

Mindfulness in Education: Narratives of university students who have completed a course in mindfulness

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Mindfulness is a particular way of being that cultivates awareness in the present moment, while acknowledging one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations in a non-judgmental and compassionate way. The development of mindfulness may include practices such as sitting meditation, the body scan, and yoga. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) brought this practice to Western medicine as a treatment for chronic pain, anxiety and depression. Mindfulness is conceptualized as a skill that can be learned and strengthened over time.

Mindfulness has been studied in university graduate students. Dorian and Killebrew (2014) used qualitative constant comparison to examine weekly reflective journals from psychotherapy students who completed a mindfulness course. Bonifas and Napoli (2014) measured Master of Social Work graduate students' quality of life and levels of stress before and after a course in mindfulness. At the end of their course, students reported increased quality of life in many domains. Slavik (2014) examined the effects of mindfulness-based practices that were introduced to Child and Youth Care students. At the end of the semester, a short questionnaire was given to participants, and emerging themes included decreased stress, improved concentration, and self-awareness.

The overall purpose of this study was to collect narratives from students who had completed the 4th year undergraduate course, *Foundations of Mindfulness*, and to explore their

understanding and implementation of mindfulness practice. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did students' practices of mindfulness and self-compassion develop throughout the course?
2. How do mindfulness and self-compassion impact students' daily and long term self-care and management of stress?

All students from the Winter 2015 semester of the University of New Brunswick's *Foundations of Mindfulness* course were invited to participate. Five students volunteered to participate in the research, and no incentives were offered. Names and other identifying information have been altered to preserve confidentiality. Also, gender-neutral language has been used throughout. Narrative inquiry was utilized, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, using inductive and semantic techniques, was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Five themes emerged: community, health, mindfulness-based practices, self-compassion, and spirituality.

Community

Participants described how the mindfulness course encouraged group discussion and reflection through experiential learning. They identified the positive, caring community of the classroom as being beneficial for their learning. Corin reflected on the atmosphere of the class, "I don't think there was ever an occasion when there wasn't empathy." Mackenzie also referred to the supportive environment:

"I think the key for me was that it was a very trusting environment. I felt that you could be open and honest with the group, and I think when you can be trusting and open and honest, you can think of things that you

otherwise can't think of. Your mind will be more open to ideas."

Participants reported how the discussion-based format allowed them to understand that they were not alone in the difficulties they had with their mindfulness practice, and helped them work through the challenges they faced. Pat reported:

"I think to be honest, it was really helpful just to be on a journey with multiple people, and to hear other class members share their stories of what their challenges were, or what worked for them, or a breakthrough moment that they had. It really helped to realize that everyone has a bit of a different journey, and that this isn't something that can just magically and easily happen."

Health

Participants also discussed the impact of mindfulness practice on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Corin discussed struggling with mental health, and reported "being able to step back...really takes me out of that moment where I'm stuck." Corin described using mindfulness exercises in times of stress:

"When I am in extreme moments of stress... that is the reminder that you need to step back and focus... just reflect on what you should be doing, and not get caught in this mist of terrible thoughts."

Emory discussed a tendency to ruminate, being able to feel the location of the anxiety within the body and then returning to the present moment before the anxiety increased. Emory explained:

"I've been able to regularly check-in and notice when I'm feeling stressed or worried about things, and when I notice that, then I can actually start making some

informed actions about how to dissipate that or kind of resolve those feelings of anxiety...I think I've gained a higher level of emotional intelligence, intelligence of recognizing where it's stemming from... I am able to talk to myself calmly and [be] loving."

Mackenzie used mindfulness to cope with a heel injury that was interfering with participation in important activities, "I would do these practices where I would be present for ten minutes, and then visualize myself on my favourite bike rides." Mackenzie also reported being able to use meditation to relive positive memories.

Mindfulness-Based Practices

Every participant discussed their understanding of mindfulness as a metacognitive process where they are able to observe, but not get consumed by, cognitions and emotions in the present moment. Pat discussed mindfulness as "having an awareness of yourself and your surroundings." Pat also described non-judgement as being important in mindfulness practice:

"Non-judgment is something that really stuck out to me. Just recognizing how you're feeling in the present moment, and not judging that feeling or labeling that feeling, or trying to categorize your...feelings."

Corin described an assignment where students were encouraged to choose three words that would be their mantra for the week. Corin chose "positive, friendly, and dutiful," and engaged in the practice of remembering and repeating these three words in the morning and throughout the day, as this represented who they wanted to be. Corin described the practice:

"Just repeating those, and putting all of my focus there...So many good things came out of that. I got stronger connections with everybody in my social life...I wasn't stressed about getting everything

done...from that simple practice of just setting your intention in the morning and trying your best to follow through.”

Self-Compassion

Participants reported that self-compassion, the ability to be mindful of one’s emotions in the present moment, and to be kind to oneself in the face of suffering, was an important, yet difficult practice. Marvel talked about having a conceptual understanding of self-compassion, but found it difficult to practice. “If a friend came to me, I’d be able to help them through. But there’s a disconnect between what I know, all the self-compassion knowledge and all the mindfulness stuff, and then there’s...what are you actually doing...so it’s rough.” Marvel then elaborated:

“Accepting yourself, loving yourself, recognizing what you’re good at, and knowing that that’s not bragging...But it’s also owning what you’re not good at, and being like, that’s okay, I’m just human...so this is what I’m feeling, and it’s okay. It’s normal...just accepting where you’re at in a moment...I think that’s how self-compassion and mindfulness tie together.”

Emory told a story of a particularly intense meditation experience. This meditation revealed emotions that Emory was not aware of at the time, and provided an opportunity to use self-compassion to process these emotions:

“Probably a month into meditating regularly. I had one particular session where the theme of compassion really came out... all of a sudden, there’s...all this commotion, like really heavy stuff that I had no idea was there...It was hard to describe... I just started weeping, and there was just like, I don’t know, shame or disappointment? I just felt like I had really screwed

up somehow. Like I had really just failed...in that moment, it was kind of scary, and I wanted to kind of get away from it. But I allowed myself to confront it.”

Emory reported being able to feel the difficult emotions and cry, by utilizing the practice of self-compassion.

Spirituality

Participants identified the course as an opportunity to explore and enhance their spiritual well-being. Corin described the practice of mindfulness as actually being a spiritual act, and engagement in the practice as “being in a higher level of consciousness.” Emory found the class itself to be an exploration of spiritual well-being that allowed exploration of topics such as interconnectedness and a new way of understanding the self, in order to “gain some understanding of reality.” Emory also reported experiencing a changed concept of the self:

“My whole definition of what the self is has been radically changed within the past year...I really interpret the self as not me as the single unit, but sort of this concept of more of a relationship with everything else that people would perceive as outside of you. And so, if you want to talk about the self, then I’m talking about me, but I’m also talking about you, and I’m talking about all the things that are going on around me, because they’re all related in a way. Those two things have kind of become one and the same, that internal and that external realm. For all intents and purposes, you can remove the self and just say compassion.”

Emory was dissatisfied with the scientific worldview, began to explore other ways of perceiving the world, and was hopeful that developing a meditation practice would facilitate that exploration.

Emory chose to do a group project on spirituality, which allowed this participant to explore different way of understanding the self and the world:

“Going through that process of exploring spirituality, which to me was a very metaphysical, philosophical journey...It ultimately would have come down to themes of duality...the outside world can't exist without the inside world... those two things have to be connected in a way, because on their own they don't make sense anymore ... And so through that thought process, you realize these are not independent. They are totally dependent on each other. And so that completely changes how you perceive things. It's no longer you against the world.”

Conclusions

The results of this study support previous research that suggests that mindfulness is a useful tool for university students. Participants identified the importance of formal practices such as sitting meditation and contemplative meditations that had themes such as self-compassion. Informal practices such as walking meditation, mindful washing of dishes, and taking mindful breaths were also described as being beneficial. Participants discussed how these mindfulness practices influenced their capacity to be present for their everyday life, and particularly when dealing with difficult emotions. Their experiences revealed that they learned to pause and rest in awareness of difficult emotions, rather than react during times of frustration.

Of particular interest was the connection between their learning and the trusting, empathetic, community environment of the classroom. Every participant discussed the positive impact that the learning community had on their ability to understand

complex topics of mindfulness. After the course was completed, the UNB Society for Meditation was established by one of the students in the class, so that they could continue to share weekly practices with one another.

Many of the practices that students found valuable were also the most spiritual in nature. Students also reported the informal practices as being most accessible throughout the day. Participants told stories of increased health, and how mindfulness and self-compassion played an important role in their self-care. Every participant wanted to learn more about self-compassion in order to discover new ways of managing stress in the future.

Findings suggest the value of offering and enrolling in a mindfulness course at the post-secondary education level. Mindfulness practice was important to the participants' sense of well-being, and was recognized as a valuable tool for managing the stressors related to university life. The course was comprised of students from diverse backgrounds and degree programs, including kinesiology, nursing, education, engineering, biology, leadership studies, and psychology. One participant who was pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy even shared that this was the most important course in an entire university career as it contained pragmatic, relevant knowledge that could be utilized in everyday life. It is inspiring to observe the progressive movement of universities in offering courses, such as the Foundations of Mindfulness, that move beyond a sole focus on cognitive intelligence, and include a holistic perspective of the student.

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