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A Pedagogy of Well-Being: Introducing Mindfulness to First-Year Access Students

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This article examines the impact of introducing mindfulness practices to an Access (developmental) course aimed at first-year students. As a pathway to well-being, the cultivation of mindfulness supports the harmonious balance of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of the self. An ancillary aim of this qualitative study is to examine the similarities between mindfulness practices and traditional teachings of First Nation, Inuit and Métis First Peoples of Canada. Using precepts from the Medicine Wheel of Learning, the content of a developmental course entitled University 101 was adapted to incorporate Indigenous traditions of teaching and learning. Acknowledging this holistic approach, circles of learning were used to introduce and to apply new concepts. Formal and informal mindfulness practices emphasizing breath awareness, movement, and being present were regular components of the course. This article focuses on the analysis of interview questions exploring the impact of mindfulness practices on first-year Aboriginal Access students.

INTRODUCTION

A Pedagogy of Well-Being

Within the scope of a multi-disciplinary review defining well-being, Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012) propose well-being as the state of equilibrium or balance that can be affected by life events or challenges. Further, the authors posit that many attempts at defining well-being have focused purely on dimensions of this concept, rather than on an easily accessible, universal, and practical definition. For example, according to Moliver (2010), well-being is a dimension of health enhancement which applies to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This is consistent with the definition of health put forward by the World Health Organization (2012), "Health is a state of optimal physical, mental and social well-being not merely the absence of disease and infirmity." Accordingly, well-being is defined in this article as a holistic, self-driven process involving personal lifestyle, spiritual, mental, physical, emotional, and environmental dimensions dependent on the ebb and flow of life experiences.

Within the context of the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2008), Pidgeon, Archibald and Hawkey (2014) conceptualized the (w)holistic Indigenous

Framework as the interconnectedness of the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual elements of human development. This framework emphasizes Kirkness and Barnhard's (1991) work with the 4Rs: *respect* for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultural integrity, *relevance* to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis perspectives and experiences, *reciprocal* relationships, and *responsibility*. Important consideration is given to the connections and relations of family and community as well as the impact of institutional and political influences on the individual's well-being. This (w) holistic approach values health, balance, the minimization of unhealthy behaviors, and positive interactions with others and community (Hettler, 1979; Pidgeon et al., 2014). Since, historically, the well-being model represents health in terms of maximizing one's potential, the challenge posed in pedagogical contexts is the implementation of conditions and supports that cultivate well-being as a holistic, self-driven process (Miller, 2007).

Seligman (2002, 2011) contributes to the discussion by identifying parameters which support well-being. Positioned as a construct, the recognized father of positive psychology theorizes that positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishments (PERMA) present as seminal instances of well-being. In optimal circumstances, PERMA can help individuals reach a life of fulfillment, happiness, and meaning. Accordingly, Seligman suggests that institutions can support well-being by ensuring that the foundational elements of PERMA are fully integrated into identified environments. Similarly to the 4Rs' focus on respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility, PERMA is also situated within a framework emphasizing the interconnectedness and harmonious balance of all aspects of an individual's self.

As discussed above, there are many reasons to incorporate mindfulness practices into higher education. These range from physiological and emotional benefits, increases in overall well-being for both instructors and students, and improvements in learning and memory ability (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012). The practices of mindfulness have universal appeal emphasizing the cultivation of greater awareness, resiliency, and emotional regulation while fostering engagement, positive relationships, and accomplishments (Ragoonaden, 2015).

Acknowledging the high rate of stress, anxiety, and depression of university students (de Bruin, Meppelink, & Bögels, 2014; Cuseo, 2003), particularly during their Freshman year, sustainable mindfulness practices led by qualified instructors could provide the necessary tools for adapting and surviving this stress-laden transitory period (Cullen, 2011). Further, mindfulness spaces can provide forums which lay the foundations for sustainable and supportive communities emphasizing all aspects of well-being. In keeping with the above premises, this qualitative study assessed the impact of mindfulness practices on the well-being of first year Aboriginal Access students.

A Definition of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a reflective practice that involves paying close attention to thoughts, emotions, and body sensations in order to bring the practitioner to new levels of self-understanding and awareness (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 144). By paying attention, one can become more aware of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, not only in oneself, but also more conscious of the impact of one’s surroundings and the individuals inhabiting this environment. Langer (1989) suggests that mindfulness can allow the practitioner to view the world through new perspectives that can have a life-altering influence. She also suggests that the state of being mindful has three qualities: “the creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an awareness of more than one perspective” (as cited in Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000, p. 31). Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen (2012) suggest that mindfulness is “a natural human capacity, which involves observing, participating and accepting each of life’s moments from a state of equilibrium or loving kindness” (p. 2). Likewise, Soloway, Poulin and Mackenzie (2011) state that “Mindfulness training strengthens one’s capacity to pay attention, non-judgmentally, to one’s thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, thereby enabling a more skillful response to life’s challenges” (p. 220). These definitions provide a solid rationale for introducing mindfulness practices to higher education.

Rationale for Mindfulness in Education

Due to the positive results emanating from evidence-based research in medicine and in health, mindfulness protocols are becoming highly regarded as non-invasive mental health intervention strategies in educational contexts (Mackenzie, 2015). Specific studies demonstrate that practicing mindfulness decreases occupational stress and compassion burnout and can positively contribute to overall well-being (Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris, & Katz, 2013; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013). In keeping with the above, there exists research indicating that well-being can also be positioned to promote creativity, capability, and productivity (Neilson, 2008; Seligman, 2002, 2011). Reflecting on the inner curriculum of classrooms, Lantieri (2008) acknowledges that the field of education must not only pay attention to the inner lives of teachers and students, but also give them pedagogical strategies designed to cultivate skills that foster inner calm and resilience. Similarly, Goleman (2008), emphasizing the importance of social and emotional resiliency, supports the cultivation of mindful teaching and learning practices in educational contexts. By cultivating the potential of mindful awareness, the significant values of personal growth, learning, moral living, and caring for others are also nurtured (Roeser et al., 2012).

First Year Access Studies and Mindfulness

This research was undertaken, with permission, on the unceded, traditional and ancestral territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation upon which the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus is situated. Conceived as an opportunity for students to transition to higher education, Aboriginal Access Studies (Aboriginal Programs and Services, UBC Okanagan) prepares students for degree studies by providing parameters to facilitate the social, emotional, and cultural adaptation to university level courses. Prospective university students attend core classes in biology, education, English, and math. Specifically, the course entitled, EDUC 104 *Academic Pedagogy: An Aboriginal Perspective*, based on the internationally recognized University 101 program (Barefoot, 1993; Gardner, 1980, 1981), attempts to redress the cultural discontinuities (Ogbu, 1982) between contemporary education systems and the increasing diversity in school populations in North America. Infused with the holistic perspective of Indigenous teaching and learning, this course aims to “end the fragmentation that Eurocentric educational systems imposed on First Nations students, and to facilitate the goal of wholeness to which Indigenous knowledge aspires” (Battiste, 2002, p.30).

In the Access program, students are in school full-time, taking the above mentioned mandatory developmental courses. Respecting the interconnectedness of Indigenous pedagogy, EDUC 104's emphasis is placed on the interrelationship of new knowledge in a culturally responsive framework (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Acknowledging the importance of illumination and enlightenment embedded in the diverse representations of the Medicine Wheel (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 2004), the regular presence of elders, guest speakers from local, place-based First Nations communities, and active peer mentoring from upper level Indigenous students were integral components of this highly supportive educational environment. Understanding the physical, social, and emotional needs of first year students, contemplative practices were introduced to complement events organized by Aboriginal Programs and Services, like participation in a Sweat Lodge and a Salmon Feast.

Befitting the cultural and linguistic plurality of the First Nation Peoples of Canada, many variations of the Medicine Wheel of Learning exist (Bopp et al., 2004). The common element found in most North American First Nations is the concept of (w)holism reflecting the interrelationships between structural, individual, social and cultural factors associated with individual aspirations, intentions, and actions (Archibald et al., 2009, p. iv). Within this context, the Medicine Wheel can provide the parameters for a holistic approach to education emphasizing interdependence, equilibrium, and unity in a nested system (Archibald, 1995; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). Working closely with Aboriginal Programs and Services as well

as community partners, EDUC 104, infused with mindfulness practices and culturally responsive pedagogy, has been conceptualized to reflect interconnectivity in a nested system, where all facets of learning link with each other on emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical levels. Teaching from this holistic perspective offers an alternative approach to the Western school structure, where learning is segregated into individualized and linear-based disciplines (Armstrong, 2005; Claypool & Preston, 2011). It is within this context that mindfulness practices, with a focus on cultivating a state of equilibrium through awareness and non-judgment, were introduced.

Formal and Informal Mindfulness Practice

As discussed, the practices of mindfulness, aimed at bringing awareness to thoughts, emotions, and sensations, can be easily integrated into many aspects of first year students' lives. Accepting that mindfulness practices can be applied to a variety of contexts any time of day or night, a combination of formal and informal practices were introduced. Taking holistic directions from the Medicine Wheel of Learning (Bopp et al., 2004), proven mindfulness activities became weekly occurrences in EDUC 104 (Albrecht & al., 2012; Battiste, 2002; Broderick, 2013; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Cullen, 2011; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Salzman, 2014; Schoeberlein & Seth, 2009). The aim of these practices was to nurture well-being through acts of kindness and compassion by being attentive, intentional, and authentic in all actions and experiences. In particular, students engaged in the following practices over the course of a 13 week university semester:

1. Breath awareness
2. Being present (developing focus and attention)
3. Mindful eating and movement

METHODS

As part of a larger research initiative investigating the impact of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) in an introductory university level course, this study adhered to research mandates established by the University's Ethics Committee, the Faculty of Education's Aboriginal Advisory committee, as well as acknowledgement and support from Aboriginal Programs and Services. In order to ensure the objectivity of each participant's response, a research assistant introduced the study, underscored the confidential nature of the work, reiterated the withdrawal policy, asked for informed consent, conducted the interview, and collected the initial data. The author, also the course instructor, did not have

access to the data until the last day of grade appeal as dictated by university-wide policy. Once ethical permission was granted, seven students agreed to sit for a semi-structured interview. Demographic information indicated that four women and three men between the ages of 18 and 53 participated in the research. Students were not required to provide further demographic information relating to cultural and linguistic identities. As Access students, none had met the minimum requirements for admission to university. This was a first-time experience in higher education for all seven participants.

Based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), semi-structured interviews provided the data from which new information was generated. Eight interview questions were divided into three sections. Questions 1-4 inquired into the type of skills acquired and how these are applied to other courses. Questions 5-6 examined the impact of mindfulness on students' well-being. The last series of questions, 7-8, interrogated the benefits of this course in the short term and the long term. The results presented below focus solely on the participants' responses to the following three open-ended questions:

6. Have the mindfulness exercises been beneficial? Give examples.
7. Have you used the mindfulness exercises in other situations (class/home/work)? Give examples.
8. Is there anything else that you would like to add about EDUC 104 and its impact on your learning?

Transcription of questions 6, 7, and 8 of the interviews is complete and following and thematic coding of the responses has resulted in identifiable themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Measures taken to determine categories include using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify and to analyze the data collected from the interviews. In keeping with grounded theory, this technique identified relationships between codes which provided a more refined analysis.

RESULTS

As the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, three thematic categories addressing the impact of the mindfulness practices emerged. To conclude this section, the benefits as reported by the participants are presented.

1. Self-Reported Perceptions of Stress
2. Similarities between Breath Exercises and Traditional Practices
3. Developing Focus and Attention

The following verbatim transcriptions support the thematic categorizations.

Theme 1: Self-Reported Perceptions of Stress

The impact of the formal and informal mindfulness practices on the perceived stress level of participants was a common theme found in the interview data.

When I first got started in September, I was really focused on school and nothing else. So, just anxious I guess you could call it, on making sure that, you know, all my work got done, and not being able to turn it off in my head. So, learning that, you know, to make time for myself and my husband and, you know, mindfulness, relaxation and having a good balance, that was important for me. (F3)

It was more just stress and keeping the mindfulness. I really liked that because then it really kind of centered me out before classes start, and, yeah. So taking the time to actual kind of settle yourself in, you know? So, it really settled myself down before class. When I'm rushing around to get to class and then I get to class and do the mindfulness and, you know, kind of let me at ease. And so, and then I learnt that, you know, that's, that's good. I never really did stuff like that before on my own. (F2)

The collected data reflected Cuseo (2003) and de Bruin, Meppelink and Bögels (2014) acknowledgement of the high levels of stress and anxiety in first-year students. As hypothesized the mindfulness practices alleviated, to some extent, feelings of anxiety and the feelings of being rushed and disconnected.

Theme 2: Breath Exercises and Traditional Practices

Another important element that emerged from the data was the recognition that breath awareness exercises possessed similar traits to Indigenous traditional practices relating to smudging and prayer.

Just calming yourself. Breathing. Exhaling out. Very, very similar to our culture in smudging. That's what I thought of it. I thought if I could be burning my sage right now, this is why I would be doing it. To sort of cleanse all the negative stuff I've heard, all the stuff I've seen. Just to sort of center yourself. (F4)

“We know what's right. The traditional ways, right? It's a way to heal yourself or center yourself to learn something. You know, to let the good stuff in. And that's why smudging, kinda like mindfulness is important.” (F1)

In an attempt to move away from cultural discontinuities between mainstream schooling and diverse realities (Ogbu, 1982), EDUC 104 was conceptualized within the scope of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) incorporating students' traditions and values into the course content. In this case, since the Access course was aimed at Indigenous students, the Faculty of Education's Aboriginal Advisory committee approved the use of precepts from the Medicine Wheel of Learning with the mindfulness practices.

Theme 3: Developing Focus and Attention

Similar to previous research (Langer, 1989; Meiklejohn et al., 2012), the interview data revealed the impact of the mindfulness practices on renewed focus and attention in the academic courses.

And seeing myself go through that and use the actual skills from actually just kind of sitting in class, and listening, and paying attention, and actually using my skills that I learnt in class, after. So, it was good that way, you know? It was good to see yourself transition and that part take place. (M7)

I think so. Because I find with mindfulness, I find myself— I'm applying it right now. So in school, so even just this morning I was walking to the bus and it was really pretty, so instead of rushing to class, I'm just like, take my time. So I guess that's a mindless activity, walking. So with the mindfulness, it's really good to just stop and reflect, and even just when I'm typing up— stop and reflect and, 'What am I doing? What's the main purpose? Why am I sending this message? (M5)

Ritchart and Perkins (2000) state that nurturing the disposition of mindfulness in schools requires attention to the students' abilities, inclinations, and sensitivities. This means developing the ability to see and understand more than one perspective, and by becoming aware of the difference between mindfulness and mindlessness. In particular, it means that students become aware of when they are mindful and when they are likely to participate in mindless behaviour. The above transcripts reveal how students engaging in mindfulness practices develop the ability to distinguish between mindful and mindless behaviours.

Benefits

During the semi-structured interview, question 6 specifically invited students to discuss the benefits or lack of benefits of the mindfulness practices introduced in EDUC 104 and its impact on their learning experiences.

Yeah, that helps a lot. Because I find myself trying to stay present in conversations, and also just staying present when I'm walking somewhere, or even when I'm in my room I'm always in my own head. So I thought, 'Well where am I right now? What am I doing, what am I here for?' (M6)

It was an enormous boon to come to Educ Pedagogy in the mornings, perform a mindfulness exercise, and learn about new skills and practices towards education, then be able to follow up and utilize these skills in my next class. The mindfulness exercises don't just calm a stressed brain, but also teach us how to recenter our focus and energy. This is great to do first thing in the morning on a stressful day, but I also use this centering technique before I study. (F2)

Mackenzie (2015) summarizes the plethora of research which suggest that mindfulness-based interventions in health and in education can enhance cognitive skills, brain function, immune system function, emotional regulation, stress resiliency, as well as pro-social behavior and communication skills. The student comments reflect the positive impact of the mindfulness practices on their academic lives by noting the attributes of mindfulness contributing to successful academic experiences and overall well-being (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Flook et al., 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

DISCUSSION

The above results presented the themes emerging from the interviews conducted with all participants: perceived stress levels; similarities between breath practices and traditional practices; and self-reported increased attention and focus. The data, though limited, did demonstrate that the introduction of mindfulness practices in an Access course did impact the academic pathway of first-year students. Analysis of the interview data revealed a self-reported increase in attention, focus, and general well-being as well as a self-reported reduction in stress levels. The above three identified themes support the generalized discussion relating to how the different dimensions of well-being can be influenced by life experiences and challenges (Dodge et al., 2012; Mayol, Scott, & Schreiber, 2013), the importance of adhering to PERMA by creating conditions that support positive relationships, positive emotions, engagement, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2002, 2011), as well as the crucial presence of a (w)holistic framework which acknowledges and recognizes Indigenous cultural traditions (Archibald et al., 2009; Pidgeon et al., 2014).

In particular, the participants explained how the application of skills relating to stress reduction, attention, and focus influenced their academic experiences.

This is relevant to Langer (1989), and Ritchhart and Perkins' (2000) premises regarding promoting thinking skills in educational contexts. Ritchhart and Perkins (2000) identified instructional strategies emphasizing the following disposition: "looking closely, exploring possibilities and perspectives, and introducing ambiguity" (p. 31). In their work, they found that students who received instructional strategies based on these principles showed greater facility and creativity, and decreased mindlessness when solving classroom problems. During the interviews in this study, participants described their own emergent awareness about their educational potential, and the ensuing consideration of their self-imposed goals.

In the seminal White Paper by Meiklejohn et al., (2012), a review of the literature reported that students enrolled in mindful based programs experienced lowered anxiety and improvements in mental distress and worry, increased self-resilience, improvements in teacher rated attention, social skills, physical health, and objective measures of selective attention. Thus, the results presented reflect previous research that attest to the positive benefits of mindfulness practices. Of note is the fact that participants also pointed out how their own emergent mindful dispositions impacted on daily activities and how shared narratives based on historical, societal, cultural, and linguistic experiences supported the development of a sustainable community of practice. Soloway et al. (2011) recognize that a state of mindfulness can be achieved formally through practices of contemplative awareness or meditation and can also be used more informally as a way to approach daily life while simply eating, working, or doing any other everyday activity. In fact, Meiklejohn et al. (2012) describe informal mindfulness practices as "the weaving of mindful awareness into activities of everyday life, such as showering, walking, eating, and interpersonal interactions" (p. 1).

As indicated in this research, a (w)holistic approach to well-being seems to have minimized unhealthy behaviors by supporting a calmer, more focused approach to the complexities of a first-year university experience. By paying attention and focusing on the activity at hand, the practices of mindfulness seems to have led to increased clarity and stability of attention as well as a reduced reactivity in the body's physiological stress response. Further, the similarities between mindfulness practices and Indigenous traditional practices and cultural values as well as the emergent sense of community was mentioned several times by all participants. The similarities between contemplative practices in diverse cultural and spiritual traditions have been noted elsewhere (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Ragoonaden, 2015). As indicated, Pidgeon et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of the 4Rs (focus on respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility of First Nation, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada), and Seligman's (2002) theorization of PERMA (positive emotion, relationship, engagement and accomplishments) are situated within frameworks that emphasizes the interconnectedness and harmonious balance of

all aspects of an individual's self. Despite its limited scope, this study did demonstrate the potential, within educational contexts, to actively enhance well-being strategies as integral components of supporting positive classroom experiences and, potentially, community-building.

Acknowledging the high rate of stress, anxiety, and depression of university students (de Bruin et al., 2014; Cuseo, 2003), mindfulness practices such as the ones introduced in this course, led by a qualified instructor, could provide the necessary strategies for adapting and surviving this transitory period. Previous studies indicate that mindfulness-trained educators embody behaviors and attitudes through their presence and interaction with students in the classroom. Through this practice, their students can develop an increased sense of well-being and self-efficacy leading to increased clarity and stability of attention (Cullen, 2011; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2012). This is an important consideration in the delivery of a mindfulness curriculum in higher education and has the potential to impact on the perceived benefits of these practices.

Despite the plethora of studies into the effects of mindfulness training in clinical and non-clinical populations (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012), only a few studies relating to mindfulness in higher education are available. Further, very few of these studies are of a qualitative nature. Most are experimental and focus on pre and post-tests determining the physiological impact of mindfulness practices. Understanding the limitations of this study, the following observations emerged from the collected data:

- ***Stress, balancing & mindfulness:*** students commented specifically about the holistic benefit of the mindfulness practices.
- ***Cultural content:*** students acknowledged the similarities of their own spiritual traditions like smudging and prayer ceremonies. This was an important connection providing a safe, nurturing context for teaching and learning.
- ***Integration:*** application of mindfulness into everyday life and other courses appears to be an essential aspect that supports further understanding of the practices.

CONCLUSION

The above observations support previous research indicating that the introduction of mindfulness practices in health, clinical, and educational contexts is beneficial (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Mackenzie, 2015). The practice of mindfulness in higher education is a burgeoning area of interest with preliminary findings indicating that the

inclusion of mindfulness practices can reduce stress, increase resiliency, improve academic outcomes, and foster a greater sense of well-being. Further, the findings reported here suggest that incorporating mindfulness into culturally responsive context has many benefits, in particular, for the well-being and the academic pathway of Access students. Future research directions could include an exploration of culturally responsive pedagogy and mindfulness practices with diversified populations over a longer period of time culminating with a model for the sustainable development of mindful communities of practice in higher education.

NOTES

1. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous have been used interchangeably in this paper. In Canada, the term Aboriginal refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples as noted in the Canadian Constitution (Section 35[1]) (see Pidgeon et al., [2014] for more detail).

2. The spelling of “wholistic” with a “w” is intentional and reflects the interconnections and interrelationships that are important components of Indigenous epistemologies (see Pidgeon et al., [2014] for more detail).

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