

Mindfulness in the Academy – Transforming our Work and Ourselves ‘One Moment at a Time’



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In this paper we (a faculty member and an educational developer) discuss our attempts to be more mindful in the academy with attention to mindfulness practices within the classroom and the development of a community of practice at our institution as ways to foster community and deepen learning. Included within the paper is an introduction to mindfulness and the benefits of mindfulness and mediation practices - generally and within education. In addition to providing current resources we include details of our own experiences as examples through which others may be able to incorporate these practices into their own classrooms and institutions.

Introduction

A career as an academic was never a 9-to-5 Monday to Friday endeavour. Today, however, as the pace of our world moves increasingly faster and greater responsibilities are assigned to members of the academy, the need to pay attention to personal health and wellness, and to be mindful of how we engage with others has become more pressing. Faculty members, instructors and administrators often report feeling stressed and overwhelmed as they struggle to balance the many demands of academic life (Kinman & Wray, 2013) while students are increasingly seeking services related to mental health issues (University of Toronto, 2014).

One way to address the struggle for balance in our academic life may be the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is an ancient practice founded in many Eastern philosophies including Buddhism, Taoism, and Yoga. Fundamentally, mindfulness is about consciously bringing our awareness to the present moment – to the here-and-

now experience. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), a world authority on mindfulness, defines it as: “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p.144).

Mindful activities, particularly those involving various forms of meditation, have the potential to assist faculty, staff, and students become more resilient in responding to the day-to-day pressures of academia. Research suggests that practicing mindfulness can improve academic performance in terms of increasing attention, memory, and concentration as well as one’s ability to manage stress (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). On a broader level, mindfulness activities can help support the development of the “whole person”, allowing us to consider the broader purpose of education and its transformational role in human development (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). In transforming our learning experiences, whether our own or those of

our students, we need to focus first on transforming ourselves. Mindfulness offers opportunities to do so.

In this paper, we (a faculty member and an educational developer) discuss our own attempts to be more mindful in the academy with attention to mindfulness practices in the classroom as a way to foster community and deepen learning. We also share our experiences creating a community of practice (Cox & Richlin, 2004; Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008) focused on mindfulness - a new initiative at our institution for faculty and staff.

The Need for Mindfulness in the Academy

Paula's story – Stumbling into mindfulness

My experience using mindfulness in the classroom began...very unexpectedly. It is a shock to me now to realize how much I didn't know about what I was doing, and I am quite sure that had I actually thought it all through before starting, there is no way I would have begun.

It was the first day of my first semester teaching at the City University of New York and as usual negotiating a city of 8 million took its toll. I entered the classroom - after 3 subway transfers, a sprint across 4 lanes of traffic, and a narrow miss with a bicycle courier riding the wrong way up 2nd Avenue – with my heart racing, mind spinning and sweat dripping down my back. As 60 undergraduate students turned their attention to me I thought, "I need a minute", which, I quickly realized, would require us all to take a minute. While frantically trying to think about how to make this minute happen, I found myself 'channeling' teachers in my very new yoga practice – "Ok everyone, please close your computers and turn your cell phones off... as we will start our class today by stopping... by bringing ourselves and our awareness into this space, this classroom, this moment... find a comfortable seat, close your eyes gently from top to bottom, lower your shoulders, relax your jaw... and bring your attention to your breath" ... and so began

my practice of beginning all of my classes with meditation.

Jill's story – Searching for ways to quiet the mind.

Mindfulness has always been a fascination for me. I took meditation classes in the early 80's but always felt I wasn't "good" at it so never kept up any regular commitment (I know now that judging one's ability to meditate is not very mindful!). I also started yoga about 15 years ago and have come to appreciate the ways in which my mind quiets when I need to focus on the pose. As an educational developer and university administrator for 16 years, I have also witnessed and participated in a number of conversations about academic stress, feelings of impostership, alienation from the academic community, and the search for work life balance. So, when Paula approached me at our new faculty gathering and asked if I knew anyone interested in mindfulness, I felt there might be many people who would welcome the opportunity to explore this further. And, I definitely wanted to be part of it!

What is Mindfulness and How Does it 'Work'?

Mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.144).

Juliet Adams, Founder of Mindfulnet.org provides a simple description of mindfulness in The ABC's of Mindfulness (<http://mindfulnet.org/page2.htm#Intro>):

- *A is for awareness* - Becoming more aware of what you are thinking and doing – what's going on in your mind and body.
- *B is for "just Being"* with your experience. Avoiding the tendency to respond on auto-pilot and feed problems by creating your own story.

- *C is for seeing things* and responding more wisely. By creating a gap between the experience and our reaction to it, we can make wiser choices.

One of the most basic mindfulness practices is meditation. Meditation usually begins with physically ‘settling’ into a comfortable sitting position and then directing one’s attention to the breath. We use the breath as an anchor in meditation; as thoughts drift in and we find ourselves getting immersed in the ‘story in our heads’, re-finding the breath helps us bring our attention back, without judgment, to the present moment. The intention in meditation, despite what many believe, is not to clear our minds, but rather to cultivate an awareness of the present moment with acceptance, non-judgment, curiosity and compassion for ourselves. Noticing whatever arises with a growing degree of acceptance and non-judgment leads to increased clarity and stability of attention and reduced reactivity in the body’s physiological stress responses (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

The benefits of mindfulness

Studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits.

Physical benefits include:

- *Boosting our immune system* - in one comprehensive study, researchers maintain that just eight weeks of mindfulness training helps the immune system fight off illness (Davidson et al., 2003).
- *Inducing positive changes in the brain* - as neuroscientist Sara Lazar (2011) explains, the practice of sitting quietly and bringing one’s awareness to the present moment can literally change our brains. Neuro-imaging studies suggest that 30 minutes of meditation a day for eight weeks can increase the density of gray matter in brain

regions associated with memory, stress, and empathy. While other studies have relied on self-reported data, these researchers used magnetic imaging to demonstrate physical changes to the brain (Hölze et al., 2011).

Psychological benefits include:

- *Improving memory and attention* - studies show that meditation improves the ability to focus, to concentrate, and to remember information (Marsh & Wong, 2011; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).
- *Reducing negative emotions and stress* - a review of empirical studies on mindfulness meditation showed that meditators demonstrated significantly higher levels of mindfulness, self-compassion and overall sense of well-being and significantly lower levels of negative psychological behaviours such as rumination, thought suppression, fear of emotion, or difficulty with emotional regulation (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011).
- *Alleviating depression* - some studies suggest that mindfulness is at least as good as antidepressants in combating depression and anxiety (John-Henderson, 2011; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).

Social benefits include:

- *Fostering compassion and altruism* - people who meditate are more likely to practice self-care (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011) as well as demonstrate compassion, care and empathy for others (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011; Simon-Thomas, 2013).
- *Enhancing relationships* - mindfulness training can help couples feel more optimistic and relaxed, closer to one another and ultimately, more satisfied with their relationship (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004).

Mindfulness in Education

In addition to the numerous physical, psychological and social benefits, mindfulness activities in education create benefits specific to teaching, learning and classroom behaviour. Mindfulness and meditative practices can result in greater psychological well-being for students, a greater degree of concentration, reduced class disruptions, and improved academic performance (Bush, 2011; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). Bush (2011) stated that,

Educators are interested in the calming, quieting, focusing qualities of mindfulness that help students reduce stress and become more patient and present in the classroom, but they are also interested in how that calm stability can positively affect cognitive functions like attention, working memory, and long-term memory, and lead eventually toward understanding and wisdom. (p. 184)

As research in this area grows, we are learning that teaching mindfulness in the classroom is beneficial not only for students, but for teachers and schools.

- *Mindfulness helps students:* Mindfulness training has been shown to improve test scores and working memory capacity (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013) and also reduces psychological distress stress (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2003) among students.
- *Mindfulness helps schools:* There's scientific evidence that teaching mindfulness in the classroom reduces behavior problems and aggression among students, and improves their happiness levels and ability to pay attention (Jennings, 2010; Suttie, 2007).
- *Mindfulness has also been shown to benefit educators,* both personally and

professionally: Mindfulness-based teacher training initiatives have shown increases in teachers' sense of well-being and teaching self-efficacy, as well as their ability to manage classroom behavior and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students (Meiklejohn, J., et al., 2012). Teachers trained in mindfulness show lower blood pressure, less negative emotion and symptoms of depression, and greater compassion and empathy (Jansen, 2012).

Mindfulness in Higher Education

Historically, much of the research and practice in mindfulness and education has been focused on K-12 teachers and students. However, interest in the higher education sector has been increasing nationally as well as internationally over the past decade. A recent issue of University of Toronto's Alumni Magazine, for example, highlights numerous mindfulness research projects undertaken at the University of Toronto with mounting evidence pointing to the beneficial effects of meditation on depression, stress, binge eating, and addiction (MacDonald, 2014).

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, incorporated in 1997, has been organizing educational retreats and summer institutes for its members for over 20 years. Since 2010, it has hosted an annual conference focused specifically on contemplative practices in higher education. The Center formed the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, which brings together academics and educators, staff, and students from a multitude of disciplines "committed to the transformation of higher education through the recovery and development of the contemplative dimensions of teaching, learning and knowing". The organization has just published its first journal (2014) dedicated to promoting "the understanding, development, and application of contemplative and

introspective methods” (<http://www.contemplative-mind.org/>).

The Mindfulness in Education Network, also based in the United States, was established in 2001 to promote “mindfulness as an antidote to the growing stress, conflict and confusion in educational settings as well as an invaluable gift to give students” (<http://www.mindfuled.org/>).

In Canada, Simon Fraser University recently launched its Master of Education program in Contemplative Inquiry and Approaches in Education, stating it is the first university in North America to offer a graduate degree in this area (<http://www.sfu.ca/sfunews/stories/2013/new-masters-marries-education-with-mindfulness.html>).

Many universities offer courses in contemplative practices, including Columbia, Penn State, Harvard, and Yale. The University of Toronto has the Centre for Mindfulness Studies, led by faculty members who teach mindfulness practices, meditation, and cognitive behaviour strategies to health care practitioners as well as individuals (Macdonald, 2014).

In addition to active research in mindfulness, many universities have established workshops in mindfulness practices as part of their support programs for students. Focused on helping students cope with stress and anxiety and improving learning, these initiatives have demonstrated positive results. A literature review conducted by the University of Toronto’s provost found that interventions such as mindfulness strategies were helpful in reducing university student stress, anxiety, and depression and made the recommendation that universities should make such programs widely available to students (University of Toronto, 2014).

Integrating Mindfulness into the Academy

The growing interest in mindfulness training at institutions of higher education provides a variety of opportunities to expand beyond workshops and

short courses offered by student support units to explore possibilities for integrating mindfulness strategies into the classroom, the curriculum, and communities of practice. It was this interest in the integrative capacity of this work that brought the two of us (Paula and Jill) into discussion about ways to share best practices. In this next section, we outline our efforts to introduce mindfulness activities within both the classroom and among colleagues within the institution.

Introducing mindfulness to the classroom (Paula)

Observing, and experiencing, the ways in which group meditation fostered a positive classroom environment, I continued to build mindfulness practices into my teaching practice in my new position as Assistant Professor at Brock University.

The process I developed for integrating mindfulness meditation into my courses consists of three steps:

1. In the second class of the semester I introduce the concepts of mindfulness and meditation, explain how I came to use this in my teaching, and that other students have found it to be useful to them. I tell them that we will be beginning each class with a short meditation and ask that they keep an open mind and participate. I also give them the option to opt out of the meditation by arriving to class at 10 past the hour and explain clearly that this will in no way affect their grade in the course.
2. In weeks 2 through 12 (11 weeks total) we begin each class with a brief (2-3 minute) discussion of one of three topics related to mindfulness: *What is it? Why do it/benefits?* And *How to do it? (Strategies)*. This is followed by a short guided meditation which, at the beginning of the semester, is 1-2 minutes and then as students develop their skills and feel more comfortable with

the practice, gradually becomes longer. I begin the meditation the same way each week as I talk them ‘into’ their practice and help them to prepare physically and settle into the room. This includes asking them to turn off all their technology, getting comfortable in their seats with feet flat on the floor and hands on their laps, and closing their eyes (recognizing some students may not feel comfortable doing this, I suggest that those who do want to close their eyes can simply ‘soften’ their gaze and lower their eyelids). Then I use a variety of breathing and other present awareness techniques (e.g., body scan) to help them focus their attention and begin their meditation. After this, I leave them for a period of time (approximately 2 to 5 minutes) to practice on their own. I end the meditation by asking them to open their eyes.

3. During the final class students are asked to complete an anonymous evaluation of the practice. The evaluation is completed at the same time as the departmental course evaluations and is administered by the TA.

I was completely overwhelmed when I began reviewing these evaluations and also the course evaluations where many students made direct reference to the meditation practice. The responses were incredibly positive (indeed, I did not receive any critical or negative comments about the practice), and they highlighted many aspects and impacts of the practice that I had previously not considered. For example, students connected the practice with a positive sense of self and feeling cared for:

“I think that this mindfulness was an awesome experience. It allowed me to feel better about myself and it felt good to know that a professor actually cared about my mental wellbeing.”

The care and trusting relationship between students and instructor was mentioned frequently in the evaluations, as was the way in which the meditation seemed to help students feel less anxious and supported their learning:

“After doing mindfulness at the beginning of each class, it made me feel more relaxed and calm and it was easier for me to focus in class. I wish each professor did this for their class.”

I, too, felt the practice enhanced my relationship with my students while also fostering personal and professional growth; I felt a real sense of community and a strong connection to my students through this practice. Personally, I experienced an inner sense of calm and focus and a greater awareness of the joy I feel when teaching. As an educator, I was aware how the practice also promoted an improved sense of preparedness (readiness) and teaching-efficacy, and boosted my energy for teaching.

At the end of my first year I was convinced of the transformative power of in-class meditation. It was impossible not to notice the calm and the readiness we all felt after taking those few minutes to pause in our day, to take time for ourselves, to breathe and bring ourselves into the present moment. Time and again, I witnessed this transformation as I asked them to open their eyes and found all of them staring straight back at me with a focused, alert presence that none of us were feeling when we entered the classroom. This meditative and, I would argue, pedagogical practice provides an opportunity to co-create a new, more positive space for teaching and learning.

Inspired by all of this I am in the process of launching *The Mindfulness Experiment* – a new program of research aimed at: a) understanding the ways in which mindfulness practices can be integrated into post-secondary classrooms and curriculum, and b) the impact of doing so (on the students, the teacher and the classroom learning environment).

Mindfulness practices for faculty and staff (Jill)

When Paula asked me if I knew others interested in mindfulness, I was confident that this topic would resonate with both faculty and staff, largely because of a growing sense that people are often overwhelmed and searching for better work life balance. My work in the teaching centre routinely affords me the opportunity to talk with faculty members and graduate students about their efforts to balance teaching, research, and family commitments. With every passing year, this challenge appears to become increasingly difficult.

In 2013 at the STLHE conference at Cape Breton University, Professors Barbara Seeber (Brock University) and Maggie Berg (Queen's University) presented a well-attended session entitled *Collegiality in the Corporate University*, in which they argued for the need to adopt principles from the Slow Movement, particularly "slow conviviality, as a model of congeniality... in order to resist the fragmentation of our professional lives". Other initiatives in higher education have pointed to the need for reconnecting to a sense of purpose in the work that faculty members do. Parker Palmer for example, has written numerous books on the challenges of alienation within the academy, particularly within the teaching learning relationship. His seminal work *The Courage to Teach* (2007) points to how losing one's sense of authenticity and identity can result in a teaching life of anxiety and stress.

Indeed, the story I most often hear from faculty (and other Professionals) is that the institutions in which they work are the heart's worst enemy. In this story, institutions continually try to diminish the human heart in order to consolidate their own power, and the individual is left with a discouraging choice: to distance one's self from the institution and its mission and

sink into deepening cynicism (an occupational hazard of academic life), or to maintain eternal vigilance against institutional invasion and fight for one's life when it comes (p. 119).

His recommendation is to connect with 'the teacher within' through strategies that are contemplative:

...solitude and silence, meditative reading and walking in the woods, keeping a journal, finding a friend who will simply listen. I merely propose that we need to learn as many ways as we can of "talking to ourselves" (p. 116).

Palmer asserts that it is through conversation with colleagues that teachers can come to an understanding of ways to move beyond tips and techniques to find their inner teacher. Through exchanging ideas, best practices, and stories of trial and triumph, we can reconnect with the motivation that had inspired us to enter this vocation in the first place. Bringing people together in community to share who they are as teachers was certainly one of our motivations for starting a mindfulness community of practice.

Forming a community of practice

Creating a community of practice (Cox & Richlin, 2004; Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) specifically focused on mindfulness is a new initiative at our institution. While the literature in this area originally identified a community of practice or CoP as individuals coming together to discuss shared interests in an informal and organic way, recent work suggests that many groups form as a result of a focused, organizational initiative that brings people together and provides structure, giving the group momentum.

...the emerging picture of a CoP is a group of individuals immersed in a domain of practice, who share their knowledge and experience of the domain in a variety of ways, very often informally. This sharing serves a variety of purposes: it enables good practice to be spread; it enables novices to become more knowledgeable and experienced; and it enables the community to develop new knowledge (Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008, p. 66).

This was certainly our experience in establishing the first and subsequent gatherings (we purposefully elected not to call these 'meetings') of the mindfulness group. There was considerable variation in the reasons stated by members about why they chose to participate, ranging from research opportunities between faculty to seeking out a shared, restful space with like-minded individuals. It was, in fact, this latter reason that seemed to predominate our first gathering, as members narrated their personal experiences with mindfulness in both the teaching and learning setting, and in personal practice.

Although we began our first few gatherings with a structured agenda, we quickly abandoned it in favour of a looser format that involved a period of meditation at the outset, a discussion of a reading or topic, and a closing meditative activity. An experienced practitioner of mindfulness had introduced us to a Tibetan singing bowl at our first gathering, so we purchased one and chimed the bowl to begin and end our time together.

As a community of practice, our group membership waxed and waned throughout the year, with some participants lamenting the lack of time to attend while new folks joined as they heard about our gatherings from others. While attendance decreased as the term became busier, each gathering saw a core group who were keen to devote some time to contemplative practices. Interestingly, many people verbalized how much they felt comforted by *the idea* of a mindfulness

group, as if its very existence afforded a potential for well-being, should they have time to attend.

At the end of our first year, we (Paula and Jill) met to reflect on what we had learned, and decided to share our experience at the STLHE conference in Kingston. We viewed this as an opportunity to summarize and organize what we were doing, as a way to assess if, and how, this resonated with others, and as a way for us to learn what others were doing and thinking. We expected that there would be interest in a session on strategies that supported student learning at a national teaching conference. We did not, however, anticipate that so many attendees were themselves looking for a moment of mindfulness in an otherwise busy conference agenda. The session was attended by close to 50 people and we had to move in extra chairs, eventually turning people away at the door.

We began our session with a meditation, which created a focused, energized, engaged audience and an open learning environment. We then shared our vision and outcomes of the work we had completed with both students and colleagues in our community of practice. The invitation for others to contribute to a growing list of resources for educators created a lively discussion and we closed our session with a centering exercise involving reading the poem *Lost* by David Wagoner (1999).

We heard many positive responses from attendees and we left the session with a strong sense that the need for, and interest in, mindfulness as a way of being (not just a way of doing) within the academy is strong.

Challenges to integrating mindfulness into the academy

While there are clearly many benefits to practicing mindfulness in higher education, there are also significant challenges in introducing these practices in a meaningful way. First and foremost, while many people respond positively to the idea of engaging in mindfulness activities, both in terms of

their integration within the classroom and as part of a community of practice, we are socialized to put work first and maintain our busy-ness. This tendency to put our own well-being at the bottom of our priority list means contemplative practices are routinely taken off the to-do list.

Introducing mindfulness meditation in the university setting is also challenging given that we work in an academic culture rooted in scientific inquiry and where it is commonplace to question any practice appearing devotional, emotional, or spiritual in nature. A community of practice that engages in meditation and conducts research into mindfulness activities is operating outside of traditional forms of scholarship. As Zajonc (n.d.) suggests however, we should view these practices as complementing, rather than in competition with, conventional methods of inquiry:

The reflective, contemplative and experiential methods developed within the contemplative traditions offer a complimentary set of research methods for exploring the mind and the world. When taken together with conventional methods, an enriched research methodology and pedagogy are available for opening up new pathways for deepening and enlarging perspectives which can lead to real and lasting solutions to the problems we confront

(<http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe>).

Additionally, there are challenges that arise from the power dynamics within the classroom and how mindfulness practices such as meditation are introduced to students and for what purpose. In summarizing ways in which fellows of the Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society introduce mindfulness practices to students, Bush (2011) raises important questions about the difficulties this work involves:

How do you naturally and gracefully lead students in contemplative practices in an academic setting? How do you negotiate the different ‘presence’ you manifest in class, at least during certain moments? How do you move back and forth, wearing ‘different hats’? What exactly is the boundary between doing something that feels appropriate experientially, and doing something that feels devotional? How do you invite students to bring their whole selves to the course, and yet judge them by way of evaluation and grading? (p.191)

These are just some of the challenges that educators working with these practices will encounter. Of course, challenges will come not only from ‘others’ but also from within ourselves as mindfulness is a reflective activity that will surface questions of authenticity, identity, power, and relationship within the teaching learning context. All of these demand exploring.

Conclusion

Engaging in mindfulness as colleagues and as educators both reinforces what we know and understand about supporting ourselves and our students, while pushing us to continue to investigate ways to deepen this understanding. Although we have just begun our explorations of this work, we recognize its potential as being impactful for students, for the institution, and for us personally and professionally. Mindfulness practices offer us opportunities to transform ourselves “one moment at a time” and in doing so, we are better able to assist students with their journeys into learning, and to find balance within ourselves, and within our teaching practices.

Moving forward, we will continue to offer students the opportunity to engage with mindfulness strategies and to co-investigate their effect. We will also continue to host gatherings of our community of practice, as a place to “do”

mindfulness activities as well as share best practices. We know that such gatherings have a ripple effect and an unseen impact, as participants take newly introduced practices into their own contexts of research, teaching and institutional support.

Since facilitating our session at STLHE, we have directly heard from two institutions offering or starting communities of practice on mindfulness. At our own institution, we have broadened our practice to include other contemplative activities such as yoga, pedagogical walk and talks, and sessions on creativity in the classroom and reflective learning. Such activities bring individuals together to discuss academic work in ways that move beyond disciplinary content and closer to our essential needs as humans. As Zajonc (n.d.) points out:

A contemplatively oriented college or university can be a community where we learn to practice an ethics of genuine compassion, and learn to extend generosity to others beyond those closest to us. This development can be supported by contemplative practices, service-learning, and a genuine engagement within our surrounding community and its needs (<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>).

Lastly, we hope that our own investigations into mindfulness and its impacts can contribute to a larger conversation about the nature and purpose of our work in higher education while fostering a caring, collegial, and genuine environment within which to have this discussion.

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