

Incorporating Mindfulness-Based Activities into the Learning Environment

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Abstract

The learning environment (LE) is a dynamic and evolving space that is co-created by faculty, staff and students. The LE can play an important role in student success and can also impact job satisfaction for faculty and staff. Mindfulness-based activities are gaining attention as strategies to impact the learning environment in multiple ways. Incorporating mindfulness-based activities into the learning environment holds the potential for positive impact with students, faculty, and staff alike. This article will describe mindfulness-based activities, explore associated literature, and offer strategies to consider implementing in your own learning environment.

INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS-BASED ACTIVITIES INTO THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As institutions of Higher Education continue to evolve, the impact of the learning environment (LE) on student success and well-being becomes increasingly important. Rusticus (2023) described the key elements of a positive learning environment as psychological, social, cultural, and physical settings. These key elements are broad and expansive, providing an opportunity for multiple strategies to be explored. Mindfulness-based activities are supported in the literature as strategies that can impact these elements of the LE. Incorporating mindfulness-based activities into the LE holds the potential for positive impact for students, faculty, and staff alike.

BACKGROUND

Mindfulness has been practiced for thousands of years, particularly in Eastern cultures. This practice is recognized as a component of Buddhism, but can also be seen in a variety of other religious, cultural, and secular settings. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD is a prominent figure in the modern mindfulness movement. This movement expands the practice of mindfulness beyond a religious practice. His work continues to drive a broadened view of the potential impact of incorporating mindfulness into our life routines. Dr. Kabot-Zinn (2005) describes the many influences we have that impact our mental health and well-being. Mindfulness has been described as a way to shift into a more conscious way of being. Mindfulness is a practice that can cultivate “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness” (Kabot-Zinn, 2005, p. 4). Mayo Clinic describes mindfulness as a way to focus on what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without judgment. “Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress” (Mayo Clinic, 2022, p. 1). Mindfulness can be one strategy to help move the mind from a more stressful part of the brain to a brain space that can be more logical, thoughtful, and controlled. Logical, thoughtful and controlled could positively impact the LE. Additionally, mindfulness may help with stress reduction, self-awareness, increased attention span, positive physiological impact with things like blood pressure and improved sleep (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Mindfulness can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Activities associated with mindfulness can range from a simple breathing activity, meditation, a mindful walk, or perhaps using your senses to consciously observe an object. These are just a few examples of mindfulness practice opportunities.

For the profession of nursing, applied learning in mindfulness-based activities extends beyond the LE. Practicing nurses can experience high levels of stress that can impact them on a personal and professional level. Mindfulness can be one strategy to help manage and combat work related stressors. In addition to the self-care benefits of mindfulness there could be benefits for clients in the care of nurses. Bernstein (2019) describes how mindfulness can help nurses be more fully present with their patients. Being present creates a space that limits distractions and enhances decision making. This awareness of

potential enhanced decision making would be positive for the LE and connects nicely to many other career fields. While there are official training and certifications available in mindfulness, there are numerous applications that are free and available online. Headspace, Calm, or UCLA Mindful are just a few examples of resources that are available for exploration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The incorporation of mindfulness-based activities into the learning environment is not new in the education setting. Literature can be found from the early 1970s that supports the use of mindfulness to improve educational outcomes for elementary school students. In more recent years, a focus on mindfulness as a tool for success in higher education has become more prominent. While some studies are centered on incorporating mindfulness as a course that is a component of a plan of study (Alexander et al., 2024; Deshpande et al., 2023; Ergas & Hadar, 2023), others seek relationships between the practice of mindfulness and positive outcomes in higher education settings (Barry et al., 2019; Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013; Schwind et al., 2017; Vidal-Melia et al., 2022; Zarotti, Povah, & Simpson, 2020).

Engaging students, staff, and faculty in a 10-week mindfulness course, Alexander et al. (2024) found it difficult to retain their subjects in a lengthy course. However, those who completed the course reported lower levels of perceived stress. Additionally, of those who completed the entire course, most reported they would continue using their new-found mindfulness tools (Alexander et al., 2024).

Over the course of four years, Desphande et al. (2023) engaged over 300 students in a course designed to teach multiple methods of mindfulness. A total of ninety participants completed surveys before, during, and after the course. The data showed that there was a statistically significant improvement in mindfulness and life satisfaction. Additionally, there were statistically significant decreases in both psychological distress and perceived stress (Desphande et al., 2023). Furthermore, all 90 participants stated they would encourage others to participate in a mindfulness course.

Ergas and Hadar (2021) examined outcomes of a semester-long mindfulness course over the period of eight years. The authors analyzed the data from 143 participants' responses and shared many positive outcomes. During their examination of the qualitative data, authors found that mindfulness practice was reportedly linked to positive effects in over eighty percent of the participants (Ergas & Hadar, 2021). The positive outcomes included "enhanced self/body awareness", "stress reduction/coping", "improvements in concentration/focus", "compassion", and "joy and enhanced sense of meaning in life" (Ergas and Hadar, 2021, p. 369).

Using a randomized controlled trial, Barry et al. (2019, p. 302) examined the use of a "spoken guided mindfulness practice of breath awareness" recorded and provided to 43 participants. Another 39 participants were placed in a control group and provided no mindfulness intervention. At the end of the 8-week

intervention (participants were asked to use the recorded mindfulness activity daily), it was found that there were statistically significant differences in multiple outcomes. Those in the control group reported a decrease in “depression” and an increase in “self-efficacy”, “hope”, and “resilience” (Barry et al., 2019, p. 304).

Schwind et al. (2017) provided mindfulness exercises at the beginning and end of each class for eight weeks. Students were additionally asked to practice “mindful breathing four to five times per week” (Schwind et al., 2017, p. 92). At the end of their qualitative study, the authors reported that students shared they had less stress and anxiety along with an increase in relaxation and focus.

Seeking a relationship between mindfulness, resilience, and academic achievement, Vidal-Melia et al. (2022) looked at questionnaire outcomes of almost 500 students in four separate educational organizations. Instead of providing mindfulness exercises, the authors used a scale that determined the presence of mindfulness. The results showed that there was a significant positive influence on resilience when the participants exhibited characteristics of mindfulness. Additionally, authors found that resilience and academic achievement were significantly directly related.

Lastly, Regehr, Glancy, and Pitts completed “a systematic review of the literature and meta-analysis” (2013, p. 1). The authors examined peer-reviewed articles and found 24 studies which “examined the effects of various models of cognitive, behavioral, and/or mindfulness-based techniques” (Regehr et al., 2013, p. 7) on students in higher education. The goal of each study was to reduce the amount of stress the participants experienced. The most promising finding from the meta-analysis completed by Regehr et al. (2013) was the reduction of stress and anxiety among hundreds of university-level students

APPLYING MINDFULNESS-BASED ACTIVITIES

The authors have implemented mindfulness, particularly mindful breathing, into the LE and as a component of self-care for future nurses. A key component of most mindfulness activities is a focus on breathing. The use of something as simple as breathing provides a quick and easy way to incorporate mindfulness into the LE. The focus has leaned toward applying mindful breathing activities during times of anticipated or observed stress. Brief, mindful breathing activities have been used prior to class, during simulation, prior to exams, and when working with individual students. Having a moment of intentional breathing can help bring the mind back to a state that allows for enhanced focus and clarity. Anecdotally, some students have provided positive feedback with this type of mindfulness activity.

In addition to the practice of mindful breathing, there are many other mindfulness-based activities that can be explored. Another primary focus utilized is the practice of gratitude. Nursing is a high stress career and research has identified strategies to combat burnout. One way the American Nurses Association (2023) suggests for increasing physical and psychological well-being in nurses and those around them is by practicing gratitude. The

significance of practicing gratitude extends beyond nursing. Tolcher et al. (2024) describes positive impact with gratitude intervention groups in college students. There are multiple ways to practice gratitude, it is easy to learn, and is an inexpensive option to incorporate.

Gratitude is something that has endless opportunities for expression. This includes the simple act of a thank you message or card. Sending words of thank you to individuals who keep our building clean, guest speakers, students who went above and beyond on a project, or a peer who stepped in to help can have positive impact on the LE. These simple acts of gratitude are a few examples of ways to instill gratitude into the LE. On a larger scale, a “stress less” finals week activity has been implemented over the last several semesters. There is a note of gratitude shared with students for their hard work all semester, positive thoughts are extended for final exams, grab and go snacks are available, and a variety of items to inspire are available at the motivation station.

Engaging students directly can be as easy as having students write down what they are grateful for on a white board when they enter the classroom. Some have created opportunities for “Griffin Gratitude” which allows for expression of gratitude and connects to the larger University level LE. Some students or professors may prefer to use interactive technology to participate in mindfulness activities. There are several platforms that can be used in-person or via online format. Kahoot! is an example of one such user-friendly platform for all levels of education, this interactive learning tool provides quick feedback and has provided positive results when used consistently in the classroom. The word cloud feature on this platform works seamlessly for students to anonymously send their words of gratitude that are displayed collectively on screen. Pear Deck and Nearpod are also great platform options to use that are free and integrate as add-on extensions into Google slides. This allows students to respond to prompts at their own pace or instructor-led pace.

Learning management systems that have a white board interface, such as Canvas, will allow students to post sticky notes to a digital board that can be displayed during class time or anytime in the course. This option was utilized; however, it did not work with students using iPads, therefore verifying compatibility with whichever platform you utilize is imperative prior to integration. Discussion boards with a weekly posting of student and instructor gratitude could provide a more feasible option if awarding points to this activity as an assignment is warranted.

Students may be reluctant to buy-in to these activities initially. Incorporating as a component of self-care teaching allows for reasoning behind various activities and how they can be beneficial in our daily and professional lives. One faculty member has students create two self-care goals and share about their experience in achieving these goals through an assignment.

CONCLUSION

Applying mindfulness-based activities have the potential to positively impact the LE. Their inclusion can benefit students, faculty, and staff alike. The possibilities for utilization are broad and expansive. They have been implemented in a variety of ways, but their utility is, possibly, limited only by the imagination.

While there is a growing body of literature supporting varied utilizations of mindfulness-based activities in higher education, additional research could provide more robust evidence to support university-led initiatives. This team hopes that interested individuals explore the literature and consider incorporating mindfulness-based activities into their own LEs.

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