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Learning Mindful Leadership in Virtual Spaces

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This research examines the processes and outcomes of learning mindful leadership in virtual spaces. The development of best practices for teaching mindfulness in online courses is hindered by a lack of research. Additionally, there is a lack of research on contemplative education practices concerned with the development of the whole person, particularly developing emotional intelligence capacities for leadership. This paper reports on a grounded theory study on an online educational leadership course involving nine graduate students. Data includes course artifacts and an electronic survey. Key findings include that learners experienced a shift in their attitude toward mindful leadership and they identified several impactful practices which aided their exploration of leadership. The impacts of mindfulness practices on learners included uncovering their personal barriers to developing leadership potential and the role of self-care and management for leaders. Peer-to-peer learning was a key process in learning mindful leadership.

Leadership is a complex process which has garnered much research and discussion over at least the past century and a half (Northouse, 2016). One aspect of leadership is emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), which is “the ability to accurately perceive, understand and express emotion; the ability to use emotion to effectively think and reason; and the ability to regulate one’s emotions” (Majeski et al., 2017, p. 136). As organizations and leaders face increasingly complex challenges in rapidly evolving contexts, emotional intelligence has become a key competency for leadership and helping adult learners develop these skills is a critical need (Majeski et al., 2017). This need has become more evident during the current global pandemic and the polarized leadership at lo-

cal, regional, national, and international levels exacerbating the pandemic's effects. Developing leadership competencies is addressed through formal and non-formal training, academic programs of study, and popular culture. Regardless of where leadership training and development occurs, the incorporation of mindfulness practices and skills can enhance the development of the whole person (Shapiro et al., 2011), including emotional intelligence.

Mindfulness goes by many names (contemplative practice, introspection, meditation, mindfulness meditation, reflection, etc.) and is "the intentional training of attention and awareness, such that consciousness becomes more finely attuned to events and experiences in the present" (Shapiro et al., 2011, p. 494). Its use in higher education is gaining traction and rationales for its use include enhanced cognitive and academic performance, stress management, and development of the whole person (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2011). While a body of research exists regarding the first two points, the third (development of the whole person) is an under-researched area (Shapiro et al., 2011).

The teaching of emotional intelligence is often relegated to external, stand-alone, and/or optional settings and Majeski et al. (2017) offer guidance on incorporating it into online and face-to-face discipline-based courses. According to Shapiro et al. (2011), how to provide effective mindfulness instruction is an area in which more exploration and research is warranted. Researching this topic in online learning environments is particularly relevant at a time when online learning in higher education has been trending upward in general (Salvo et al., 2017) and a global pandemic has forced most higher education institutions to offer most courses via distance learning for the foreseeable future.

The qualitative research discussed below is a grounded theory study focusing on learning mindful leadership practices in online settings. As such it explores attitude shifts, impactful practices, learning outcomes, and learning processes employed by learners. The learners were graduate students in an educational leadership master's program who engaged in deliberate mindfulness practices and were generally novice practitioners (Wheeler et al., 2017). The findings contribute to

identifying best practices for teaching mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2011), specifically in online settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To frame this exploration of learning mindful leadership in an online environment, two areas of literature are discussed: the developing field of contemplative education and community of inquiry. While contemplative education is receiving wider attention and inquiry, exploration of its use in online environments is undeveloped and scarce. The community of inquiry framework is used in research on online learning, making it appropriate for exploring the effectiveness of learning mindful leadership in virtual spaces.

Contemplative Education

Contemplative education is a growing field of academic study and practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2011; Wheeler et al., 2017). It merges introspective practices, experiential learning, and academics to help learners engage on academic, social, and personal levels. According to Barbezat and Bush (2014), the benefits of these practices in higher education settings include increased concentration and attention; improved mental health and psychological well-being; increased connection, generosity, and loving kindness; deepened understanding of the course material; and increased creativity and insight. Shapiro et al. (2011) cite improved cognitive/academic performance, stress management, and development of the whole person as a rationale for the use of mindfulness in higher education. The benefits of cognitive/academic performance and stress management have received more attention in the literature compared to development of the whole person (Shapiro et al., 2011). Developing the whole person, particularly cultivating emotional intelligence and self-regulating abilities is a crucial skill for leadership, as “leaders are challenged not only to be aware of their own and others’ emotions but to be self-motivated and self-regulated as well” (Majeski et al., 2017, p. 136). Exploring the development of the whole person is an area to which the current study seeks to contribute.

Most research on the teaching of mindfulness in higher education is focused on traditional learning contexts, with scant research on online learning environments. Simmons and Redman (2018) offer a rare look at teaching mindfulness online. Their quantitative study compared two different online instructional modes (real time sessions with a tutor or self-guided) during a four-week optional course on mindfulness using established psychometric instruments to assess impacts on learner attention, wellbeing, and motivation. A key finding was that mindfulness training may help learners shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation for their learning. Most relevant to the current study is the low level of participants' engagement with each other in the Simmons and Redman study. The course was offered as a stand-alone course on mindfulness. While the course environment included discussion space, participants did not avail themselves of the opportunity to engage with fellow learners and the researchers reported low engagement among learners as a limitation of the study. Similarly, Spadaro, and Hunker (2016) conducted a 24-week descriptive study on a small group of online nursing students using validated instruments to measure perceived stress, anxiety, and attention. Participants in an 8-week program with a 16-week follow up showed decreased stress, improved mood, and more efficient cognition after learning mindfulness practices in an asynchronous program focused solely on learning mindfulness practice. Instruments to measure stress and mood were administered at baseline, eight weeks, and 24 weeks. Cognitive effects were measured at baseline and eight weeks. Participants were encouraged to post thoughts and observations on their suggested weekly mindfulness practice. The researchers did not discuss the frequency or level of participant interaction. In both studies, the mindfulness components were separate from the content that learners were studying in their degree programs and are in line with Shapiro et al.'s (2011) report of cognitive/academic and stress management foci dominating the literature on mindfulness in higher education. In the current study, a mindfulness component was integrated into course material, allowing the learning of course content and mindfulness skill development to occur in tandem, as well as providing opportunity to explore the development of the whole person aspect of mindful learning in higher education.

Community of Inquiry

The importance of community in higher education, particularly as it impacts learner satisfaction (Tinto, 1993) and persistence (Kuh, 2009), has been well documented. As online learning developed as a viable and effective means of providing educational access, researchers and practitioners began to explore how learners and teachers build community in non-traditional educational environments (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Rovai, 2000, 2004). Garrison et al.'s (2000) community of inquiry framework, focusing on teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence, has provided structure to research on effective online learning and development of effective practice (Lohr & Haley, 2018). Teaching presence goes beyond direct interaction to include creation and facilitation of learning environments; cognitive presence is concerned with applying, sharing, and synthesizing content and knowledge; and social presence among learners "is demonstrated through open communication, group cohesion, and affective expression" (Lohr & Haley, 2018, p. 13). Rovai (2000) also explored learner community and its role in learning, identifying the components of class community as spirit, trust, interaction, and learning. From the learner's perspective, social presence (or lack thereof) is often cited as a criticism or complaint about online learning environments. According to Rovai (2004), "students with stronger feelings of being connected to others in their online courses felt more satisfied with their distance education program" (p. 86). Lohr and Haley's study (2018) explored intentional community building in an online graduate course by creating opportunities for learners to develop social presence, which in addition to increasing learning and communication (cognitive presence), resulted in an active and engaged online community. The use of biographical prompts in a discussion on learning and memory provided the opportunity for learners to share personal experiences and their associated emotions with each other. Course instructors used an early intensive teaching presence (direct and visible involvement in discussion boards) to create a safe space for learners to open up to each other as the course proceeded, resulting in learner-led discussions which enabled the use of social presence to achieve cognitive presence and deep interaction with course material. The current

study contributes to the literature on community of inquiry through its examination of social presence among learners of mindful leadership in virtual spaces.

PROCESS AND METHODS

Participants

Participants were graduate students in a hybrid Master of Leadership Program and several were working toward a student affairs concentration. Nine learners (out of 17 total) agreed to participate in this study after the course ended by granting permission to use course artifacts and completing an online survey. Data was collected in Fall 2016. Seven participants identified as white, two identified as people of color, and one as a non-traditional student (25+ years old). Seven participants reported they had no previous formal training in mindfulness. Two participants discussed practices that they connected to mindfulness: one participant cited Lamaze training and participation in a few yoga classes; a second participant cited prayer as a form of mindfulness. According to Wheeler et al.'s definition (2017), study participants can be labeled as novice practitioners, indicating they are "individuals being trained for the first time during the study period" (p. 1483). Pseudonyms are used to identify specific participants.

A Process of Learning Mindfulness Online

A contemplative education component was added to an existing 16-week (13 module) asynchronous online course in educational leadership. This was accomplished through the addition of a text on mindful leadership. *Finding the space to lead: A practical guide to mindful leadership* by Janice Marturano (2015) was selected due to its specific focus on leadership. Marturano maintains a companion website with audio versions of the text's mindfulness practices and reflections. The contemplative educational component was introduced during the first course module which was asynchronous. During this time the students began reading about mindful leadership in the Marturano text. Module 2 included the course's first synchronous meeting during which they discussed the

contemplative education component and asynchronously began working with mindfulness exercises and reflecting on their experiences. This process continued throughout the semester. Students discussed course materials in groups of eight to ten. Modules 2-11 included a discussion question specifically on the Marturano text and learner experiences with the mindfulness exercises introduced in each chapter. Marturano's text is structured to scaffold learners through simple mindfulness practices which build learners' comfort with and confidence in their practice, leading to more complex and probing exercises that encourage deep reflection and insight. For example, the first mindfulness exercise is a simple but powerful breath awareness exercise, which gently introduces learners to mindfulness and its capacity for relaxation and awareness. Exercises in later chapters introduce compassion and kindness, uncovering valued leadership principles, and culminate with a reflection on who they want to become as leaders. The instructor maintained an active presence in discussion boards during each module, sharing her experiences with mindfulness practices, suggestions to help learners in their struggles, and celebrating their successes. The instructor also did this during summary videos that accompanied each module. This course utilized shared journaling to provide another avenue for reflection and discussion on students' leadership development. Students journaled in groups of three to four and focused on specific prompts to reflect on their experiences with leadership, both as leaders and as followers. The culminating activity for the shared journal exercise was a paper in which learners reflected on what they learned about themselves as leaders throughout the course.

This was an online course in a mostly online program, which is a challenging way to teach and learn given its relative newness in education settings. Research on online teaching found that it "demanded a minimum of 20 percent more time than traditional instruction" (Tomei, 2004, p. 44). The addition of a mindfulness component did not necessitate additional instructor time beyond that normally required for online course delivery, as one of the usual two discussion questions were focused on the mindfulness content and activities. No participants were novice online learners nor did they report any challenges with the de-

livery mode. This was a graded course, with graded class participation via discussion boards or optional student organized online synchronous meetings. These activities were evaluated using a three-point rubric: 0 = no posting, 1 = surface depth (e.g., repeating what was already stated), 2 = moderate depth (e.g., descriptive, information transfer), 3 = synthesis depth (e.g., analytical thought). Shared journals were evaluated solely by posting frequency (initial post and responses to each journal partner). A resource on giving and receiving constructive criticism was provided at the onset of the semester, adapted from West and West (2009). It provided technical guidance on giving and receiving feedback (i.e., validating accuracy of material and/or affirming experience, trying not to only understand the points being made, but the point of view). It also stressed the personal and meaningful nature of our work and writing and the need to take care when giving feedback and accepting it gracefully.

Data Analysis

This is a primarily qualitative study which collected a small amount of quantitative data using a survey. Qualitative data was compiled from course artifacts and included discussion board posts, journal entries, analysis papers, and video recordings of synchronous meetings and discussions. Discussion prompts asked participants to reflect on their experience with specific mindfulness exercises and how they may have influenced their life. As an example, here is the prompt for Module Three, which focused on a daily mindfulness practice:

Chapter Five of Finding the Space to Lead discusses the idea of purposeful pauses. Share your three purposeful pauses and describe your experience in integrating them into your mindfulness practice. How do you remember to do them? How often have you done them? What have you noticed while doing them and afterward?

The prompt for Module Six opened the pathway to mindful leadership: “Chapter Eight explores the crucial importance of being aware of our own leadership principles. Share your responses to the reflection on leadership principles. Did any of your responses surprise you? Why or why not?”

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was the method used to analyze course artifacts, with data being managed and analyzed using NVivo 11. Analysis closely followed Charmaz's (2014) guidance, beginning with line-by-line initial coding, followed by focused coding on the initial codes. The categories of barriers to growth, changes to make, impactful practices, learning processes and role of mindfulness emerged from reviewing and sorting focused codes. For example, the focused code barriers to growth emerged from experiences reported by two participants during the exercise and prompt on leadership potential. Both reported insights into what was keeping them from reaching their full leadership potential prompting a re-examination of data. Memoing on the categories led to their coalescing into the themes discussed below. Study participants also completed an electronic survey administered via Qualtrics after the course ended about their experiences with the mindfulness exercises. The survey asked ten questions and focused on attitudes toward mindful leadership, documented participant-reported frequency of mindfulness practice, and which practices participants found useful. Limitations of the study include its very small sample size, reliance on participant self-reported behavior, and that the participants may only represent learners who had a positive experience with the contemplative educational component. The researcher was also the course instructor and an advocate for mindfulness, which may have introduced bias into participant data and subsequent analysis. The study was also designed after the course was in progress, however participants were not aware their course artifacts were a potential source of research data until after the course was complete and course grades submitted.

FINDINGS

The study's findings are presented in four categories: attitudes toward mindful leadership, impactful practices, impact of practices, and learning processes.

Attitudes toward Mindful Leadership

To supplement the qualitative data culled from course artifacts, an on-line survey was administered to participants after the course was com-

pleted. The survey revealed changes in attitudes toward mindful leadership by asking a retrospective pre/post question (resulting in paired samples) about attitudes before and after taking the course. Five survey participants reported that prior to the course, they thought the role of mindfulness in developing leadership skills was *slightly important or not important at all*, based on a 5-point Likert scale. At the end of the course, six reported the role of mindfulness in developing leadership skills to be *extremely important or very important*, representing a meaningful shift in attitude. More detail is provided in Figure 1 below.

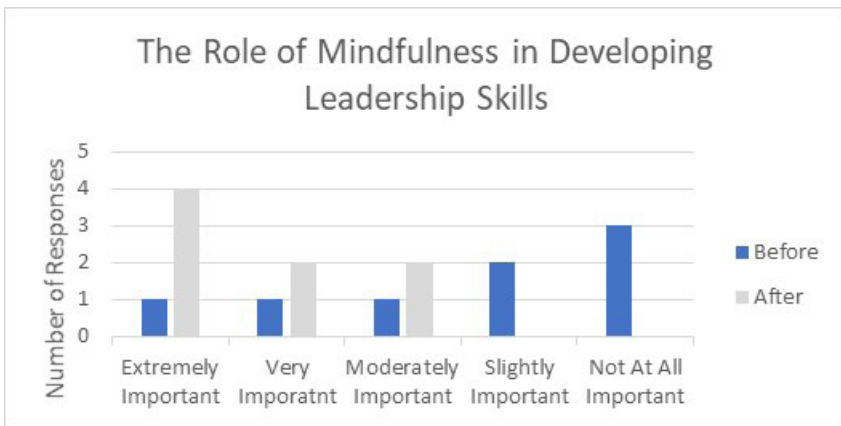


Figure 1. Attitude shifts in the role of mindfulness in developing leadership skills. (Retrospective Pre-Post, n=8).

Participants also reported a range of frequency in practicing mindfulness from once a week to daily, with half reporting they practiced two to three times a week. Their level of commitment or intention to practice ranged from half reporting *very strong to strong* intentions and half reporting intentions that were *weak or neither weak nor strong*.

Impactful Practices

Based on survey results and analysis of course artifacts, four practices were identified as being impactful in terms of cultivating mindfulness and in eliciting reactions that indicate significant and/or potentially last-

ing impacts on participants. In reflecting on their experiences with these practices, participants reported insight into their behaviors; discomfort, anxiety or stress; feelings of love/compassion, relaxation, calm/peace, or refreshment/rejuvenation; and intentions to integrate them into daily life. These practices were mindful walking, purposeful pauses, scheduling space, and compassion and kindness. Mindful walking and purposeful pauses were commonly discussed by participants in sharing and describing their processes of learning mindfulness skills. Mindful walking is “cultivating the capacity to bring awareness to everything we experience as we simply pay attention to the movement of the body through its surroundings” (Marturano, p. 84). Purposeful pauses are moments when we intentionally pull ourselves out of a moment to notice what we are sensing or experiencing. Doing so enables one to “become more awake to what is all around you and what you feel inside of yourself” (Marturano, 2015, pp. 57-58) leading to clarity about the present and immediate future. These were popular exercises because they could be practiced anywhere, anytime, and easily connected to other daily practices. There was also immediate benefit realized from improved concentration, productivity, and stress relief. Scheduling space as well as compassion and kindness practices were two practices in which participants experienced significant insights into their behavior and attitudes. The scheduling space practice applies awareness meditation to a day’s calendar or to do list, reviewing one’s commitments and noticing the physical and emotional states that ensue. “Cultivating compassion often begins with a kindness practice that helps us to recognize and open our hearts to the fundamental needs of all human beings” (Marturano, p. 152).

Mindful walking.

Mindful walking was described by participants as promoting relaxation and providing a break from the daily grind or routine. Many participants chose outdoors for their mindful walking, which for Sara led to significant insights. She reported:

I absolutely love mindful walking. I naturally have to reflect in order to process my thoughts, and I love to reflect in the midst of nature. As I was reading the text,

I realized that I often distract myself while walking by listening to music or talking on the phone. I never thought about how I was robbing myself of reflection time by welcoming these distractions.

Purposeful pauses.

Participants integrated purposeful pauses into exercise, bedtime or morning routines, driving, and work routines. In addition to providing opportunities for much-needed breaks and relaxation, they often led to behavior changes or the realizations that behavior changes were needed. Nico shared how he developed the habit of taking a purposeful pause before meetings.

My...purposeful pause is when I have one on one meetings with my Resident Advisors (RA). Before they come in, I take a moment to stop what I'm working on and I intentionally close my laptop so that I am not still doing work or getting distracted by emails that pop up. I do this every time I have a one on one which is three times a week, every other week. I find that by doing this, I am much more engaged in what my RA is telling me.

Scheduling space.

Scheduling space was one of the practices with visceral responses noted by participants, who reported a lot of anxiety, tension, and constriction when engaged in the practice. Additionally, many set intentions to make changes in their approaches to their schedules and reported realizations about the need to develop the capacity to say no and be thoughtful about their time. This was particularly true for female participants. Through the practice, Dayna "was reminded that I am a human created with limits, and limits are tagged to every human, no one can be superman or superwoman and do it all (I am actually really grateful for that!)."

Compassion and kindness meditations.

Compassion and kindness meditations were also impactful practices for many. The impact participants reported had to do finding new ways to re-

late to self and others. The exercise asks the individual to wish kindness and compassion for oneself, which is difficult for many people. The participants in this study were no different. Wishing well for others was also beneficial and helped connect participants to leadership skills. Dayna shared:

I really appreciated learning that having compassion on oneself had a direct correlation with having compassion on other people. This mentality has been a really gentle and kind reminder to myself and has also helped me in my pursuit of leadership with working with others who may be very different than me.

Although some experienced trouble wishing compassion or ease for themselves, learning that it is connected to being compassionate to others is an important lesson, particularly for leaders.

Impacts of Practices

The impacts of mindfulness practices on students fall into two main categories: uncovering barriers to leadership potential as well as self-care and management.

Barriers to leadership potential.

Participants identified and discussed barriers to their development as leaders. Barriers include limitations and self-restrictions; worry; and fear and doubt. The limitations identified were external, often related to their positions as graduate assistants, and internal, which took the form of self-imposed restrictions based on their perceptions of themselves and their abilities. Worries about taking on leadership roles was another barrier identified, as was fear and doubt about one's ability to be a leader.

Limitations and self-restrictions.

Participants were graduate students in a leadership program to prepare themselves for taking on future leadership positions and challenges. For some of the students, reflecting on their leadership potential uncovered feelings of being limited by their current roles and ready to do more. While they expressed frustrations with the limitations placed on them by being graduate assistants, they also recognized that they were on the

right path and preparing themselves for more rather than stuck where they are, merely waiting for their turn.

Lana provided an example. In describing her experience with this reflection, she moved through the exercise with initial discomfort, but ultimately was at peace. She shared:

I am able to find rest in most things that I do because I feel like I am right where I am supposed to be. That doesn't mean I'm always where I want to be, but it does mean that I try to find the purpose behind every why I am in this place...Although I sometimes feel like my current role is too small, I know that this is not forever. I also know that this season of life holds a special purpose in preparing me for the role or season where I am fulfilling my dreams.

One of Marturano's reflective exercises encourages reflection upon whether one has promised oneself to things that are too small. For one participant this reflection opened up new possibilities. Dayna reported that previously she had accepted limitations on what she would be able to accomplish as a leader based on her introverted personality. She reported:

When thinking about what makes something small in my personal pursuit of leadership, I recognized that I often fall under thinking about my future leadership aspirations through the eyes of what I feel is appropriate for my demeanor and personality type.

This reflection led Dayna to

think "big" about what I want to pursue with my future. Instead of limiting myself with a role that I used to believe was what I would do, it helped me think through ways in which I could open myself up to dreaming about the possibilities of pursuing something that may seem a little bit out of reach. It was refreshing to be optimistic about the future and exciting to think big about what the future could potentially hold.

Realizing that who you thought you were and what you thought you could be has not reached the limit seems to be a significant developmental event, transformative even.

Worry.

The reflection on leadership potential led Meagan to a very insightful experience on why she was holding herself back from taking on leadership roles.

The thing that is too small in my life that I've promised myself to is worry. I am constantly worried about something and often wake up to a bit of an upset stomach without even understanding why I am anxious. An image continued to unfold of a person walking down the street with an empty trash bag on his back that became full as he continued to add small cans to it...It seems to represent to me that I like to take on a little bit of everyone's baggage...and at first sight is not much, but as I continue to worry and take home a bit of every situation, that bag cannot be held and is the point in time where I've realized that I've been carrying around and promised myself to all of these things that are just too small. I think as a leader, that is my biggest obstacle to overcome – the sense that I need to carry situations around with me until they're solved, which makes me shy away from leadership responsibility in the first place. I think I've known this tendency to worry for a while, but I don't think I've realized how much of my worry may not even be mine. Lots of new things to think and pray about.

This was a very intense experience for her, filled with insight into her barriers to growth as a leader. Although the problem itself was one she was aware of, this reflection helped to identify more fully the issue and what she can do to help resolve or move past it. If she can find a way to either not take on others' worries or a way to shed them, she may find herself more open to taking on leadership roles.

Fear and doubt.

Fear and doubt was another issue discussed by participants as a barrier to their developing their leadership potential. Nico shared “there have been times that I have been reluctant to taking bigger roles at work and in organizations. While I know that I want to do more, I sometimes feel that I am not ready or capable just yet.” In discussing his fear with another student, Nico shared that his motivation for getting past fear was the desire to do more. “I’m realizing that I want more and want to do more so I’m just forcing myself beyond the fear. But I’m also building the confidence and telling myself that I’m capable of handling whatever is to come next.”

Self-care and management.

Throughout their semester focused on learning mindfulness practices, examples of the need for self-care and management arose as being an important element for leadership. Themes related to self-care and management include work/life balance, creating one’s own stress, prioritizing tasks, and healthy leadership. Marturano’s reflection on scheduling space brought forth several insights related to this theme.

Work/life balance.

Work/life balance is an issue of concern these days in many professions. Mindfulness practices are one way to help people connect with its importance and provide tools for helping to bring that balance into being. Making time for oneself and/or family is an example of work/life imbalance noted by participants. Meagan shared her growing realization that she needed to make time to enjoy life, instead of being so wrapped up in getting things done.

I have recently (primarily because of this book) started to think more about how much of life with my daughter I’m missing because I’m so focused on the next thing on the to-do list. I spend way too much time looking at my phone when I should be engaged and enjoying our walks or playing. I also haven’t decided what it will be, but I am determined to find regular time to do something I enjoy.

Creating one's own stress.

Lana recognized that she was creating unnecessary stress for herself, sharing that “this exercise helped me realize that I stress myself out over course work that I still have plenty of time to complete.” Her insight was that by making a few changes, she could reduce the emotional response that her calendar was causing. She elaborated:

After this realization, I have made a few goals to reduce the frequency of these emotions. First, I will schedule personal time so that I can spend more time with family and friends. Then, I will not stress myself out if large assignments aren't completed by the date that I want (which is usually way too early). Finally, I will set aside time to review my calendar each week in order to successfully prepare for the week or months ahead.

These changes should help Lana achieve a healthier school/life balance and develop habits that would serve any leader well.

Prioritizing tasks.

Since the students are busy people who are often juggling work, school, family, internships, and other extra-curricular activities, the scheduling space reflection resonated strongly. They discussed their love/hate relationships with their schedules and their dependence on their devices and stress in instances of being parted from them. Dave discovered that while he uses a calendar quite extensively he does not engage in mindful planning of how he spends his time.

I feel like I need to spend more time on daily planning of my work, rather than just planning my meetings. Everyday there are probably 20 things that at some point in the day I think about needing to do. Of those 20 things, typically I complete ten or 12 of them. I think spending some time each morning prioritizing my list, and scheduling time to work on each item will go a long way towards relieving some of the constant stress I feel be-

cause there always seems to be fewer hours in the day than tasks I need to complete.

Healthy leadership.

Participants identified the use of mindfulness practices to help sustain themselves as healthy leaders. As one shared in the follow-up survey, a benefit of adding the mindfulness component to the course was that

I learned that mindful leadership is essential to the overall health of the leader. If the leader is connected to themselves, they are able to be present in relationship with others. Mindful leadership equips leaders with the concept of themselves, which in return, allows them to lead in a healthy way.

Learning Processes

The process of learning mindfulness in a virtual classroom involved peer-to-peer learning, with an important role being that of supporting each other throughout the course. This support took the form of responding with compassion, corroborating peers' choices and experiences, relating to and encouraging each other, expressing appreciation to one another, and questioning.

Meagan shared the experience of learning a valuable lesson about practicing mindful listening when she traveled to a new city and failed to listen mindfully during the third of three job interviews. Anna corroborated Meagan's experience by writing

[In]your defense, you were tired, and you were stressed, and you were doing your best. Our brains can only handle so much information and then we are overloaded... It sounds like you were overloaded. But the good news is that you learned a lesson. I don't blame you one bit for being tired. You were trying to get a job.

Anna corroborated the lesson learned, while reminding Meagan of the limits of human endurance which led to the situation. This also presented Anna with the opportunity to practice compassion toward a peer.

As participants shared their experience in purposefully pausing, respondents supported and affirmed their choices. Mia related that she had chosen as purposeful pauses events that she already participated in daily. Daniel corroborated these choices by writing “picking events that happen each day is a smart idea. Habits are hard to start, but if you attach them to a currently existing habit then it is that much easier.” Corroborating each other’s experiences, whether they be with the mindfulness exercises or relating their experiences as leaders or simply as human beings, was a common practice.

As students were beginning to explore mindfulness early in the course, there was recognition and connection of mindfulness activities to other activities many of them had been doing. When they were doing the early exercises, prayer was one of those activities which emerged as a mindfulness activity they were already engaged in or familiar with. Their discussion provided an example of corroborating by relating. Daniel identified prayer as meditation when he shared that “my primary form of mediation is prayer.” Anna and Lana corroborated Daniel’s perspective by relating their own experiences with prayer as meditation.

Anna replied:

That is awesome. Prayer, yes. I do meditate a lot !!!! I heard a minister do a sermon on “Breath Prayers.” When you breathe you say a prayer that lasts as long as you breathe, inhale, exhale, that is how long it lasts... and if you are concentrating on your prayer then that is meditating. Very awesome point, Daniell!! Thank you.

For Anna, Daniel’s declaration that prayer was meditation provided her with a connection between the two practices. This allowed her to draw on her prior knowledge and experience to gain confidence and credibility as a meditator.

Lana wrote to Daniel:

I agree with everyone on thanking you for mentioning prayer as a form of meditation! I initially thought of prayer as my form of meditation when I first read through

the questions, but I realized that prayer is oftentimes very difficult for me. I am constantly getting distracted or sidetracked in the midst of my prayers. This is only a testament to the fact that meditation truly is a habit that takes practice and discipline.

For Lana, Daniel's statement corroborated her initial reaction to the reading and exercises as well and she could relate with a similar experience and perspective. That her experience with prayer (difficulty concentrating/distractions) is a common experience in other meditation practices also serves to further connect the two practices. It also serves to corroborate Daniel's experiences with meditation and prayer, who shared that "meditation is not easy for me. My brain is always going a mile a minute and it can get exhausting."

Deep listening was a discussion topic and mindfulness practice. Dayna shared the experience of not being listened to and also being a bad listener to a follower. Ricky's response was both corroborating and appreciative.

Regarding...that time you were caught not focusing on the person speaking, all I can say is that we have all been there! I can unfortunately name more than one situation where I found myself failing to listen to the other. Thank you for sharing that experience because not often do you have others admitting to that.

Participants also questioned each other about their experiences, which helped them to dig in and share more deeply. Recalling Nico's discussion about fear limiting his leadership, Ricky expressed gratitude in his response: "thanks for being honest in admitting that. It can be difficult to take on new roles." He then challenged Nico to dig deeper by asking "how can you get past that fear and start to take on new and more challenging roles?"

DISCUSSION

Marturano's (2015) program was effective at helping learners build a foundation for mindfulness practice in tandem with their learning about

leadership principles. Early exercises were very basic and focused on relaxation and awareness. Not only did this help persuade the students of the benefit of mindfulness by giving simple tools that produced immediate and noticeable outcomes for practitioners, but also helped them develop the necessary skills required for the more focused and deeper exercises, such as compassion and kindness and exploring leadership potential and barriers. Having a mindfulness program rooted in their discipline helped to legitimize the practice in ways that a program disconnected from any specific context may not have.

Findings from this study indicate that it may be useful to incorporate mindfulness practices into learning about leadership. The shift in participant attitudes toward the role of mindfulness in leadership and their willingness to devote time to exploring and developing a personal mindfulness practice evidence the value that these leaders placed on its potential. They were able to understand and connect mindfulness to healthy leadership practice, in addition to uncovering barriers to reaching their personal leadership potential. Their shared experience led them to better understandings of themselves as individuals and as leaders, helping them to make gains in the development of their own emotional intelligence (Majeski et al., 2017). Developing a sustained mindfulness practice may help them develop skills for dealing with the stresses and demands they face in current and future leadership settings (Shapiro et al., 2011).

The findings also indicate that learning mindfulness in virtual settings can be effective. The online learning environment can open up space for deep and sustained connection between learners (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Lohr & Haley, 2018). In an online course, learning and working with an exercise and discussing it with peers is an activity that can extend over several days. The “distance” afforded by online learning can benefit some learners. Dave provided an example of the benefit of learning mindfulness in an online environment.

Before posting my thoughts...I really had to spend some time...developing them. Specifically, I think it made me more comfortable reflecting on my shortcomings. Admitting a shortcoming is never particularly easy, however I found it easier to identify and write

about areas I need improvement than it typically is for me to talk about.

Online environments may also provide multiple ways of working with material. In this study, learners were able to practice on their own, as well as participate in online group discussions, shared journaling spaces, and synchronous meetings. This allowed for the deep connection and social presence that many learners crave in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Dave shared that “despite never really meeting Ricky, Meagan, or [other student], I feel like I know more about them than many classmates I sat next to three days a week for an entire semester in undergrad.” The mindfulness component, intentional course design, and online environment aligned to support the development of a sense of trust and closeness, indicating the level of community built among learners (Lohr & Haley, 2018; Rovai, 2000, 2004). Perhaps the best argument for incorporating a contemplative educational component into coursework comes directly from one of the learners, who shared in the follow-up survey that

I thought that the mindfulness exercises were a different way of exploring and applying the leadership theories of the course. The book by Marturano helped practically show how to incorporate personal understandings of leadership [in]to real life.

CONCLUSION

Integrating mindfulness components into discipline-focused courses can be an effective means for both teaching mindfulness skills and allowing learners to explore the role of mindfulness in their professional practice. The process for accomplishing this described above is a possible model for embedding mindfulness components into virtual spaces. Key in its success was the intersection of teaching presence and social presence in facilitating cognitive presence. Given the significant increase in learning in online environments necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, our learners need tools to aid their focus and functioning in their academic, professional, and personal lives. This study’s findings are applicable

to both incorporating contemplative learning in online environments and toward developing contemplative leadership skills. With increasing levels of polarization and broad-based calls for social change, more educators will explore teaching and learning contemplative leadership in online contexts.

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