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Teaching Mindfulness Across Generations: A Case Study

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While people interested in mindfulness can access teachings in many ways, learning situations that include interaction with instructors and other students can enhance learning. In particular, intergenerational groups can provide an important context for increasing generational awareness and decreasing ageism. This case study describes a semester-long class about mindfulness that included reading, discussion, and practice. Participants included 10 young adults (ages 21-23) and 5 elders (ages 67-96). Thematic analysis of student writing showed that students understood mindfulness both as a potential means of coping with age-related challenges and as a way to enhance the wisdom that can come with greater lived experience. The paper concludes with recommendations for bringing mindfulness into an intergenerational context.

Academic interest in mindfulness has exploded in recent years. In the PSYCINFO database, a search for “mindfulness” as a keyword results in 1,524 articles for the year 2020 alone. Recent articles link mindfulness interventions to cardiovascular health (Nardi et al., 2020), sexual well-being (Leavitt et al., 2020), treatment-resistant depression (Foroughi et al., 2020) and the elementary classroom climate (Meyer et al., 2020).

As evidence for the benefits of mindfulness accumulates, educators continue to bring mindfulness into education at all levels. In higher education, contemplative practices have been incorporated into many disciplines including legal education (Magee, 2016), science (Francl, 2016), writing (Simmer-Brown, 2016), and environmental studies (Wapner, 2016). Courses including contemplative practice have been shown to benefit students’ mental health (Liss et al., 2020).

At the same time, the variety of ways in which people can encounter mindfulness and contemplative practices is increasing. Students don't need to wait to take a class that incorporates mindfulness practices when books, apps and YouTube videos are widely available. Yet there are particular benefits to learning these practices with others, and to applying mindfulness to diverse areas of study within the academy.

This paper focuses on the benefits of creating intergenerational communities for learning mindfulness. In this case study, students and elders participated in a semester-long class about mindfulness and aging. The evaluation demonstrates that an intergenerational community is not only effective for teaching about mindfulness but can serve to enhance understanding across the generations.

The Context of Mindfulness Interventions

We can think about all teaching, including mindfulness teaching and interventions, as having three components: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction (Moore, 1989). All mindfulness training presupposes some interaction between the learner and the content, whether this content is written material, a recorded audio or video, or a teacher's words. Indeed, a number of studies demonstrating the impact of mindfulness only assess learner-content interaction. For example, studies that assign subjects to listen to recordings of guided meditations have shown that this type of interaction with mindfulness content can reduce discrimination and bias (Lueke & Gibson, 2015, 2016).

However, educators know through experience that learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction is important for learning. Mindfulness learners with access to instructors can ask questions about the material and about their experience, and the relationship with the instructor can strengthen the impact of the content being shared. Indeed, this is the conclusion of a study of the impact of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) on participants (Ruijgrok-Lupton et al., 2018). Participant well-being and stress reduction were greater for those whose teachers had completed an additional year of training. In the case of MBSR, Jon Kabat-Zinn states that "the quality of MBSR as an intervention is only as

good as the MBSR instructor and his or her understanding of what is required to deliver a truly mindfulness-based program” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, pp. 281-282).

Learner-learner interaction can also be critical for learning. Two strategies to increase learner-learner interaction are collaborative learning, where teachers and students together form a community in search of knowledge, and cooperative learning, where the teacher structures group activities (Barkley et al., 2014). A variety of theories support the importance of collaborative learning (Barkley et al., 2014), but social constructivism is especially relevant for teachers of mindfulness. The idea that knowledge is not a given but constructed through social interaction is entirely consistent with mindfulness principles (Gergen, 1999). Learning collaboratively supports cognitive learning as well as student engagement and is valued by students and instructors (Barkley et al., 2014).

While learner-learner interaction has not been explicitly addressed in the evaluation of mindfulness interventions, it is often implicitly present. Many mindfulness-based interventions are based on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) model, which includes not only learner-content interaction but also learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction (Fjorback et al., 2011).

Learner-learner interaction can also be an important aspect of mindfulness-based interventions offered to particular groups of learners. For example, mindfulness, meditation, and yoga have benefits for people who are incarcerated (Derlic, 2020). The MBSR program was used for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Kimbrough et al., 2010) with only slight modifications to the program. Mindfulness practices can also be effective in the treatment of substance use disorders (Lee Lloyd Johnson, 2019). In particular, mindfulness-based relapse prevention has been shown to be effective (Witkiewitz et al., 2010), but as this program has all three types of interaction the relative contribution of learner-learner interaction is not clear.

As new applications of mindfulness continue to emerge in the higher education setting, we should be thoughtful about not only the content we choose and the training of instructors, but about our approach

to learner-learner interaction. Indeed, this component (learner-learner interaction) could be designed to meet additional learning objectives.

One additional objective that might interest instructors is the use of mindfulness to help participants gain insights into issues of diversity and oppression. If mindfulness practice is “the systematic and intentional cultivation of mindful presence, and through it, of wisdom, compassion, and other qualities of mind and heart conducive to breaking free from the fetters of our own persistent blindness and delusions” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, pp. 109-110), then we could expect that it could help us notice and decrease our implicit bias (Banaji et al., 2015). Indeed, research has demonstrated that various mindfulness interventions do decrease bias (Kang et al., 2014; Lueke & Gibson, 2015; Stell & Farsides, 2016).

One of the most common types of bias in our society is ageism, defined by Robert Butler as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against someone because they are old (Butler, 2005). It is ironic that ageism in Western society is so prevalent (Wilson et al., 2019), given that ageism is bias against our future selves. Instructors in aging studies and gerontology have a long history of designing intergenerational experiences with the goal of reducing ageism on the part of students. There is often the assumption that contact in and of itself is enough to diminish negative stereotypes. Without a strong reflective component, however, stereotypes remain and the elders that students befriend become exceptions to the ageist “rule” (Erickson, 2019). One response to this is the inclusion of contemplative practices, which have been shown to have a positive impact in courses dealing with oppression and diversity (Berila, 2014; Daubenmier et al., 2020; Lundahl & Keating, 2020).

Gerontology educators are moving away from framing intergenerational experiences as “service learning,” in which the salient characteristics of elders are their needs and vulnerabilities, and moving towards true intergenerational learning, where different generational experiences enhance learning and help both generations gain insight into the impact of biography and history (Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014). Learning mindfulness in an intergenerational context might be an appropriate vehicle for true intergenerational learning. In the process, we might see a shift

from a focus on aging-related challenges to the benefits of more lived experience.

One of the benefits often associated with aging is wisdom. There are a variety of models of wisdom in the psychological literature, some arising from an attempt to measure wisdom itself, and some attempting to define what makes a person wise. Staudinger and Glück (2011) reviewed the psychological literature on wisdom to identify common factors, several of which will be familiar to mindfulness teachers and practitioners, especially searching for insight, reflective attitude, and high level of concern for others.

Explicit psychological theories of wisdom conceptualize wisdom as a personal characteristic, as a cognitive capability, or being an expert in “the meaning and conduct of life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm operationalizes wisdom as having five criteria: rich factual knowledge about life, rich procedural knowledge about life, lifespan contextualism, relativism of values and life priorities, and recognition and management of uncertainty (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Age itself is not the best predictor of wisdom-related performance as measured in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm; instead, wisdom-related performance among a group of people ages 68-77 was associated with growth, adjustment, and a generative concern for the welfare of others (Wink & Staudinger, 2016).

Another model of wisdom uses five different criteria: openness, emotional regulation, humor, critical life experience, and reminiscence and reflectiveness (Webster, 2007). This model was used in a description of an intergenerational high school English class, which showed that the intergenerational aspect of the group helped stimulate wisdom development in both elders and students (DeMichelis et al., 2015). Another study of wisdom development shows that having a growth mindset related to wisdom is associated with higher scores on a wisdom scale (Alhosseini & Ferrari, 2020).

It may be that learning about mindfulness in an intergenerational context can encourage both students and elders to see and experience the nature of wisdom in a deep way, and to see its development in people of all ages. This could help participants to expand their understanding of aging to include growth as well as challenges.

This paper describes a college class on mindfulness and aging whose learners included 10 traditional-aged college students and 5 elders who were tenants of an independent living facility (ILF). A thematic analysis of qualitative data from student papers shows how students understood the intersection of mindfulness and aging and the ways the intergenerational environment impacted their learning. I include my own reflections from the instructor point of view and offer recommendations for others interested in creating similar intergenerational learning communities.

Description of Class

A class titled “Mindfulness and Aging” was offered from January to May 2020 and met for 65 minutes twice a week. The class met at the independent living facility (ILF) to remove transportation barriers for ILF tenants.

The ILF elders were official auditors, meaning that they were officially enrolled but not for credit. The elders ranged in age from 67 to 96, with two of the elders in their late sixties and the other three elders in their nineties; two were male, and all were white. One elder had a background in mindfulness, but the topic and practices were new to the other four elders. The traditional-aged college students (N=10; ages 21-23) had all previously taken at least one aging-related class but were majoring in a variety of fields including chemistry, cinema and photography, occupational therapy, and aging studies. Two of the students were people of color and all but one were female.

As the instructor, I had previous experience teaching mindfulness and meditation, completing training in teaching [Koru Mindfulness](#) as well as the Graduate Certificate in Mindfulness Studies at Lesley University. In addition to leading drop-in meditation sessions for faculty, staff, and students on campus, I had led short meditation courses in senior housing facilities and the local senior center over several years.

The participants and instructor were able to sit around a large table in the ILF classroom space during the first half of the semester; after the move to remote instruction in March 2020 most participants were able

to continue to meet through Zoom. Two elders and one young adult were not able to join the synchronous sessions for the second half of the class.

The first two weeks of the class (4 sessions) were designed to get participants acquainted with each other and to establish expectations for reading, discussion, and participation. After the first two weeks, the class was organized so that one session per week was a discussion of readings, primarily *Mindfulness: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology* (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). This text was chosen because it facilitated discussion of both the Buddhist origins of contemporary mindfulness as well as its intersection with contemporary psychology. The other weekly session was devoted to practice. These practice sessions were organized around two additional texts, *Real Happiness* (Salzberg, 2019) and *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (Neff & Germer, 2018). We were joined by four additional ILF elders during the practice sessions based on the Salzberg book.

The traditional-aged students submitted regular reflections on readings and practices and completed a research paper. They shared articles with the group as their research progressed, and also gave presentations to the class based on their research papers. Examples of paper topics included the relation of mindfulness and sleep, the role of the default mode network in mindfulness, and the application of mindfulness to physical rehabilitation. Data collection was approved by the college's Institutional Review Board (IRB148).

Impact on Students

Methodology

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the impact of the course on students' perceptions of mindfulness and aging (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The material used in the analysis was the set of student responses to two essay questions included in the final exam. (Because one student did not remain in the class after the move to remote instruction, nine of the ten students completed the exam.) My initial reading of these responses was for the purposes of grading; for this analysis (two years after grading)

I used only copies of student responses with names removed. I began the thematic analysis by separating each student response into individual statements or ideas. After generating codes for each of these, I was able to group the statements by code to generate themes.

As a participant-observer, I did come to the analysis with my own understanding of the experience and of the goals that I had as an instructor. I am a white, cis-gender woman, and my attitudes about the subject matter have been shaped by my 22 years of college teaching experience in gerontology and my ten years of mindfulness practice in the Insight Meditation tradition.

Mindfulness as a Coping Strategy

The first prompt was: “Someone asks you to summarize what you’ve learned from this class about the relationship between mindfulness and aging. How do you respond?” The open-ended nature of this prompt offered students the chance to frame their response in a variety of ways. The thematic analysis revealed that student responses fell into two broad categories. Six of the nine students focused their responses on how mindfulness can help elders cope with challenges.

Specific codes in this “mindfulness as coping” category included age-related challenges, mental health, positive outlook, quality of life, and successful aging. Several examples of how students articulated this perspective were:

“Adapting to the changes of aging can be aided by mindfulness.” (Student 3)

“Whether we experience late adulthood pain free or full of suffering, mindfulness grounds us and gives us perspective.” (Student 5)

“Mindfulness can help reduce one’s stress and anxiety, as well as reframe one’s perspective and thoughts, all of which are helpful to the aging population.” (Student 8)

In some cases, this “mindfulness as coping strategy” framework focused on specific aspects of aging that students observed in class participants. Several ILF participants were experiencing painful arthritis. One student shared that these two elders “explained to me that when we practiced mindfulness meditation that the pain actually decreased from it since their bodies and minds were able to relax” (Student 6).

Another aging-related challenge that students commented on was caregiving. One of the ILF participants was engaged in spousal caregiving and spoke about its rewards and challenges to the class. A possible connection between caregiving and mindfulness practice was outlined by one student:

“While being a caregiver to someone you love is necessary and rewarding there are also stressors present. Mindfulness can address this situation through a lens of compassion for both yourself and those around you.” (Student 3)

Some of the students utilizing this “mindfulness as coping” framework identified a positive outlook as both a possible outcome of mindfulness practice and something that can help elders cope with the challenges of aging. One student identified a specific ILF tenant as someone who “did a great job of being mindful and thinking about the present, which is why he stood out to me as the happiest elder in the classroom” (Student 6). This positive outlook was associated for one student with “enthusiasm for life and living” (Student 1).

Another mindfulness-related coping mechanism mentioned by students was the notion of reframing.

“As older adults, we may feel saddened or angered by changes in our physical and cognitive abilities. We may be suffering from both physical pain and by comparing what we once were to what we are now. By taking a step back and realizing that aging is a natural process, older adults can reframe their difficulties and respond to them in a way that will be more beneficial...You can

be grateful for all that your body has done for you in the past and all the things it will do for you in the present and future.” (Student 7)

This process of reframing was related to the issue of ageism by one student, who mentioned “the negative stigma from society that is associated with aging” (Student 8). For this student, mindfulness practice “can help many aging adults change their perspective of aging” (Student 8).

Two of the responses focused on coping saw mindfulness practice as a way to counter possible stagnation with aging. One student was impressed by the ILF participants’ willingness to try new things, since “from my personal experience, older people tend to avoid trying new things” (Student 1). This student thought that mindfulness practice itself might “encourage them to try something new” (Student 1). Another student echoed this theme of possible stagnation with aging, saying that “typically, as we age, we rarely make any definitive changes to our inner selves...We become almost exaggerated versions of our younger selves” (Student 5).

Mindfulness as Wisdom

The remaining three students took a different approach in their responses to this first prompt. These four responses focused on the benefits of more lived experience and how mindfulness can complement and support the natural process of developing wisdom. Codes in this category included: perspective, wisdom, and open mind. Student 1 saw the end goal of mindfulness practice as “when you are one with your outside body and inside, everything is in equilibrium.” They followed this by saying, “I think this happens as you age.” Equilibrium, as characterized by this student, “is to be able to reflect on significant portions of your life and compare them, which can only really occur if you have lived long enough” (Student 1). This student expected that resentment and hatred might increase with age, but their observation was the “instead of letting resentment and guilt build up, they learned ways to forgive.”

Student 4 also associated wisdom with age, saying:

“That is what I consider to be wisdom; the openness and acceptance that comes from having a plethora of life experiences and because of those experiences realizing the transient nature of life...I think that mindfulness practice can both help heighten current wisdom, as well as expedite the acquisition of new wisdom... Mindfulness is just a tool to facilitate, catalyze and heighten those experiences and perspectives.” (4)

Student 9 described using mindfulness to work through trauma from childhood. This process “provided insight similar to that gained when talking with an older adult who has reflected on their life and the way things work, distilled wisdom through appraisal and reappraisal.” This student saw that the elders in the group had a head start in terms of emotional regulation: “We [the young adults] are still learning some of the coping mechanisms that the older adults added to their toolbox decades ago.”

This last statement shows the intersection between the “mindfulness as coping” and the “mindfulness as wisdom” frameworks. Learning from life experience (wisdom) can help us respond more effectively to life’s challenges (coping). What really differentiated these two types of responses was whether students articulated a sense that elders’ lived experience could have led to some of the same outcomes as mindfulness practice.

Intergenerational Learning – Student Responses

Another final exam prompt asked students to reflect on the experience of learning mindfulness in a group. The prompt was:

Do you think that the context in which we learn or practice mindfulness matters? Currently, for example, many people learn and practice mindfulness using apps. How might that experience be different from learning mindfulness in person with similarly-aged peers? And how might both of those experiences be different from

what you've experienced this semester in an intergenerational context? How did the group enhance or detract from your experience?

All students were able to articulate ways in which the group setting had been beneficial for them. Five of the nine students shared specific ways in which practicing in community was beneficial. Some of these saw practice in community as essential to applying skills gained in mindfulness. The importance of community was foremost for Student 4, who stated that "the embodiment of mindfulness is social in nature." The notion of the class community as a safe space for vulnerability was mentioned by four students; these students saw the ability to be honest with the group as enhancing their ability to be honest with themselves.

The other major theme in students' responses to this question was the value in hearing different perspectives. These five students explicitly linked their exposure to a variety of perspectives to the intergenerational context. One example of this comes from Student 7: "I felt as if being mindful and practicing meditation with the elders matured my outlook on life and exposed me to new perspectives."

Related to the theme of different perspectives, Student 2 focused their response on the value of the required readings. They said, "with the books that we read, my approach to the practice of being mindful was bolstered with professional opinions and arguments about the topic." They said that it was important for their development to learn to think critically about mindfulness practice in addition to learning and doing the practices themselves.

Three of the nine students talked about how the intergenerational group solidified a sense of common humanity. As student 3 said, "we all realized that we experience many of the same things and many of the same emotions...but down to the foundation they are the same." Some students mentioned specific parallels, noting that "we were all in a period of rapid change. College students moving to college in a new place and the residents moving from their homes..." (Student 5).

Impact on Elders

The elders participating in the class were a self-selected group, so were likely to begin the experience with an interest in the subject matter and an interest in interacting with the young adults. Mid-semester, elders had a chance to offer feedback as part of a general check-in process. Some commented favorably on the intergenerational context; one elder said, “Students bring energy and insights which those of us who could be their grandparents do not necessarily have.” One elder said that the class was helping in the adjustment to the ILF, a “huge change” for this participant.

Once pandemic restrictions were imposed in mid-March and we transitioned to online participation, three of the five elders were able to continue participating. Two of these three responded to my request for reflection at the end of the semester. The feedback was brief but positive, focusing on the benefits of the intergenerational experience.

Instructor Reflection

As often happens when trying something new, I was unsure at the beginning how this class would be received. Would any ILF tenants be interested? Would students be able to manage the transportation issues? How would the reading and practice be received by the group? The experience of a course focused on discussion and practice depends heavily on the participants. Would they be engaged during class? Would they practice outside of class?

One lesson for me was the power of the unusual setting and participants to shift student-instructor patterns. Traditional-aged college students came into the elders’ space rather than a typical classroom. The elders attended for personal reasons, not for course credit or compensation. This real-time modeling of lifelong learning created a different type of dialogue, much closer to the kind of dialogue outlined by Bohm (2014). In this case the intergenerational nature of the group helped create a true collaborative learning environment. When the instructor is also the oldest person in the room, social norms around age and role coincide. But when some of the learners are older (or much older!) than the instructor, there is naturally a redistribution of authority in the group.

Another lesson for me was the power of life experience to ground mindfulness training. Because this was a class offered as part of the gerontology curriculum, hearing elders discuss age-related challenges was an important benefit for student learning. As mentioned earlier, one ILF tenant had recently moved to the ILF and found mindfulness of emotions very helpful with her adjustment. Another ILF tenant was open about her struggles with a progressive illness, and her hope that mindfulness practice could help slow down the disease process. She was open with the group about the times when her condition would flare up; students then observed her mindful coping in real time. A third ILF tenant was in a period of intensive caregiving for a spouse while dealing with his own health problems. In the context of the group, students gained a better understanding of the nature of the stressors common in later life but were also able to see them in a broader framework. Because the mindfulness material encouraged participants to notice ways in which suffering can be perpetuated through patterns of thoughts and emotions, the challenges of the elders were more easily seen as human challenges amenable to some of the same coping strategies as the challenges faced by the young adult students.

Students are often offered mindfulness and meditation in the context of coping with immediate stress. The idea that these coping skills could be useful throughout a long life is usually not emphasized. These students, however, had real-life examples of the lifelong need for effective coping resources: "Hearing [the elders] talk about how they wish they could have learned these mindfulness techniques when they were younger encourages me to keep going with my mindfulness and actively use it in my daily life."

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the sample. The instructor, all of the elders, and most of the students were white. There was also likely a good deal of homogeneity in terms of socio-economic status, as students were attending a private college and elders in the ILF were able to afford the monthly charges. It is also important to note

that the data used for the evaluation may reflect response bias. Students were writing the essays for a grade, so may have been more likely to express positive views of mindfulness and aging, as well as of the class experience.

Future Directions and Recommendations

There are many ways in which this particular teaching and learning situation was unique, including a college with an undergraduate curriculum in gerontology associated with an ILF for elders, an instructor with experience in both gerontology and mindfulness, and the availability of student transportation. Despite this perhaps unusual confluence of factors, other educators may be able to use this framework in their own teaching environment.

For educators in gerontology, this case study shows how mindfulness can be used as a focus for intergenerational learning. If gerontology educators are interested in centering experiences around mindfulness, however, they will need to gain experience in teaching mindfulness or find partners interested in working collaboratively to create intergenerational mindfulness opportunities. Teachers of mindfulness, on the other hand, should become more aware of the possibilities of intergenerational learning (Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014). While many mindfulness training and practice contexts are age-integrated, it might take some additional training and reflection to find ways to utilize generational awareness as a tool to enhance mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness instructors who are interested in the intergenerational context will also need to be educated about dementia. In our case, ILF staff knew the residents and their capabilities, and kept those in mind when facilitating course auditing. We did initially have a sixth auditor with some cognitive challenges; this elder became overwhelmed with the reading and decided to drop out. We encouraged other tenants who were interested in learning about mindfulness to come to the practice sessions if they did not want to audit the full course, and in this context one ILF tenant with dementia attended along with her daughter-in-law. While it was hard to assess the impact of the group on the tenant,

the daughter-in-law saw it as a positive experience for both of them. It may be that encouraging people with dementia to attend with their care partners is a possible way to include people with dementia in intergenerational mindfulness groups.

People providing services to elders could look towards these intergenerational mindfulness learning opportunities as sustainable projects to increase community well-being. It can be challenging, however, to create the conditions that helped this project thrive. My experience with informal “drop-in” meditation groups, both on the college campus and in contexts with older adults, is that not requiring a commitment to participate indeed leads to low commitment on the part of participants. Much of the interaction in our class came during the discussion of readings rather than in the context of in-class meditation exercises, so without the inclusion of reading and discussion we may not see the benefits of the intergenerational context as clearly.

Our experiences in this class demonstrated a number of features that may help other educators bring mindfulness into an intergenerational context. By bringing the class to the elders, we enhanced the participation of elders and shifted traditional classroom dynamics. The commitment of the students and the elders was enhanced by the course framework, whether that was taking the course for a grade (students) or committing to auditing the course (elders). Students had the background and interest to appreciate the contact with the elders, and the alternation of discussion and practice allowed for the development of a community. While the move to remote instruction was challenging, the successful continuation of the class in the remote environment is a testament to the community-building that we were able to achieve in the first half of the semester.

It is my hope that more gerontology faculty will develop programs around mindfulness, and that more mindfulness instructors will become interested in the possibilities of true intergenerational practice, and that increasing intergenerational mindfulness programs will benefit current elders, as well as everyone who is an elder in training.

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