

***Cultivating Mindfulness Meditation in Class from Students' Perspectives***

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**Abstract**

Cultivating mindfulness through meditation is vital towards holistic education and students' wellbeing. Seventy-six college students from George Mason University experienced first-hand the benefits of mindfulness, and what it was like to always begin a class with a five to ten minutes of mindfulness meditation. Individual reflections students submitted suggest that by paying attention to what is going on around us, including our thoughts and feelings without judging them, we can minimize our stress and anxiety, improve focus and attention, and increase self-awareness and promote wellbeing. Students' reflections further indicate that not only does meditation enable students to be present in the moment the experience also provides them peace of mind. They are able to participate and interact more in discussion and learning activities. Meditation helps them absorb course materials well. Students would like their professors integrate mindfulness meditation as part of students' learning experience in class.

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College students often face moderate to high stress levels as a result of pressure from heavy course loads, peer pressure, family obligations, having a part time if not full time job, financial debt, or doing volunteer work and community service (Cline 2015). In annual surveys conducted between 1985 and 1995, increasing proportions of students reported feeling overwhelmed (Oman et. al. 2008). In 2004, stress was the most commonly identified impediment to academic performance, cited by one-third (32%) of nearly 50,000 students surveyed at seventy-four US campuses (p. 569). In her ACHA/NCHA II Reference Group Executive Summary of Spring 2012, Nierenberg (2012) reports that 29% of college students felt that their academic performance has been negatively affected by stress. In fact, in assessing college students' personal choices and attitudes about stress management, Page (1987) reports that 60.1% of the 300 students he surveyed indicated that they did not relax enough. And, 33% believed that the way they handled stress was a serious problem (Janowlak and Hackman 1994, p. 1007). Continuing stress may lead students into unproductive rumination that consumes

energy and compounds the experience of stress. Intensified stress can undermine resilience factors (Oman et. al. 2008). Although a certain level of stress may result in improved performance, too much stress can adversely affect physical and mental health (p. 569) and can lessen a student's ability to be productive and pay attention to their personal, social, and academic undertakings.

*As college students, we have so much going on around us: what assignment is due when, what happened at work yesterday, when we have to meet our friend for lunch, the fight we had with our significant other this morning. All these are taking over our minds daily, causing anxiety, depression, worry, fear, doubt, overstimulation, and to be overworked (Kristina Weems 2015).*

For Natascha Brown (2015), her biggest challenge is how to maintain equilibrium given her being a full time parent, a full time employee, and a full time student. Brown feels she always takes on so much that she does not have time to focus on herself let alone her wellbeing.

What Kristina and Natascha shared are just examples of what many college students go through and feel everyday in school. Based on what students have expressed, they need to find a way to address stressors without compromising academic performance and wellbeing. As investigators have noted (Lustman, Sowa, & O'Hara 1984), stress, anxiety, depression, and somatic distress are among the most common symptoms for which college students seek clinical care (p. 31).

What can teachers do to help address what college students go through in school and in their personal lives as mentioned above? How do college students describe their mindfulness meditation experience in class, and what benefits does their meditation experience have on them?

The first section of this article describes the conduct of mindfulness meditation in three New Century College Learning Community (NCLC) courses at George Mason University (GMU) in Spring 2015. The second section highlights the impact of mindfulness meditation on college students as they described it, based on individual reflections that they submitted and shared in class. Finally, the article makes a summative case as to why mindfulness meditation needs to be incorporated in higher education from students' perspective. Excerpts describing students' first-hand experience with mindfulness meditation in class are being highlighted throughout the article.

## **Method**

### **I. Participants**

Students were enrolled in three interdisciplinary NCLC courses that I teach at GMU. The classes involved were NCLC 314 Conflict, Trauma and Healing (6 credits), NCLC 416 Refugee and Internal Displacement (3 credits), and NCLC 475 Human Trafficking and the International Community (3 credits). All are competency-based courses and highlight Well-being competency described as the life-long experience of life satisfaction, happiness, and purpose ([ncc.gmu.edu](http://ncc.gmu.edu)). During the semester, students are provided the opportunity to experience the following characteristics comprising the Well-being competency: First, to develop insights and habits of

regularly assessing one's own quality of life; second, to develop self-efficacy and control over one's own life; third, to effectively self-manage stress and anxiety; fourth, to find equanimity, peacefulness, and resiliency in the face of adversity; fifth, to develop imaginative and inclusive ways to solve problems; and sixth, to create and sustain positive relationships and social support (ncc.gmu.edu).

A total of seventy-six junior and graduating seniors from various academic disciplines participated in the weekly mindfulness meditation. Thirty one submitted written individual reflections on their experience by the end of the semester while the rest did an oral reflection during class time. Six were skeptical of the practice in the beginning of the semester, thinking it was too "touch-feely and a waste of time. All six of them did feel pressed for time and other commitments which rendered them unable to practice any type of meditation. Terms such as *students* and *participants*, as well as *mindfulness meditation* and *meditation* per se will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

## II. Procedure

The mindfulness meditation was conducted as part of students' experiential learning in class. Every session would start with a five to ten minute meditation. When it was first introduced, students were asked if they do some type of meditation on their own. While majority said they do not observe any type of meditation, eleven said they were into yoga and silent meditation such as daily prayers and a quiet time for themselves.

“Although mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation like sitting in the full lotus, it is about living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn 1994). In class, every meditation activity was facilitated with a meditative music in the background. Students were asked to relax and be comfortable whether in a sitting or standing position. They could either close their eyes or simply observe the classroom environment with open eyes. The class is dimly lit for a more relaxing environment. Students were instructed to be aware of any mental content, including thoughts, imagery, physical sensations, or feelings as they occur in consciousness on a moment-to-moment basis along with non-judgmental acceptance of it (Tarrasch 2014, p. 1322). In other words, they were being encouraged to take notice of what they were sensing in a given moment, and to embrace and integrate into their meditation whatever transpired within the classroom such as the sounds coming from outside the classroom, the smell of the environment, and the things around them for those with open eyes. Background music came with visual images on screen. A short debriefing in terms of how students felt and what it was like for them to have a quiet moment before class began, followed each meditation activity.

In March 2015, students were asked to reflect on their meditation experience in class and write a 2-3 page reflection paper about it. Potential effects of meditation on students while in class and possible integration of meditation in classroom setting were some of the themes suggested.

### III. Response

Students' reflections, both written and oral, suggest that mindfulness meditation helps them in many ways. They favor having a regular meditation in class. It does not matter how long the actual meditation would take. Even if it takes only a few minutes but if done well, is enough for them to experience its benefits in class. Fourteen have expressed reluctance to begin with since they were not used to the practice, but were convinced later on of its potential benefits. Eighteen indicated their reasons why some professors are hesitant to incorporate meditation in class.

Participants echo Langer's statement which suggests that by paying attention to what's going on around us, instead of operating on auto-pilot, we can reduce stress, unlock creativity, and boost performance (HBRS 2014). By being aware of their surroundings, including thoughts and feelings without judging them students are able to minimize their stress and anxiety, improve focus and attention, and increase self-awareness and promote wellbeing. Students' reflections further suggest that not only does meditation enable them to be present in the moment the experience also gives them peace of mind. They are able to participate and interact more in discussion and learning activities. Meditation helps them absorb course materials well. In fact, they would like to see professors, regardless of the courses they teach, integrate mindfulness meditation as part of students' learning experience in class.

#### IV Discussion

There are two basic types of meditation practices (Tarrasch 2014): concentrative meditation and mindfulness meditation. Concentration practices focus on a specific object of attention such as an image, a word (usually called mantra) or an emotion (p. 1322). When the mind wanders away from the focus of meditation, attention is redirected back to the focal point. By contrast, mindfulness meditation does not restrict attention to a single object or event. Instead awareness follows thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise, flowing freely from one to another (p. 1322). Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes the nature of this state as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (p. 4). It is a process of actively noticing new things and makes one more sensitive to context and perspective (HBRS 2014), without reflecting back on memories of the past nor looking ahead to anticipate the future, and without trying to solve problems or otherwise prevent the unpleasant aspects of the current situation (Tarrasch 2014, p. 1322). Non-judgmental acceptance refers to the ability to refrain from turning away from unpleasant experiences, maintaining an open, compassionate attitude and the willingness to let things be just as they are (p.1322). For Langer, mindfulness is the essence of engagement therefore it is energy begetting and not energy-consuming (HBRS 2014).

As practiced, mindfulness through meditation or mindfulness meditation is a form of meditation technique which opens and expands to an awareness of thoughts and feelings as they pass through the mind, but not focusing on a single purpose (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin & Freedman 2006, p. 375). It actualizes and integrates the personality of humankind to those higher fulfilled states of personal integration (Ferguson 1981, p. 68). Mindfulness meditation involves

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three core elements (Shapiro et. al. 2006), namely: intention, attention, and attitude. Intention involves consciously and purposefully regulating attention. Attention, on the other hand, is the ability to sustain attention in the present moment without interpretation, discrimination or evaluation. Attitude is a frame of mind brought to mindfulness meditation; commonly described as openness, acceptance, or non-judgmentally (p. 375).

Students identified, at least, three major benefits of mindfulness meditation in class. First is that mindfulness meditation helps minimize stress and anxiety. Cintya Galarza (2015) describes her experience,

*As I learned more and more about the benefits of meditation, it became clear to me that this was something that I needed to do. Seeing everyone partake in this practice and enjoy doing it made me become more positive that this is something I could carry out...the music became more soothing, and I felt more at peace with myself. After each meditation, I would feel less stressed and more energized but calm within. My mind became less foggy, and I could see more clearly what I needed to do.*

Findings on college students' stress reduction from meditation are consistent with numerous studies of the physiological and psychological effects of diverse meditation-based interventions in adult populations (Oman et.al. 2008, p. 570). Clinicians concur that individual responses to stress can be controlled when one begins to meditate (Janowlak and Hackman 1994, p. 1007). In their study of fifty-six undergraduates, for example, who were enrolled in an introduction to psychology course at Hampton University (Hall 1999, p. 410), those who were in



the meditation group had semester GPAs significantly higher than the nonmeditation group, including cumulative GPAs (p. 414). The rigid, tense, anxiety-filled semesters that students have come to dread may be replaced with calm, relaxed sessions dedicated to optimal learning and cognitive development for those who chose to participate (p. 414).

The second major benefit of mindfulness meditation is that it helps improve focus and attention. Researchers from the University of Miami found that students who took a seven-week mindfulness training course had improved attention and less-mind wandering compared with a control group that did not receive the training. “Relative to the control group, mindfulness training participants had higher task accuracy and self-reported being more ‘on-task’ after the 7 week training period,” the researchers wrote in the study, though the training “did not significantly benefit the operation san task or accuracy on the delayed-recognition task” (The Third Metric 2015). Researchers wrote that while-short form mindfulness training did not bolster working memory task performance it may help curb mind wandering. For Nicole Zarou (2015) who crams all of her classes into two days a week, having a time to meditate in the middle of her school day is much needed. “A five to ten minute time to myself with a soothing sound in the background” she says, “helps my brain recuperate for the rest of the day. It helps increase my attention span, and gives me better nights sleep. I feel more connected.” Alice Taylor Agyeman (2015) explains how incorporating mindfulness meditation in class has allowed her to recharge her brain to better process and comprehend new course materials, made her become more articulate when it comes to discussion. In a 2012 study (NCCAM) researchers compared brain images from fifty adult meditators and fifty adult non-meditators. Results suggested that people who practiced meditation for many years have more folds in the outer layer of the brain. This

process, called gyrification may increase the brain's ability to process information (p. 4). A 2013 review of three clinical studies suggests that meditation may slow, stall, or even reverse changes that take place in the brain due to normal aging (p. 4).

Educators at Nystrom Elementary school in Richmond, California are seeing some of those positive effects of mindfulness in their students in terms of reduce absenteeism and suspensions (Schwartz 2014). Mindfulness, according to Vicki Zakrzewski, education director at the UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center, which studies the science behind mindfulness, increases the activity in the prefrontal cortex of our brain. This is where we make our decisions, how we plan, our abstract thinking.”

*...the silent reflection time observed in the beginning of our NCLC 475 class has allowed me the opportunity to reorganize my thoughts after a long day and to better enjoy the discussions that follow. Having come straight to class from a 12-hour day of rushing around DC area, getting a five minute time to just relax my mind before jumping in to new course material allows me to reboot my thought process and clear my brain of any thoughts not related to studying human trafficking. It has increased my productivity as well as level of engagement in the course (Hayley Cline 2015).*

The idea of mindfulness meditation providing focus and attention is not only confined within students' academic undertakings, it also includes self-centering towards constructive and holistic learning. Madison McCoy (2015) says it well,

*As a student who suffers from chronic migraines, stress and pain are present in my everyday life. Often times I walk into a classroom in a whirlwind of thoughts, ideas, and lists of what I have to do for the day. Meditation helped me center myself and become more present. By incorporating meditation in class, I could re-center myself in order to open myself up to the topics at hand. Class meditation helped produce more cohesive, constructive, and thoughtful discussions where students became engaged and invested. Without a doubt, this kind of classroom environment produces constructive and holistic learning environment.*

McCoy's experience and others' suggest that meditation may lead to neurological changes and foster physiological health benefits. Indeed, meditative practices have been linked with a wide range of positive outcomes related to effective functioning, including academic performance, concentration, perceptual sensitivity, reaction time, memory, self-control, and self-esteem (Oman et.al. 2008, p. 570).

The third major benefit of mindfulness meditation is that it helps increase self-awareness and promotes well-being. Schools around the United States, including elementary schools, are beginning to use mindfulness as part of an effort to address the social and emotional needs of children, improving student achievement in the process (Schwartz 2014). Studies of mindfulness program in schools have found that regular practice, even just a few minutes per day, improves student self-control and increase their classroom participation, respect for others, happiness, optimism, and self-acceptable levels. It attracts students who aspire to cultivate creativity, wellbeing, and compassionate connections.

*... when I meditate, I feel that my mind and body become one and I am fully harmonized with every part of me... meditation helps me learn more about myself because I am naturally discovering myself whenever I am at peace mentally* (Rawan Al-Halali 2015).

For Agyeman (2015), the experience did not only give her inner peace, it also made her become more aware of the blessings in life and more welcoming and understanding of others. Felicia Baez (2015) describes her meditation experience as an opportunity to ponder on life and life's experiences. Meditation (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante & Flinders 2008, p. 570) is perceived as beneficial for spiritual growth and personal effectiveness. In a national survey of more than 100,000 US college students, a large majority reported an interest in spirituality (80%) or a search for meaning or purpose in life (76%). About half (47%) considered seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually as essential or very important. The point here is that like physical exercise that is both aerobic and enjoyable, stress-management exercises, according to the psychological principle of goal alignment, may be more enduringly integrated into many students' lifestyles if they are experienced as not only good for health but also supportive of spiritual growth (p. 570). That is why perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of mindfulness meditation is the capacity to adopt an "observing self" (Tarrasch 2014, p. 1323).

## Summary

This article suggests that mindfulness practices such as meditation can be successfully introduced into traditional academic settings and integrated as part of students' experiential learning. As students' reflections show, there are potential benefits of mindfulness meditation which extend across many different settings. They range from reducing anxiety to increasing well-being, and from the reduction of psychological distress to the improvement of cognition. (Hall 1999, p. 409). First, mindfulness meditation is good for our bodies. Practicing mindfulness through meditation boosts our immune system's ability to fight off illness. Second, it is good for our minds. As discussed above, mindfulness meditation increases positive emotions while reducing negative emotions and stress. Third, mindfulness meditation changes our brains. It increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy. Fourth, mindfulness meditation helps us focus, to concentrate. Studies suggest that mindfulness helps us tune out distractions and improves our memory and attention skills. Fifth, mindfulness meditation fosters compassion and altruism. It makes us more likely to help someone in need and understand suffering of others and regulating emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well as shown in students realizing how much they need meditation for their own sanity and wellbeing. According to Crane (2012), meditation helps a person explore his or her inner self and worldviews. With the changing view of what one sees, he or she becomes more open to acceptance and embrace the things he or she was not able to before. One student in class indicates how meditating in class made her become kinder to herself and appreciative of the blessings she is given with. Practicing mindfulness meditation increases self-awareness (Crane 2012). Finally, mindfulness meditation assists classes and schools

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whereby it helps reduce behavior problems among students, and improves their ability to stay focus and pay attention (Greater Good, the Science of Meaningful Life).

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