

NON-JUDGEMENTAL ATTENTION WITH INTENTION: MINDFULNESS IN THE CURRICULUM AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Abstract

Extensive research has been conducted on the effects of mindfulness on the human brain and psyche, demonstrating that stress, rumination, and anxiety can decrease, as creativity and attentiveness increase in subjects who practice mindfulness regularly (Kabat-Zinn 1982, 2009; Hölzel et al., 2011). Mindfulness has been shown to have multiple benefits across fields such as medicine, psychology, and business. According to proponents, living mindfully, with an unobstructed availability to experience, allows us to exercise greater awareness and emotional self-regulation, can foster transformative learning (Barner & Barner 2011), and can increase well-being (Singleton et al., 2014). These outcomes have supported the exploration of mindfulness in the field of education where it has been shown to increase focus and concentration, promote creative thinking and mental flexibility, and decrease distractedness (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2017; Zeidan et al., 2010). Moreover, mindfulness shifts the focus from a self-referential narrative to one that is more open to and accepting of others. Its practice can improve social cooperation, through more altruistic and compassionate decisions and behavior (Donald et al., 2019; Iwamoto et al., 2020; Condon et al., 2013). In this hands-on presentation, using the vehicle of study abroad, we suggest ways in which mindfulness can be successfully incorporated into education at multiple levels. The presentation will include a brief theoretical framework to illustrate the principles of mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat & Bush 2014; Palmer & Zajonc 2010; Owen-Smith 2018), followed by specific praxis, such as *statio*, visualization, or loving kindness meditation. Attendees will be guided in simple techniques that they can use in their respective classrooms or institutions. A time for individual and collective reflection will follow each practical activity.

Keywords: *Mindfulness, contemplative pedagogy, higher education, study abroad.*

1. Introduction and objectives

Following the recent Covid-19 pandemic, levels of student anxiety and depression have increased dramatically and perceptibly for their educators, hindering the academic experience and student engagement in and out of the classroom. Extensive research has been conducted on the effects of mindfulness on the human brain and psyche, demonstrating that stress, rumination, and anxiety can decrease, as creativity and attentiveness increase in subjects who practice mindfulness regularly (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 2009; Hölzel et al., 2011). Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR, Kabat-Zinn, 2009) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT, Segal et al., 2013), have become commonplace in medical centers, as interventions for improving mental and physical health, and to encourage positive behavior changes (Britton et al., 2021). According to proponents, living mindfully, with an unobstructed availability to experience, allows us to exercise greater awareness and emotional self-regulation, can foster transformative learning (Barner & Barner, 2011), and can increase well-being (Singleton et al., 2014).

Mindfulness, as an experiential method of the discipline of contemplative pedagogy, has also been shown to have productive effects on the student population. Recent exploration of mindfulness in the field of education has revealed an increase focus and concentration in students. The use of mindfulness in education has also been shown to promote creative thinking and mental flexibility, and decrease distractedness (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2017; Zeidan et al., 2010). Moreover, mindfulness shifts the focus from a self-referential narrative to one that is more open to and accepting of others. Its practice can improve social cooperation, through more altruistic and compassionate decisions and behavior (Donald et al., 2019; Iwamoto et al., 2020; Condon et al., 2013). This aligns with the 21st century learning

skills of collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, as well as the 21st century life skills of flexibility, productivity, and social skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

Contemplative pedagogy in the higher education classroom is considered both a process (practice) and an outcome (awareness) (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). In a holistic approach, contemplative pedagogy uses introspective forms that bring together third-person study and critical first-person reflection, where third-person approach implies the study of the underlying philosophy and psychology of the human contemplative experience (Roth, 2006), and through a first-person approach, students experience contemplative techniques directly (Roth, 2014).

Metacognition is a central learning goal for students in higher education, as they become critical thinkers and discern a vocation for the future. Specifically in the study abroad context, extensive research into learning gains has demonstrated that developing student metacognition, or one's ability to be intentionally self-reflective, can inspire transformative learning (Vande Berg et al., 2012; Zull, 2012). Consequently, it is important to continually search for pedagogical practices that facilitate metacognitive learning both on campus and in study abroad programs. The discipline of contemplative pedagogy and the associated practice of mindfulness provide multiple strategies and a framework for an experiential and facilitated approach to guide student metacognitive reflection (Bai et al., 2009; Zajonc, 2013). The teacher plays an indispensable role in guiding students through the contemplative practice and helping them link the practice to mindful awareness, reflection, and learning.

Mindfulness, as one experiential method within contemplative pedagogy, is defined as "moment-to-moment awareness," reached through a "systematic approach to developing new kinds of control and wisdom in our lives, based on inner capacities for relaxation, paying attention, awareness, and insight" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 2). While the specific classroom approaches to mindfulness may vary, most applications of contemplative pedagogy involve forms of meditation and introspection. For Barbezat and Bush (2014), classroom introspective and contemplative exercises have four main goals: (a) Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability; (b) Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material; (c) Compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspect of education; (d) Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight (p. 11).

Exposure to techniques in contemplative pedagogy helps students be active participant observers in their surroundings. Mindfulness practice in the classroom encourages students to engage with their whole mind and body, to refine and cultivate the use of their senses (more fine-tuned perceptive acuity), and to cultivate the ability to be present in the moment. It provides a vehicle for students to be more aware, attentive, and in wonder with their surroundings and with the material they encounter in and out of the classroom, as they construct knowledge. In turn, a greater sense of awareness, focus, and clarity can supplement necessary 21st century learning skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, or productivity, and aid in the students' discernment of vocation and purpose in life post-degree.

This presentation will provide the opportunity to learn about and experience first-hand some contemplative pedagogies that can be used in the classroom.

2. Methods

The purpose of this presentation is to equip educators with a few tools to incorporate contemplative pedagogies into their classrooms. We employed five specific methods suggested by the mindfulness literature: *Statio*, Breathing exercises, Visualization, Loving kindness meditation, and the Raisin meditation. The presentation was formulated as a workshop, so this paper will describe each of the techniques. The methods were practiced both in the domestic U.S. higher education setting, and in study abroad programs, specifically 13 students in a study abroad seminar in the fall 2018 and from two sections of an introductory survey course of francophone literature (fall 2021—3 women—and fall 2022—2 men and one woman). Students responded to anonymous qualitative questionnaires regarding the experience. Some student feedback and comments are integrated in the Results and Conclusion section.

2.1. *Statio*

Statio, a Benedictine monastic practice, is defined as a sacred pause, a moment to stop before beginning the next thing. Traditionally, the practice is done before the beginning of community prayer: Members of the monastic community gather together outside of Chapel to practice the "virtue of presence" and pause a few minutes prior to entering the space and praying together (Chittister, 1990). It is a way to enter fully into the moment and proceed intentionally and mindfully to the next step ahead. How to do it: In the classroom, the practice of *statio* translates as taking one or two minutes at the

beginning of class period to simply be, without phones, without the textbook, and breathe before engaging with the new material. It brings mind and body into the same space and asks the practitioners to be intentionally present to the moment. It can be signaled by a singing bowl or simply by the voice of the teacher, until it becomes common practice and students engage in it independently without any necessary signal.

2.2. Breathing exercises

While an activity that we all do continuously, breathing is taken for granted and often overlooked. Controlled breathing can decrease blood pressure and heart rate, and inspire ease and a sense of peace and grounding. Simple breathing exercises can benefit students' wellbeing and their focus at the beginning of class, or before an exam or public presentation. Simple breathing shifts one's focus to the breath and therefore to the here and now. How to do it: Breathe in, aware of the tip of the nose and how the lungs expand as you do so. Breathe out, noting how the body slowly relaxes when the air leaves the lungs. As you breathe, notice how your abdomen and your chest gently expand and then release. An easy and effective breathing exercise is four-part breathing, or square breathing. This consists of completely emptying the lungs and then inhaling for a count of four, holding the breath for a count of four, exhaling for a count of four and holding for the count of four. One may repeat the exercise a few times, until feeling more relaxed.

2.3. Visualization

One of the simplest ways to practice letting go, and therefore greater openness and availability to new experiences and transactions with the environment (learning) is to quiet the mind and to imagine all our worries, anxieties, and concerns gently dissipating. How to do it: To practice visualization, one sits or lies in a comfortable position, with the palms of the hands gently posed on the knees. With eyes closed, one focuses on the breath for a few instants. Once relaxed and focused in the moment, one imagines oneself in a room where one enjoys being. Sit there, or lie there, comfortably, for a few moments, noting the surroundings. Then, gently imagine all frustrations, all anxieties, worries, resentments, and fears. Gather them together and bring all stressors into a tight bundle: Tie a big knot around it. Grab the bundle and make your way to the closest window, or door, in the room. Open the window, and purposefully throw the bundle out the window with all the energy you can muster. Return to your sitting or lying position for a few moments before returning to focus on your breath and to contact with reality around you.

2.4. Loving kindness meditation

This meditation, where one visualizes someone progressively becoming happier by sending them love, is a meditation focused outward, in connection with others. How to do it: This meditation starts by looking inward, and imagining ourselves growing increasingly happy. One may repeat the words: *May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy. May I live my life with ease.* The meditation progresses to imagining someone who is close to us, someone who we love dearly, also growing increasingly happy. We can send them our love, imagine a little circle of light and love growing steadily from the center of their bodies, until it surrounds them fully. One can send them the same words repeated for oneself. In a next step, one can imagine someone whose relationship to us is fairly neutral, like the bus driver, the fish monger, or the cashier at the supermarket. Imagine them growing increasingly happy. One can send them love, imagine a little circle of light and love growing steadily from the center of their bodies, until it surrounds them fully. One can send them the same words you repeated for oneself. The meditation continues as one imagines someone with whom it has been more difficult communicating, someone who has caused pain in some way, following the same steps outlined above. Finally, one can expand the field of awareness to include a larger group of people, the community, or the world, and imagining it filled with that same growing light, sharing with it the same words as before.

2.5. The raisin meditation

The raisin activity, adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012), consists of mindfully interacting with a raisin with all five senses. How to do it: Bring some raisins to class and distribute one to each student. Have the students spend a few minutes observing it, feeling it, smelling it, hearing it, and then finally taking a small bite to savor it slowly. The activity is followed by journaling, or free writing.

3. Results and conclusion

Overall, student response to the use of contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness in the curriculum has been positive. As expected from previous research conducted on the impact of

mindfulness on decreasing anxiety and stress, one student mentioned that “we learned different grounding techniques that I still use to combat my anxiety today [...] I'm much better at reminding myself that the only thing I have to care about is the 'now', the present moment. This mindset has really been helpful in *stopping patterns of rumination and catastrophizing in my life, which is incredibly valuable.* (authors' emphasis) (Student 9).

In regard to the use of *statio*, one student commented, “I have really enjoyed doing the *statio* before class. I find that it helps me become more centered and focused for the day's class and, therefore, has helped me learn better” (Student 11). Other students confirmed the greater focus allowed when practicing mindfulness techniques associated with the curriculum: “I think it helped me focus in class more and keep me grounded in taking advantage of all the resources I had available around me [...] I felt that I was more present in the moment of learning and had a stronger desire to use books, professors and other tools to help me learn more. It kind of helped me be more curious about other topics than just my major interest” (Student 10).

Thanks to the continuous reinforcement of contemplative practices and the encouragement of student agency, students can remember not only the tools, but consciously opt to continue using them, even after the class is completed. Student 10 noted, “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.” This same student recalls the power of paying attention and engaging mindfully with the surroundings: “I so vividly remember breathing the fresh air and just feeling a sense of freedom and peace high up in the clouds.” Another student substantiates the importance of contemplative pedagogies in daily life, even after the end of classes: “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. In other words, I don't go on my phone or watch TV.” (Student 2)

Students have reported that learning about and practicing mindfulness allowed for connections with and for others at a deeper level, in their personal, academic, and professional spheres: “At the very least, I talk with members of my family. I practice active listening with others. I journal more than I used to and value connecting with myself in addition to the world around me. I still like to do a few of the meditations we practiced, such as the loving-kindness meditation” (Student 2); “it will [have an impact in future]. I envision it benefiting every aspect of my life. Patience, appreciation, and respect are what I've learned and continue to learn from mindfulness. These things are valuable in relationships, in activity, and in general existence” (Student 7)

In the context of a liberal arts education, contemplative pedagogy is well aligned with the goals of educating the whole person, or *cura personalis*. Moreover, it integrates well with the 21st century learning and life skills. While highly applicable in the classroom in a domestic setting, the setting of study abroad programs, is especially conducive to students' vulnerability and openness to engagement with their surroundings. Thus, the study abroad space, out of students' comfort zone, is also advantageous for the integration of contemplative pedagogy in experiential teaching and learning. In line with recent literature on integration of contemplative perspectives within teaching and learning at higher education institutions (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Owen-Smith, 2018; Zajonc, 2013), and in post-pandemic times, we strongly recommend that educators consider the inclusion of contemplative practices in the classroom, both at home, and in the study abroad context.

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