the act of drawing a composition with shapes and lines. Colors must be seen precisely for what they are, disconnected from any meaning for accuracy (Montarou, 2013). Both meditation and drawing require a sustained focus on the moment of perception. In observational drawing, the body and mind work together to engage in an act of unique mindfulness. This state of mind “can be described as expanded consciousness, not in a philosophical or religious sense, but in the sense that the relationship between body and mind is in a state of flow” (Montarou, 2013, p.13). The experience of this state as simultaneously mental and physical is of great importance in the creative process, opening up improvisation and free-flowing ideas. The different stages of the drawing process to achieve “flow” resemble those described by researchers on mindfulness and by the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi, who described three stages in the process of developing the basic experience of mindfulness (Billeter, 2010): control of attention, a feeling of mastering the task, and becoming one with the subject.

The master French artist Paul Cézanne discussed the state of mindfulness he achieved after painting and drawing landscapes for hours on end. He famously stated, “The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 11). A particular characteristic of this state of mind is that all sense of time is erased. When mindfully painting,
Cézanne seemed to become one with time, and the land itself was fully present. He experienced being “at one” with his surroundings and was “in flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). By entering a state of mindfulness while sketching, the artist can simultaneously observe their own thinking as both participant and spectator, witnessing the emergence of the subject on the drawing sheet.

Professor Ron Wigglesworth has connected drawing, with its awareness and mindfulness of body movement, with kinesthesia. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), *kinesthesia* means having an “awareness of the position and movement of the parts of the body by means of sensory organs (proprioceptors) in the muscles and joints.” Most people are familiar with kinesthetics in the context of sports. Athletes practice the same motion repeatedly until it becomes almost automatic. They build up consistent movement patterns resulting in predictable outcomes. However, Wigglesworth illustrated that we can find this movement in drawing technique as well; as we are more aware of our movements, we can understand the control we need to create in drawing. Wigglesworth (2017) found that “by limiting [his] motions, it was possible to draw relatively quickly and accurately. Additionally, presenting drawing as a kinesthetic exercise akin to mastering a sports technique can make the drawing process less intimidating” (p. 37)

**Drawing, Mindfulness, and Nature**

Observing nature while drawing can have beneficial implications for students and can naturally turn into a mindfulness experience. I have personally experienced this as described in my introduction, as I drew and painted the many places I observed during a study abroad in Europe. According to artist Peter London, there is a beneficial connection of mindfulness, drawing, and nature. London (2003) stated, “Art is a holistic language that is uttered from the
mind, body and spirit. In this way, art is a perfect form of expression with which to imagine, investigate, propose and engage in a new worldview” (p. 2).

London (2003) also explained how observation and mindfulness in nature can allow students to form meaning and cultivate a simple, authentic, firsthand way of seeing nature as it is and we are just as we are. As we draw closer to nature, two profoundly important and powerful qualities are experienced. One is that the entire world takes on a new degree of poignancy, luminosity, preciousness, subtlety, mystery and intimacy. The other is that we increasingly experience ourselves in just the same way; poignant, luminous, precious, subtle, mysterious, and intimate. For as we draw closer to Nature, we simultaneously draw closer to ourselves (p. 2).

Connecting with nature while being mindful often gives artists a greater sense of meaning, appreciation for life, connection, and perspective.

**Observational Drawing**

Drawing can serve many purposes and is “d [;] fun/gives pleasure, provides excitement, and can create and release tensions” (Wilson, 1987, p. 189). Achieving realistic drawing skills has three important aspects: realistic drawing develops perception skills, instills confidence in creative ability, and facilitates a shift to a new mode of thinking that will develop the potential for insightful, creative problem solving and the development of critical thinking. This in turn stimulates higher-order thinking and visual literacy skills (Edwards, 1982). In his book *Ways of Worldmaking*, Nelson Goodman (1982) said that pictures from drawings can provide students with a unique way of worldmaking, as much of our knowledge of the world is actually derived from symbolic sources as opposed to direct perceptions of things and events.
Just as different kinds of speaking and writing serve different purposes, drawings need to be understood not just as an end in themselves but as a unique way of communicating (Adams, 2013, p. 2). Drawing is more than a set of discrete skills and techniques; it is a means of developing a capacity for different kinds of thinking, particularly thinking in progress, as well as conclusive thought (Fava, 2014). Drawing practitioners describe the purpose of observational drawing in many ways, including “to understand the engineering structure and texture of objects, human beings, environments” (Rohr, 2010, p. 15) and to “sharpen observational skills” (Hare, 2010, p. 24). Echoing Ruskin’s (1991) dictum that to learn to draw is to learn to see, Leo Duff (2010) described the purpose of observational drawing as “to look, to see, to focus, to concentrate, to sustain your concentration.” According to Duff, observational skill enables “decision making [and] clarity of vision” (p. 53).

**Perception in Drawing**

Observational drawing plays a fundamental role in the construction of perceptual skills. Students practice becoming aware of a subject through their senses for a sustained period of time. As students observe, they can learn about a specific subject and gain insight. However, in order to really learn from an experience, we first have to internalize what we have observed correctly, and for many students, this takes time and practice. “Learning thus, ensues through the development of insight which is essential for personal and intellectual growth as well as the development of skill” (O’Farell & Meban, 2003, para. 2). The purpose of observational drawing is to enable students to understand what they are experiencing, to perceive relationships not evident from a casual glance or from a photograph. The constant viewing and reviewing, identifying elements, measuring, establishing relationships, and making connections involves a number of approximations, modifications, and refinements. The drawing is not an illustration: it
is a record of the student’s struggle to understand. This is why drawing can be so closely related to meditation, as “meditation and mindfulness involve looking at the world without judgment and allowing what is in front of us to become understandable” (Glaser, 2008, p. 13). According to Betty Edwards (1982), drawing from observation not only promotes perceptual skills but also allows perception of the self, self-expression, and interpretation. This means that by observing a student’s drawing, we can understand how they see the world in front of them. The drawing in a way is like a journal entry, showing the viewer the creators unique and personal perspectives through a visual language.

**Drawing as an Interdisciplinary Practice**

A century ago, drawing was taught as an essential skill for scientists, not only valued for communicating findings but also for enhancing observations (Landon, 2015). With the development of photography, these two disciplines started to veer away from each other, despite their similarities and combined benefits. Drawing is valuable not only for work in the art classroom but also in other contexts such as science. Artist Leonardo DaVinci used observational drawing for his research to develop new inventions. Drawing can also be used as a form of analysis when learning about the history and cultural diversity of art, science topics, craft and design; and in understanding emotions and state of mind, or it can be used as a tool to tell a story. Drawing obliges students not only to look but also to think about what they are looking at (Adams, 2013). Drawing is a useful strategy for recording information, “as the time taken to do the drawing increases the amount of attention paid to the subject and prompts students to question what they are observing” (Adams, 2013, p. 155). Research notebooks, sketchbooks, visual diaries, and travel journals all have an important part to play in shaping habits that underpin our ability to draw and to learn through drawing. They nurture skills of observation,
recording, reflection, analysis, interpretation, experimentation, planning, and synthesis. They create a mindset where students are more receptive to experience and ideas and provide opportunities for students not only to reflect upon and rework their experience but also to experiment and imagine, to generate and develop new ideas.

For example, Ron Wigglesworth (2017) stated that while incorporating biology into his drawing practice, he “learned about anatomical morphological structures, evolutionary links, and taxonomy—and gained greater insights that [he] would not have had without drawing the specimens” (p. 292). Additionally, “these insights inspired [him] to research topics [he’ had not even known existed” (p. 293) For Wigglesworth, the process of drawing facilitated learning and raised questions as often as it answered them. It increased his capacity to develop thinking across multiple disciplines and encouraged additional creative exploration. Reintroducing drawing back into other disciplines such as science, math, and history may foster student learning in any subject area, inside or outside of the classroom. Drawing may also add interest and engage the student more effectively.

**Observational Drawing in Medical Schools**

As mentioned, the interdisciplinary nature of drawing has helped students across many disciplines improve their learning. The skills learned through observational drawing are demonstrated in medical schools across the country that are implementing art into their curriculums. Lyon (2016) stated that there “is a need, in these disciplinary domains, to make more explicit the underpinning pedagogical approach to drawing and the impact that different approaches have on learning” (p. 221). Medical students at Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, for example, are required to take humanities seminars in their first year. And in the past few years, more schools, including Harvard Medical School and the
University of Texas at Austin’s Dell Medical School, have developed their own arts and humanities programs (Lesser, 2017).

At the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, a study showed that art observation training for first-year medical students can improve clinical ophthalmology observational skills. Principles from the field of visual arts, which is reputed to excel in teaching observation and description, can be successfully applied to medical training (Gurwin, 2017). In his paper “Improving Observational Skills to Enhance the Clinical Examination,” Steven Russell from the University of Alabama demonstrated that medical student and resident observational skills can be improved using a museum-based drawing curriculum. Visual thinking strategies were validated teaching techniques that stimulated learning and encouraged evidence-based decision making in medical students.

**Issues in Artistic Development**

Although there is great potential for student learning when art is integrated with other subjects, I have noticed that many of my students lack confidence in their artistic abilities. Lasky and Mukerji (1980) said, “Art is the child’s first form of visual language and precedes the development of writing skills” (p. 154). But as we age, art becomes reserved for only those who have artistic success as judged by themselves or by their peers, parents, or teachers. Too many people begin to believe they cannot draw. If drawing is regarded as art, then observational drawing may already be impossible (Wigglesworth, 2017). Many students tell themselves, “I can’t draw,” which inhibits them from gaining the benefits of interdisciplinary art and drawing. A decline in art/drawing among older children has been identified over decades. Theorizing on the “I can’t draw” problem has deep roots, from the psychological human development lens described by Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982), to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1980,
1983), to Davis’s U curve theory (Davis, 1997; Davis & Gardner 1992, 2000). Pariser (1997) noted that “early adolescence is the graveyard of artistic activity, (124)” while suggesting the need to account for cultural differences in drawing development. Mark Graham (2003) concurred, describing drawing development as neglected and pedagogically arrested at early ages, while observing that graphic representation, as a way of thinking, remains undeveloped. More recently, the “I can’t draw” cognitive gap is theorized as being both cultural and parallel to the arrested or impoverished cognitive development of language and literacy (Cohn 2012, 2014; Graham, 2003; Milbrath, 2012; Unsworth, 2001). Neil Cohn (2012) theorized that children develop a resistance to progress in drawing when schematic representations are achieved, and the majority do not go on to develop graphic schemas or syntax in perceptual drawings. Children also lack a working memory in drawing to articulate schematic information, thus for many, this gap manifests as a resistance to drawing (Cohn, 2012). My hope is that by implementing mindfulness into drawing and taking a hands-on, interactive approach to learning, I can overcome Davis’s “U curve theory” and students’ beliefs that they “cannot draw.”

**A Core Foundation Met with Disconnection**

Although many students believe they cannot draw, observational drawing is a fundamental core foundation in art education and creation. As previously discussed, a century ago drawing was taught as an essential skill for scientists, valued for communicating findings but also for enhancing observations. There were few cameras and no printers, copiers, or online images; if you wanted to convey information visually, you had to do it yourself. However, now we can google any picture we want to in seconds, and we have access to endless amounts of visual imagery. Because of this access to technology, it’s easy to become disconnected from the observation process. I consistently have at least one student every day who asks me if they can
trace something from their phone because it is “too hard to draw.” While technology is a wonderful tool, looking at a photograph of something won’t have the same effect as drawing it.

The practice of observational drawing was a key component in the training and success of some of the “great” classical artists in history, like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Peter Paul Rubens. Da Vinci’s power of observation and skill as an illustrator “enabled him to notice and accurately recreate the effects he saw in nature, adding liveliness to his portraits” (Museum of Science, 2022, para. 2). Fueled by his curiosity and the desire to learn, da Vinci consistently tried to explain what he saw, often “writing and sketching . . . these observations in his notebooks, (para. 4)” and was among the first to take a scientific approach toward understanding how our world works and how we see it. Michelangelo and Rubens were also able to draw and paint the human form with incredible accuracy and gesture, thanks to the countless hours they devoted to sketching and observing human anatomy with cadavers. Michelle Fava (2014) stated that observational drawing is a skill that “can both inform and extend the mind, facilitating greater creativity and problem solving through situated cognition” (p. 123). Barbara Tversky (2010) described drawing as a “tool for thought” (p. 1), as drawing allows one to think in a different way.

While observational drawing is a core art foundation, as mentioned, it is easy for students today to become disconnected from the observation process because of their access to technology. According to Meta (2021), the average person spends 1.7 seconds looking at a piece of content. Students today are growing up in a world heavily influenced by technology and social media, in which their norm is to observe something for only 1.7 seconds. Perhaps this is feeding into students’ beliefs that they “cannot draw.” It isn’t that they can’t draw but rather that they
don’t know how to observe. They aren’t used to the practice of observing a subject for longer periods of time.

**Transferable Skills**

One of my goals for this study is to increase student confidence in drawing and students’ ability to be more creative and thoughtful artists. If cognitive skills are employed in observational drawing, can we assume that observational skill acquisition leads to collateral, transferable benefits in other areas of art, the self, and beyond? The transferability of cognitive skill in drawing is a contested issue and may be beyond the scope of this study. Fava (2014) noted, “Any causal relation would be hard to measure as any enhancement of overall graphic or visual cognitive ability will most likely be the result of combined activities” (p. 124). As drawing can be a tool to learn in an interdisciplinary way, it may be difficult to measure if it can directly improve confidence and creativity and be considered a transferable skill. I understand the criticisms of the practical applications.

**Conclusion**

The intent of this literature review has been to provide a context and framework to guide my research. Through the study and collection of data surrounding mindfulness, observational drawing, and artistic development, I hope to create an experience that positively influences my students’ artistic practices and their lives beyond the classroom. As mentioned, one of the original ancient purposes of mindfulness was to end suffering and engender growth and peace. Students today continually face new and unique challenges; through this curriculum, I hope to create a growth-promoting yet peaceful alternative to the chaos.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research explores the effects of a mindfulness-based observational drawing curriculum within an integrated, arts-based course for preservice elementary educators. I designed a curriculum that connected mindfulness with observational drawing in order to study the affordances and limitations of observational drawing as an artistic practice and to study the effectiveness of my approach to teaching this sometimes-problematic aspect of artmaking. I was interested both in how mindfulness might be effectively taught and practiced within a visual arts class and how an exploration of ideas and practices associated with mindfulness and observational drawing in an arts method course influences student artmaking, students’ attitudes toward teaching and learning, and students’ perceptions of self and art practice. My research was informed by qualitative case study approaches as well as a combination of action research and autobiographical research, which I adopted as the curriculum evolved and I considered weekly student responses.

In this chapter, I describe the reasons I used case study research as the main methodology for conducting my research. I also provide a brief overview of the important aspects of case-based research, along with a justifying rationale. The rest of the chapter details the data and how it was collected and analyzed. The final portion addresses my specific context, time frame, and procedures.

Research Questions

Inspired by my own observational drawing experiences, I pursued additional insights about teaching and learning from my students, designed a mindfulness curriculum, and integrating it into an observational drawing curriculum. The two research questions I focused on were (a) how does an exploration of mindfulness influence students’ artmaking and perceptions
of their own art practice? and (b) how can mindfulness improve students’ confidence and drawing skill?

This study was conducted in a university-level course that I have taught for some time; therefore, I knew the general level and capabilities of the students in this class. The semester-long curriculum I designed, called Mindfulness and Observational Drawing, involved observational drawing lessons designed to minimize the stress and anxiety often associated with this practice, and to boost confidence and skill. All lessons used and insights behind each lesson are provided in Chapter 4.

Art has long been connected to the expression of self and the understanding of identity; hence, the mindfulness material augments existing course content. The intent of this project is to integrate classroom art experiences with the practices of mindfulness and provide opportunities for students to engage in a transformative learning experience (Ergas, 2017; Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 2001) that has the potential to be self-illuminating and to positively influence students’ future teaching practice, as well as my own. This is a qualitative, exploratory study of how such a program might be implemented or integrated into a teaching methods course and how such a program might influence teaching and learning within the course.

Research Methodology

As the semester unfolded, the study organically morphed into a qualitative case study of my preservice elementary education class that was influenced by action research and autobiographical research. This qualitative case study of a unique educational experiment was inspired by my autobiographical reflections about observational drawing, mindfulness, self-efficacy, and education. I will elaborate on each methodology that informed this study as an introduction to how I conducted my research. Although my original methodology intent was
action research, turning to a case study informed by action research and autobiographical
research allowed the study to flow organically without being affected by my own bias. A full
description of the curriculum and my approach to curriculum theory, again, is described in
Chapter 4.

**Case Study Research**

Case study methodology was the key methodology I used in my research. Case study
methodology allows researchers to examine an individual, a group, a variable, an episode, or a
series of episodes to gain insights into phenomena or issues or to identify new areas for inquiry
(Crowe et al., 2011). For an entire semester, I studied a class of undergraduate preservice
elementary school teachers, which was a unique experience; most students had limited exposure
to art and mindfulness prior to the start of the semester, yet they were taking the class to learn
how to teach art to their future students. Other students in the class were not preservice
elementary majors but were simply taking the class to fulfill the required art credit for their
university studies. This qualitative study focused on raw, sometimes vulnerable student
responses and their art projects without expected outcomes of concrete facts and figures.

Hand et al. (2008) stated, “Case study methodology offers a creative and flexible way to
gain a comprehensive understanding of human complexities in context, using various means to
collect data” (p. 393). My various “collections” of data included personal written observations,
recorded class discussions, projects, and written responses from the students. The case study
format allowed me to gain firsthand knowledge about the education comparison/inquiry in
question. This was beneficial, as I was most interested in studying firsthand, individual responses
to my curriculum. The case study format also enabled me to discover and document particular
issues and challenges that arose with observational drawing. Crossley and Vulliamy (1984)
stated that comparative case studies can be applied to “enhance the potential generalizability of research findings” (p. 204). The case study research result can be given context and meaning by reference to another specific issue within other research projects.

Case studies also allow for open-endedness and creative applications. Case studies can be used as a way to evaluate programs (Quinn & Kahn, 2001), can help researchers develop or test hypotheses (Tollefson-Hall, 2009), and can involve action research, as my study does (Chung, 2009; Zimmerman, 1992). A case study can allow for insights into the nuances of art education practices that might be missed by other types of research. Ultimately, my study provided an in-depth analysis of my students’ experiences and how mindfulness changed their experiences and perceptions of observational drawing and artmaking.

**Autobiographical Research**

My personal narrative with observational drawing and mindfulness ultimately inspired the creation of this study. Each student’s narrative also informed the data. Qualitative autobiographical research offers a unique insight into the behaviors, beliefs, and meanings of the situations and people studied. The reflexive elements of autobiography can make for more self-aware research as well (Hannabus, 2000). As we look at past experiences, actions, thoughts, and behaviors through a present-day lens, we can increase our understanding of them. A key part of my methodology was my study of student confidence and the experiences students have while drawing. My students’ confidence was greatly affected by their past experiences. I saw glimpses of this in class discussions and reflection journals that shared their past and present thoughts about art, drawing, and mindfulness, influenced by their individual narratives and past artistic self-efficacy. By reflecting in this way, “[students] can become more aware of how [they] have
constructed [their] sense of self (or artistic confidence) through the many facets of [their lives]” (West, 2019, para. 10).

**Action Research**

Action research greatly influenced how I structured the study. Scholar Liora Bresler (1994) has defined action research as “the study of one’s own practice in order to improve it” (p. 12). John Elliott (1991), another prominent action researcher, believed that the responsibility of a teacher is to interpret their everyday practice in the pursuit of reflective self-development. Elliott wanted the teacher to unify theory and practice. According to Elliott (1991), action research is an attempt to improve the quality of life in a social situation. While there are numerous similarities between traditional educational research and action research, there is one crucial difference: action research is educational research, but more specifically, it is research that is conducted by educators for themselves (Mertler, 2014).

Action research might be defined as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (Elliott, 1991, p. 69) It aims to aid in practical judgment in concrete situations, and the validity of the “theories” or hypotheses it generates depends not so much on “scientific” tests of truth as on their usefulness in helping people to act more intelligently and skillfully. In action research, “theories” are not validated independently and then applied to practice; they are validated through practice. Central to Elliott’s (1987) analysis is the idea that the action researcher develops a personal interpretive understanding from working on practical problems, and that practical action and discourse constitutes the theoretical understanding to be obtained.

Many models exist for action research, though they all share the same basic principles of starting with a central problem or topic, observing or monitoring what takes place, collecting
data, acting based on the data, and starting a new stage of action research (Mertler, 2007). While this study does not follow action research in its entirety, these basic principles are included in the format of the given curriculum.

**Application to the Site, Context, and Data Collection**

This qualitative research study was carried out in the undergraduate course Art for Elementary School Teachers (ARTED 326) at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in the fall semester of 2019. Although this course is tailored to elementary education majors, it is also a general elective at the university, fulfilling the university’s three-credit minimum requirement for the arts. As a result, students enrolled in ARTED 326 show diversity in their fields of study beyond elementary education, including STEM fields and social science majors.

Class size in this course usually ranges from 12 to 24 students. The number is limited by the size of the art classroom used for the course. The students in the class were informed about the study and invited to participate. All students agreed to and participated in every aspect of the mindfulness and art curriculum. I gathered data from the entire class, but chose a smaller group, chosen at random, for more detailed analysis for some of the mindful activities. Because the reflections required from participants are detailed, I needed a manageable sample in order to interpret the detailed qualitative data. I was interested in students’ individual responses to the curriculum; hence, this relatively small sample size allowed me to explore students’ responses in greater detail.

Ultimately, I hoped to improve my students’ relationship with drawing based on what I had observed in past classes, so my first step was fact finding to determine if my preconceived notions were valid. Before I initiated any form of study or action, it was important for me to understand how my classroom that semester was functioning, what my students’ skill levels
were, and how my students felt about art, observational drawing, and mindfulness. To do this, I observed the classroom environment and my students’ attitudes, engagement, and skill levels, primarily in drawing, for three class periods, keeping a reflective journal of the findings. I did not ask students questions in this step but instead focused on observed actions, participation, and outward expressions of student feelings toward drawing. Throughout this time, I took pictures of student art so I could more closely observe what the students were creating and better understand their skill levels and interests.

In response to my findings, I created an observational drawing curriculum based on mindfulness. The goals of mindfulness in education are to help students gain self-awareness, improve observation and empathy, and learn techniques to calm and focus the mind and communicate mindfully. These skills are not limited to helping students perform academically but can be applied to everyday life.

**Personal Observations and Other Collection Methods**

According to Karin Tollefson-Hall (2013), “A case study centers on research questions. There may be one general question encompassing the idea of the study and the researcher often has a series of sub-questions to help guide the research” (p. 205). Therefore, research questions should be “broad enough to allow for investigation” and simultaneously “narrow enough to make the project manageable” (p. 205). Throughout the six-week curriculum, my daily personal reflection focused on these questions:

1. Were the students interested and participating in the lesson? Did they seem stressed or frustrated?
2. What makes the students excited to draw and more willing to invest?
3. Did it seem like the students were understanding the concepts and topics being taught?
4. Were these topics and concepts successfully applied?
5. Are the students more confident in themselves as artists?
6. Is there improvement in skills such as observation, critical thinking, and awareness?

The in-class curriculum included unique, weekly observational drawing lessons for the students, paired with a mindfulness activity and reflective journaling prompts. Including additional home requirements, students wrote reflective journal entries 7–8 times per week. Each entry was a thought, reflection, observation, drawing, collage, painting, or collection based on questions that related to the mindfulness curriculum.

Over the course of the study, I conducted class discussions to better understand students’ feelings about observational drawing, mindfulness, and their creative confidence. I recorded these responses in my reflections and notes. I based the class discussions on the guidelines presented by Shannon Oltmann (2016) in “Qualitative Interviews: A Methodological Discussion of the Interviewer and Respondent Contexts”, she explained that group discussions for interviews “for qualitative research allow probing and clarification of issues that are raised. With a semi structured format, the agenda is set, but the interviewer is free to follow their respondent’s train of thought and to explore tangential areas that may arise. The interviewer may rephrase the questions and how they are asked depending on the individual participants or group” (p. 1).

For additional data, I administered student questionnaires at the beginning and end of the study, allowing me to compare and contrast students’ answers and how they evolved over the semester. The questionnaires included the following items:

1. Favorite type of art to do and why?
2. Do you like to draw? On this smiley face scale, where would you be?
3. How often do you draw outside of art class?

4. What is your favorite thing to draw? What is your least favorite?

5. What makes drawing fun?

6. On the same smiley face scale, how confident do you feel in your ability to draw from life?

7. What makes drawing difficult?

8. What makes someone good at drawing? What makes a drawing successful?

9. What makes someone creative? Do you feel like you are a creative person?

10. What is mindfulness? What do you know about it?

For the final questionnaire, I added the following questions to evaluate how the curriculum affected the students:

1. What has been your favorite activity that we have done? What has been your least?

2. Have your feelings toward drawing changed?

3. On the smiley face scale, how confident do you feel in your ability to draw?
5. What do you think is the most important thing about making a drawing?

7. What was one thing you have learned from this class that you remember the most?

8. Has your opinion of drawing changed? If so, how?

9. How do you feel about mindfulness? Have you enjoyed it? Do you think it has changed the way you draw?

In addition to collecting written questionnaire responses, I took pictures of the assignments and other class reflections to document students’ work.

**Mindfulness Activity Sources**

Throughout the study, students participated in mindfulness exercises and art activities. The primary purpose of these exercises and activities, as further discussed in Chapter 4, was to improve student social and emotional well-being. In turn, I hoped these exercises would improve their drawing confidence and technical artmaking abilities. Because these practices are so closely tied to social and emotional learning, all mindfulness activities were informed by not only traditional Buddhist meditation exercises but also by art therapy techniques. Art therapy techniques are created by certified counselors that have been trained in both psychology and fine arts and are validated by clinical trials and scientific discourse. Art therapists use the creative process to improve individuals’ physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Alder University, 2022). While the mindfulness activities in this study were influenced by art therapy techniques from certified art therapists, I am not an art therapist, nor do I claim that activities associated
with this study constitute art therapy. Techniques were simply used to improve student well-being.

To create some of my activities, I referred to Youhjung (2021), a Board-Certified Art Therapist (ATR-BC) currently working in Washington, DC. Youhjung received Bachelor of Arts degrees in psychology and studio art from the University of Texas at Austin and a master’s degree in art therapy from the School of Visual Arts. I was drawn to her techniques and resources because her work has included helping children and adults with anxiety.

**Limitations**

In this qualitative case study, I collected data from students enrolled in ARTED326. Because this class is open to all majors, as previously discussed, students had a wide range of artistic ability, experience, and approach. Some of the projects were also assigned as homework building on what was being created in class; therefore, the student work environment also varied. It may be argued that these variables made the study difficult to measure, as there were several factors that could have affected student responses. These arguments raise valid issues; however, my study was organized in the best way possible to mitigate these concerns.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present findings from the study. These findings include data collected from student interviews, personal field notes, class discussions, student art assignments, and student journaling experiences throughout the semester. Further discussion on these findings, implications for the practice, and recommendations for additional research are presented in Chapter 5.

The main question at the center of this study was, How does an exploration of mindfulness influence students’ artmaking and perceptions of their own art practice? A related question for this study was, How can mindfulness improve students’ confidence and drawing skill? Student confidence and perceptions in artmaking may be connected to their social and emotional learning (Edgar & Morrison, 2021; Omasta et al., 2020). For example, the National Consortium for Core Arts Standards (2020) has described a primary purpose for arts education as the development of social and emotional well-being. For some art educators, this connection became particularly relevant because of the stress connected with the COVID-19 pandemic (Sabol, 2021). Intersections between the arts and social and emotional learning provide one rationale for the study of mindfulness and artmaking.

With these questions in mind, I created an art curriculum for inexperienced undergraduate art students in order to explore ways to increase student confidence and drawing skill in various artistic mediums. Students participated in mindfulness meditation exercises, reflective journal entries, and a variety of art practices that included drawing. These activities were important for addressing inexperienced preservice elementary students’ apprehension and lack of confidence with artmaking, especially drawing. These students often also feel stress and anxiety about artmaking.
**Pre-Intervention**

As I needed to understand student skill levels and their overall attitudes about art and observational drawing, I first observed their attitudes, engagement, and skill level for three class periods with minimal instruction. I kept a reflective journal of my findings as a preassessment of student skill levels and attitudes toward artmaking and drawing.

For example, on one of these three days, students drew outside on the Joseph Fielding Smith Building Rooftop Terrace for 15 minutes. Based on my observations, the students seemed to enjoy this activity more than other indoor artmaking activities, such as drawing simple still-life shapes for 20 minutes (during which most students turned to their phones instead of their drawings). While outside, students were allowed to draw anything in the landscape they could observe. By this point, it became clear that there was a wide range of drawing interest and ability among the students. For example, one student, Lex, was less engaged, often distracted by his phone, and regularly looked around at other students while working. His depiction of a planted tree and the background patio (Figure 4.1) shows a lack of detail and an undeveloped perception of depth and proportion within the scene.

Another student, Annabelle, drew two images: one of the clocktower and one of the mountains to the east of campus (Figure 4.2). Comparing Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, we see that Annabelle’s drawing shows greater attention to detail and a greater sense of value and perspective. While Annabelle was much quieter in class compared to Lex, she was extremely engaged in the drawing process. As for the rest of the class, although there was a wide range of ability among the students, overall, it seemed like the majority of students were engaged and putting effort into their drawing process.
Figures 4.1 and 4.2: Landscape drawings
After three days of observations, and before implementing any curriculum change or mindfulness intervention, I gave each student an in-class questionnaire to gather additional data about their attitudes, behaviors, thought processes, and opinions on observational drawing for the purposes of this chapter, these results are summarized here and include the most common answers.

**In-Class Questionnaire**

1. Do you like to draw? On this smiley face scale, what represents how you feel about drawing? What influences in your life have made you feel this way?

   ![Smiley Face Scale]

   Student answers: Awful = 0, Not Very Good = 3, Okay = 14, Really Good = 2, Fantastic =1

2. How often do you draw outside of art class?

   Student answers: “Rarely.” “Except on doodles or notes in other classes, it is soothing to doodle.” “I wish I did it more in my free time, but I don’t.”

3. Is drawing stressful? Relaxing? If so, why?

   Student answers: Seven students said drawing is stressful, and 13 said it is relaxing “only if it isn’t graded in any way.” If someone were to “judge or grade” the drawing, 9 students said they “would change their answer to stressful.”

4. What is your favorite thing to draw? What is your least favorite?

   Student answers: The majority agreed that abstract images are their favorite to draw, followed by landscapes, flowers, doodles, and buildings. Least-favorite images to draw included people and faces, followed by “anything realistic” and animals.

5. What makes drawing enjoyable?

   Student answer: The top answer was “showing your creativity” followed by “being alone,” “no grade”, “chill”, “success”, “being outside”, and “not having to think.”
6. On the same smiley face scale as in question one (1), how confident do you feel in your ability to draw?

Student answers: Awful= 2, Not Very Good = 11, Okay = 6, Really Good = 1, Fantastic = 0

7. What makes drawing difficult?

Student answers: Most common answers included “details,” “adding too much to the drawing,” “other people approaching and looking,” “wanting it to be perfect,” “proportions,” “lack of patience,” “making something look 3D,”

8. What makes someone good at drawing?

Student answers: Most said, “Emotion and feeling conveyed,” “making something look realistic,” “ability to create something beautiful,” “it looked like how you wanted to carry it out, no surprises.”

9. Do you view yourself as an artistic or creative person? Where would you put yourself on the smiley face scale? Why or why not?

Student answers: No, I am not creative = 5. Yes, I am creative = 8 students. I am somewhat creative = 7.

Other comments: “I have a hard time deciding what to draw.” “I am creative and artistic but not with drawing.” “It is easier for me to copy someone else’s idea.”

After the students completed the questionnaires, we discussed their comments in class. Most students said they were “okay” at drawing and that their confidence in drawing was “not very good.” I was relieved to see that only two students reported that they were awful at drawing, as I had expected more negative answers based on body language and comments made in the class discussion. Throughout the first three days of class, students seemed to enjoy and actively participate while drawing landscapes outside, though at other times they seemed more challenged or disengaged, such as when I asked them to draw eggs in their sketchbook from life (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).
Figures 4.3 and 4.4: Egg drawings
Again, some students displayed a greater skill level than others. At the beginning of the activity, all the students were engaged in drawing their eggs, but as time went on, some students became uncomfortable and quiet and seemed unsure of themselves. Many students were fidgety and disengaged, looking at their phones instead of working on the project. Perhaps these behaviors were a consequence of a lack of interest in the simple subject matter or other stresses from the day.

From the questionnaire, I found that most of the students liked to draw but that drawing became stressful and unappealing if it was graded or judged in any way. Typical comments from students included, “Drawing is relaxing unless it is graded; then I don’t like it,” “When someone is watching and judging my drawing, it becomes stressful,” and “Drawing is most fun when it is chill and relaxing.” When I asked why they had these feelings, they replied with comments such as, “I see other people drawing better than me” or “When I took middle school art, I wasn’t very good, and my teacher told me I wasn’t a good artist.”

After considering these findings, I created an artmaking curriculum that incorporated mindfulness to explore the difference mindfulness could potentially make in student observational drawing and artmaking. Based on the literature I reviewed and these initial responses from students, I designed the semester-long curriculum *Mindfulness and Drawing*, which included 10 drawing and related-medium method lessons that approached common artmaking techniques in unique ways. The lessons were designed to minimize the stress and anxiety often associated with this sometimes-problematic area of artmaking to study the effectiveness, affordances, and limitations of mindfulness in drawing as an artistic practice. I hoped to improve the students’ confidence, skills, and approach by teaching them “how to ‘see’ the world as it is, not how it might be remembered or thought to be” (Patterson, 2015).
Interpretation of Mindfulness

In thinking about mindfulness, guided meditation and yoga often come to mind, as they are directly and universally interpreted as mindfulness practices. However, mindfulness can be found in a plethora of other places. According to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), *mindfulness* is defined as “the quality or state of being present, conscious, or aware.” Therefore, we can interpret any activity that creates this state as a mindfulness practice. The class guided-meditation exercises presented in this study will be considered a mindfulness practice, as will the other activities students participate in, including their art practice. The variety of non-observational intuitive mindfulness art projects, thoughtful journal responses, and mindfulness drawing exercises described in this chapter can be interpreted as mindfulness training. For example, in one mindfulness observational activity, students were asked to create a plein air landscape drawing with the following instructions: “Take three minutes and observe the land before you start to draw. List your observations in your sketchbook.” I continued to prompt students to study details such as the shadows cast across the land and basic shapes in the organic landscape, and to identify the colors that were most represented in front of them before they drew. While art can often be naturally and instinctively mindful on its own, for the sake of this study, I will not include any art practice without a correlated meditation, documented personal reflection, or journal entry as a mindful practice.

Overview of Mindfulness Curriculum

Over the 10-week semester, each drawing class averaged 45 minutes. Students were also given drawing homework each week that took on average, 15 minutes to complete. Through the successive iterations of mindful drawing lessons, I adapted the lessons each week to address my
concerns about student outcomes, such as engagement, self-efficacy, artmaking performance, and students’ thoughts/behaviors toward drawing.

These concerns are necessary to address, as they directly affect student artmaking and their perceptions of self and their art practices. While my hope is that this curriculum benefits preservice art students as they develop a positive relationship with art and drawing, a lack of engagement or low self-efficacy (essentially one’s confidence in achieving something) can inhibit students from improving their art practice.

For example, a student with low self-efficacy or confidence may suffer from a lack of motivation that could affect their art practice. According to Albert Bandura (2011), having a healthy self-image can drive a person to succeed even when they experience failure. and having a healthy self-image means a person is more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn and improve (Bandura, 2011). However, if students have been criticized by people close to them, such as peers or previous art teachers, over a long period of time, they will likely develop low artistic self-esteem. Low self-efficacy can play a significant role in restricting a person’s motivation and ability to progress. A student may be reluctant to pursue opportunities in the arts, such as applying for college art programs, despite their interest in it. Elementary education students who move on to teach may avoid specific art topics they are intimidated by, or they may have a difficult time showing their artwork in public. This low self-efficacy can make students self-critical as they underestimate positive qualities and focus on their inadequacies, rejections, and failures. I hoped that including mindfulness in this curriculum would help students overcome anxieties about artmaking.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with
more capable peers (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Instruction focused within each student’s ZPD is neither too difficult nor too easy; it is just challenging enough to help them develop new skills by building on the skills they have already established. If art instruction is too easy, students may lose interest, and if it is too difficult, students may become overwhelmed and give up on the lesson at hand, so it is important for the educator to stay within this ideal zone.

On Day 1 of the study, I explained the research and questions I was investigating to my students: How does the exploration of ideas and practices that are associated with mindfulness paired with drawing in an arts method course influence student artmaking and their perceptions of self and art practice? In addition to this overarching question, I also wondered if mindfulness could improve students’ drawing confidence and thus the quality of their drawing.

Students completed three main activities during each class period: (a) a combined mindfulness meditation or mindfulness practice activity prior to the drawing activity, (b) a drawing or art practice that related to the mindfulness practice of the day, and (c) a journal
response about the experience. Throughout the semester, I collected qualitative data from journal responses and class discussions to measure drawing skill and attitudes toward artmaking. To measure drawing skill and artmaking improvements, I used the following rubric:

**Drawing Technique Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Mastery 10–8</th>
<th>Accomplished 7–6</th>
<th>Approaching understanding 5–0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representation and accuracy</td>
<td>The drawing represents a clear representation of the object of the drawing.</td>
<td>The drawing somewhat represents the object of the drawing.</td>
<td>The drawing shows minimally represents the object of the drawing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic skills</td>
<td>Drawing exhibits attention to detail and a variety of drawing techniques.</td>
<td>Drawing contains many strong elements but needs further refinement. A few drawing techniques were used.</td>
<td>Drawing lacks detail, shows little effort in work, and may be incomplete. Minimal variety in drawing techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shading/value</td>
<td>Shading is well done with defined attention to detail and a clear light source. Objects appear real and three-dimensional.</td>
<td>Drawing is shaded but needs refinement to make it look more realistic. The drawing has two-dimensional and three-dimensional qualities.</td>
<td>Shading is not complete or is absent. Drawing looks incomplete and looks two-dimensional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout/proportion</td>
<td>Layout and proportions are properly sketched. Objects look natural without distortion.</td>
<td>Most of the drawing is properly laid out, but the drawing has a few areas that need further refinement in order to look natural/proportional.</td>
<td>Subject/object drawn is out of proportion, and the drawing does not look realistically convincing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Day 1: Landscape Observations**

Each day I began class with a different guided meditation that followed this general format:

Close your eyes. First, we need to sit up tall. I want you to imagine there is a string on the top of your head and someone is pulling it up. Stretch your spine
nice and long; create space between each vertebra. Make sure you are sitting evenly on each sit bone in your pelvis. Feel your feet in contact with the floor and the ground underneath you. Stretch your hands all the way up to the sky, and then let them come down. Now place your hands on your stomach and take two to three breaths, noticing your stomach rising and falling with each in and out breath. Breathing is important with mindfulness; it is a practice that is regularly found in yoga. In vinyasa yoga, every movement is equally coordinated with one breath. This helps slow your heart if you are anxious or stressed. Focus on your toes—wiggle them around, curl them up, and then release them. Roll your ankles around a few times in each direction, then relax. Let’s keep this pattern now with your calf muscles, then your knees, thighs, pelvis, and back. Stay nice and tall, but let any tension melt away. Now focus on your shoulders and how they feel—wiggle them around and then relax. Now do the same with your neck muscles and your jaw. Take a deep breath and let go of any tension you’re holding in these places. Finally, go to the top of your head; it is light.

This was the first meditation we did together as a class, and it didn’t come without awkward looks of uneasiness and confusion. Some students seemed just fine participating in the meditation, while others were hesitant or were looking around at other classmates. A few students were distracted by their phones in the beginning but were able to put them away and join the class. In contemporary culture, mindfulness and meditation can be seen as “hippy” or “out there,” so I understood that it might have been difficult for some students to relate to the practice.
After our meditation, we went outside to draw the landscape of Squaw Peak, as shown in Figure 4.5. We then spent three minutes sitting mindfully and observing before we started to draw. I wanted my students to more carefully observe in the present moment and to point out observations about the landscape they hadn’t noticed before to aid in drawing accuracy. I asked them questions to think about such as, “Where is the light coming from? How does the light affect the landscape it falls on? How do the shadows fall? Can you see a range of shadows? What is the lightest part of the landscape? The darkest? What about the colors? How many colors can you pick out? Are they warm? Cool? What lines do you see? What different textures do you see in this landscape? Where is most of the detail? Where are things blurry? What shapes can you pick out? Many of you stated that you felt overwhelmed with detail. Try to break up your landscape into simple shapes that you can lay out first. Do you see triangles? Circles? Ovals?”

Students were instructed to try and find basic shapes in the landscape that could make their drawing more accurate.
Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7: Observed landscape and student drawings
After observing, students drew the landscape for 20 minutes. To diversify the drawing curriculum, students drew with oil pastels instead of graphite pencils. My hope was that this material would add interest while helping the students to not feel overwhelmed by focusing on small details due to the oil pastels’ width. Because of the nature of the medium, many of the drawings looked impressionistic from the textures, light, and colors created. Tommy’s drawing in Figure 4.6 and Sarah’s drawing in Figure 4.7 illustrate how they observed color, shape, and value. We can see the development of value and space in the mountains and the inclusion of texture in the tiny trees in the background. In Figure 4.7, we see that Sarah focused more on basic shapes, creating more accurate proportions of the trees and mountains in her drawing.

I was pleasantly surprised with the results of the drawing activity. From what I observed, most students were actively engaged in their work. A few students were checking their phones, but most were consistently looking back and forth from the drawing to the landscape. After drawing, I asked the students to write a reflection about their experience. Some of their responses included:

I feel like my drawing was successful because I was able to really focus on the values of the colors and general shapes instead of getting lost in the details and becoming overwhelmed. I really liked today’s experience drawing outside. It was breezy but not enough to feel uncomfortable, and the sun on my back felt nice. Not going to lie, though; I did get distracted and started thinking about what else I had going on tonight and this coming week.

Today’s experience was nice because it felt like a break. I was less stressed about the outcome because I have been doing more drawing lately. While I was drawing, I thought
about the shapes and colors of the landscape. I also thought about different techniques I should try.

My drawing doesn’t look as good as it could, but I feel like I was successful in learning how to draw with oil pastels. I focused more on blending colors. I think art is a skill, and you’re only good at it when you practice a lot. I did enjoy drawing today; the sun felt good on my back, and it was very different from the rest of my day.

I felt like my drawing was successful because I personally enjoyed the process and end product of it. I am particularly proud of this because I tried something I never tried before, and it looks surprisingly good. I enjoyed today because I challenged myself to be minimal because I usually rely on little details as I draw. It came out very differently than anything I have ever done. My mind wandered a bit, and I got distracted with thoughts, but I tried to focus on blending colors and paying attention to the landscape.

I tried my best and I definitely feel more confident; my drawing was more successful than the last time we drew! I need to focus more on coloring and creativity. I think a successful drawing, especially in nature, catches the meaning and beauty. It does not have to be perfect. I liked today because I was calm and not worried about what other people thought. I hope I can get better.

Overall, it seemed like the students felt like this drawing practice was refreshing and relaxing and that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with nature.

**Initial Conclusions**

These responses align with many similar thoughts and responses from other students in the class. Overall, I observed that my students enjoyed drawing outside, they were more relaxed
compared to previous days, they were more observant and purposeful with their mark making, and they felt like they were successful in one way or the other. My instruction and the use of oil pastels benefited many students, aiding them in not overcomplicating their drawings.

However, none of the students directly mentioned our mindfulness activity in their reflections. While students enjoyed the drawing experience and their successes, I don’t know how much of this was due to our initial meditation or just to the fact that we were drawing nature outside on a nice day with brightly colored materials. A few students did mention in their reflections that they still got distracted during the drawing process or meditation by their thoughts and didn’t focus as much as they thought they should. Is there a way to engage these students even further?

**Day 2: The Human Figure and Portraits**

Many students stated on their initial presurvey that the human body was an intimidating subject to draw, especially the human face. In response, I created the “mindful emotion portrait exercises” and other activities as discussed here as scaffolds to move students progressively toward completing an observational drawing portrait with minimal anxiety. The “mindful emotional portraits” did not involve any observational drawing but were intended to connect students to their emotions. For over a decade, a growing body of research and related school practice has demonstrated the importance of “social and emotional learning (SEL)” in preparing students for both academic success and, more broadly, life effectiveness (CASEL, 2003; Elias et al., 1997; Weissberg, 2000). SEL can be defined as the process through which students develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence. This competence increases optimally when integrated throughout an art curriculum. In one study,
researchers found a direct positive correlation between emotional knowledge and arts participation, and between the knowledge of emotions and art training (Qiao et al., 2021).

Day 2 began with students focusing on being mindful with their bodies, creating a pathway for understanding and empathy toward them. My hope was that, as a result, observationally drawing the human body later would be less daunting for students if they could more easily approach the body with familiarity and comfort during drawing exercises.

I started the class with a guided meditation, similar to what we did on Day 1. It seemed like students were more receptive to actually doing the meditation on the second day compared to the first day, but I still sensed a bit of hesitation and feelings of awkwardness. While most students participated and closed their eyes, a handful of students struggled to stay still and participate. They would open their eyes, look around at others, or look at their phones.

At the end of the meditation, I gave the students a piece of paper with a simple outline of a gender-neutral body and explained that they were going to participate in a “mindful emotion portrait exercise.” I gave them the following instructions:

With your colored pencils, color in how your body feels today, right now. First, color in your heart, your center. What color represents this? What about your head? Your shoulders? Your legs? Color in your body based on how each part feels. Maybe some parts will be multicolored. Fill in the body. There are warm colors, and there are cool colors. Light or dark, color is a great indicator of feeling and emotion. You can create patterns if you desire. There are a lot of ways we can be mindful. It’s important to take time and be mindful of ourselves, our emotions, and how we feel in our bodies. Sometimes we resist, deny, or suppress our emotions, especially pain or stress.
Everyone’s body will look different, and that is OK. We can love and appreciate our bodies even when we are not in a “perfect” state.

Students participated in this exercise for about 10 minutes. All the students seemed to be engaged with this activity, even the ones who struggled with the initial guided meditation and seemed distracted. While students worked, I played relaxing music in the background to aid their focus and state of mind. After students finished filling in their 2D body, I asked them to reflect on their experience by describing the physical sensations they colored in. For example, perhaps they felt nervous in their stomach or in their shoulders because they carried tension there, or warm near their heart because they had had a good day. Last, I asked them what they learned about their bodies from this drawing. Sam wrote that she felt calm in their head as represented by

*Figures 4.8 and 4.9: Mindful body drawings*
blue in Figure 4.8. This is balance with green representing peace for them, while their stomach was growling and hungry represented by yellow. Laura wrote about her drawing (Figure 4.9), “Red represents my stress and confusion, because I feel like I am often overworked. Blue is where I feel calm or cold. Green is the logical part of me, always trying to deal with illogical emotions. Yellow is happiness and joy! Orange is where I feel hot and bothered.”

Many students recognized in their responses that emotions and feelings can manifest in physical sensations within the body. On that day, most of the class felt like they were happy yet tired, hungry, or stressed for a variety of reasons. Many students commented that they really liked the activity and that it helped them wind down and relax after a long day.

Next, I led the class in discussing color further and what it can represent. Students clearly understood how colors can help a person be mindful about their own body and emotions. Students also concluded that an artist can be mindful when adding color to an observational painting or drawing. Sam noted that colors can play a key role in the emotion and moment of a work of art. An example of this is the work of Van Gogh. The self-portraits he completed at different stages in his life give us a glimpse of his emotional state at the time. In Figure 4.11, the viewer can sense feelings of sadness and crisis, as the colors are much more muted and carry a somber tone that doesn’t match the bright hues we’re used to the artist using, as seen in Figure 4.10.

We also discussed Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and looked at examples such as Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. These movements are a great example of the use of color, texture, and light to capture a fleeting moment in time, which can be a mindfulness exercise. We also explored the Expressionism movement, whose painters focused solely on expressing the emotional rather than physical, and on spontaneity (Tate Museum,
I showed examples to the class of Emil Nolde’s Expressionist watercolor landscapes (see Figure 4.12). For a beginning-level observational art activity, I asked students to work on replicating one of Nolde’s paintings for 10 minutes. I hoped that the students, by experimenting with replication, would start to discover drawing and painting techniques like color theory and mark making. I also hoped that this observation exercise would induce less stress as the 3D space they would normally draw (as in plein air) was simplified into a 2D space.

Based on data from the initial surveys, students found more realistic/representational drawings “stressful.” I hoped that Nolde’s free-flowing, abstract, but somewhat representational, style would be less frightening to replicate as it eased the students into a simplified observation. I wanted to mix this “favorite” of a landscape with their “least favorite,” the human body. We see an example of Sara’s work in Figure 4.10. She was really starting to understand how to blend the
colors of watercolor to create a similar look to Nolde through her experimentation, despite having little experience with watercolor prior to this class.

In addition to this activity, we also had a quick lesson on watercolor technique. We discussed how to change color saturation and a variety of different techniques, such as dry brush, glaze, wet on wet, and stippling. We also discussed color theory, how to create certain colors that may be difficult, complementary colors, analogous colors, tints and shades, and warm and cool colors.

It was now time to tackle the “most stressful thing to draw” according to student responses: the human face. Faces are also one of the most difficult things for me to draw accurately, so I sympathized with my students; I have personally felt the anxiety and frustration that comes with drawing the human form. I instructed the students to first create a blind contour self-portrait for 10 minutes using a mirror. After completing this first drawing, I then asked them to work on their second drawing for 15 minutes, a traditional observational portrait, attempting to make it as accurate as possible. I hoped that the mix of mindfulness exercises, such as blind contour, would heighten their observational skills while making the task of drawing their face less intimidating. On the drawing rubric scale, most drawings scored a 6 or 7, with a few outliers (see Figures 4.11-4.13 for student examples).

Many of the students wrote in their sketchbooks that they enjoyed drawing the blind contour more than they did the traditional portrait. Karina said, “I thought the blind contour was more fun; it seemed like it was easier.” Another student said, “The blind contour was fun even though it didn’t look as good.”

It seemed that the students enjoyed the process more, but was it less stressful? Most of the students said they had fun and were engaged in most of the mindfulness exercises, but many
noted in their journals that the traditional observational drawing was still difficult, and they expressed a lack of confidence in their capabilities. I tried to incorporate other mediums, styles, and subject matters to add interest and diversity to the exercise, but I wondered if this variety took away from the overall goals of the process, almost becoming a distraction. It is unclear to me how much of a difference mindfulness made on their traditional observational portrait drawings.
Day 3: Learning Through Drawing

On Day 3, I wanted to address a problem that I saw in the data for Day 2, the human body and portraits. Many students wrote in their journal responses that they became frustrated with their portraits when they didn’t turn out how they expected them to, and therefore they didn’t count them as “a successful drawing.” My overall goal for the day was to help students understand that a successful drawing doesn’t necessarily have to correlate with how realistic/accurate their rendering is. Success can be found in the process of learning and making, and drawing can be used as a tool for learning and collecting data. This is an important goal for some mindfulness practices—to help us become engaged with the process rather than the end result. Instead of focusing on perfection and the result, we can focus on detail and absorbing information and understanding what is in front of us. For example, as previously discussed,
drawing has traditionally been used as a way to carefully observe and record scientific observations. We see this in the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, Beatrix Potter, and Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Hundreds of years ago before photography, drawings were an important part of the scientific process and discovery.

I began class with a guided meditation to help the students relax and come to the present moment. While this meditation was similar to the other meditations we had done, I modified it to include points that were relevant to what the students were going to focus on today. Following is a portion of the meditation:

As you breathe, try to let go of any tension; you don’t have to be strained. As we draw, we also don’t have to be strained as we so often are. We can be mindful, in the present, but maybe the goal of the drawing is to learn about the objects you are drawing instead of trying to achieve perfection. Maybe the experience is more important than the outcome. Imagine your head clearing, and there is energy flowing all around your body. This energy is yours to use, and you can use it for anything you set your mind to.

After our meditation, I showed the class examples of artists who straddled the line between art and science and used drawing as a way to learn more about the world, such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Maria Sibylla Merian, Charles Darwin, and Carl Linnaeus. Maria Sibylla Merian, for instance, accidentally discovered insect metamorphosis because she drew tropical insects with such detail (Lotzof, 2021). Leonardo Da Vinci was an artist, scientist, inventor, and draftsman whose works were contingent upon the scientific knowledge he gained from drawing the human anatomy and other natural forms from observation. Paleobiologist Anna K. Behrensmeyer (2015) stated, “Drawing what you see is more powerful than photography for learning about spatial patterns and relationships” (para. 1).
Following this discussion, I asked the class to choose an individual object in the room to draw and learn about for 15 minutes. I also asked them to write down three new things they learned about the object by observing it. These objects ranged from fruits and vegetables to bottles and shoes. I prompted them to try and learn everything they could about the object they chose and not necessarily make a “perfect drawing.” To aid them in their drawings and provide technique, I also prompted students to start simple and observe the general shape of their object before beginning. I encouraged them to draw lightly at first so that they could erase later if needed. I showed them that it is beneficial to look for straight edges and for curved lines. Through my observations, I have found that students often overexaggerate curves, lines, and angles (for example, the top ellipse of a drawn cylinder is often too rounded), making the drawing look less realistic. I also advised students to be mindful of shadows if adding value,
checking to see where the light sources are coming from and if the shadows and highlights match the source direction.

Figure 4.14, 4.15, and 4.16: Pumpkin charcoal drawings
For this drawing, students were prompted to work in charcoal. I chose this material because it is easy to use to create value and is soft and easy to smudge. In Abby’s drawing in Figure 4.15, we see the beginning stages of understanding value, shadows, and overall form. Based on observations, it is fair to say that the majority of the class demonstrated a skill level that was on par with Abby’s drawing. On the drawing rubric, I gave Abby’s drawing a 6 out of 10. Figure 4.16 shows an example from Eva, a student who typically displayed drawing skills that were more developed than the rest of the class. Eva’s drawing displays accuracy in form and value and received an 8/10. After the activity, I asked students to reflect on their experience and share what they learned. Responses included:

I learned that harsh contrasts in color and shadows create the best drawing. Knowing where the light source is helps create the most realistic drawing. It was really stressful when I had to keep going darker and darker because it meant a greater commitment to what I was creating. I don’t think my charcoal drawing turned out very well; it is sad. My paintings look way better.

I learned that paying attention to the light is very important. Objects can look different depending on where they are in the light. I found charcoal to be stressful; I’ve never used it before. I guess my drawing was successful because I tried my best, but it doesn’t look very good.

Yeah, I feel like my drawing was successful. I learned about shading, and I felt like I did it pretty well. I am pleased with my object.

To my surprise, many students found the charcoal to be a stressful material to work with instead of a more pleasant one. Perhaps this is due to the quick contrast it can create and the
material’s natural tendency to get messy and dark rather quickly. Students may become anxious in their reserved mark making because the charcoal may look “bolder” than desired. I find it interesting that many students were dissatisfied with their work, because I saw improvement and a greater attention to value when compared to drawings from the beginning of the semester. For example, let’s take a look at Jessica’s work up to this point. For her homework on Day 2, Jessica drew a blueberry, as shown in Figure 4.17. While this was an honest attempt, there is little sense of value or space. I gave this drawing a score of 3/10. As I look at Jessica’s charcoal drawing of a cone, shown in Figure 4.18, from Day 3’s exercise, I see a greater attention to value and sense of space. I gave this drawing a 6/10. Even though Jessica expressed that she didn’t like this drawing and that it caused some frustration, I consider this a successful drawing and improvement for her. This brings up issues with cognitive dissonance among students. For further discussion on these implications, see Chapter 5.
Day 4: Drawing with Senses

Mindfulness often requires the use of multiple senses, so for Day 4, I wanted to use sound and texture to create art. Perhaps this approach would relieve students’ anxieties about drawing from the previous day. We started off the day with a guided meditation that brought awareness to the present moment, the body, sound, and texture. As the students’ eyes were closed, I prompted them to observe what they were hearing in the space. I placed a variety of objects on their tables and asked them to reach out and touch each object while their eyes were closed, noting the sensation on their fingers.
Exercise 1: Texture Creations

From what I had observed previously, texture was a difficult element for the students to render. I wanted to create an activity that approached texture in a less daunting way but that would still help them with their observational skills. Each table had a still life set up with a variety of objects, such as fabric, bottles, fruits and vegetables, or smooth metal shapes. I prompted students to focus solely on the texture of these objects, not the shape, size, color, or value. I asked them, “What color does each texture feel like? What patterns, lines, or shapes would represent the texture? On a page in your sketchbook, draw this texture in an abstract way. Incorporate all of the textures that you see into a single composition. Ask yourself how you can create cohesive unity. How can you make it look balanced? Figure 4.19 shows Emma’s work, and Figure 4.20 shows Arianna’s work. We see different interpretations of the texture in each piece. I admired the free-flowing organic marks each of the students made. Each piece had its
own personality and unique interpretation. Based on journal entries and comments, students were more confident and invested in this activity and felt freer with their mark making.

Figures 4.19 and 4.20: Texture drawings

Exercise 2: Listening to Sound

Being mindful of our present moment includes being mindful of sound. Sound can play an important role in the feeling and narrative of a place and can be visually represented. In Woman with a Parasol by Claude Monet, we see evidence of sound by Monet’s visual
representation of wind. The clouds, vegetation, and the subjects’ garments are all painted with movement. We can see the direction of the wind and how fast it is blowing. If we were physically present in this painting, we would hear the wind rushing past our ears and the grass rustling underneath our feet. If Monet wasn’t mindful of sound, perhaps the wind and gesture of the painting would be less developed.

For this mindfulness sound activity, I played six songs, each for two minutes. These songs had no words and were not familiar to the students, yet they conveyed a unique mood. I asked students to make an abstract drawing incorporating all of these sounds, just like we did with the texture drawing activity. They created abstract lines, shapes, and textures that fit their visual description of the sound. Each student interpreted the music differently. Figure 4.21 shows Emma’s work, with its more intense and rich colors such as orange, red, and dark green, and Figure 4.22 shows Haley’s work, more pastel in color with softer textures and more whitespace.
Following these two activities, I asked students, “How did this activity affect your attitude toward artmaking? What do you think your strongest sense is? What is composition, and what makes composition successful? Do you think yours was successful?” Most students said that the music activity was their favorite exercise. It is also interesting to note that, over a year after this study was completed, I received an unexpected email from a student expressing to me how much he had loved this activity and had connected with it. Joel explained to me that the activity helped him understand how an abstract piece of art can hold emotion and meaning, dispelling his previous thought abstract art was an “excuse for bad artists to pass off their work.

Figure 4.21 and 4.22: Drawings from Emma and Haley
as revolutionary and creative.” He also added that he still uses this sound activity as a mindfulness exercise to destress. Students responses about the activity included:

I felt like today’s exercises pushed my creativity. I felt like I had to get in touch with my emotions more to express things and make them abstract. However, I think my art has improved very little to be honest.

“Today was so nice because I could just do what I feel and not stress about what things looked like. I felt like I really had to incorporate my emotions into the painting today! I feel like I have improved because I am more comfortable doing art now compared to when the class started.

I feel more comfortable doing art now. Today’s exercise made me feel more fluid and flexible. Today the “rules” seemed more flexible and freer. I could just do what I felt like I wanted without judgment.

I don’t really understand abstract art, but this activity helped, and it was really fun, and I felt like it helped me be more casual in my approach.

I loved today because I could put what I was emotionally feeling on the paper when reflecting on the music. I appreciated the experience of today more than other art we have done. I think my art skills have improved because I am learning a lot in different mediums, like paint and charcoal, along with pencils.
This activity made me feel very excited and calm! I just really enjoyed the sound. I feel like good sound can lead to good art. It just inspires you. I felt more confident and open to creativity. I am not sure if I am improving my skills at all, but I definitely enjoy class better.

Based on journal responses and class recordings, it is difficult to measure if this activity improved students’ observation skills. However, it is clear that for many students, this activity did influence their perception of self and their art practice. While the activity was not necessarily related to observational drawing, many students were able to better connect with and understand abstract art and its significance. Joel, for example, was able to better connect with the emotion that an abstract piece of art can carry, and it allowed him to see past his critical judgment of abstract art.

**Day 5: Midway Thoughts**

Day 5 started off with a class discussion. I wanted to check in with students and see how they were doing midway through this mindful intervention and gather their thoughts. The following is our conversation, which includes direct quotes from the class:

*Me:* If you asked a group of kindergarteners, “Can you draw?” what would they say? If you asked the same question to older kids, what would they say?

*Class:* Kindergarteners would say yes. A student in middle school or high school would be more hesitant.

*Me:* Why would they say no? What changed?

*Class:* As a kid, they don’t compare themselves to others. They focus on their own self-worth.
Pressure and comparison build as you get older; it is stressful! You don’t understand or care as a kid. One student said, “Comparing is so hard. I compare myself so much. As we get older, we are told to focus on realistic results, not abstract. There is all of this expectation of realism. We want the egg to look like the egg. We want it to be perfect.”

Me: Where does this perfectionism come from? Why do we do this?

Class: From other subjects. You have to get perfect grades in other classes. It is the same with art, right? Another student: Maybe from photography? We want things to look like photographs.

Another student: Famous artists took a bold move to be famous. To be famous, you have to be so amazing and brilliant. It is so hard to be amazing nowadays because so many people are good. It is so hard to be bold now. Hard to compete with so much talent today. Daunting.

Me: What are the criteria of a good artist when you are young?

Class: Realism all the way. If it looks real, it is so good. We allow ourselves to be creative when we are young. But then teachers praise realism. Teachers do that. If you draw something realistic as a little kid, it is amazing. Another student: We are losing education on how to be yourself and creativity. It is all about the test. Confinement. I feel like the system is killing us.

System of assessment is everywhere. You can’t escape it. Intentions of our art change as we get older. Just get it done and get a grade. Instead of when you were little, you did it for fun. They are just checkmarks. School takes the fun out of it. Another student: As we get older, what we are told is that good art is more mainstream painting and drawing. When as a kid, the world is open. You make things with leaves or mud. Mainstream realism expectation. Part of a long tradition in art and renaissance. Art has moved to a much more diverse place, but it hangs in there somehow.

Me: How can we say it is good art, then, if it isn’t real?
Class: Probably effort? Self-evaluation. Is the artist really invested in it? What is the end goal? The criteria change. Intent is important. The whole class agreed that intent makes good art.

Another student: Technique!!! It is based on technique and craftsmanship. Is it nicely crafted?

Me: What about people who deliberately make art messy?

Class: Kids understand what good art is based on what is around them. They will understand on their own without us telling them. They will figure it out on their OWN. Based on our CULTURE around us. Images are everywhere. When I was in middle school, I remember wearing the same thing. Uggs and jeans skirts and stuff. They are trying to be like each other. It was cool. They will treat art in a similar way. The mainstream thing is cool. Another student: It’s important to consider the learning outcome when we teach them. Maybe it is more important to teach how to hold a brush or about color. Experience over end result. Intention!! LEARNING OUTCOME. I want them to have fun with color. Expectations are powerful in the classroom. Don’t be hyper-attached to a certain definition in art.

Student: “Figures and faces are still so stressful for me! I am scared to draw those things.”

Me: Any other comments?

Students: This class has allowed me to become more carefree about my art. It is fun and not stressful. It has also opened me up to feelings and emotion!

Instead of drawing to make something perfect, I just try to create a feeling.

I have learned to appreciate more styles of art.

I am still frustrated with observational drawing because I just can’t connect my hand with what I see.

I love watercolor! It is my new favorite.
I love expressing what I feel; I can interpret it in my own way. No one has to know what I am thinking. Like a secret message.

I was really unsure of what was coming, but this class was way better than I expected!

**Discussion Breakdown**

This discussion was enlightening and raised many important points. First, throughout the class discussions and journal entries, the students repeatedly brought up the concepts of pressure and perfectionism. Brigham Young University is a rigorous, private, religiously affiliated university; therefore, many of the students feel obligated to perform highly in every class they take, not just art. This is a cultural problem, as these students have felt pressure to perform well their entire lives. The “drawing anxiety” I see in my class may have bled over from other classes and the expectations they are constantly bombarded with. A commonly taught doctrine in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) doctrine is “Be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (Book of Mormon, 1830). While this doctrine beautifully encourages one to strive for improvement and greatness, the modern-day LDS culture I have witnessed at BYU as a student and teacher sometimes turns this doctrine into something more toxic and damaging.

As students at BYU strive for perfection, they compare themselves to their peers. Sometimes this perfection turns into competition and judgment. Instead of seeking satisfaction from self-improvement, they may seek satisfaction from the approval of others. When they don’t perform well, they experience anxiety. I had hoped that my curriculum was helping to relieve some of this pressure in my classroom. While not every student gave positive feedback about the class, comments like Sarah’s—“This class has allowed me to become more carefree about my
art. It is fun and not stressful. It has also opened me up to feelings and emotion”—give me hope that this curriculum is going in the right direction in relieving some of this anxiety.

Assessment can be a brutal subject, but I think it also plays a big role in improving education. While this study is not suited to address assessment, comments from students like, “Assessment is killing us” and “I like drawing until someone grades it” are concerning. How can we assess students accurately and fairly without detracting from the enjoyment of a subject because of the associated pressure and anxiety? In this study, students were graded only on participation rather than skill. There was no pressure to turn in a perfect drawing. I hypothesize that this factor contributed to many of the students reporting lowered stress levels in class.

While it seemed like not all students’ drawing technique had improved at this point, I received comments that illustrated a shift in my students’ attitudes, as many of them noted that drawing had become less stressful and more enjoyable for them. Therefore, I counted this as a more productive art experience for them. I hoped that this change in thinking would provide a means for improving their art technique and skills.

Mindfulness and Healing

Concluding this class discussion, students participated in a mindfulness activity that focused on facing personal weaknesses. This exercise was similar to the “mindful emotion portrait exercises” the students had completed on Day 2 because it focuses on social emotional learning practices. I felt this would be a helpful tool to help students conquer underlying fears that could be affecting their self-efficacy in art. We started with a mindfulness meditation, focusing on our breathing and posture. Then I gave the students the following instruction:
Put your right hand on your heart and your left hand on your belly. This is a technique often used in art therapy to help reduce anxiety and stress. Now focus on your sketchbook in front of you. You should all have a bowl with tissue paper pieces, water, and a brush. Go ahead and wet your sketchbook paper. Tear the tissue paper into small pieces and lay them out on your paper to create a composition, then press the tissue paper on top to allow the water to soak into it. Once the color dissipates, you can remove the tissue paper. Using the tissue paper, create an image of a strength you have or a part of yourself that you like. This is a very repetitive movement, and the tearing releases some tension.
When we are depressed and down, it is often because we focus on our fears, our limitations, and what others think of us. That is why we feel hopeless and down. Once you finish with your first tissue paper painting, go ahead and start a second. In this next one, create an image of a weakness that you see in yourself. We are just using colors and shapes, so it is very simple. Like we talked about before, colors are very important and can express emotion and mood.

*Figure 4.23 and Figure 4.24: Arianna and Emma’s tissue paper paintings*
Once students completed their paintings, I asked them to reflect and respond to the following questions in their sketchbooks:

1. If you didn’t have this depressed feeling, this anxiety, this weakness, who would you be, or what would you be able to do?
2. If these two images were having a conversation with each other, what would they say?
3. Reflect on your semester and this class. How are things going?

Arianna (Figure 4.23) wrote, “The cool-toned picture says that I am not enough; I can’t make the mark. The warmer picture says it is good to have fun and enjoy life! I have never taken an art class out of high school, and I am really loving expressing creativity in low stress. Such a good change of pace and I look forward to creating.” Emma (Figure 4.24) wrote, “If these two images were talking, they would be like hope and doubt arguing against each other to win me over. I have really struggled to feel confident in this class and with art. I have really enjoyed this mindful experiment, but apart from that I am still scared to open my sketchbook and create something.”

To work on drawing technique, I next asked the students to draw three different chairs from three different perspectives. I have been trying to mix up the more traditional drawing methods with my mindfulness expressive activities in order to develop student skills in observational drawing while keeping the curriculum interesting. I wanted them to become more proficient in observational drawing because of the many benefits it provides. Observational drawing can be used as a learning tool, it can help students develop perception skills, it can instill confidence in creative ability, and it facilitates a shift to a new mode of thinking that develops the potential for insightful problem solving and critical thinking (Edwards, 1982). This in turn stimulates higher order thinking and visual literacy skills. I believe these benefits can positively
affect multiple areas of students’ lives outside of their visual arts practice. Additionally, research has suggested that one reason older students lose interest in drawing or being artists is because they lack the skills to do the things they think an artist should do, namely draw well (Edwards, 1982). The curriculum for this class addresses this from two directions: helping the students draw better and helping them understand that being an artist is more than being able to draw well (Graham, 2005). For example, Anabella drew the chairs in Figures 4.25 and 4.26. At this point in the class, I noticed that Anabella was very much enjoying all of the art projects and was always
attentive in class. Additionally, she was very reflective and mindful in her journaling. She remarked that drawing the brown chair was the most difficult for her because it was observed

Figure 4.25 and 4.26: Anabella’s chairs
from a unique viewpoint that entailed foreshortening, which is typically a challenge for students to re-create. from a unique viewpoint that entailed foreshortening, which is typically a challenge for students to re-create.

**Day 6: Mindful Mandalas**

Throughout the study, I had concerns about the meditations I had included. Did students think they were weird? Were they bored? After the meditations, my students looked sleepy and tired, and as a result it was difficult to have conversations with them. The same six students eagerly participated and shared comments regularly following our meditations, but the rest of the class in silence. To gauge what they were feeling, I asked them how they felt about the meditations specifically thus far.

Surprisingly, many students mentioned that meditation was their favorite part of the class. One student said, “My favorite part of the class is the meditation. It grounds me and reminds me that everything will be ok.” Another student said, “I really wasn’t sure what to expect from this whole thing. However, now, after doing a lot of them, I really like them. I think it does help me to have more fun in art, and it gives me time to process what I am doing.” Another student commented, “At first they were really strange, but now it is something I look forward to.” Another student said, “This is definitely out of my element, but it has been relaxing and interesting to try something new.”

When I mentioned their fatigue and the difficulty, we experienced having discussions after the meditations, the students mutually agreed that they were tired and quiet because of the day and time of the class. The class was held on Mondays at 5:00 p.m. Many students told me that by class time, they had already had a long day full of classes, and they felt tired, stressed,
and burned out. Also, 5:00 is dinner time, and most students were hungry and didn’t have food to snack on before class.

To combat the fatigue and hunger, I tried a slightly different approach in the meditation on this day. We started with basic yoga poses to increase movement and blood flow and participated in a guided meditation similar to ones we had done in previous classes. The increased movement hopefully engaged students more and woke them up.

After mindful yoga, we created mandalas. I shared with the class that mandalas have a spiritual origin and are often used as a mindfulness tool. Mandalas appear in many cultures and are a prominent art form in many Buddhist practices. Buddhist mandalas are a special form of meditation and mindfulness and are created to be a blessing or healing for the world (Brauen, 1997). A mandala can be compared to building a house for enlightened beings because it is a spiritual palace for buddhas to enter. Buddhists focus on creating the piece with positive loving energy and compassion, and they often meditate to prepare and achieve the proper mindset to create the mandala. This process is seen as a spiritual path that eventually leads to enlightenment. The process of creating a mandala could be looked at as a journey or the event of telling a story.

I explained to the students that sand mandalas exist for a week, are meditated with, admired, then destroyed. To Buddhists, this process shows that the beauty of things is in the present moment. The mandala sand is swept up then given away for healing and blessing. The remaining sand is poured into the river to go out into the world. The sand will wash up all around the world to spread goodness.
While this process is unfamiliar to most BYU students, there are shared similarities within our Western culture. As a class, we discussed things in our lives that are similar to this practice. Many students said that taking the sacrament at church, attending the temple, reading scriptures, and journaling were similar to creating a mandala, as were spending time in nature, serving others, and creating art.

I prompted students to create a mandala, using oil pastels, that represented a personal journey, just like creating a mandala represents a journey of enlightenment for Buddhists (see Figures 4.27 and 4.28). Overall, this was a very successful project. All of the students were engaged and put forth effort into their drawings. Many students were candid about their personal journeys, and I am grateful they were willing to be so vulnerable with their writing.
Day 7: Observational Drawing with Fabric

We started the class with a mindfulness meditation and basic yoga poses, focusing on posture and alignment and how our bodies felt. I wanted to really test the students on this day, to see how they would handle a more rigorous drawing challenge.

![Reflection]

Figure 4.29 and Figure 4.30: Fabric drawings and responses
After the meditation, I told students that we would be focusing on the skill of creating value in drawing once again. We did this by observing the value of pieces of fabric in a cast light for 30 minutes. I instructed the students to just observe and be mindful for two minutes before picking up the pencil. I asked them to take note of shapes, where the light is falling, where the light source is coming from, and how shadows are being cast.

Some students struggled with this assignment. Lex, for example, was on his phone for the majority of the class, and he was minimally engaged in the drawing activity. When I privately asked him about this later, he told me that the class is too long, and he feels like he can’t focus for the amount of time required. As a class, we had progressed so much with other mindfulness drawing activities, but today felt like a big step backward. Many students were fidgety. Kiersten was constantly looking around at what other people were doing, and Karina was on her phone. Brittany was falling asleep and didn’t look as interested in this activity as she had been with the mandala activity. On the drawing rubric, most students’ drawings hovered around a 5–6/10. The drawing in Figure 4.30 received the highest score, a 7/10, while the drawing in Figure 4.29 received a 5/10.

I concluded that 15–20 minutes was the sweet spot for these skill-building activities. Most students were engaged at first, but after 20 minutes they became distracted and disengaged. I realized that 30 minutes was just too long for this setting.

In our class discussion following this activity, one student said, “Today was my least favorite. There is just added pressure when you have to draw realistically.” Annabelle, on the other hand, said, “I enjoyed drawing today. I always like drawing in this class because it relaxes me, and I don’t feel pressure to produce a high level of art. I think the relaxed environment helps me produce more successful art and challenges me on how I see myself doing art.” Kayla said,
“This was hard, and it wasn’t interesting to draw. Drawing is more enjoyable when there isn’t pressure. I liked the activity where we responded to music with mindfulness; that was my favorite and better than this.”

While students’ opinions about the activity were mixed, most of the class felt like it wasn’t fun or exciting and that it was too difficult. Many talked about feeling “added pressure,” which is interesting because, as the researcher, I felt like there wasn’t added pressure. I wasn’t grading their drawings, just observing. Perhaps the zone of proximal development was just out of reach for many of the students with the assignment, making it feel overwhelming. As previously discussed, the zone of proximal development refers to the range of abilities an individual can perform with the guidance of an expert but cannot yet perform on their own (Vygotsky, 1962). Some students stated that they thought their drawing skills and their relationship with imperfection had improved over the course of the semester. One student said, “I have learned that it is OK to mess up. At first, I struggled with mindfulness, but now it has become easy with time and practice.” Overall, there was a mix of responses, and I realized I needed to make a few changes to aid students in drawing something of this difficulty level.

Day 8: Reconnecting
Day 8 was a shortened class period. We were also at a point in the semester when students seemed drained and overwhelmed, so I wanted to give them a mindfulness activity that focused on healing self-reflection. After our meditation, I asked students to trace their hand in their sketchbook. This drawing of their hand would represent themselves. Then, I asked them to make a bullet-point list of things that made them happy or that gave them purpose. After they completed the list, I asked them to give each bullet point a representative color and then, with themselves in the center, fill in the hand. I hoped this would re-center them, as college students in particular often feel overwhelmed with their rigorous schedules and academic demands. It is easy for students to forget what is most valuable to them, what gives them joy and purpose. Art can enable us to reconnect with what is important to us. This reconnection can fill our spirits, give us energy, and remind us what we are passionate about! While the students were quiet on

Figures 4.31 and 4.32: Student self-reflection meditation
this day, all were engaged and seemed focused on the activity. As I read their reflections, I was impressed with how vulnerable and real each reflection was (see Figures 4.31 and 4.32). Each student sincerely represented themselves in this activity, as they did with the mandala activity.

Day 9: Copying Master Drawings

My students had struggled with observational drawing on Day 7. I was trying to help them improve on fundamentals, but the assignment was too long, and there was added pressure to create a fabric rendering. On Day 9, I decided to take a different approach to the same assignment inspired by the Louvre Museum. We started class with a mindful meditation, then jumped right into our sketchbooks. I told the students about an experience I had at the Louvre Museum in Paris (see Figure 4.33). As I walked through the Louvre Museum, I saw people drawing, painting, and copying master works just so they could learn the technique and figure out how to do it themselves. By observing and taking time with an artwork, these artists were able to gain great insights. So why not do the same thing in our class? I gave the students a picture of a pencil drawing I had created (Figure 4.34) and asked them to try and replicate my drawing. Before they started, I asked them to write down four observations about the drawing. I gave them 15 minutes as opposed to 30 minutes so they wouldn’t lose focus. Additionally, I
Figure 4.33 and Figure 4.34: Louvre Museum and pencil drawing

decided to use a drawing of shapes rather than fabric, as the fabric seemed like it was a bit overwhelming and perhaps outside of the zone of proximal development for many of the students. While the class had drawn shapes previously, this arrangement was more difficult and required attention to perspective and proportion.

I wasn’t totally sure what to expect. Would students be bored just copying a drawing? I was pleasantly surprised by the outcome. First, all of the students were engaged! Jessica and Lex, two talkative students who weren’t normally engaged as much as other students, were fully participating. And I was seeing great results—students were creating well-rendered drawings! Why is it easier for students to copy from a photograph but so difficult to do so from life? Most of the students completed more in this short 15-minute span than they did in the 30 minutes they had to draw fabric on Day 7. Was this due to a different approach or because fabric is harder to draw for most people? Jessica was so excited that her drawing came out “good” that she took a picture of it and sent it to her friend.

After the exercise, I collected comments from the students. Kirsten told me that she really had started to love mindfulness and that she had talked about it in another class. She shared how much mindfulness had helped her to relax and focus. Jackie said that creating this drawing was
way less stressful than drawing fabric, and she felt more confident. Jessica agreed that this
drawing was more fun to draw than fabric. She commented that she “likes drawing things with
straight lines instead of curves” and also said it was way less stressful when there was an
example of how to do it. Her drawing (Figure 4.36) received a score of 7/10. Eva mentioned that
she really liked the cross-hatching technique she figured out how to do (Figure 4.37); she
received a 7/10 on her project. Anabella said she was stressed because she chose ink, and
she used so much ink! She was worried that she would run out. Her drawing (Figure 4.38) also
received a score of 7/10.
Figure 4.35, 4.36, and 4.37: Kirsten, Eva, and Anabella’s drawings
Day 10: Copying Master Drawings, Part 2

On Day 10, we started our class with mindful meditation. Wanting to build on the success of the previous day, I asked the students to “copy” another master drawing I had created. However, this time I asked them to draw the photo upside down. According to researcher Betty Edwards (1979), drawing upside down activates the brain’s right side and enhances how we recognize shapes and lines in a picture. People tend to draw what they know, so drawing upside down can help artists focus only on what they see (Edwards, 1979). I let the students pick between four photocopied pencil drawings: a milk carton, a book, a seashell, and an ice cream cone. I hoped to provide an ideal zone of proximal development by upping the difficulty from the basic shapes they drew in the previous class but making it less rigorous than fabric. I instructed the students to draw for 15 minutes. As they drew, I encouraged them to observe where the lightest and darkest shades were and to break down the form into simple shapes they could recognize. To encourage the students to figure out the artist’s technique on their own by
being mindful and observant, I asked them questions like, “How firm do you think the artist held his pencil to the paper in order to create this type of shading?”

Once again, the students were engaged and successful with this drawing method! They were focused, and there were minimal distractions. Lex and Sarah, two students who were constantly distracted by their phones, dived into the project. Students told me that they liked
drawing in this way because it was simplified and easier to understand—the hard part of figuring out how to render the 3D object on 2D paper was already done for them. Why can we so easily observe and copy a drawing, but real life is more difficult? Foreshortening, perhaps? Students told me that they sometimes have difficulty seeing shadows and that they get confused when looking at something that is 3D. Sarah said, “It was nice to see how someone else did it.” Figures 4.38–4.41 show examples of student renderings. The majority of the drawing scores landed between 6/1- and 7/10, with Figure 4.41, by Annabelle, scoring the highest with an 8/10.

Figures 4.38, 4.39, 4.40, and 4.41: Copied drawings

Day 11: Still Life and Class Discussion

On the final day of the study, I instructed the students to begin with a self-directed meditation and then to create a still life with objects that represented “their month of December.” This approach allowed the students to focus on ideas and objects that were meaningful to them.
Overall, I was quite impressed with their drawings. Generally, there was increased in attention to value, detail, and perspective. The drawing in Figure 4.49 received a semester high score of 9/10 on the drawing rubric scale. In comparison to their work at the beginning of the semester, these drawings should great improvement in skill and technique. For other student examples that reflect the class’s average score of 7/10, see Figures 4.42–4.46.
This drawing was a great opportunity for me to think back on this semester & consider what I've learned & what I want to keep learning. I'm thankful I had chances in this class to try different types of art & gain an interest in continuing to make art.
Figure 4.42, 4.43, 4.44, 4.45, and 4.46: Final observational drawings
After the students completed their drawings, we had a class discussion to wrap up the last day of instruction:

**Me:** How has your experience of drawing changed with mindfulness?

**Students:** I have loved it. I am always so stressed about the future. I stress about assignments, worried I will forget things. This has helped a lot with that.

I value a routine. I started really looking forward to our mindfulness by the end of the semester. I like doing this at the beginning of class. It sets a good mood.

I like it! It reminds me of my yoga class.

I have actually been doing it outside of class. I do it right before I go to bed because it helps me sleep better.

**Me:** Has mindfulness been difficult for you?

**Students:** Most of the time it was good, but sometimes I just had a hard time focusing. It’s hard to turn off your brain sometimes.

**Me:** Do you think mindfulness has helped you improve your drawing skills? Why or why not?

**Students:** I liked when the activity had more of an art therapy vibe, like when we drew our hands and represented how we were feeling in the hand. I feel like I have a lack of skill when it comes to drawing, and I think this type of art therapy exercise helped me observe better in the long run because I was less stressed. Also, repetition helped, drawing consistently.

Yes, I learned it’s OK to make a mistake, to just roll with the drawing.

I don’t think mindfulness necessarily helped, but the calm state that it put me in helped a lot with stress and helped me draw better.

**Me:** Has your drawing confidence improved? Why or why not?
Students: Yeah, my confidence has gotten a lot better. I am more comfortable drawing and showing other people my drawings.

I feel like my skill level only improved a little, but I am definitely more comfortable with drawing less scared of it.

I didn’t like the activities we did with abstract drawings. But I guess I was able to let go of my perfectionist tendencies and just let things flow, let it be.

I have learned that abstract art is intentional instead of being random.

I have a lot of personal bias with this. When you draw, I know your confidence and feelings affect you! My confidence was totally destroyed by my high school art experience. Drawing wasn’t about the process, just about making the final product perfect. I hated it. This class has really helped me get over the hurdle of that. A drawing doesn’t have to be perfect; I don’t have to be afraid of it. I can draw something because I am interested in it, because I just enjoy the process.

Me: I have observed people are not confident in their drawing abilities. That is why I created this study in the first place! I wanted to help in some way. Because of this lack of confidence, perhaps some shy away from drawing. I wanted to create a curriculum that takes away the fear and lack of confidence so you can draw and enjoy it, reap its benefits.

Me: What have you enjoyed this semester? What have you not enjoyed?

Students: I loved when we drew outside and chose what angle and scene we wanted to draw. That was nice and fun.

I loved our watercolor drawings. We listened to the music, drew the textures; that was so fun.

I liked when we re-created and drew the pictures that you drew. That really helped me understand how to do shadows.
I like how this just helped to slow us down. There is so much going on in college all of the time. I don’t normally spend time drawing outside, but I did that in this class.

Personally, I like variety, so if we only drew with pencils that would get boring. I liked the incorporation of oil pastels, watercolors, and other mediums into the drawings.

**Me:** Do you feel like anyone can learn how to draw? Or does it just come down to natural talent?

**Students:** Personally, I think it is a combo of natural ability and practice. If you don’t have a natural ability, I guess you could still do it, but it would take a lot longer. I like art but have to have time to do it.

**Conclusions**

Throughout the study, I was exploring the affordances and limitations of incorporating mindfulness into a drawing curriculum. The results varied depending on the student. Some students improved their drawing technique and increased their drawing confidence. Others had minimal growth in their confidence, despite the fact that I saw clear improvement in their drawing technique. At the start of this study, I was more focused on improving technical drawing skill and the drawing confidence that goes along with it. However, as the study progressed, the most impactful result for me and for my students was not the improvement in technical observational drawing abilities but the artistic emotional expression and vulnerability they achieved.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In the introduction to this thesis, I shared some of my concerns regarding student perceptions of drawing practice and how their confidence affects this practice and thus their skill level. Overall, elementary students like to create art and draw, but it is difficult to sustain their interest; college students are fearful of drawing or artmaking and don’t apply themselves to achieve their full potential. As a result, my older students lack drawing confidence and skill in drawing and often in other artmaking activities. Since many of these students are pre-service elementary teachers, their lack of art experience and confidence could limit the range of their teaching. Consequently, my study of how artmaking and drawing might be influenced by connections to mindfulness is potentially significant. Both elementary education and students from other majors have a difficult time expressing themselves within art, and consequently, they miss out on an important dimension of learning and representing knowledge and reaping the benefits of mindfulness.

I wondered what would happen if students participated in a drawing curriculum that incorporated mindfulness, in contrast to a traditional drawing curriculum that focused exclusively on developing skill or technique. My original questions were: How does an exploration of mindfulness influence students’ artmaking and their perceptions of their own art practice and how mindfulness can improve students’ confidence and skill in drawing. In my exploration of these two questions several other unexpected themes emerged including: perfectionism and comparing, social and emotional learning, assessment and artmaking,

An important element of this study was autobiographical. In addition to examining mindfulness and observational drawing, I was also interested in my own teaching practice and how I could connect my personal artistic experiences with my students’ artistic experiences,
given that most of them had very little art background. As the study progressed, I diverged from observational drawing by adding other artmaking activities that were designed to build student confidence and connect them to a mindfulness practice. Some of these activities focused more on social and emotional learning, which I quickly realized were closely tied to student confidence and perceptions. Throughout the study, I was interested in how I could engage students in what many of them found intimidating: art and drawing.

**Perfectionism and Comparing**

Throughout the class discussions and journal entries, the students repeatedly mentioned pressure and perfectionism. When they don’t perform well, they experience anxiety. I had hoped that my curriculum was helping to relieve some of this pressure in my classroom. While not every student gave positive feedback on this aspect, I was encouraged by comments like Sarah’s: “This class has allowed me to become more carefree about my art. It is fun and not stressful. It has also opened me up to feelings and emotion.” Her comments suggested that by focusing on the process and less on the final outcome, students might have a better experience with artmaking.

**Social and Emotional Learning**

At the start of my study, I must admit I was more focused on technical skill in observational drawing and how, through increased confidence, this skill can improve students’ lives and broaden their abilities as elementary educators. I was focused on helping my students “get over the fear” of drawing so they could become excellent artists and skilled drawers. I thought a mindfulness intervention would be a means to an end, creating more technically skilled artists due to increased confidence. However, as the study progressed, I became more interested in students’ personal expression and the social and emotional aspect of art. Many students
improved their technical skills as the study progressed, but I think the most impactful parts of this study for me and for the students were the creative activities and the reflections that arose from these activities. These were the activities where we checked in with our emotions and told stories and expressed emotion through color, texture, and line. I think this approach made art more comfortable for students and acted as a scaffold to help them feel less anxious about art and mark making and have fewer worries about their art being judged. The students seemed to care more about their art when it was emotional or vulnerable. Mark making became meaningful. It was important that students no longer believed that a Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko painting was “silly, looks like a kid could do that.” Joel, for example, was able to better connect with the emotion that an abstract piece of art can carry, and this connection allowed him to see past his once-critical judgment of abstract art.

A limitation of the study was the lack of a way to evaluate creative and personal expression within the rubric. As the study progressed, I realized that student confidence and perceptions in artmaking really are closely tied to their social and emotional learning (Edgar & Morrison, 2021; Omasta et al., 2020). Based on the qualitative data I collected, students were at the highest levels of engagement and found the most meaning in art activities when they helped them understand their emotions and connect with their bodies. I understood from the data that these activities were impactful, but they did not focus on technical observational drawing skill. Rather, these activities focused on creativity and personal expression. The rubric had no way of measuring students’ creativity, personal expression, or improvement of engagement (again, aspects that became more and more important to me as the study progressed).
Assessment and Artmaking

While this study is not suited to address assessment, comments from students like, “Assessment is killing us” and “I like drawing until someone grades it; then I don’t like it” are concerning. How can we assess students fairly and accurately without creating pressure and anxiety and detracting from their enjoyment of a subject (and perhaps even taking away from the improvement itself)? In this study, students were graded only on participation, not skill; I hypothesize that this focus played a part in the students reporting lowered stress levels. However, I don’t think this grading system is a good solution for many curriculums. Nevertheless, assessment is a critical part of teaching, despite the wishes of students. More studies may need to be done to investigate assessment solutions that measure improvement and achievement accurately with minimal anxiety.

Observational Drawing Skill

In Chapter 4, I discussed that I wanted to determine if incorporating mindfulness in a drawing practice would improve student drawing skill. To measure drawing skill and technical improvement, I used the rubric in Chapter 4 to assess different technical components of the students’ drawings. This rubric was beneficial because it helped me better analyze and assess not only skill but also students’ effort.

While assessing drawings using the rubric allowed me to compare drawings, it also had some negative components. First, it was difficult to distinguish if students’ skill improvement throughout the semester was due to their drawing practice/repetition or the mindfulness practices. It’s no secret that if you repeat an action on a regular basis, you will likely get better at it. Students were consistently practicing drawing throughout the semester. This is a fact I simply did not take into account prior to the study. The majority of the students improved their drawing
skill by the end of the study, but I don’t know exactly how much mindfulness affected their improvement. While I do have qualitative data from student responses expressing that they enjoyed drawing a lot more because of mindfulness, there is no way to determine how much mindfulness contributed to their technical abilities. Another study would have to be done to find this answer. However, looking at the experience holistically, observational drawing skills might not be as important as I originally thought. Perhaps the most important component of their experiences was learning to enjoy and appreciate the process of artmaking and to gain enough confidence with drawing mediums and strategies to be able to use them in their own classrooms.

**Implications for Teaching Practice**

Observational drawing, even paired with mindfulness, is challenging. However, through the strategy of deliberately focusing on mindfulness and the process of artmaking, I discovered that when students make personal connections in their work, it can be more meaningful and enjoyable. This thesis explored multiple pathways for students to connect with artmaking and works of art through their senses. Mindfulness encourages students to spend more time in the process, consider observations with more care, and bring their knowledge and experiences to the task of creating personal meaning. By creating art and drawing through mindfulness, asking questions, talking about it, and exploring with multiple senses, I feel like I can create more authentic and meaningful drawing experiences and connections.

One way to do this when teaching observational drawing is to make it personal! Attach a story to it. Instead of gathering random objects from the art room for students to draw students can curate their objects to convey meaning. What can these objects express? Can they have a conversation with each other? On Day 11, for example, students drew a still life with objects that represented the past month of their lives. This focus seemed to help students be more engaged in
their activity. When you make something “more,” you increase thoughtfulness, engagement, time spent on the task, and, with all of this, drawing skill.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance often refers to the perception of contradictory information, often regarding a person’s feelings or ideas (Festinger, 1957). Throughout my assessments, I noticed that a few of the students struggled with cognitive dissonance regarding their art. For example, in Chapter 4, on Day 3, I mentioned Jessica, who I saw clear improvement from; her average drawing assessment score increased from a 3/10 to a 6/10. Despite the improvement I saw and talked to her about, Jessica still didn’t believe that she improved and thought of her drawing as a failure (Figure #4.18). How can we respond to this common behavior as educators in constructive ways? Like Jessica, for others there was also disconnection between their own assessment of their progress and my assessment of their progress. This is not an uncommon experience for many art teachers, whose experience with art and artmaking allows them to appreciate the efforts of their students in ways that students cannot. It is probably not enough just to praise their efforts; students probably need evidence which is credible for them.

**The Process of Making Bad Art**

Students with little to no art education background such as the ones in this study, value realism over other forms of art, viewing it as the “most successful” artform. I think this is because the high level of technical skill required to make lifelike drawings and paintings can more easily be interpreted as impressive and successful when compared to an abstract painting or conceptual art. As students highly value realism in drawing, they want to be able to draw realistically in order to feel successful themselves. However, students don’t realize or forget that
this level of skill takes years of practice, so when their drawing isn’t perfect despite weeks of practicing in class, they get frustrated. I believe this tradition of general society historically putting realism on an art pedestal matched with high levels of perfectionism is how the cognitive dissonance for many of my students in the previous paragraph came to be.

So how do we overcome this? After pondering this question and combing through my data, I realized that art educators need to give students permission to make bad art. Make students expect bad art! We need to remind students that art is a skill and that it takes practice to improve. Failure is a part of any process, and even drawing experts deal with failed drawings. Teaching students that failure is good, is beneficial. Second, encourage students to trust in the process and reflect on what is happening. Good things often take time and effort. Rome wasn’t built in a day; one’s drawing skills won’t drastically improve in a day. It is important for students to step back and reflect on the process regularly. If I could go back in time in this study to help Jessica, I would have given her this assignment: “Take 5 minutes and reflect on your drawing. Tell me 3 positive things about your drawing. Now tell me 3 things in your drawing that you can improve on.” This way we can talk about improvements being made while still giving constructive feedback. All in all, most of the students in my class didn’t have an extensive art background, so I couldn’t expect highly skilled observational drawings from them. Removing the expectation of perfectionism may help students attain greater technical drawing ability in the long run as students better understand the process of drawing and accept the time and energy it takes to see improvements.

While improving drawing technique is valuable, the main point of art (in my opinion) is to explore something, to connect, and to communicate. Maybe the point of the connection to mindfulness is not to improve skills, but rather to help student explore and appreciate the
experience of drawing and other forms of artmaking. Sometimes this looks like an ugly mess even when it was an honest attempt, and that’s OK. It’s important to remind students they can still find success in the process alone. Focusing on process over product is valuable for beginners. I think it is helpful to explore what students want to express. If the students need reassurance about their work (even if the technique is poor), art educators can point out where they were successful, such as conveying personal meaning through the art or learning to work with a new media.

There were a few times during this study when we explored feelings, self-talk, our inner critic, and cognitive distortions. I think these explorations were ultimately positive for the students and helped many of them become kinder to their art practice and more invested in the process. However, I think it’s important to remember that art educators don’t always need to provide positive feedback to help students feel better about their art. Sometimes students need to accept and explore those negative feelings. Perhaps when a student says, “My drawing of a face sucks; noses are so hard to draw!” the art educator can validate their feelings with “Yes, they are hard. I struggle with drawing faces too, and I understand. Let’s look at how we can improve the perspective here” instead of glazing over their frustrations with (false) positive feedback. Art educators can also discuss the value in participating in something that is challenging. Many of us naturally want to avoid things that we don’t feel good at. However, we improve and learn the most when we feel uncomfortable.

**Creative Challenges: Copying Is Good?**

On Day 10 of the study, I observed that students had a hard time drawing objects from life by themselves. However, when I drew the objects and let students copy my drawings, their drawings were significantly more successful. Sarah said, “It was nice to see how someone else
did it. That helped me draw.” I included this activity to simply lower the difficulty of the exercise, but this outcome raises important questions about creativity.

Creativity and copying seem to be opposites: creativity requires originality, innovative ideas, and methods, but copying is just mimicking someone else. It seems contradictory that copying another artist’s work can increase students’ skills. But after looking into this idea further, I found that copying can be a significant help to students. Researchers from Japan have found that copying helped facilitate artistic creativity in architecture students (Ishibashi & Okada, 2004). In their study, the works created by the group that had copied other artists were rated as more creative than the work created by the group that hadn’t copied, and these students exhibited more experimentation and confidence in the long run. Notably, their works did not simply echo the work that was copied but reflected their own personal style, suggesting that the act of copying led to a broader sense of artistic freedom among participants.

Creativity is sometimes seen as the goal of art education and copying is seen as something to avoid. However, copying from master drawings or sculptures was a common educational practice in art academies throughout the Renaissance and in 18th and 19th century art academies. This tradition continues in the 20th and 21st centuries in art schools that connect their teaching to these traditions. In fact, the whole notion of creativity might be viewed as more of a 20th century anomaly that has been adopted by art educators who locate themselves in the child study movement of education. In post-modern art practice, the idea of originality is often questioned and strategies of appropriation or mixing of existing texts or images are legitimate practices.

So, what does this mean? More studies need to be done to investigate this paradox, but based on my observations, perhaps students were constrained by a lack of exposure to other
possibilities and solutions to their drawing. Again, most of the students who participated in this study didn’t have a strong art background, so they could have been feeling lost in an unfamiliar space. Perhaps letting students copy me allowed them to think through technical aspects of their own drawings that they might not have otherwise questioned or considered. In 2018, Beaty and Kenett determined that people are more creative when they have more hobbies. Perhaps this increased creativity results from having more exposure to ideas and artistic solutions. While I have heard many educators shame copying, perhaps it shouldn’t have such negative connotations. Copying can be a tool to show students how to create skillful mark making.

“Creativity is not about thinking something in your mind by yourself,” Okada said. “Creativity occurs when you encounter something” (Ishibashi, & Okada, 2004, p. 623).

**Mindfulness**

In my opinion, the mindfulness practice almost acted as art therapy for the students. Many students expressed that the class helped them relax because it was toward the end of the day. I think the time of the class helped them focus more on the class and be present in the moment. The students seemed to be much more present in this class than in my other classes.

As I consider the results of implementing a mindfulness observational drawing curriculum in my college-level art class, I see both affordances and limitations. Initially, I hoped that exposure to drawing with mindfulness would help my students feel less stressed about their art, become more invested, and gain confidence and technical skill in drawing. Kirsten told me that she really started to love mindfulness and that she talked about it in another class. She shared how much mindfulness had helped her relax and focus.

Over the course of the study, I noticed an overlap between studio dispositions such as observation, awareness, and developing craftsmanship and mindfulness practice. Rather than
being finished works of art, the drawings students completed throughout the study reflected a process of cultivating awareness and curiosity. While drawing can be seen as a way to represent something, it can also be a powerful tool for focusing the mind, an opportunity for self-reflection, and a way to critically engage with the world as an artist. For many students, making a drawing became a kind of meditative ritual that appeared to enhance their attention, self-regulation, and curiosity (Patterson, 2015). There are many reasons to include observational drawing as part of an art education, including its important art-historical connections and its continued practice among many artists. Engaging in this form of drawing allows students to become more aware of and attentive to whatever they are drawing and to see the details of their visual world. Increased attentiveness and awareness are also part of most mindfulness meditation practices (Graham & Lewis, 2020).

Conclusion

The questions at the center of this study were, how can mindfulness influence students’ artmaking and their perceptions of their own art practice and how can mindfulness improve students’ confidence and skill in drawing? My research began as an exploration of relationships between mindfulness, artmaking, student confidence, and observational drawing. I began with the premise that observational drawing is an important skill for students to learn. Observational drawing can be a powerful tool in promoting different types of learning and awareness. I was aware that many of my students lacked confidence with artmaking, including drawing. Through my curricular innovation that included mindfulness, I wanted to change their relationship with drawing. These possibilities were the original motivation of this study of art and mindfulness. As the research progressed, I encountered important connections between mindfulness, drawing, and the process of artmaking. I also found unexpected emergent themes of social and emotional
learning, the benefits of making copies, assessment in art, and problems posed by existing expectations about art. One of the greatest shifts I saw in most students was their thoughtfulness and approach to art. Art became more meaningful, more emotionally introspective, and vulnerable. The inclusion of mindfulness made art more comfortable for those who were uncomfortable, and students created more meaning in their mark making. I hope these findings benefit both teachers, researchers and students to come, and mindfulness can continue to be used as a tool for growth, healing, and connection in art!
REFERENCES


https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/05/10/visitor-viewpoint-momas-mystery-man/


122
https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472541437.ch-004


https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.988


https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102