



MANAGING STRESS
TO IMPROVE LEARNING
W o r l d E d u c a t i o n

Managing Stress to Improve Learning Final Project Outcomes

Attachment to Final Project Report
Prepared by Lenore Balliro, Project Director

August 17, 2012

Quantitative Outcomes

What Did Student Learn?

What did students learn as a result of their participation in the Managing Stress Project? We offer both quantitative and qualitative data to share.

Quantitative Data- Pre and Post Surveys

To assess what students learned in the project, we administered a pre and post survey to ESOL, ABE, GED students in all classes participating in the project. Though we did not capture 100% of the students due to absences, we did gather enough data to make a significant assessment of the project's value. We asked the following questions and asked students to rate their answers using the following: Nothing, A little, Some, A lot

Student Survey Questions

Before taking this class

1. How much do you know about stress and how it affects your body?
2. How much do you know about stress and how it affects your brain, learning, and memory?
3. How much do you know about ways to control your stress?
4. How much do you know about community resources such as clinics and other supports that can help you with stress?

After taking this class

1. How much do you know about stress and how it affects your body?
2. How much do you know about stress and how it affects your brain, learning, and memory?
3. How much do you know about ways to control your stress?
4. How much do you know about community resources such as clinics and other supports that can help you with stress?

We also asked students the following questions:

1. What things can you do to help manage stress? Please think of three things.
2. What stress reduction activities did you like best?

Time and resources did not allow us to differentiate among ESOL, ABE, GED, or college transition classes.

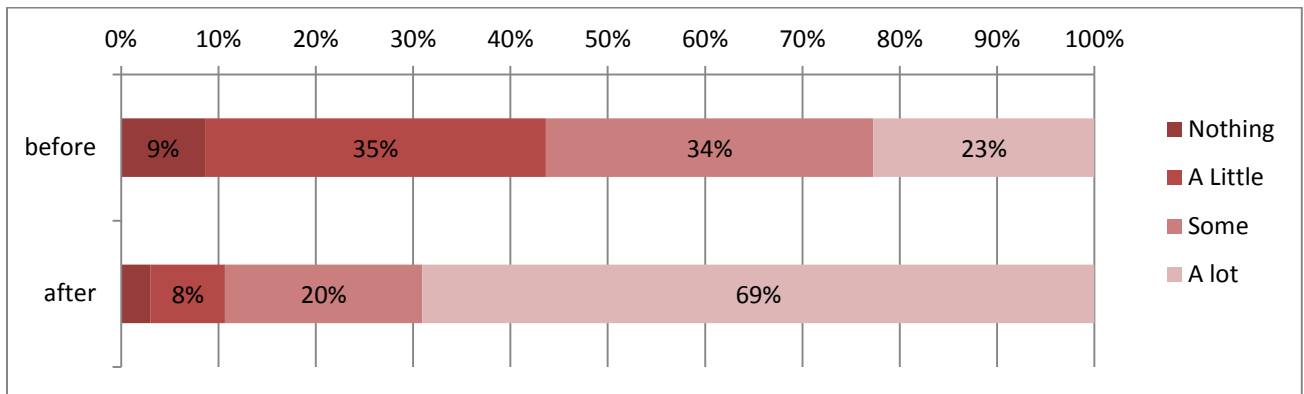
Bilingual support was given to students in low level ESOL classes where students shared the same first language. In the case of multi-language classes, the teacher made a language lesson out of the survey before it was administered.

Summary:

All categories in the post surveys displayed a significant increase in student awareness about stress. Please review the bar graphs below to see the aggregate of student responses.

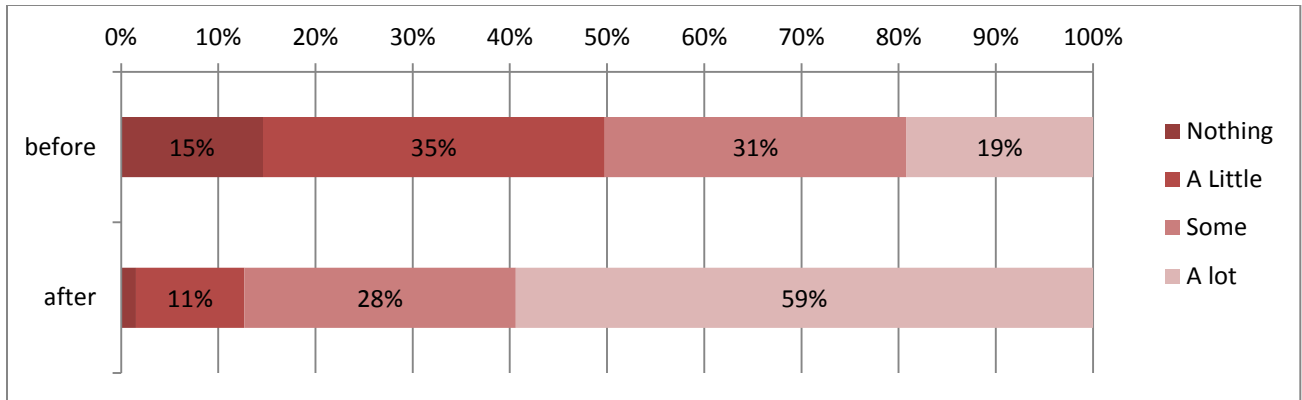
How much do you know about stress and how it affects your body?

	before	after
Nothing	19	6
A Little	77	15
Some	74	40
A Lot	50	136



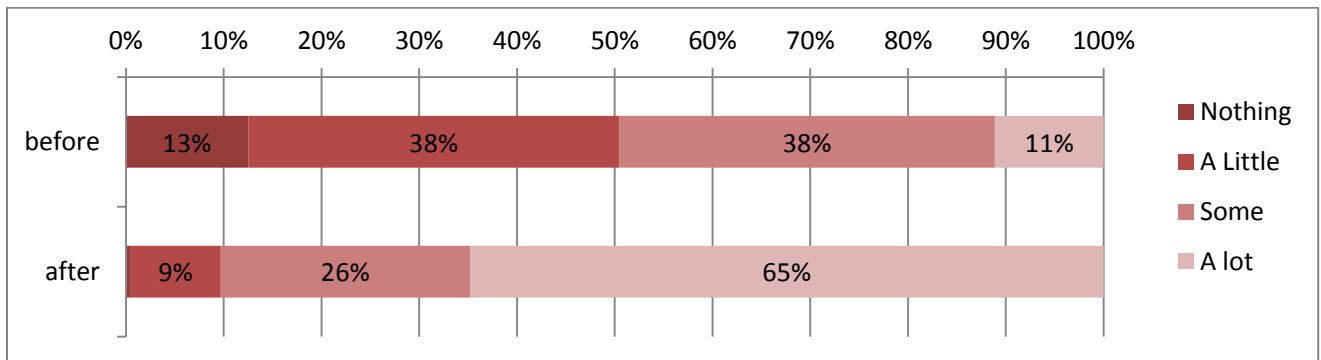
How much do you know about stress and how it affects your brain, learning, and memory?

	before	after
Nothing	32	3
A Little	77	22
Some	68	55
A Lot	42	117



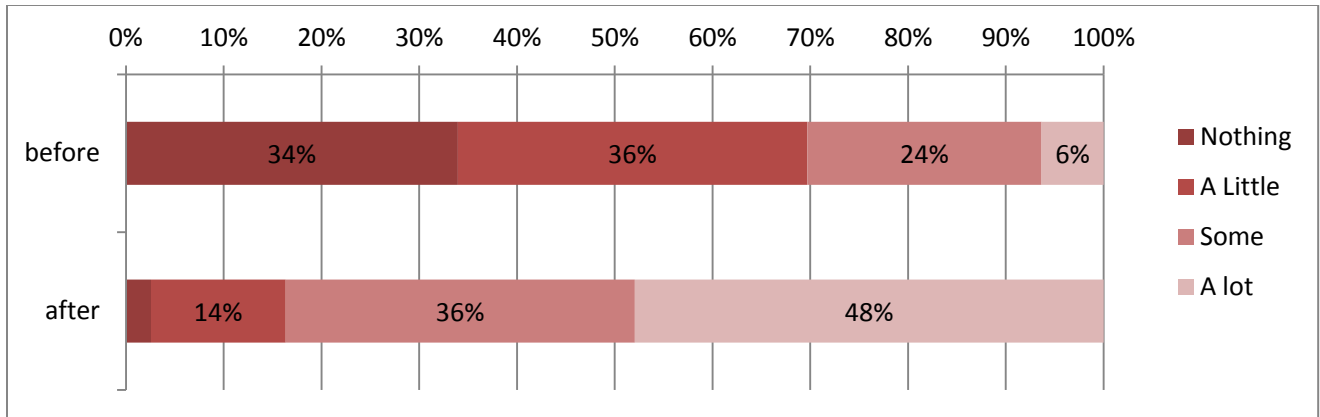
How much do you know about ways to control your stress?

	before	after
Nothing	27	1
A Little	82	18
Some	83	50
A Lot	24	127



How much do you know about community resources such as clinics and other supports that can help you with stress?

	before	after
Nothing	75	5
A Little	79	27
Some	53	70
A Lot	14	94



Qualitative Outcomes

What did Students Learn? Student Comments

Before summarizing some of the student responses to the open-ended questions, it is worth noting that during our discussions in the project, teachers said that for many of the students, particularly women, the idea of taking time for one's self for stress reduction and self-care was a foreign idea.



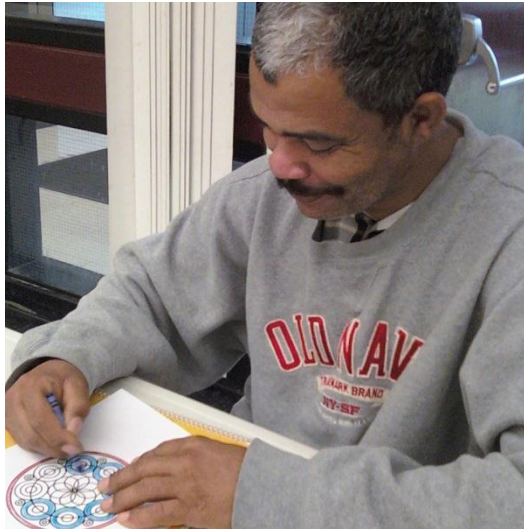
Working two jobs, caring for children, taking classes, and struggling to get by made many students feel there was no way or time to de-stress. Many had no role models in their earlier lives for dealing with stress reduction in a healthy way. Immigrant and refugee women discussed the expectations of women in their cultures and how that affected their stress loads. Participation in the project opened discussions among students about the need for self-care and finding ways to fit healthy coping strategies into their lives to benefit themselves and their families. It also allowed them to practice strategies and to select the ones that fit best into their lives.

Students in the project identified learning about the following areas for managing stress (in students' own words)

Walking, deep breathing, yoga stretches, taking "time outs" prioritizing time and tasks, "don't take too much in," write, draw, take a bath, meditation, time alone, talking out problems, exercise, journaling, breathing deeply, writing down worries and marking the ones you can do something about, listening to

music, using the letting go bowl, planning ahead, close my eyes, sit back, say NO, brain gym exercises, sleeping well, drinking water, stretching, pray, come to class—it makes me feel much better; dance, breathe from belly, dance, write in journal, coloring mandalas, creative art, art classes, drawing. Je chant, je boire de l' eau, Je palé avec me amie; je suis chanter, faire l'exercise; priere

Students identified the following as their favorite stress reduction strategies learned in the project:



Overall, many students mentioned Brain Gym educational kinesthetic activities such as PACE (Positive, Active, Clear, Energetic), coloring and making mandalas, expressive arts, and the “Altered Shoes” project as their favorite strategies; others named the letting go bowl, deep breathing, and stretching. Read a sample of comments below

- We began our class with our ritual PACE exercises. These exercises do seem to help wake you up to get you going and be even more ready to learn. I think it is really helping a lot of the students to feel more focused and energized. I have to say, I felt a little self-conscious the first day we did these exercises, but am now much more relaxed. I can feel the difference when applying a couple particular exercises.
- We started out the day with our PACE exercises. I have found (PACE) exercises helpful in waking me up and giving me enough energy to get through the next ninety minutes of class.... I think all the classes would go better if we had to do more physical activity instead of just sitting and listening.
- The breathing exercises... had a great effect on me. I softened my face, put my tongue on the top of my mouth, and closed my eyes to focus on my breathing. This really helped me to relax!
- I am definitely going to use this outside of class. It's so easy, doesn't take long, and no one has to know you're doing it. This is a great tool!"
- I find myself much more relaxed, grounded, and focused after doing (PACE) exercises, which is great.
- I have stress balls now and I use them.
- I liked folding my hands and arms, closing my eyes and leaning against the wall, listening to my breathing.



- Doing the stress tree. The whole family got involved, and we each made our own tree. I also liked doing brain gym. It helped with my concentration.
- I liked doing the guided journey. It is so relaxing to clear our mind.
- Body scanning and the stress tree.
- Writing helps me to think before I react. Breathing is also helpful.
- Now I make a schedule for my household to keep up so we all know what's going on with each other
- I liked the letting go ritual.

Quantitative Outcomes

What Did Teachers Learn?

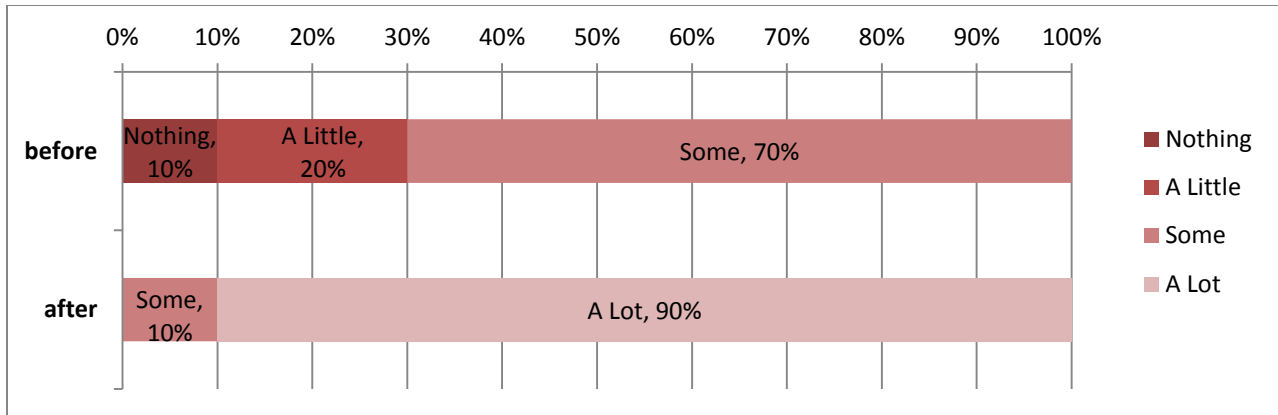
We used the same format as the student survey to assess changes in participants' knowledge and practice, substituting different questions relevant to their roles. We also asked open-ended questions about how practitioners saw their practice change as a result of their participation in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning project. The charts below illustrate a significant change in every area.

The written responses to the open-ended questions reveal a rich, multi-layered set of responses impossible to get from the numbers alone. We have included the written responses at the end of this section.

n=10

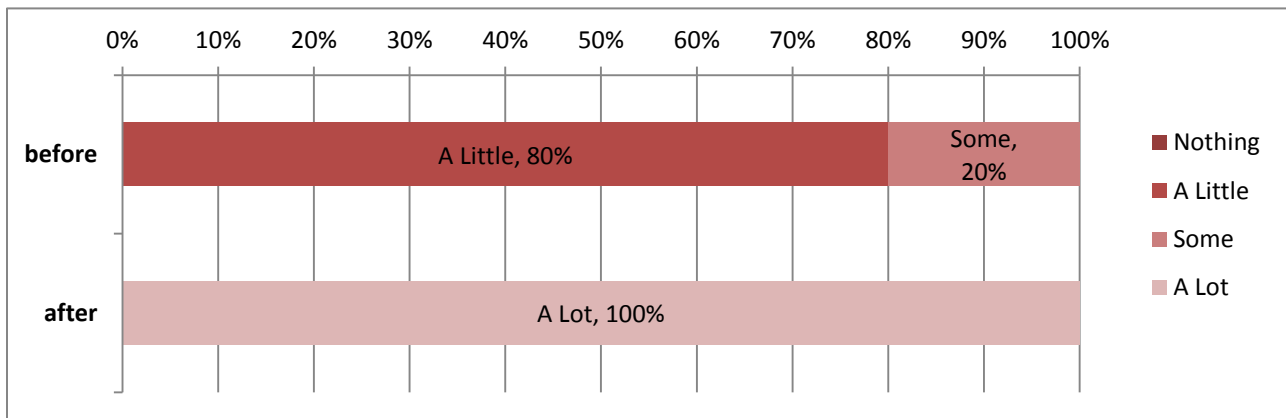
1. Before/after participating in Managing Stress to Improve Learning, how much did/do you know about the role of chronic stress, trauma, and negative life events on learning, memory, and classroom participation?

	before	after
Nothing	1	0
A Little	2	0
Some	7	1
A Lot	0	9



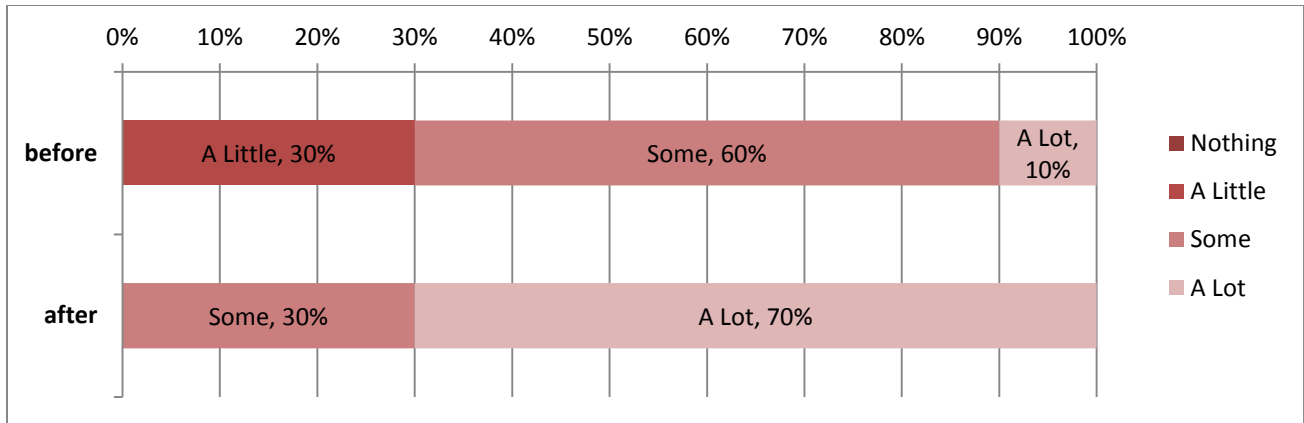
2. Before/after participating in Managing Stress to Improve Learning, how much did/do you know about using a repertoire of classroom activities, strategies, and resources for promoting mental health of adult learners?

	before	after
Nothing	0	0
A Little	8	0
Some	2	0
A Lot	0	10



3. Before/after participating in Managing Stress to Improve Learning, how much did/do you know about culturally appropriate community mental health and other human services relevant to your students?

	before	after
Nothing	0	0
A Little	3	0
Some	6	3
A Lot	1	7



Qualitative Outcomes

What Did Teachers Learn? Teacher Reflections

We are including samples of the teachers' narratives in response to the open-ended questions on the surveys. These provide snapshots of teachers' experiences over the two years of the project.

Jeymi Arroyo Project Hope, Roxbury, MA

Jeymi is an education advocate at Project Hope women's homeless shelter and adult basic education center. Jeymi counsels students and teaches an intermediate-level ESOL she describes as holistic. She is working toward her master's degree as a licensed mental health practitioner.



I feel blessed to have participated in this project because I feel that not only have the students benefitted from it but I, too, have benefitted from it. I think I have learned to be a better facilitator for the Women of Strength class. The Woman of Strength class was integrated in the adult educations services curriculum because our goal was to have the women learn to take care of themselves as a whole: mind, body and soul. In incorporating the expressive arts into the classroom it has surely taught them to find a new way to take care of themselves both mentally and physically, and it has also really emphasized how important it is to take time to relax and be able to regain focus. The women also started seeing this class as an opportunity for them to spend time together, chat, and share some of their fears, hopes and dreams with each other. In seeing this, it made me feel like I've made a positive impact in the lives of the women we serve here at Project Hope and it gives me a sense of satisfaction.

Daily Rituals

What I learned to do in class is starting the class with a ritual. That was not a norm for me; I usually began class directly to talk about what the topic of the day was. However, after learning some tips in



this project, I have made a great effort to always start the class with either an icebreaker or a check-in. We as a classroom have also established a ritual called the “letting go” and students seem to feel good in writing something on a paper and symbolically throwing it into the “ocean” (it’s really the bowl), to let go of that negative feeling that may be hindering our happiness or educational goals that day.

The Role of Movement/Body Awareness

I learned to incorporate some yoga stretches in class. We were able to practice with some professional yoga instructors. The students really liked it and they realized how important it is for one to stretch the body and move around. This helped students release stress that they had in their bodies. Being able to also dance Zumba was another activity we did that helped relieve some stress, and students learned that exercise can be fun and if we could incorporate it on our daily routine, it will help us manage stress better and we can focus more in class.

One of the things I was able to do to promote safety and stability in the classroom is starting out classes with having students learn about what guidelines they wanted to set for themselves as members of the class. As we established guidelines, students were able to see the seriousness of our class and they began to feel safe and willing to share with others their fears, hopes, and challenges.

One of the things we encourage students to do when they are not able to stay focused or present is to go get a drink of water or to go for a walk. Another thing I have done when others are not “present” is to sit one on one with them in class and find out what is making it hard for them to focus. Usually the lack of focus in the ESOL class is because the student may not necessarily understand what they have to do in their assignment or activity, being able to sit with them and guide them through the process helps them stay focused and present for the class.

Responding to Students’ Distress

My ability to respond to student’s emotional distress has increased. If I see someone who is not doing so well, I give her space and let her be. Sometimes during circle time, some students are feeling down and don’t want to talk much so we give them the opportunity to “pass” to give them their space and option to stay quiet until they are willing to share. Another thing I have learned is to recommend that students go for a cup of water, a quick walk or even to grab a mandala coloring page and to color away when they feel distressed. This helps them feel relaxed.

Expressive Arts

In integrating expressive arts into the classroom students have learned how to incorporate their feelings into art and have learned that there are various ways to let out their emotions and have also learned that it is a healthy way to relieve stress. The challenges of incorporating expressive arts in the classroom have been getting to the students to be positive on their art pieces because sometimes they can be critical about it. It was also challenging to work with students who had never done arts and crafts as projects and therefore they did not know where and how to begin. Therefore, they needed a lot of guidance to get them started.



Jeri Bayer

Welcome Project, Somerville MA



Jeri has several years of experience teaching and doing staff development for teachers of ESOL in community-based settings and community colleges. As a poet, Jeri has integrated her love of language with her passion for teaching ESOL students. In this project she taught intermediate level and a mixed level ESOL classes at the Mystic Housing Development in Somerville, MA.

I will just say that this has been the most significant professional development opportunity I have engaged in. Having an extended period of time in which to learn and try new things, reflect on them, and gather and discuss them with others, has resulted in a full integration into my teaching practice of an awareness of stress as an impediment to learning and strategies to reduce it. Whenever I engage with students now, I am more mindful than before of the need to create an environment as stress-free as possible, to plan activities that help students to relax and focus, and to be sensitive to the issues facing those who may have suffered extreme stress or trauma.

Classroom Environment

My awareness of what's critical in the physical set-up of a classroom has always been strong, but I was reminded again of its importance through this project. Students need to be comfortable (e.g. warm enough but not too warm; lighting needs to be sufficient to see well; close to other students but not so close as to be cramped; easy access to an exit) and they need to feel safe. Creating a classroom

environment that is safe and stable is important for enabling the learning of all students, and is particularly critical for those who have suffered trauma. I now have more ideas about how to do this through the physical set-up of the classroom, the establishment of ritual activities, and the ways in which I interact with certain students



By being more attentive to classroom set-up, ritual activities, and involvement of the body, I am now more likely to be able to help students stay focused and present in class. Our group

discussions about various situations and strategies were extremely helpful in providing new ideas and encouraging me to think about things from fresh perspectives.

Daily Rituals

I'm still working on this, and recognize it as very important. The predictability of opening and closing rituals, even of the briefest or simplest kind, is reassuring to students, reduces the stress that comes from not knowing what to expect, and over time helps to open and prepare students for the learning experience. I usually start with some sort of check-in that follows the soft playing of music. The letting-go bowl is a good tool to use in this process. At the conclusion of class, I try to engage students in a brief reflection on what they learned during class and what their high and low moments were. **The**

Role of Movement/Body Awareness

My new understanding of how different parts of the brain function and the impact that stress has on the brain and body has given me an entirely new outlook on teaching and learning. As much as we are our thoughts and emotions, we are also our bodies, and we need to engage them to help with learning. From now on I know I will feel remiss if I don't engage my students in Brain Gym and other activities that involve physical movement, as well as give them options for things they can do with their hands (fidgets) while-studying.

Brain Gym has been a wonderful addition to my teaching repertoire. I have used it both to begin a class, and as a break in the middle. My students have been interested in learning about the purpose for doing it and they enjoy its physical nature. I will continue to use this in whatever setting I may teach in the future.



Building Community

This has always been key to my teaching and my top priority, since I believe that people learn better when they experience the safety, invigoration, and

sense of belonging that comes from being part of a community. Doing the stress awareness, education, and relief activities helped significantly in the development of community within the classes that I taught over the course of this project, and I intend to continue with them in future classes.

Responding to Students' Distress

While I've always been sensitive and responsive to my students' emotional needs to the extent that they are apparent, I now have a greater understanding of why some of them may have particular kinds of distress and the kinds of resources to which I can try to connect them. **Expressive Arts**

My students clearly liked the arts activities we engaged in, particularly the ones that involved painting, drawing, and coloring. They relaxed to an extent that they don't usually do in the language classroom, perhaps because the focus wasn't on language, which is so challenging to them. However, this does raise an issue since the purpose of the class is to help them to learn English. A case can be made that by having this relaxing break, their brains become better prepared for learning, but given the amount of preparation required on the teacher's part, the cost, and the time in class needed to complete at least a visual arts project, I think that there are other more time and cost efficient ways of helping students to relax (e.g., music, humor, Brain Gym, mandalas). I think the dramatic arts are probably more appropriate for the ESOL classroom, as well as writing for those students with enough vocabulary to make it meaningful.



Ronda Alley

Sumner Adult Education, Sullivan, Maine

Ronda integrated stress reduction strategies into her WorkReady and Juggling Life and Learning Class. Many of her WorkReady students were returning to school after being laid off from local manufacturing plants. Ronda's experience as a life coach brought an added dimension and sensitivity to her work with dislocated workers.

The Managing Stress to Improve Learning project has given me the most comprehensive, tangible tools and resources for adult learners. The activities provided a positive communication tool that helped students begin the process of talking about stress and the impact it has on their learning. These initial conversations then opened the door for relating how stress impacts health and well-being.

The year was a learning experience. A gradual integration of techniques inside and outside the classroom was needed in order for a shift to happen. Introducing a different technique each week in class and at staff meetings, when possible, made communicating about stress, life, and well-being almost routine.

Rituals

The biggest change I have implemented is an opening ritual at the beginning of every class. This is something I will continue to use in all classes, workshops, or trainings that I do. The value of setting the

intention and removing obstacles is invaluable for both the learner and the presenter/teacher. In one class it might be a breathing exercise or a guided meditation to quiet the mind and relax the body, or it may be a quick brain gym exercise or a “Five minutes to write what’s on your mind” activity to get us going. I have also found that a quick ending ritual helps people move into the next phase of their day in a more focused way.

Manipulatives (fidgets) are another tool I will continue to use. I have seen firsthand how these simple items can help a student remain focused in the classroom. I also believe these tools subconsciously give students the courage to speak up in class. I have noticed some of the quietest students join in a discussion while working with a ball of clay. At the end of class some of the creations become works of art on display in a common area. This seemingly simple gesture brings smiles to students who either created them or the ones viewing.

I believe that incorporating stress management techniques into the classroom each week has helped build trust and a feeling of community among our students. For example, I have had students ask for a guided imagery session because they were feeling overwhelmed.

Responding to Students

In the past I have been at a loss when students disrupt an entire class because of stressors in their lives. Now because I have made stress management an integral part of class, students are learning techniques and tools they can use to help themselves and others respond more positively. For example, if a student is overwhelmed by the busy-ness of working, school and managing a family, he or she can ask for a five-minute problem solving session at the end of class. This is where a student names a problem and others respond in a brainstorming session. The student then comes to the next class and lets us know how it went. This helps remove mental clutter from taking up students’ focus during the entire class by moving it to the end of the class. It also helps students learn problem solving skills they can use in other parts of their lives.

The learning that happened during this project gave me the courage to teach in a way that was true to me and to explore creative ways that I can integrate these concepts into all classes, workshops, and trainings.

Expressive Arts

The benefits have been enormous and the challenges overwhelming, but incorporating expressive arts into my classroom has been a positive change for all involved. I learned a lot about my teaching style and changes that needed to be made, and students learned that “art” is not something to be afraid of. At first I introduced the expressive arts puzzle project as being a percent of their grade. This failed miserably! Four people dropped out of



class that day. Luckily I was able to get them back and give me another try. Next, we started “playing” each week with incorporating our creative sides into the work we were doing. Finally, the last two weeks of class were devoted to the puzzle project, which was a way to have students display the learning that had taken place over the cycle. By then, people forgot about the words “project” and “grades” and let their imaginations do the reflections.

Sally Daniels

Sumner Adult Education, Sullivan, Maine

Sally has worked in adult basic education/college transitions for several years as a coordinator, counselor, and teacher. She has presented at local and national conferences on stress management in the classroom and has taken trainings in Brain Gym.

While I was writing the original proposal to participate in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning Project, I could feel my stress increase as I proposed adding even more to the content of my class. Fortunately, the Managing Stress Project has been fully flexible and allowed me to explore multiple approaches while feeding me content through shared resources.

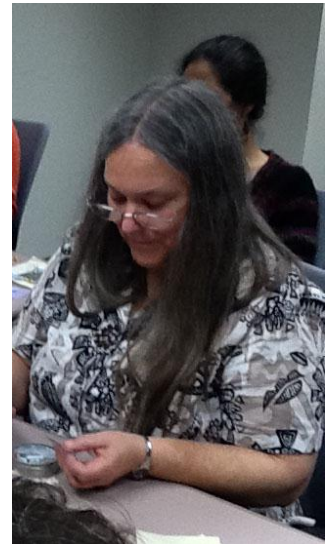
The background gained from the initial training institute and the rich resources and tools shared allowed the project to evolve into an important component of my class and the full College Transitions Project.

Participating students developed an acceptance of the importance of managing stress as part of their overall stress management approach. Fortunately, my students had the chance to actively practice easy to use, cost-free techniques to help them manage stress. The students now better understand the role of positive thinking and their role in managing their environment. Equally important, the students are now willing to share their pro-active strategies and positive attitudes with fellow students and their family.

The level of confidence gained by the students in the fall session was the highest among my three semesters of involvement. Reflecting on the past 15 months, I grew the most my first semester, at the very start of the Managing Stress Project. Even before the fall 2010 Institute, I had a vision of how this might look, but lacked the full substance. The initial Institute helped my vision further gel, and gave me strong content to explore; the balance of the fall 2010 session saw an active flowing of new content and tools from a variety of sources. This evolution created a strong managing stress strand within my College Success class. The spring session allowed for full implementation, and strong reflection around student growth.

Environment

Modification of the environment to help prevent stress has been a key benefit of participation in this project. Not only fidgets and PACE (Brain Gym), but the active encouragement by demonstrating various Brain Gym and deep-breathing techniques has allowed the students to better notice their



manifestations of stress and manage their situations, better preventing emotional distress in the classroom.

Rituals

I introduced [PACE](#) in week four of the cycle and by week seven it was fully institutionalized and became the cornerstone of our daily ritual. PACE helps transition students to their new class and becomes the springboard for each class session's stress management topic.



Movement and the Body

The class overall learned to enjoy, and seemingly welcome, our use of movement in the classroom and their approach to learning. Several students have commented on their use of our techniques both in and outside of class.

Responding to Student Distress

While I feel I have always been sensitive even to subtle emotional distress of students, participation in this project has better equipped me with an ability to respond in relaxed and practical ways. Students anticipate the managing stress focus for the day to evolve after we complete our PACE routine.

This structure allows me to address the needs of individual students without actually directly identifying them. Because of the wide array of strategies learned through participation in this project, I can typically progress on to a topic actually needed at that moment, without the individual student being identified. This subtle approach benefits all, and allowed me to later assist that student in her growing ability to notice a need for self-management.

Expressive Arts

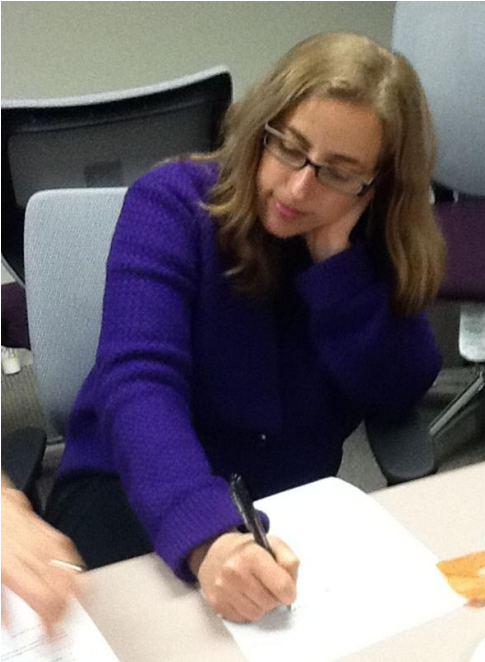
Most students have a positive attitude toward the expressive arts project ([stress tree of knowledge](#)) and eagerly share their enthusiasm. However, a few students were overly concerned around the creativity necessary to complete the project. In an attempt to both build engagement and dispel concern, I actively shared past successful projects. Weekly, I brought in a [sampling of completed trees](#). This allowed for further clarification to build awareness and comfort. This active sharing of successful samples of student work paved the way to readily focus in on a section of the tree. The sharing and classroom discussion, teamed with three [fold-a-poem](#) activities, help the students consider content to include in their tree project. Fall 2011 semester yielded only a handful of College Transitions graduates, yet of the completing students,



the expressive arts Tree of Knowledge about Stress Management Projects were the most comprehensive and effective. One student used a cake to display her understanding of stress - a project enjoyed by all!

Lisa Gimbel

The Welcome Project, Somerville, MA



Lisa coordinated the ESOL program at the Welcome Project, based at a large public housing development. In her role as coordinator, Lisa expanded her Managing Stress commitment to include the design and implementation of her own managing stress trainings for other Welcome project teachers.

Learning about stress and the stress response has given me more tools for understanding and wanting to make changes in my own life, responses, and pace of living. If what Gandhi says is true, and we must be the change we wish to see, then the changes I've made in my own life have been necessary. I couldn't be much of a resource to students when I was running out from class to another 15 meetings and commitments, or teaching at the end of an eight-hour day at a different job. If I want my students to have lower

stress levels, I needed to be a part of that, and being constantly stretched and strained wasn't helpful.

I feel like I've made some definite progress as a teacher and am more able to carry out projects and to focus on topics. I was initially very interested in learning how to do project-based learning, and though I still don't understand exactly what the term means, I think I've probably figured out how to do it.

Rituals

It doesn't matter what they are so much, but the consistency does. In the evaluation with my students they said they loved having the (daily) dictation and the dictionary work, that the slow and steady and visible progress was important to them. Especially in topic-based classes, which frequently aren't focused on grammar points, having tangible learning outcomes is important for the students. A student might not be thrilled about the topic of that particular day, but know they'll have at least the learning rituals that are built in. It's also huge for the lower literacy and lower level students because it means there's a segment of the class that once they understand the rules, they don't have to struggle to understand directions for.

The Role of the Body and Movement in Learning

This program has encouraged my own personal learning about the role of the body and movement in learning, which has then continued into the classroom. Though I used to do activities to get students up and talking to each other, I didn't have folks stretch or move as much as I do now. I feel like it's part of

activating people's brains and that I don't need an excuse to do it. Knowing the science, even a little bit of it, is helpful.

We'll be providing a yoga class once or twice a week for students in the spring – I'm excited to see how it is responded to, and what students experience in terms of language learning.

Providing fidgets and regular opportunities for students to be in their bodies in class IS a powerful way for people to be focused and present – it makes it possible, rather than iterating the importance of it.



For some of the students, they now request something to fidget with every day if I forget to put the basket of objects out. I've found for me, as a teacher and learner, I benefit greatly from having something in my hands to fiddle with, far more than seems logical. The experiential learning of this helps me to be able to understand how it is for my students.

Responding to Students' Distress

I've been more aware of students' emotional distress and have found ways to connect with students outside of class to support them, which I didn't do in the past.

Integrating Expressive Arts

I believe that all people benefit from being able to participate in expressive arts, and that there is a sad lack of spaces where this is possible. . . It seems very important that the teacher be confident bringing expressive arts into the classroom and that students will trust that energy. The kind of ownership and connection people form when expressing themselves in one way or another is unlike the feel of other kinds of activities, so I sense that there is a lot of power in it.

When we did [playback theatre](#), we had fun generating a number of activities and ways of working with the form that would maximize language production.

I feel like this project has just begun – we're in the beginning phases of learning with it. It's exciting to see our teachers at the Welcome Project hunger for it, eager for the full training we'll do in January. I'd like to have opportunities or prompts to reflect on how the learning continues, on a quarterly basis or so.

Thank you for creating the opportunity to focus on this critical and enlivening juncture between worlds, one which so rarely gets the spotlight but causes so much shine in people's lives. I feel like I've been so fortunate to be part of the project, and am not exaggerating when I say it's just beginning. There's a need, a desperate need, to pull ourselves as humans away from worry and work and screens and obligations and into what it means to be alive as humans.

Sarah Bayer
Project Hope, Roxbury, MA

Sarah has worked at Project Hope for many years as a LICSW and has guided new staff through the Managing Stress project. Her experience as a dancer has enriched the project.

This has been an extremely valuable project to students and staff at Project Hope. I feel we are now well equipped to continue to carry on the commitment to bringing the creative arts into our daily curriculum. As teachers – it has been also important for us to recognize the value of self-care so that we are in turn better able to support our students. We’ve been particularly lucky to have our Women of Strength class already established so that we could deepen the work of making the mind, body, spirit, emotion connection in life’s daily challenges. It’s exciting to see the spin-offs of this project:

One student launched a parenting support group called P2P (Parent to Parent). This student facilitated bi-weekly discussions with her peers about parenting issues – a major source of stress for our students.

Another student offered to start a Monday morning craft circle to teach crochet and plastic canvas needle point to any students who want to learn. These projects demonstrate the power of sharing the managing stress strategies so that the students can create their own practices at school and home.

In reflecting back over this year and a half, I think about all the great stuff we did and learned during the training institutes. It was wonderful to get together with the other members of the project and learn and share with them. I loved having the space to try things out together first and then use these exercises if they felt applicable for our students. We’ve incorporated a number of the [improv games](#) we shared and of course – right away used the wonderful image of the [Stress Tree of Knowledge](#) as a jumping off project.

I found I refer to and use many of the very rich materials offered in the institutes and loved doing the [Stir a Memory](#) project! We now have such a wealth of materials to refer to; I hope we can continue to access the Wiggio site (virtual community of practice) for this purpose. I’ll look to these materials as I continue on with our work in this arena. Though I was initially resistant to taking on Wiggio, I’ve come to learn it is a good tool for sharing and posting info.

We’re in the process of exploring the possibility of offering a conflict resolution workshop to our students. They’re requested this a number of times and feel this would be helpful for them both in their peer and personal relationships.



Rituals

I've learned that rituals are important in starting and ending class. In our ABE class, we haven't always been consistent with this and I hope to continue to work on consistency. Rituals focused on self-care and community connection support all of us by grounding ourselves in the community guidelines we create.

This fall we invited the director of Healthworks, a local women's fitness center, to our Women of Strength class to share the program with our students. We've had a partnership over the last few years where our students receive a free membership. A number of students have taken advantage of this arrangement and use the center on a regular basis. Thanks to the generosity of a local yoga class, whose participants donated money to support our efforts, we also offered a five-part series of basic yoga classes to students and staff at Project Hope.

One of our ABE teachers received her yoga teacher training certificate last summer and was excited to design and teach this series. The funds allowed us to purchase some yoga mats and we plan to teach another series. The students who attended really appreciated and enjoyed the class and would like to continue.

We've given a number of students stress balls to use during class and plan to create a stress management table in our student lounge area where students can choose a variety of things to do to help them manage anxiety during the day. We have a folder of mandalas with markers, a bowl of gadgets and stress balls and clay. The Letting Go bowl also sits on this table for students to use throughout the day. At the end of the day there are often many papers in the bowl—a sign this is regularly used.

We use improvisational games to promote community connection and fun. We've all learned the power and importance of laughter in managing stress and for making connection with one another so these games can often lead to a lot of laughter and silliness that helps us enjoy our time together. I've observed that while students are involved in a longer term project like our Affirmation boxes and Altered Shoe projects, they enjoy the informal time of chatting while they do their art. This kind of activity offers relaxation while they are also focused on channeling their creativity.

It's in this combination that lovely connections can happen. One example: Two students, both from Haiti, ended up working at the same table on their shoes together. They didn't know each other well but connected through the process of exploring how they wanted to design their shoes. They each chose the Haitian flag proudly sharing their national statement on the flag. At this same table a student from Honduras worked on her shoe and shared her fond memories of her homeland. These were community building conversations that allowed the students to get to know each other in new ways. I was very moved by the trust and support they offered one another through these informal chats. A number of students had a difficult time getting started with their shoes. They felt at a loss, expressing that they weren't "artistic" enough. I watched as their group peers made suggestions and shared ideas to help them get unstuck. They conversed about their own stories which led to a way for the students who felt

inadequate to move forward. When the students presented their shoes at the final celebration – there was such love and respect shown in the room.

Responding to Student Distress

I believe this project has allowed us the room to pay close attention to all the ways our students are managing challenging life situations. We're better keyed into them and now have more tools to offer them and reminders of how they might incorporate these tools at home and with their children.

In combination with our other two foundations classes, Health and Wellness and the Science of Learning we've been able to explore the topic of stress and its effects from various perspectives. I believe this has supported our students to better understand the signs of their own emotional distress which in turn helps them to implement coping strategies. I'd like to continue to remind our class that sometimes it's very simple strategies like drinking water or taking a walk and focusing on breath that can have an immediate effect. If we continue to remind them of these very manageable ways of self-care, the positive outcomes will begin to get noticed.

Expressive Arts

Beginning last year with our Managing Stress Trees of Knowledge, we've been on an exploration with our students to recognize the ways they manage stress and incorporate healthy ways of handling the stress they experience in their lives. We've also spent some time reflecting on the more negative ways of handling stress and how we can work on transforming these into positive approaches. For example, a common stress management tool is smoking. We encourage our students who smoke to explore physical outlets of managing this same stress to see if they can create healthy strategies.

Our students' altered [shoes](#) and [written reflections](#) on them are a tribute to the power and importance of using the creative arts to deepen our connections to one another and in this process nurture our mental, spiritual, emotional and physical selves.



“Thank you for creating the opportunity to focus on this critical and enlivening juncture between worlds, one which so rarely gets the spotlight but causes so much shine in people’s lives. I feel like I’ve been so fortunate to be part of the project, and am not exaggerating when I say it’s just beginning. There’s a need, a desperate need, to pull ourselves as humans away from worry and work and screens and obligations and into what it means to be alive as humans.”

“I will just say that this has been the most significant professional development opportunity I have engaged in. Having an extended period of time in which to learn and try new things, reflect on them, and gather and discuss them with others, has resulted in a full integration into my teaching practice of an awareness of stress as an impediment to learning and strategies to reduce it. Whenever I engage with students now, I am more mindful than before of the need to create an environment as stress-free as possible, to plan activities that help students to relax and focus, and to be sensitive to the issues facing those who may have suffered extreme stress or trauma”.