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Clearing a Space: A Centering Method for Enhancing Receptivity and Presence for the Classroom

Joan Klagsbrun

***Editor's Note:** "Clearing a Space: A Centering Method for Enhancing Receptivity and Presence in the Classroom," describes the history and application of Clearing A Space, "a five to ten minute induction into a state of reduced stress and enhanced receptivity." As a focusing tool, "Clearing a Space," is a short, effective centering tool that allows students to acknowledge and put aside their personal burdens, stressors and worries of the moment to better attend to the subject matter at hand.*

Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong. If you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two and one."

—Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind How Stress Interferes with Receptivity to Learning

The educational experience is comprised of two aspects: teaching and learning. Although one might be tempted to view these aspects as one that is active (teaching) and one that is passive (learning), in truth, both are active. For good teaching to occur, the teacher needs to be competent and passionate about her topic and to have well-organized and relevant teaching materials. She must be present and connected to what she is teaching. Similarly, for real learning to occur, the student must not only be present in body, mind and in spirit, but must also have some readiness and intention to learn.

Students come to school under the burden of a large number of stressors. Undergraduates must deal with the intensity of a relatively unstructured campus life, their own adolescent dramas, and the issues of separating from parents and re-inventing themselves as young adults. Graduate students may face a continuation of those stressors from their undergraduate years, plus additional ones. Some commute long distances, often in the evening, to get to and from school; many are engaged in school activities as they raise families or search for life partners; most are concerned about the financial pressures of being a student. For any student, attendant stresses often mean that while they may be physically present in class, it is difficult for them to be fully present intellectually and emotionally.

High stress levels are a direct impediment to a person's ability to learn effectively. Students need to be taught methods of dealing with the stressors that keep them from being fully present in class. Many teachers understand how to achieve a sense of presence when stressed themselves, but few of them are well-versed in helping students to get into a state of receptivity at the beginning of a class. In my experience, and from the clinical experiences and research that my colleagues and I have done, (Grindler Katonah, 1999; Klagsbrun, 1999; Klagsbrun et al, 2006) Clearing A Space is an effective and original method for rapid stress reduction. I propose that the Clearing A Space method could be an explicit part of any teaching/learning curriculum, and would offer both teachers and

students the opportunity to become more active and effective participants in the educational experience.

What is Clearing A Space?

Clearing A Space is five to ten minute induction into a state of reduced stress and enhanced receptivity. It differs from other stress-reduction methods in that it is a process that explicitly names and places aside each person's list of current stressors. It is both a means of becoming aware of one's stress load, and reducing it at the same time. Clearing A Space uses the metaphor of searching inside oneself, and allowing whatever obstacles one finds to feeling "fine or all clear" to be noted, tagged, separated from the self, and placed at the right distance away. Whether a student (or teacher) feels anxious, fearful, angry, scattered, fatigued, preoccupied or distracted, making some time to identify what is "between me and feeling fine or ready to be in class," and then "setting these issues aside" enables each person to be more present and receptive for the learning at hand.

Clearing A Space invites students to connect with themselves just as they are, in the privacy of their own minds and hearts. It invites each person to take an inventory of what is between her and feeling present and ready for class, and to then find a sense of what she would be like if all of those impediments to feeling good were removed. It is a way to resurrect a sense of well-being and presence, both of which enhance one's capacity for effective learning.

The Origins of Clearing a Space

Clearing A Space is the first step in a process called Focusing. In the 1960s, Eugene Gendlin, a philosopher, and Carl Rogers, a psychologist, carried out research which explored the question: "Why is some therapy successful in helping people make significant changes in their lives, and why is some therapy unsuccessful?" (Gendlin, 1981). They looked at variables such as the therapist's qualities of empathy, as well as the effect of particular approaches to therapy. To their surprise, what they discovered was that the factor that most accurately predicted success in therapy had nothing to do with either the qualities of the therapist, or the type of therapy being used. Rather, the most accurate predictor involved the client's capacity to be connected to his or her inner process.

Clients who were successful—who achieved significant positive change from their therapies—kept in touch with their inner process as they were talking. They did not spend time talking about something but from it. In recorded sessions, it was observed that these clients often spoke haltingly and tentatively, and seemed to be groping their way to an internal sense of what they were feeling in the moment. They intuitively knew when they had the right word or image or sentence to describe that feeling, because their bodies let go and relaxed when they found a satisfactory way to characterize it. These clients were the ones who got better in therapy over a year's time.

Gendlin studied how these clients connected to their inner felt sense. He then turned this naturally occurring process into a six-step method he named Focusing. He chose the name 'Focusing' because, like the lens of a camera, this process clarifies what is at first vague and unclear in the body by symbolizing it with a word, phrase, or image. Although the original intent of his Focusing method was to help people succeed in therapy, it soon

became apparent that the Focusing method could also be useful in the fields of education, the expressive arts, theology, business and healthcare. Since Focusing is a generic skill, it can be utilized whenever a deeper and more personal understanding is sought.

As he continued to refine the Focusing system, Gendlin noticed that when practitioners initially engaged in naming their current issues, the Focusing process that followed was deeper and more effective. Eventually he incorporated a systematic way of recognizing and cataloging the stressors or issues of the moment, without becoming consumed by them. He called this preliminary step Clearing A Space.

Focusing, Clearing a Space and Relaxation

There is some research demonstrating that the inner bodily attention an individual develops through Focusing helps the body to relax (Gendlin, 1961; Bernick 1969; Gendlin, 1999). This makes sense since we carry situations in our body as physical tension that is specific to each psychological issue—such as tightness in the stomach about one issue, shallow breathing and constriction about another, and tight shoulders about a third. When we try to turn our attention away from the problems, often the body retains the stress, tension, or agitation. Placing the generalized feeling of agitation or malaise or anger aside in one fell swoop doesn't usually work well. However, with Clearing A Space, we attend to how the body is carrying each stressor or problem, and then mentally place "all about that one" aside. This specificity allows us to relax the specific bodily tightness or constriction attached to a specific issue. The end result is usually a more relaxed and peaceful mind-body system.

Ways that Clearing a Space is Different from Other Contemplative Practices

There are some similarities between Clearing A Space and other contemplative practices such as the relaxation response and meditation. All three methods lead to a calming of the sympathetic system, and all involve turning inward and using silence as part of their practice. However, there are some interesting differences with Clearing A Space. First, instead of giving only bare attention to the stressor, as one does in meditation, in Clearing A Space one directs one's attention fully to a concern or difficulty, and then observes how the body is carrying that issue.

Imagery usually does not play a significant role in meditation. It is, however, an integral element of Clearing A Space. It can be creatively by each person as a unique way to characterize and become empowered to place each stressful concern outside the body.

Clearing A Space also has a relational dimension. This contrasts with relaxation and meditation, which are generally used as solo practices. Whether it is the teacher-student relationship that is improved (through the teacher's voice getting connected to the reduction in stress), or whether it is contact with another student (creating a sense of intimacy and connectedness), there is a communal benefit that comes from the relational aspect of this process. The class becomes engaged in a unified way, and shares a common practice.

What Happens During Clearing a Space

The important aspects of this easily taught process are:

We create a “frame” which has as its basic assumption that feeling “OK” is our natural state. The assumption is that our lives have presented us with a number of obstacles that currently block our ability to “feel OK”.

We learn how to have a relationship with our “issues.”

We attempt to treat ourselves with an attitude of self-acceptance and kindness. This is not a forced acceptance of what feels unacceptable—it is simply an acknowledgement of whatever is there. It’s as if we are saying “hello” to our issues and making a space for them.

We give a name to whatever we are sensing inside that is contributing to feeling stressed or tense or preoccupied. This might be the name of a recognizable issue such as frustration with my boss about not giving me a raise, which I know is connected to a tight and contracted feeling in my chest, or an unknown something that is unclear but distinctly felt in the body, i.e. a knot of dread in the pit of my stomach that I don’t yet understand. Either way, we are empowered with a tool for identifying those sensations that are not yet symbolized through words.

We put each of these issues at the right distance away, outside the body, thus creating a sense of mastery. Some people use imagery to place the issues away— such as wrapping them up like a package and placing them next to where one is sitting; or placing them in boats and sending them out to sea or finding a spot where each one belongs. One student reported that her first issue was being given to a close friend who held it lovingly; a second issue was placed in a large see-through container by her side; and a third problem had to be sent to Kansas, hundreds of miles away.

Interestingly, the intelligence of the body/mind seems to know how and where each issue needs to be placed so that one gets respite from it. In this process, you are neither abandoning your problems nor confronting them, but merely parking them at a comfortable distance in order to be present for the task at hand (i.e. being present in class).

We discover our background sense. In addition to the inventory that comes from the body’s experience of what it is carrying in the moment, we are asked to identify a background sense—that familiar quality that has become like the wallpaper we don’t even see any more — that is there, coloring our whole experience. A background sense might be feeling driven, or sad, or pressured, or unprepared, or bored, or disconnected, or racing, or exhausted. The background sense might also be positive, such as feeling excited, or eager, or content. By discovering this background sense, we get a more global sense of how we are feeling.

Finally we take a minute or two to dwell in the cleared or clearer space. We enable ourselves to experience what it would be like without all those tangles that are connected to being stressed or tense or distracted or scattered. This is an important moment—we get a glimpse of what it would be like to experience ourselves without those familiar concerns and weighty issues. Without those burdens, most people report feeling lighter, less weighed down, more how they are at their best. They describe this feeling variously as feeling calm, or spacious, or finding a bigger perspective, or getting connected to their

aliveness and energy. They can often sense their inherent *healthiness*. This experience is often felt as freeing and empowering. In a classroom environment, tapping into these feelings before turning attention to learning can vitalize the learning environment.

How to Use Clearing a Space as Part of your Curriculum

There are two ways that Clearing A Space can be utilized at the start of a class. In one way, the teacher begins the class by taking the students through the protocol. Students work silently within themselves, giving themselves some needed silence and guidance to name and clear out the issues weighing on them or if they are in a positive place, to spend time reviewing what has contributed to their feeling so good. When the teacher leads the exercise, the tone of voice and acceptance and permission given can create a positive relationship and a sense from the students that their full selves are welcome in the class. The teacher is then experienced as validating them as they are, as well as offering something of value that assists students in making the transition from their busy lives into the classroom environment.

The second way to incorporate Clearing A Space into your class involves students finding a partner and taking turns reading each other the protocol. In this alternative model, students can choose to keep their issues silent or if they feel safe and comfortable with their fellow student, could say out loud what was in their way of being fully present for class that day. When a student shares with a fellow student, either by following the process out loud or in silence, there is a bond and an intimacy that has many benefits: it reduces the sense of isolation which many students face; it creates the possibility of new friendships; and it reduces stress by feeling that your situation is held and validated by a peer, and as a result it often increases mood. Having someone hold the space while you do this personal and inner reflection can also allow you to go deeper in clearing out the difficulties because it taps into the power of human connection.

The following are instructions for either the teacher or the students to read. If the peer method is being used, instead of pausing for the prescribed amount of time, the partners can give each other a signal, such as lifting a finger, to indicate that they are ready for the next instruction.

1. When you are ready, you might want to close your eyes, get comfortable in your chair, let yourself to take a few slow breaths, and then allow your awareness to gently come into the center of your body. (PAUSE 10 seconds) Ask yourself, “How am I feeling on the inside right now?”(PAUSE 5 seconds) or, if that doesn’t work, ask “What’s in the way of feeling fine today?” (PAUSE 5 seconds) Don’t answer, but let what comes in your body do the answering. Take your time and wait for a felt sense of a concern to form. (PAUSE 10 seconds) If, however, you’re feeling all fine today, just stay with that good feeling.
2. Now see if there is a word, a phrase, or an image that captures the quality of how one of the concerns or good feeling feels in your body. (PAUSE 5 seconds) Say the word, phrase, or image back to yourself, and check to see if it fits the sense you have there exactly.
3. Now give this concern your accepting, friendly attention for a few moments (PAUSE 5 seconds), but then put it aside for a while by imagining that you are

placing it outside of your body, in a safe place. Sometimes it helps to imagine that you're sitting on a park bench, and each concern can be wrapped up like a package, and placed on the park bench next to you. (PAUSE 10 seconds)

4. Notice if you feel a little lighter or clearer inside without that one. (PAUSE)
5. Now again, bring your attention inside and ask, "Except for that, am I feeling fine?" (PAUSE 5 seconds) Wait and see if something else wants your attention next.
6. If something else comes up, wait for a felt sense of that concern to form (PAUSE 10 seconds), and see if a word, phrase, or image captures the quality of how this concern feels in your body. (PAUSE 5 seconds) And then, after spending a little time with it, place it outside your body in a safe place as well. (PAUSE 10 seconds) Notice if you feel a little lighter or clearer inside without that one. (PAUSE)
7. Now, in addition to those issues and concerns, most of us have a background sense – always feeling a little anxious, or sad, or harried, or tense – see if you can find a background sense that's there for you today, and place that out as well. (PAUSE 10 seconds)
8. Now bring your attention back inside your body and you might find that there is a clearer space there. (PAUSE 5 seconds) Welcome this space and allow yourself to rest in it (PAUSE 5 seconds). There's nothing to do – just allow yourself to be. Some people find that this is a place where you can notice that you are not your problems, even though you have them. You are much larger. (PAUSE 10 seconds) See if a word or an image captures how it feels in the clear or clearer space. (PAUSE 10 seconds) Say this word or phrase back to yourself and see if it is a good fit. You might want to spend a little time with it. (PAUSE 5 seconds).
9. Now, turn your attention back to the class that is about to begin (PAUSE 5 seconds). See if you can find an intention for yourself in relation to the class material, perhaps something you want to either learn or share, or a question you may have.

Benefits of Clearing a Space

There are many advantages to teachers and students when using this mind/body tool. First, Clearing A Space connects mind/body and spirit – the process is physical (works with the body), mental (works with meaning), and spiritual (creates a broader perspective). It also connects both sides of the brain. As Le Doux put it (1998), "[Focusing] seems to be the process of putting feelings into words that enable the left and right brains to become integrated, ... linking the right brain 'felt sense' and the left brain's verbal account. These links may be important because they allow the maximum information to flow freely between the two hemispheres".

Clearing A Space releases bodily tension. Usually our concerns and issues are clumped together like a ball of yarn so that we feel a mass of worry or a general sense of sadness or tension. The different stressors or problems easily can become enmeshed with each other and then they seem to weigh us down more. When named and separated, strand by

strand, however, each concern gets our full attention, and then when removed we can feel a lightening in its absence.

Clearing A Space invites us to treat ourselves with compassion. One of the tenets of Focusing is to greet whatever emerges with friendliness, gentleness, and respect. While critical and judgmental attitudes close off lines of communication, a welcoming attitude allows us to hear from parts of ourselves that have been previously inaccessible.

Clearing A Space often elicits a deep sense of well-being in the body. After having cleared a space, students and teachers often discover an inner sense of well-being. Having set aside current stressors, we can more easily connect to a positive core identity. This cleared space is usually more than a neutral space of merely being all right; it often seems to open onto a wider spiritual experience. Many students report feeling calm, spacious, at peace, and in harmony with themselves.

Clearing a Space is transferable to a variety of other circumstances the student may face. In addition to increasing presence in the classroom, it can be utilized for stress reduction when preparing to study, write a paper, give a presentation, or deal with personal problems.

Finally, in my experience, students deeply appreciate the 10 minutes to collect and center themselves, and are so much more present that the “lost time “ of teaching is made up by their increased attentiveness and engagement with the class material. One measure I have for the effectiveness of this tool is punctuality. I have asked students who arrive late to please wait outside the class until the Clearing A Space time is complete so as not to disturb the others. Rarely does anyone arrive late! And if by chance I forget to start class with it, I am reminded to stop and help them clear a space. In my evaluations each year, students mention how helpful Clearing A Space was at the start of class. They report that it helps them with the transition to school or from one class to another. Getting themselves physically to class doesn’t assure that students are truly present. This short and effective method seems to help them ready themselves for a more productive learning experience.

Conclusion

Clearing A Space is a short and efficient centering process. It can be accomplished when students are guided to connect briefly with their issues, to bring attention into themselves in a silent way, to separate one concern or problem from another so they are not held in a confused clump, and to set the whole of each issue aside for a while. This process, whether done as a whole class or in pairs, brings a bodily relief and a sense of becoming more centered. Through this process we realize that while we each have certain issues that are weighing on us, we can observe and tag them and place them aside. The process of observing them creates the awareness that we are not our problems, and allows us to perceive that essential part of ourselves who is separate from our problems.. This connection to an unburdened or larger self typically creates a sense of inner calm or peace.

Clearing A Space also frees up attention for the class. The students and teacher have attended to themselves in a caring compassionate way, and placed aside their burdens

of the day. They are then more ready to bring attention to the class material and to be more engaged in the learning process.

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