



# MANAGING STRESS TO IMPROVE LEARNING PROGRAM NOTES

January 2011

## Who Are We?

*Program Notes* is a publication of a new project of the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education, Inc in Boston, Massachusetts called Managing Stress to Improve Learning, funded by Jane's Trust. Participants in the project, whose work is highlighted here, include the following:

Haitian Multiservice Center, Dorchester, MA  
Jean-Louis Daniel  
Alice Nelson

Project Hope, Roxbury, MA  
Jeymi Arroyo  
Sarah Bayer

Sumner Adult Education Center, Sullivan, ME  
Ronda Alley  
Sally Daniels

The Welcome Project, Somerville, MA  
Jeri Bayer  
Lisa Gimbel

Vermont Adult Education Center  
Colchester, VT.  
Louis Giancola  
Linda Snow

World Education  
Lenore Balliro



WORLD EDUCATION



Participants in the Managing Stress to Improve learning fall institute

## Drum Roll, Please!

On October 14 and 15, participants in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning project came together for the first time in an intensive experiential and research-based institute at World Education. Here, they began exploring and implementing the intention of the project: to help students develop healthy coping strategies for managing stress to improve their learning.

Through presentations by mental health professionals, participants learned about the relationship between chronic and post-traumatic stress and how these conditions impact health, brain functioning, and learning. Guided by experienced adult education practitioners, participants explored mind-body approaches to reduce stress, regulate emotions, and promote learning, such as seated yoga postures, guided visualization, and breathing techniques. All activities were selected with an eye toward adaptability and suitability for the classroom.

Expressive arts activities served to build community and to inspire teachers to try new classroom approaches. Participants created collages, manipulated clay, explored color and pattern, played movement and improvisation games, explored rhythms on African drums, and sang together. As with the mind-body activities, the expressive arts activities were analyzed for their purpose, cultural appropriateness, building potential. Read on for more details about the project!



## What's Stress Got to Do With It?

In my many years as a staff developer in adult basic education, I've heard teachers bring up the topic of stress and mental health issues that arise in their classrooms. Their concerns—that these issues impede learning, and that they feel ill equipped to address mental health needs—have stayed with me for a long time. We are not counselors or therapists, most of us, yet our students, many of whom carry the effects of trauma and chronic stress into the classroom, do view us as trusted mentors and their classrooms as safe places.

I wanted to build on the work of others, notably Myrna Ann Atkins of the International Institute, Jenny Horseman, and her Canadian colleagues, and the teachers who have worked quietly and without fanfare to help promote mental health and reduce stress in the interest of their students' well being.

My idea was to bring a cohort of teachers together to build out background knowledge of how trauma and chronic stress affects the learning process and to begin to build an awareness and set of strategies for addressing some of these issues within our classrooms. By building connections with community health providers, by creating stable, safe, and predictable classrooms for our students, by developing consistent classroom rituals, and by using the topics of stress as a learning topic, we could learn from each other what might help us to build stronger classrooms that can help students persist in their goals in the face of the many stressors they bring with them.

As a poet and visual art worker, I have seen the power of the arts to promote well being and to build community, to help offer creative direction that can make a difference. As a student in Lesley University's certificate program for expressive therapies, I began to see how many of the approaches used in expressive therapy are also suitable for the classroom, within an educational, not overtly therapeutic, context. My original concept paper was accepted by a private foundation called Jane's Trust, who valued the idea and gave its go-ahead to write a full proposal. Silja Kallenbach, Director of the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education, and I collaborated on the full proposal, and it was accepted for funding.

Some months later, the project was up and running. We recruited 10 practitioners from five programs across New England. We came together for the first time in November 2010 for a two-day workshop (See next page) and from then on the energy of the participants drove the process.

This *Program Notes* is an effort to give you a glimpse of our work from November 2010 to the beginning of January 2011. When I began selecting pieces to showcase I realized how hard everyone has been working.

We are now building a website where you can get full lesson plans, more resource information, links to videos and articles and much more. We welcome your feedback. If you'd like to be kept on an email list for further information about our project, please contact me at [lballiro@worlded.org](mailto:lballiro@worlded.org).

Peace,  
*Lenore Balliro*

# Breathing and Balancing

One of the themes of our institute was establishing continued awareness of students (and ourselves) as physical bodies, not just mental receptacles. Incorporating movement into the routine of the classroom can help relax students or help energize them, depending on what's needed during the rhythms of the day. Simple stretches, yoga postures (even from chairs) and deep breathing can help with transitions between tasks and with closing the class. Movement can also aid memory and improve focus. We know from multiple intelligences theory that some students are kinesthetic learners and can



Participants at the October institute practice simple yoga postures

benefit from activities using movement and hands-on practice. Students with ADHD can improve focus by “fiddling” with things like plasticene clay, silly putty, or stress balls. Here are a few ways participants have integrated body awareness into their classroom routines.

Amy Cameron, former ESOL teacher at the International Institute of Boston and a trained yoga instructor, brought participants through some yoga activities that she used with

her students. Since the institute, teach-

ers have been experimenting with breath work, yoga postures, deep breathing, and other activities to promote mind/body awareness.

## **Ronda Alley Says**

I began my Juggling Life and Learning Class with a guided body scan. It had worked well with my WorkReady™ class...(the students)loved it and asked if I could make tapes for them to take home. The students in the Juggling Life and Learning class did not like the body scan as a majority of them felt uncomfortable. One person said she is not used to thinking about how her body feels and it felt weird. One male student said “I hate all this feeling crap.” I acknowledged that talking about any kind of feeling, whether it is physical or emotional, is a hard thing to do when we are not used to doing it or have been taught that it is not a good thing. We had a good discussion about how men were not encouraged to feel when he was growing up. He shared with the class that he was 22 when he came home from the Vietnam War. He had been so excited to get home after two tours of duty and within a few minutes from getting off the plane he and his buddies

were covered in urine and feces (from protesters). The younger students in the class were shocked that this happened to him! At this point, a bigger discussion of our history was had and even though it seemed off target it fit nicely into “Habit #5-Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood.” By the end of class everyone said they would try the body scan again if I wanted. Wow!

## **Linda Snow Says**

I have found some (students) that really enjoy (yoga stretches) and others would like to simply watch. Those that do not want to participate still join in the circle and sit in the chair. Those that chose to sit and watch came up with the name of “Sitting Duck” for their pose. Although they are not participating, they still would like to be part of the group. One student of mine also has a background in the martial arts, and I asked him if he would like to share. His face lit up when I asked him.



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# Getting Started

## *Alice Nelson Says*

I decided I really wanted to start with a mini-unit for my Level 2 ESOL class on stress, eliciting their responses and getting into left brain/right brain stuff. I got a power point together and went ahead with the idea this week. I gave the class one hour and I wish I had done two hours. We only got through the first 5 slides covering the causes and effects of stress'. I did not use it as a power-point but as overhead transparencies because I couldn't find the computer laptop and projector – but I think it worked much better that way. I was able to use the white board and write in the student responses during the brainstorming session. (I should have written directly on the transparency and that would have allowed me to save their responses. Lenore was observing so thankfully she was able to record the responses and typed them out after class.) Now I can use those (53 items!) comments from the students to do follow up activities and lessons. We will continue the overheads next week... expanding language, looking at their lists of causes and effects and categorizing them into lists: 'I can control'/'I can't control'

## Next Steps

Students worked in groups to organize the list of items into cause/effect columns. (We did this first because there was a little confusion about what caused stress and what the effects of stress are when we brainstormed.) There was a lot of discussion and spin off ideas. I had one recorder in each group make a master list—but in the end the students wanted their own copy and just noted a cause with a C and an effect with

a E. Then I gave them all highlighting markers and asked them to go through the list again as a group and everyone was to highlight the entries they could control in some way.

They worked through the paper identifying what they could control with a highlighter and left unmarked the entries they could not control. This ended up being great and created even more discussion because some people disagreed about what they could control and why (like child support - the men overwhelmingly said it was not in their control and refused to highlight

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*I gave the class one hour and I wish I had done two hours. We only got through the first 5 slides covering 'cause of stress*

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that entry/the women had mixed opinions but generally said it was controllable...interesting). Then I asked them to look at their paper and decide what percent of the entries were highlighted and we made a line graph on the board and each student marked where on the grid their estimated percentages were. Everyone was surprised how many things they could control - most students ranged from 50%-70% of the entries in their control in some small or large way. (How resilient they were in their reasoning) We wrapped up talking about taking control and doing the difficult things to move ourselves forward.

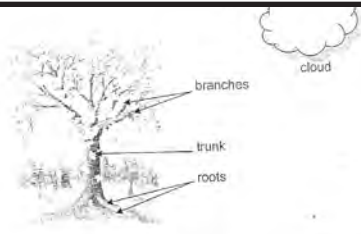
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## Resource

Kimberly Post Rowe (2007). *A Settled Mind: Stress Reduction for the Classroom and Beyond*. Raymond, Maine: Five Seeds. 2007. [www.fiveseeds.org](http://www.fiveseeds.org)

# Stress Trees

Some participants started their investigation of stress using the graphic of a “stress tree” a concept introduced by one of our consultants at the institute, Amy Cameron. Based on the “tree of knowledge” as a visual for identifying different parts of a concept, participants created trees where they could identify causes, effects, and possible ways to address stress. Here are some of the trees that emerged



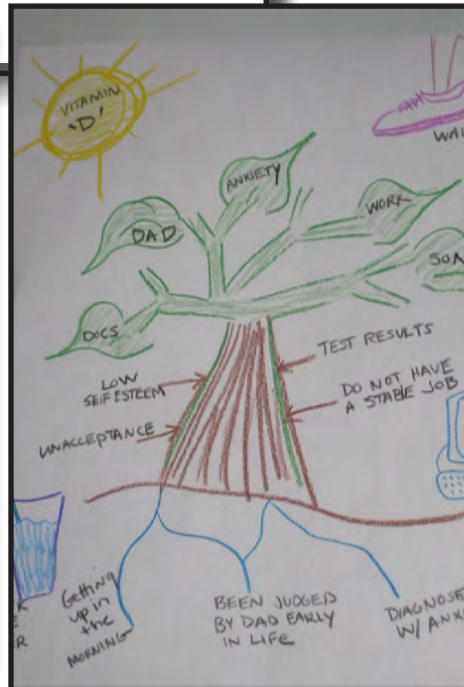
**Building a Tree of Knowledge about Stress Management**

**CLOUD:** What is a stressor (something that causes stress) in your life?

**ROOT:** What is something that you learned from your family about managing stress?

**TRUNK:** What is something that you learned from your culture about managing stress?

**BRANCH:** What is something that you taught yourself about managing stress?



# Worry Bowls

How can a simple bowl of water help students relax and focus on the day's learning? At the fall institute, Sarah Bayer from Project Hope in Roxbury led us through an activity the staff encourages at their center. A bowl filled with water—a worry bowl—is placed in the same location in the classroom. In the beginning of each cycle the worry bowl is explained to students: each student is invited to think of a worry or burden that is holding her back that day—something that might interfere with learning or concentrating or moving forward in some way. The student writes this worry down on a small piece of paper towel using water soluble markers, then places the slip



of paper into the bowl of water. The ink spreads, and eventually, the paper itself disintegrates, symbolically releasing the burden. After a few days of reminders, the ritual takes on its own life. Students use the worry bowl as needed, sometimes more than once during the day, sometimes not at all.

The students understand, of course, that their burdens do not magically disappear. However, the ritual of letting go of life's pressures—just for a little while—can serve a powerful purpose. It is a device to bring awareness and to promote focus and well-being while students

are in the classroom. The worry bowl fits into cleansing, release, and closure rituals practiced by many cultures.

## *Ronda Alley Says*

During the fourth week I turned a section of the kitchen in our program into a stress release corner and put several things on a table that students/staff could use at any time to release tension. The water bowl, a funny book, mandalas, and crayons. Each day the water bowl gets used and there are now several colored mandalas adorning the table. This week someone put a voodoo doll on the table. The doll has stressors written on it such as, sick child, broken down car, no food, eviction etc. on it and it has positive things on it too such as hugs, good health, sunshine, etc. The idea is to put one color pin in the stressors to get rid of them and another color pin in the positive things to bring more of these into your life.

## *Lisa Gimbel Says*

We got into a long conversation in the beginning of class about the difficulties of being separated from family. As the conversation was getting wrapped up one of the students started passing out the slips of paper and markers for the 'worries bowl', without solicitation. This says a lot about the value of having systems in place so that when people need them, they're there without needing explanation or set up.

## *Linda Snow Says*

I had one student that took a phone call outside of class. When she returned I could see the frustration in her face so I handed her a piece of paper towel. She very eagerly accepted and wrote something down and placed it in the bowl. She was then able to focus on the next task. I am using paper towels and washable markers, so that the colors run easily.



# Affirmation Boxes

At Project Hope, students created Affirmation Boxes to help welcome in the new year. They transformed simple boxes into collaged receptacles where they could place positive symbols or messages. One teacher, Sarah Bayer, shared her own experiences with the students as

a model. She noted: “Last week – shared collage box made by a friend after I experienced a fire. Box represented a new start, with symbols of peace and serenity both inside and outside the box. Let the class know I keep the box in a place where I can view it each day as a reminder for me of my new start – out of a traumatic experience – of loss – I now have a new home. home.”



## Self Affirmation Theory

A great deal has been written about self-affirmation theory and its role in maintaining psychological health for individuals and groups.

Here are a few links if you want to explore the validity of self-affirmation and the strong role it can have in our students' motivation.

Phyllis A. Siegel. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 41, Issue 6, November 2005, Pages 589-597. Reducing the tendency to self-handicap: The effect of self-affirmation.

[http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/~d\\_sherma/advances.final.pdf](http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/~d_sherma/advances.final.pdf)

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# LOL: Humor as Stress Reliever

According to some scientific sources, laughter reduces the level of stress hormones in the body while increasing hormones that make us feel good. Laughter also stabilizes blood pressure, helps digestion, and increases oxygen supply to the muscles. As educators, we can make use of laughter as a way to relieve stress in the class-

room, all while promoting community building and learning language and literacy. Here are a few ways participants in the Managing Stress project are LOL.

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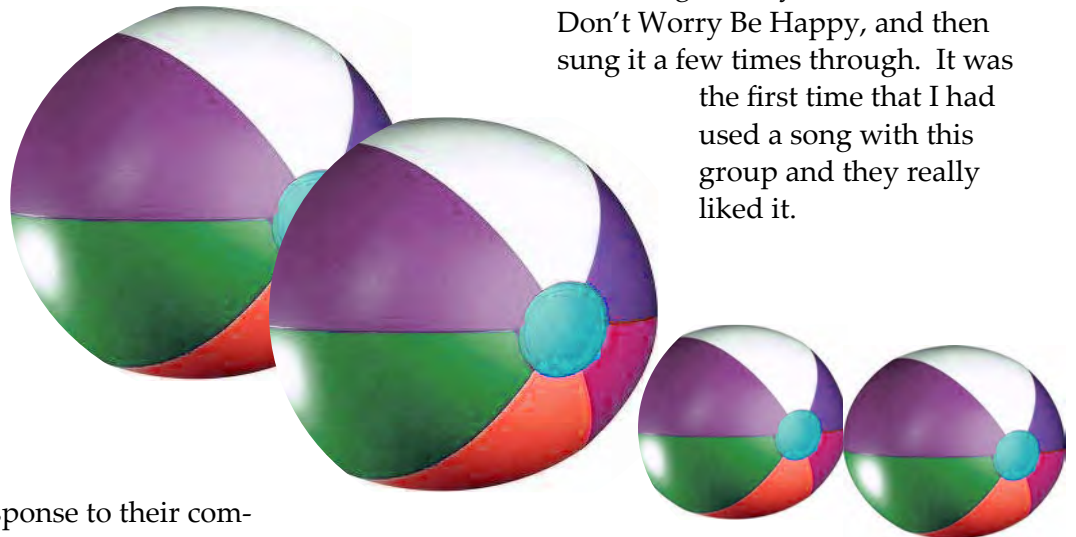
## *Lisa Gimbel Says*

When we spoke about stress reduction techniques that we had done, students said laughing was one of their favorite activities.

One day early in the semester I just brought in a beach ball and we tried to see how many times we could hit it, keeping it in the air and not touching the ground. I think we got to 50. It was unstructured, but completely hit the reset button on the earlier parts of the day and brought the students into the room.

Thursday in response to their comments about loving the laughter part, I did an

activity I had learned through a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop. The students and I literally were laughing until we were crying, making animal sounds and motions. Afterwards we did a listening activity with cloze for *Don't Worry Be Happy*, and then sung it a few times through. It was the first time that I had used a song with this group and they really liked it.



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## **Resources**

The Stress Management and Health Benefits of Laughter  
<http://stress.about.com/od/stresshealth/a/laughter.htm>

*Humor's Healing Potential*

<http://www.brianlukeseaward.net/articles/humor-potential.pdf>

Affi Khatchadourian, "The Laughing Guru" in *The New Yorker*, August 30 2010



# Stress Reduction Through Slapstick: I Love Lucy in the Classroom

## Jeri Bayer Says

In my class on Monday evening I shared the *I Love Lucy* candy factory clip with my students. <https://www.vtunnel.com>

In preparation for showing the clip, I went through it at home and transcribed the dialogue, which I typed out and copied for the students. I didn't give students the script for the first viewing of the clip, since I just wanted them to focus on the story line and enjoy the humor. It was wonderful to watch their faces as they took in Lucy and Ethel's antics! After that first showing I asked simple comprehension-focused questions. I then handed out the script and asked students to follow along as best they could while viewing the clip again. We then practiced pieces of the dialogue. At the end of class I asked everyone to think about something funny that may have happened to them at work and that we would talk about it on Wednesday.

## Recreating the Scene

On Wednesday, I started off with the Lucy clip. A number of people attended class who hadn't been there on Monday, so the students who had been there briefly described what the clip was about. As on Monday, we watched it first for general understanding, and then a second time with the script. We practiced the script several times, with different people playing different roles. Some of the words were difficult to pronounce and we worked on pronunciation as well as meaning. I then asked everyone to gather around a rectangular table at the back of the

room and with a roll of paper towels, squares of aluminum foil, a bag of Hershey's chocolate kisses, and a couple of hats we recreated the scene. It was both a lot of fun and very funny! We went through it a few times, again with people taking different roles, from conveyor belt (paper towel) operators, to candy dropper, to Lucy, Ethel, and the boss.

Everyone said they really enjoyed themselves. After the performances, we returned to seats and

students worked in groups of threes on a challenging "order of actions" activity I had prepared.

I had typed fourteen sentences describing what happens in the story and listed



them out of order. The task of the students was to read through all of the sentences and decide on the correct order. For some this was overwhelming and I needed to help a lot. If I were to do it again, I would simplify the list.

We ended the class by watching the video one more time and matching each action from the list with each piece of action in the video. The students also decided that they would like to perform the skit one more time the following Monday for the students who were absent on Wednesday. People volunteered for the three speaking roles and agreed to practice them at

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## Stress Reduction Through Slapstick

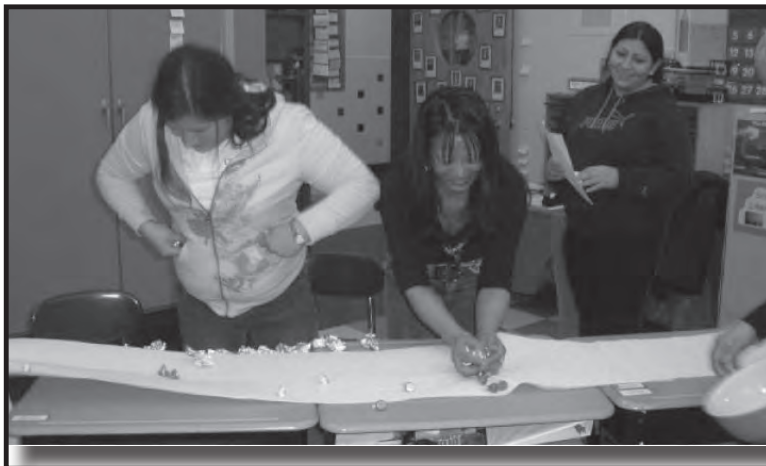
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home in preparation.

For me, intentionally building lessons to inspire laughter was a second invaluable venture. So much of what we do in ESOL classes addresses learners' immediate survival needs and concerns. I think my teaching style can usually be characterized as easy-going and good-humored, but it had been a long time since I consciously planned a funny lesson. It was such a joy and revelation to watch my students laugh at "Lucy at the Candy Factory" and then laugh harder as they

performed their own version of the skit. As a stress reducer, laughter is highly potent. Furthermore, as I observed, a class that laughs together, bonds together. In the weeks following the "Lucy lessons," students seemed more at ease

with each other, worked together with less reserve, and found humor amongst themselves more often. I look forward to doing more to stimulate laughter in my class next semester!



Jeri's students re-enact the Candy Factory episode

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chuckle **roar** grin snort smile

smirk **chortle beam** break

up **howl** cackle **GUFFAW**

**roar** *roll in the aisles* crack up **SNICKER**

be in stitches titter *giggle* **SHRIEK**

# Mandalas

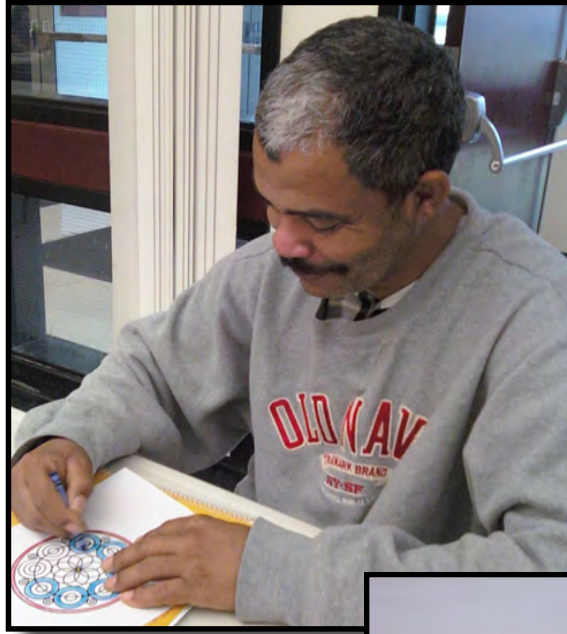
Tibetan Buddhist monks create mandalas as a form of walking meditation, using colored grains of sand to make intricate patterns, sometimes over many days. Though the word mandala literally means circle in Sanskrit, its symbolic power extends beyond that simple shape. According to the Mandala Project (<http://www.mandalaproject.org/>) the mandala can be seen as a “cosmic diagram that reminds us of our relation to the infinite, the world that extends both beyond and within our bodies and minds.” Variations on mandalas can be seen in many other cultures as well, including Native American, Hindu, and Latin American traditions.

Creating, or even coloring in mandalas, individually or in a group, can be a

soothing and meditative process requiring few materials. Mandalas can be made from colored beans, rice, or any other small colored objects. They can be painted, drawn, or colored in with pencils or markers. Mandala making is a simple and tranquil activity for parents and children. During our institute, participants took a break

after an intense morning to color mandalas. As the facilitator of the activity I was concerned that participants may find the activity infantilizing. However, they embraced the opportunity to stop and breathe and work quietly with others as their images emerged.

Many participants brought the mandala activity back with them into the classroom. Here are a few glimpses of what emerged.





# More About Mandalas

## Linda Snow Says

The third part of the routine is having Mandalas available. This has been a huge hit with the class. Many of the students have commented on how relaxing they are. The first day, I made them available before and during the first half of the class. During the first part of the class when the Mandalas were available, they were very engaged in class, and students were ac-



Students in Linda Snow's class with their mandalas

tively listening to me and one another. During the second part of the class when the Mandalas were not being used, I found that the students were starting to go off topic and having difficulty taking turns speaking. I have one student in the class who has been diagnosed

with ADHD. She has really found the Mandalas very relaxing as well as helping her maintain focus during class time. Many of the students have taken them home with them and shared them with their families.

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## Lisa Gimbel Says

I wanted to share with you guys a story from this morning. My beginners class usually gets to class 15 minutes early. I figured they could do mandalas during that time. I put out mandalas and crayons, and left the room to make copies. When I came back they were fully absorbed in coloring. I tried to shift gears, and couldn't get them to stop. Literally, it took 2 or 3 "OK, five more minutes," and about 30 minutes. They loved it! I also learned the valuable lesson: make sure students have enough time to start and finish a mandala in one setting!

### Resource

For additional information about mandalas, particularly how they can be integrated into classrooms, organizations, and even workplaces, please see the following link to the Mandala Project, a nonprofit organization is dedicated to promoting peace through art and education. [www.mandalaproject.org/](http://www.mandalaproject.org/)

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# Community Resources: Partners in Addressing Students' Needs

ESOL and ABE teachers cannot meet all the complex needs adults bring with them to the classroom. However, they can help students identify community resources that can help address some of their most pressing stressors: for example, lack of employment, substance abuse, domestic violence, and housing.

We know that giving students a list of agencies doesn't mean they feel comfortable seeking out their services. Participants in the project have come up with more interactive ways to research and introduce community services to students.

Connecting students to community resources in a meaningful and interactive way is one of the goals of the Managing Stress project.

Participants have begun to address this goal in various ways. Some of us are still getting up to speed about what the "211" telephone resource line means in various communities, then figuring out the best way to make this resource better known to students.

## Vermont 211 and Fair Housing

Some participants have asked students to prioritize the resources they would like to hear more about. In Vermont, Linda Snow and Louis Giancola invited a representative from Vermont's Fair Housing to visit the class, based on their students' interests. They have also coordinated with "Vermont 211" to come in and speak. No one in the class had heard of the 211 "Life-line."

## Somerville Community Health

Jeri Bayer and Lisa Gimbel of the Welcome Project invited an MSW intern and the Mental Health First Aid Coordinator at Somerville Community Health to visit their class, based on their students' interests. Jeri also developed a language lesson for her ESOL students based on the information. The intern provided the class with copies of a recent pamphlet, *Mental Health: Resources & Information, a Guide for the Somerville Community* and used it with the class to identify various appropriate resources.

## Haitian Center Responds to Post Earthquake Fears

One of the reasons teachers Alice Nelson and Jean-Louis Daniel from the Haitian Multi-Service Center wanted to participate in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning project was to learn strategies for addressing the feelings students were bringing with them to class after the January, 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Almost everyone in the Center was affected by the disaster, either by losing direct or extended family members or friends. When the earthquake first happened, the Center arranged free cell phone services for students so they could make calls to Haiti. A room was designated as the call room. Students not only received support through free technology; they also had the support of each other and staff members.

A year later, students have been worried about the cholera outbreak caused by conditions in Haiti since the earthquake. Jean-Louis has helped students focus on their ESOL classes by spending some time each day on reviewing the situation in Haiti. Being updated and discussing the situation in a safe and trusted environment is one way to acknowledge that students are affected by things outside the classroom. This has helped students transition to their learning tasks, which remain important to them in daily life in the U.S.

To give students information about the cholera outbreak, Alice and Jean Louis invited Guy Apollon, Health Services Director at the Haitian Center, to attend class and answer students' questions. After the session Alice reviewed the content in English developing new vocabulary.

This increased knowledge about cholera and how it is transmitted and prevented helped students deal with the anxiety about the outbreak from such a far distance, giving them information they could also transmit back to their families.

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# Resources

Lawrence, R.L., "Powerful Feelings: Exploring the Affective Domain of Informal and Arts-Based Learning." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, DOI: 10.1002/aceo.

International Institute of Boston. *Mental Health and the ESL Classroom: a Guide for Teachers Working With Refugees*. Boston, MA: International Institute. Available free online at

[www.refugees.org/uploadedFiles/Investigate/Resettlement/Teaching\\_Tools/MH\\_esl.pdf](http://www.refugees.org/uploadedFiles/Investigate/Resettlement/Teaching_Tools/MH_esl.pdf)

Dirkx, J. (2006). "The Meaning and Role of Emotions in Adult Learning." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (110) Summer.

Perry, B. (2009) "Fear and Learning: Trauma-Related Factors in the Adult Education Process."

*New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (110) Summer.

Sitler, H. (2009), "Teaching with Awareness: the Hidden Effects of Trauma on Learning" *The Clearinghouse*, Jan. Feb.

The Training Place, The Impact of Stress on Learning <http://www.trainingplace.com/source/stress.html>

"Helping Adult Learners Handle Stress" by Marjorie Jacobs.

*Field Notes*, volume 13, summer 20

<http://sabes.org/resources/publications/fieldnotes/vol13/f131jacobs.htm>

"Picture Stories for Adult ESL Health Literacy," by Kate Singleton.

Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools (Retrieved September 20, 2010; pub. Date unavailable).

[http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/Health/healthindex.html#Stressed](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/Health/healthindex.html#Stressed)

Murphy, J. (2008). *Move the body. Stretch the mind: Open yourself to learning through breathwork, movement and meditation*. Edmonton, AB: Windsound Learning Society.

To preview a sample: <http://www.learningandviolence.net>.

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/JudyMurphy/JudyMurphy.html>

Kimberly Post Rowe (2007). *A Settled Mind: Stress Reduction for the Classroom and Beyond*. Raymond, Maine: Five Seeds.

[www.fiveseeds.org](http://www.fiveseeds.org)