

Mindfulness and Transition Pedagogy

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Abstract

Mindfulness practices, which focus on developing concentration and self-awareness skills through a set of meditative techniques derived from Buddhism, have been shown to have a wide variety of positive effects in clinical and educational settings. This article describes a developing project at the University of Wollongong to devise and integrate a variety of approaches to mindfulness into curriculum development and co-curricular activities. It describes a pilot mindfulness-training project for low SES students and a theoretical framework for integrating mindfulness approaches with transition pedagogies.

Mindfulness programs, a set of stress reduction and wellness practices derived from Buddhist meditation and philosophy, are now used in a variety of psychological (Grossman & Van Dam 2011), educational (Bush 2011) and business settings (Purser & Millio 2015).

Mindfulness techniques have been applied in both curricular and extra curricular programs in higher education (Bush 2011; Zajonc 2013). Some scholars have advocated mindfulness, or a “contemplative” approach, as an overarching holistic pedagogy (Repeti 2010; Zajonc 2013) while others have tested specific interventions for particular cohorts. Examples include: studies showing the positive effects of mindfulness training in first year students for stress reduction (van der Reit et al 2015; Osmachenko & Littler 2014); for those embarking on clinical practice rounds (Gockel 2013; and as an aid to critical thinking and knowledge retention for introductory psychology students (Ramsburg & Youmans 2014).

In a review of the literature on meditative practices in higher education Shapiro and colleagues (2011) suggest these practices:

complement the traditional goals of the Academy by helping to develop traditionally valued academic skills as well as help to build important affective and interpersonal capacities...namely, the enhancement of cognitive and academic performance, the management of academic-related stress, and the development of the “whole person.” (495-6)

This paper briefly describes the origins and theoretical context of these programs and the development of a pilot project at the University of Wollongong. Drawing on data from this project and published research it then suggests a variety of connections between the affordances of mindfulness training and the development of transition pedagogies.

Mindfulness: definitions and effects

According to Gethin (2011) “the traditional Buddhist account of mindfulness plays on aspects of remembering, recalling, reminding and presence of mind.” It involves two primary processes, concentration and experiential enquiry, described succinctly by Martine Batchelor:

Samatha (concentration) stabilizes our attention, while *vipassana* (experiential inquiry) helps us to see things more clearly. The cultivation of the two together enables us to develop a mindfulness that is characterized by calmness and clarity. (Batchelor 2011: 164)

Activities that focus on cultivating these processes are often simple and repetitive such as concentration on the process of breathing, or the sensations of the body. These Buddhist models and techniques have been translated into psychological concepts and practices in a variety of ways. Ramsburg & Youmans (2013) distinguish between “open-monitoring meditation” and “focused attention meditation” and explain the cognitive effects of these two practices:

Open monitoring meditation, involves non-reactive monitoring of the moment-to-moment content of experience. [It] is thought to facilitate nonreactive meta-cognitive monitoring and an awareness of automatic cognitive and emotional interpretations of sensory perceptive stimuli...focused attention meditation, which entails sustaining attention on a chosen thought or object...is thought to facilitate directing and sustaining attention on a selected object, detecting mind wandering, and reinstating directed attention (431)

One of the most widely studied approaches is the mindfulness based stress reduction technique (MBSR). MBSR was originally developed as a treatment for reducing the stress associated with chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn 1982). It has now been applied in a variety of other clinical situations (Malinowski 2008) and has proven particularly beneficial for treating anxiety and depression (Hofman, Sawyer, Witt & Oh 2010).

But, as Purser & Milillo (2014) have recently argued, in the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is more than merely attentive awareness. The “insight” part of the mindfulness equation introduces a strong ethical dimension: “its main purpose from a Buddhist perspective is to reach a state of deep insight and compassion, not attentive stoicism” (Purser & Milillo 2014: 18). There is now a developing strand of research which is looking to adapt and harness the potential of these aspects of meditative practice through practices like Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross 2008; Oman 2008; Hoffmann, Grossman & Hinton 2011; Alba 2013). LKM meditation begins with breath-based attention focusing and then practitioners are gradually asked to focus on broadening the circle of people – from those they know to strangers – that they feel a sense of warmth or kindness towards. Like MBSR, studies of LKM have shown positive results in a variety of situations including pain relief (Carson et al 2005), post-traumatic stress (Kearney et al 2013) and schizophrenia (Johnson et al 2011). The potential for these meditative practices to build a sense of social connectedness (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross 2008) is particularly significant in university first year transition programs where developing a sense of connectedness and belonging has been shown to be critical (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods 2007).

UOW Mindfulness Project

The UOW Mindfulness Project (UMP) is an initiative to develop a suite of mindfulness programs as part of broader curriculum renewal and student wellness strategies. In its initial phases it focuses on the needs of first year students transitioning to university.

Although all students experience a high degree of stress across their university degrees, research suggests that first year students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience higher levels of depression and are impacted more by stressful events (Ibrahim, Kelly & Glazebrook 2013; Karimshah 2013). Because mindfulness programs have been shown to be effective components of interventions to address stress and depression in a

variety of populations, including first year university students (van der Reit et al 2015; Osmachenko & Littler 2014), the UMP began as a pilot focused on providing mindfulness training as part of a strategy to address the needs of students from low socio-economic status (SES) first year students. UMP will expand in 2015 to develop further initiatives to embed mindfulness practices in a range of curricular and co-curricular activities.

A cohort of 705 students, identified as either low SES or ATSI and who commenced their studies at UOW in autumn 2014 were identified using geocoded data. They were invited by email to participate in a six-hour workshop run by an expert in the field of mindfulness from the local Nan Tien Buddhist temple. During the mindfulness, meditation workshop, the students learnt about the concept of mindfulness and participated in sitting and walking meditation and breathing exercises. Students were given pre-recorded mindfulness meditations on a USB and were asked to revisit these practices at their own convenience. After two weeks students were invited back to a two-hour workshop to complete a reflective questionnaire which asked the student to discuss their experience with mindfulness over this period.

Twenty-five participants applied to be a part of the two-day workshop of whom 13 students attended the first workshop and six students returned for the second reflective workshop. While the small numbers and low completion rate does not allow us to draw any generalizable conclusions from the project it does give us some insights that will inform the project's next phase.

When asked about the main benefits of mindfulness, students commonly referred to the ability to 'relax properly' and a developing ability to consider their reactions to emotions, thoughts or feelings but each student also articulated something particular from their experience.

One student focused on their renewed ability to confront anxiety. They wrote, in an email thanking the group for arranging the session, noting the ongoing issues with anxiety they were confronting prior to the workshop. This student wrote that mindfulness had been an effective technique to overcome some of the mental challenges that haunt them on a daily basis. The student recognised that while they had not overcome their problems with anxiety they were grateful to have a tool that could help.

Another student began their reflection with the idea of relaxation but quickly moved to a deeper sense of "letting go" which enabled a perceived sense of control. They wrote:

I can actually relax my forehead. But seriously, I have learned that I can temporarily let go of thoughts and slow down my mind. I have also learned to focus on what I can do myself instead of worrying about things I can't control anyways and discovered that all of that has a calming effect on me.

A third student wrote similarly about an emerging sense of control-amidst-stress based on mindful acceptance:

As a first year student, tackling the pressures of University life, I do feel less pressure and much more aware with what needs to be done and when. Mindfulness has helped me to achieve this. I also have increased awareness to do the best I can and if that isn't enough, then I can be OK with that rather than stress about it.

Finally one student's reflection showed that mindfulness is not merely an individualistic cognitive management tool it may also lead to a great sense of group belonging:

Mindfulness has helped me to feel more connected to my peers and have a better relationship with others. This offers me more fulfilment.

This last point is particularly significant because as we have already noted research suggests “belongingness” is a key mediator of student’s intention to persist with higher education study and contributes to successful academic outcomes (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods 2007). It is also congruent with research that has shown mindfulness can have effects on social behaviours such as forgiveness and compassion (Oman et al 2008; Hoffmann, Grossman & Hinton 2011; Alba 2013).

Mindfulness and transition pedagogy

It is this combination of providing a framework for stress management and enhancing a sense of belonging and social connectedness that situates mindfulness-based strategies as potentially powerful tools in building transition pedagogies.

Universities both in Australia and internationally have devoted significant resources over the last decade to improving the smooth transition of students from secondary school to higher education thus increasing student retention and engagement (Kift, Nelson & Clarke 2010). This has become particularly important in the post-Bradley Report era of Australian higher education where new government policy has placed demands on higher education institutions to increase access and participation for students from low SES groups (Kilpatrick & Johns 2014) who may require additional transition support.

Kift and colleagues (2013) advocate for a “third generation” approach to first year transition programs that combines a strategic whole-of-institution approach to curricular and co-curricular activities. It is in this context that the UOW Mindfulness Project second phase will seek to develop a range of initiatives which link with whole-of-institution curriculum renewal spearheaded by the UOW Curriculum Transformation Project, an ambitious four year project which will review all courses in the institution and which as part of its brief seeks to develop a cohesive approach to the First Year Experience in all courses. This second phase of the UMP will involve:

- A discussion paper for the UOW University Education Committee on the development of an institution wide strategy which addresses mindfulness-based resilience strategies that aid student transition across the curriculum;
- The development and trialling of curriculum resources on mindfulness and contemplative approaches to education;
- Delivery of mindfulness training in a range of co-curricular programs.

Although mindfulness programs addressing student wellness and transition needs have tended to focus on stress reduction approaches, our own pilot data and a range of research suggests that combining a stress management approach with a some of the wider affordances of mindfulness practices such as its ability to deepen compassion and build a sense of connectedness (Alba 2013; Bach & Guse 2014) may have particular potential in the context of university transition programs. This approach will be explored in more detail in the second phase of the project.

Focus for audience discussion

The audience will be asked to consider whether they can imagine mindfulness practices being used in their classroom teaching. At what points in the curriculum could mindfulness as a

practice and a philosophy be introduced – particularly in first year subjects? What resources would academics require for them to effectively introduce mindfulness practices? How could mindfulness training be introduced to work with and enhance other reflective educational practices?

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