

# HERE AND NOW: THE LASTING EFFECTS OF MINDFULNESS ON STUDY-ABROAD PARTICIPANTS

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## Abstract

The fields of international education and study abroad are inherently conducive to new experiences and attentiveness to the moment. However, they have not been fully explored as areas of interest for the integration of contemplative practices. We present a case study of a group of 10 respondents, eighteen months after returning to the US from a study-abroad program in France. The scaffolded curriculum of the program centered around mindfulness and the use of the five senses to engage with and learn about the host culture. During the program, students practiced techniques, reflected collectively and metacognitively in writing assignments. More than a year after the study-abroad program, ten of the thirteen students volunteered answers expounding on their connection to mindfulness. Content analysis of their answers indicates that students perceive a positive impact of mindfulness on their personal, professional, and academic lives. Notably, results indicate that students may have experienced an increased awareness of and attentiveness to their surroundings, improved interoception and metacognition, a greater ability to connect with those around them, and an enhanced capacity for recall and memory.

**Keywords:** *Contemplative pedagogy, mindfulness, study abroad, intercultural communicative competency.*

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## 1. Introduction

Recent scholarship has praised and encouraged the integration of contemplative pedagogy, and the associated practice of mindfulness, in higher education teaching and learning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Owen-Smith, 2018). Proponents argue that these approaches facilitate and guide student metacognitive reflection, while providing experiential opportunities. The onset of a global pandemic has illustrated the need for the cultivation of attentiveness, introspection, self-reflection, and empathy towards self and others. Approaching life in the moment, intentionally, and without judgement, may help curb anxiety brought on by environmental stressors.

Mindfulness is a quality of mind and way of being in life, much more than a discipline or a collection of techniques (Brown et al., 2007). It has been defined as “paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p.17), and as “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). In these definitions, several elements are significant: In order to live mindfully, it is crucial to slow down and to exercise intentionality and patience; it is imperative to be attentive, to have an unobstructed availability to experience and to use our senses to be fully present to those experiences; it is all the more important to have an open mind, and a vulnerable mind, free of preconceived notions—especially those due to self-judgement—in order to be able to fully experience, and enter more intimately into the here and now.

Research demonstrates that stress, rumination and anxiety can decrease, as creativity and attentiveness can increase, in subjects who practice mindfulness regularly (Hölzel et al, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 2013). Mindfulness shifts the focus from a self-referential narrative to one that is more open to others. Its practice can improve social cooperation, through more altruistic and empathetic behavior (Condon et al., 2013; Donald et al., 2019; Iwamoto et al., 2020). Proponents argue that living mindfully allows for greater awareness and emotional self-regulation, and can foster transformative learning (Barner & Barner, 2011). They posit that a mindful approach to life and an open mind can promote: (a) non-judgement and self-compassion (Sedighimornani et al., 2019); (b) creative thinking and mental flexibility, as well as decreased distractedness (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2017; Zeidan et al., 2010), and; (c) memory and learning (Greenberg et al., 2018). Overall, they suggest, living mindfully can increase well-being (Singleton et al., 2014). Given these claims, the potential for employment of mindfulness in higher education is evident. Furthermore, mindfulness demonstrates specific promise as intercultural praxis within study-abroad programs (Bai et al., 2009; Clancy, 2020; Zajonc, 2013).

Though new to the field of international education, contemplative pedagogy has been practiced for many years across higher education disciplines by both professors and academic administrators

(Zajonc, 2013). Barbezat and Bush (2014) propose four goals for the use of contemplative pedagogy in higher education: (a) the building of focus and attention, through centering meditation and exercises that support mental stability; (b) including contemplation and introspection in course content (students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material); (c) developing compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspect of education; and, (d) inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight.

Research on the use of contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness within the context of study abroad is still in a nascent stage (Clancy 2020). While the short-term benefits of a mindful praxis are well established, we seek, in the present study, to explore the existence of persistent effects, 18 months after a one-semester program that emphasized mindfulness as a praxis for intercultural intervention.

## 2. Case study method

In the fall 2018, 13 students attending a mid-West American university participated in a 15-week study-abroad program in Cannes, France. Mindfulness was incorporated into the curriculum, with the goal of exploring its effects on students' learning. The students participated in a weekly seminar, "Experiencing Contemporary French Culture through the Five Senses (and beyond...)." The seminar, organized and taught by the faculty director (and first author), used the framework of mindfulness and the five senses, as well as the senses of proprioception and interoception, to intentionally comprehend the host culture. A pre-departure orientation (March-May 2018) preceded the program. The abroad component (August-December 2018) included on-site programs and visits organized by the faculty director. In early 2019, students participated in a welcome back dinner and a follow-up group gathering.

### 2.1. Pre-departure

The pre-departure workshops included 12 hours of experiential activities such as the contemplative techniques of *visio divina* and *audio divina*, a blindfolded activity to hone listening skills, and a yoga class focused on mindfulness. Pre-departure activities, such as a 24-hour period without using a phone, were followed by reflective writing assignments. Themes introduced pre-departure included cultivating awareness, developing a childlike curiosity and surprise/astonishment, transformation of things and people; and the contemplation on interbeing and interdependence.

### 2.2. Seminar and activities abroad

Activities in-country supported themes introduced pre-departure. The seminar consisted of one three-hour session per week and was organized into three modules: Experience (learning about the Other through the senses); Reflection (learning of Self through the Other); and Action (discerning a sense of purpose, vocation in life). Each class began with a brief meditation, and, during the semester, each student led the group in a specific mindfulness technique. The theoretical framework of the seminar included selections from Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Mindfulness for Beginners*, Thich Nhat-Hahn's *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Alain DeBotton's *The Art of Travel*, and Brené Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection*. It also included films such as Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast* and Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon*.

The on-site visits were organized in order to engage the senses. For example, to engage sight, students practiced *visio divina* in museums; for hearing, they performed an *audio divina* in a concert; for smell, they visited the Fragrance Museum in Grasse, the world capital of perfume; for taste, they participated in a blind dinner; for touch, they rode horses in the Camargue, and participated in a grape harvest. After each experiential opportunity, students journaled and submitted short reflections.

### 2.3. Follow-up material and procedures

Eighteen months after returning from the program (July 2020), in the first months of the global pandemic, students from the program were contacted via email and asked to "take 30 minutes or so of [your] time to sit, reflect intentionally, and honestly respond to" five open-ended questions about the program and continuing use of mindfulness: (a) What is the first thing that comes to mind? What was memorable?; (b) Are you still applying what you learned? What? How?; (c) Has it had an impact (positive or negative) on your academic, professional or personal life? How? Please elaborate, providing examples where appropriate.; (d) Do you think it will have an impact in the immediate future/long-term for you? If so, what do you envision?; (e) Is there anything further you would like to share about your experience with mindfulness?

Voluntary responses were collected on an Internet platform (Forms Manager) in order to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents.<sup>1</sup> Ten of the 13 study-abroad participants replied (77%). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the treatment of the results.

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<sup>1</sup>The authors have no reason to suspect that students' responses to the questionnaire, 18 months after the program's completion, would be biased or a product of social desirability. Given that the majority of respondents had graduated, their academic relationship with the institution and study-abroad director had terminated. As such, and with the voluntary and anonymous nature of the questionnaires, we believe that responses are genuine and heartfelt.

### **3. Results**

Submissions were analyzed to identify emergent themes (Patton, 2002). Four were identified: (a) “External awareness,” i.e., the impact of mindfulness on students’ ability to focus and better manage time; (b) “Self-awareness,” i.e., the impact of mindfulness on students’ sense of grounding and self-knowledge; (c) “Connections,” i.e., the impact of mindfulness on students’ connections and relationships to others, whether in the host country or after their return to the USA; (d) “Memory,” i.e., the impact of mindfulness on students’ ability to recall and create memories from experiences abroad.

### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

Notably, the organization of these four themes mirrors the threefold thematic scope of the study-abroad seminar of Experience, Reflection, Action. It also speaks to Barbezat and Bush’s four objectives of contemplative pedagogy. Overall, 18 months after the study-abroad program, students reported a global satisfaction with the seminar content and with the impact it had beyond their time abroad. From the anonymous and voluntary responses to the questionnaires, it is evident that students’ perception is that “when one takes [mindfulness] seriously and wants to live this way it is truly life changing and eye-opening” (S10). Ultimately, students recognized that mindfulness is transformative, personally, academically, and professionally. Below, we share select testimonials from each of the emergent themes.

#### **4.1. External awareness**

Students reported that learning about and practicing mindfulness during the abroad program translated into feeling more centered, present to the moment, and more connected to their surroundings. As they shifted their attention to focus intentionally on the lived moment and experience, they mentioned gaining a greater appreciation for the little things: “I am still applying what I learned. When I’m outdoors, I allow myself to connect with nature whenever it feels right. I allow myself to do that no matter if I’m observing something as small as an ant or as large as the sky. When I eat meals, I focus on food alone” (S2); “I’m much better at reminding myself that the only thing I have to care about is the ‘now’, the present moment” (S9); “Instead of just using my sense of sight, I bring in the other four senses” (S10); “It [...] helped me be more curious about other topics than just my major interest” (S10).

The focus on the present translates into an equal commitment to it in the future. Students took the time to be mindful and became acutely aware of the need to spend time with time, and grant time to time, i.e., to be patient with themselves and to take the time to learn and practice mindfulness daily.

#### **4.2. Self-Awareness**

Students consistently referred to a sense of grounding, ease and inner peace that came from practicing mindfulness in their lives, namely during challenging times: “My life feels more centered and wholesome. [...] I find that I get much more enjoyment out of everyday things now” (S6); “[Study abroad made] me the person I am today. More mindful, more calm and more peaceful” (S7); “Mindfulness continues to be a part of my life as I develop skills to manage stress and achieve balance in my life” (S1); “...when it come[s] to mindfulness I try to apply those things in new places or when I want to feel at peace. I still meditate in the morning and journal following the meditation” (S5); “This mindset has really been helpful in stopping patterns of rumination and catastrophizing in my life” (S9); “The person who went to France is not the same person who returned” (S4); “the level of independence I achieved inspires me to this very day [to] push outside of my comfort zone” (S3); “[Mindfulness] taught me to chase what I want rather than what is expected of me [...] I am more comfortable on my own because I don’t get caught up in my thoughts. I focus on the moments I am in” (S5).

In addition to feelings of grounding, ease and peace, students indicate a more centered mind, a heightened self-awareness, greater emotional self-regulation, and increased self-confidence, thus corroborating results from scientific studies showing mindfulness’s benefits in mental and emotional health and well-being.

#### **4.3. Connection**

The study-abroad experience, complemented by the weekly seminar, allowed students to learn about and experience the host culture in a very personal way. The focus on mindfulness engendered a greater attention to the moment and to the surroundings, avoiding preconceived notions, which in turn may have heightened students’ intercultural communicative competency: “Immersing myself in the culture provides you with a perspective that you cannot gain through reading a textbook. The inclusion of mindfulness increased awareness of cultural experiences as well” (S1); “mindfulness has reminded me to hone in on details and interact with others with as little judgment as possible, especially in cross-cultural

and intergenerational interactions” (S2); “With mindfulness, I will be able to foster deeper relationships with people and connections with everything” (S2); “I especially used mindfulness in my interactions with immigrants I taught English to at a non-profit last summer” (S2); “I learned to [...] see things from different perspectives. By doing this, I became more aware and more open minded to everything around me” (S8); “I practice active listening with others. I journal more than I used to and value connecting with myself in addition to the world [...]. I still like to do a few of the meditations we practiced, such as the loving-kindness meditation<sup>2</sup>” (S2); “Patience, appreciation, and respect are what I’ve learned and continue to learn from mindfulness” (S7); “Mindfulness has helped me in relationships” (S10).

Students perceived mindfulness as being impactful in their relationships with others around them, personally and professionally.

#### 4.4. Memory

Students’ responses also referred to how mindfulness became a conduit for memory. Given the nature, course objectives and learning goals of the seminar, it would be expected that students refer to the use of the five senses when asked about what they remember from their time abroad. However, beyond the recognition of the five senses as key elements during the fall 2018, students expanded on this concept to expose how the attention given to their senses allowed for the creation of memories and of more meaningful recollections of the time spent in France. An awareness of the senses produced photographic moments, allowing students to recall a holistic experience of the moment more easily: “... the blind dinner [...] was a unique and amazing experience. Most of my memories of Cannes are predominantly sight-related, so the blind dinner stands out as a memory that was more about how I felt” (S6); “...particularly memorable is the blindfolded dinner experience. I had never isolated and experienced taste like that in my life. I’m forever grateful for that experience” (S2); “Having to focus on all of our five senses, I became much more cognizant of the phenomena going on around me” (S3); “The raisin activity,<sup>3</sup> floating in the water (taking in what all five senses were experiencing), visiting the market with a different intention each week, the madeleine and tea etc. Honestly when I think of France 2018 so many locations come to mind but not in the sense that I visited x amount of places, but I genuinely remember more of the journey to get there and what emotions I felt during the experience” (S10).

The strategy of focusing on process, rather than outcome, became an intentional common practice for some upon their return, and aided in creating memories: “when I’m in an area that I want to remember, I take a moment to experience it with all five senses” (S7); “Looking back at adventures I had during my senior year (my final swim meet, eating food in my apartment, moving out of my apartment) I remember more than what the scene looked like. I remember how the swim cap felt on my head, how accidentally overly-seasoned my chicken was for dinner and how it made me felt to move out of such a room I lived for nine months in. I truly think living mindfully helps one appreciate the little things and acknowledge how much detail we once missed in our everyday living experience” (S10).

The intentional scaffolding and organization of the study-abroad seminar and associated experiences provided students with tools to continue using—even after the completion of the course and the study abroad program. The reinforcement of contemplative practices throughout the semester and the encouragement of student agency allowed students to not only remember the tools, but consciously decide to continue using them beyond their time in France. Student 10 insists, “I will forever and always incorporate mindfulness into my everyday life long term. Whether that means when I’m eating, when I’m working with patients, or when I get the chance to travel again. If I feel it slipping and need a mindfulness refresher I will take out the *Gifts of Imperfection* [Brené Brown] book or Thich Nhat Hanh or even a raisin. HAHA.”

We are cognizant that our sample size is small and aim to conduct similar studies with future study-abroad groups, in order to corroborate trends observed in this study. However, we can conclude from this study that the integration of mindfulness and learning in a study-abroad setting may help with the students’ grounding and attentiveness, self-awareness, intercultural communicative competence, and memory. A mindful approach has a lasting impact on students, who report its influence in the spheres of academic, personal, and professional lives, nearly a year and a half after returning to the United States. In line with recent literature on integration of contemplative perspectives within teaching and learning, we encourage and recommend to other international educators the integration of a mindful framework in their curricula. Irrespective of program length or program location, we see tremendous potential for the incorporation of contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness in study-abroad programs, as a vehicle to promote the maturation of young adults.

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<sup>2</sup>The use of the loving-kindness meditation, specifically, is indicative of students’ engagement with the people around them, be it acquaintances or longtime friends or family.

<sup>3</sup>The raisin meditation involved using each of the five senses to experience a raisin. The sense of taste was the last one explored, after taking a small bite of the dried fruit.

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