

MINDFULNESS IN THE WRITING CENTER: A TOTAL ENCOUNTER

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Abstract

The use of mindfulness or contemplative-based approaches has escalated across many sectors and has been the subject of increasing research interest, so it's not surprising it is now finding its way into education. This paper reports some key insights gained from a quarter-long mindfulness project implemented over eight weeks in a large community college writing center in Omaha, Nebraska. This paper will describe the initial professional development day when the writing center consultants learned about the pedagogical and theoretical value of mindfulness and its relevance to higher education. This paper will then present the quarter-long project, during which the theories behind mindfulness were put into daily practice in the writing center. Writing center consultants were asked to take part in weekly mindfulness exercises both in the writing center and at home. Questionnaires were administered by the Writing Center Coordinator to collect anonymous consultant feedback each week, in addition to a final questionnaire to measure the project's effectiveness. This co-written paper will describe each phase of the project from both the Writing Center Coordinator and the consultant perspectives. The findings of this project have led the Coordinator to incorporate a mindfulness-based foundation into their Writing Center philosophy and enforced their commitment to student-driven pedagogy.

The use of mindfulness or contemplative-based approaches has escalated across many sectors since its formal introduction into a medical setting in the 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn. As reported in a recent issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, members of Congress, large companies such as General Mills and Google, athletic teams including the Seattle Seahawks, and the U.S. military are among the many diverse contexts now engaging in formal mindfulness practices. And “the body of scientific research illustrating the positive effects of mindfulness training on mental health and well-being—at the level of the brain as well as at the level of behavior—grows steadily more well-established: It improves attention, reduces stress, and results in better emotional regulation and an improved capacity for compassion and empathy” (Davis). Thus, it's not surprising it is now finding its way into education as well. According to Deborah Schoeberlein, “Master teachers are mindful teachers, aware of themselves and attuned to their students” (I). Since the first significant move toward using mindfulness in schools in the UK in 2007, several programs have been developed to shape the mindfulness-in-education movement. Furthermore, Oxford researchers in 2015 “announced plans to launch a large-scale, seven-year, \$10 million study on mindfulness in education next year” (Davis). There is no denying the new interest in

and growing momentum of this centuries-old Buddhist practice.

As educators and consultants, in the spirit of John Dewey, we are always searching for new ways to reach our students and to bring new life to old practices. As a result, unlike some critics of the movement, we do not consider mindfulness an outdated concept. This article discusses our writing center's efforts to join the mindfulness-in-education movement.

KATIE: The Retreat

As Writing Center Coordinator, I plan an annual retreat designed as professional development regarding a topic that supports our democratic mission. The topic for a recent retreat, Mindfulness in the Writing Center, had been brewing since the previous year's session on The Importance of Making Ourselves Vulnerable as Consultants. Much good discussion ensued from a prompt that asked consultants to respond to Buddhist scholar Barbara O'Brien's quote: “To be mindful is to be fully present, not lost in daydreams, anticipation, indulgences, or worry.” The value of this sort of focus when working one-on-one with a student was clear to us all, but we also acknowledged the difficulty of making that happen given the many dynamics that contribute to a consultation, including the pressures of time, stress, and grades to name a few. Thus, as has been the case with most of our retreats, the topic for the next year's gathering was born.

During that year, I enrolled in a basic mindfulness class. Our first day, the instructor introduced the concept by quoting Jon Kabat-Zinn, who said mindfulness is “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding experience moment to moment” (145). I learned quickly how challenging this can be even when sitting for meditation, without a student and a paper or any other task before me. I devoured all of the assigned readings for the class again only to discover that in my quest to understand how to “be present,” I was anywhere and everywhere but in the moment. Grasping for some tangible future (what I could check off my to-do list after I finished reading). Dwelling on some past misstep (what I forgot to do before I came to class). Becoming aware of the fact that I was utterly

distracted in my determination to be present and to discover the means to being present was an eye-opener. I realized that incorporating mindfulness into our daily and writing center lives would need to be a deliberate exercise. While I found no guidelines for how to do this in writing centers, the research in education helped me conceive of how to make mindfulness part of our pedagogy. “Mindful teaching...,” contend Andrea Marie Hyde and James G. LaPrad, “involves attending to the present moment, including the environment, the participants (teachers, students, authors), and the content as it is variously located in a swirl of interdisciplinary fields” (7-8). Furthermore, “this practice requires (self-) awareness and (self-) reflection, including an awareness of being situated in a barrage of overlapping contexts, from the geographic to the sociocultural” (8). I began to understand the elements needed to enact the mindful approach that made good sense to us on retreat day.

Shortly thereafter, I recruited Elizabeth, one of our consultants who helped plan both retreats, to collaborate with me in creating a means by which we could engage in this self-awareness and self-reflection. In the remainder of this article, Elizabeth and I will describe the planning and execution of and insights gained from the project—I from the administrator’s perspective, sharing what we did and the reasoning behind it, and Elizabeth, from the consultant’s perspective, explaining how it all was received.

Retreat participation was not mandatory, so the attendees were there by choice. I went into the day knowing that “Although mindfulness meditation has historical roots in Buddhist practice, teachers of mindfulness in the West have adapted traditional mindful awareness practices into a secular discipline for the psychological and medical benefits they provide” (Meiklejohn et al. 292). I made clear this was not an attempt to impose a belief system, nor an effort to advance or obstruct any religious beliefs, but to support the well-being of students and our staff, as well as develop an attitude of inquiry. Nonetheless, my first priority on retreat day was bringing the group on board with a topic that may appear to some as non-academic or even frivolous. Though perhaps risky, instead of introducing the topic with words and theory, this group’s usual means of understanding, I opted for immersion. First, Elizabeth led us in a quick exercise called a “Mind Dump,” which asked retreat participants to write all that had stressed them out already that morning. Then, she ceremoniously led the group outside to a fire pit into which we were asked to throw our list of stressors. Immediately following, another consultant guided us through a Body Scan exercise, which involved closing our eyes and

becoming fully aware of every inch of our bodies, starting from our toes and moving to our heads. I peeked to see how the group was responding. Most became visibly more relaxed as the exercise unfolded. However, a few fidgeted as they glanced furtively around the room. Coming to a quiet like this, especially in a work setting, was clearly an unnatural, uncomfortable experience for some.

Those who were comfortable seemed curious, while those few who were not seemed a little suspicious. For both groups, the next segment of the retreat was designed to provide answers. A doctoral student researching the integration of mindfulness and contemplative practices into college classrooms spoke on what mindfulness is, why it is beneficial, and how we can practice it. Her explanation focused on the utility of mindfulness for both students and teachers given the pressures and distractions of the modern world. “It is a discipline,” she said, that is “intentional. It’s about disregarding the distractions and being prepared for whatever crosses our path.” She emphasized the pedagogical and theoretical values of what she called “learning through refined attention,” dispelling the common belief that anything in the realm of meditation is only a religious practice, therefore irrelevant to higher education. She invoked the Freirean logic that deepening our kindness and compassion through mindfulness creates a practice of nonjudgmental awareness that is in line with our writing center mission. She then introduced us to research of the neurophysiological basis for mindfulness practices, which included research showing how a practice of mindfulness helps develop effective emotion regulation in the brain, reduces anxiety, decreases reaction to distraction, increases memory capacity, and improves learning (Jha et al., Zeidan et al.).

After this taste of both practice and theory, I distributed an individual writing exercise with questions about common scenarios (such as: *Have you ever left a writing center shift feeling emotionally drained or mentally stressed? Have you ever experienced a feeling of dread at the beginning of a shift after looking at the appointment book? Have you ever found it difficult to detach yourself from an anticipated outcome with a student?*) designed to bring to the surface writing center moments that might have played out differently if we were practicing mindfulness.

Next, without sharing or discussing our responses, a local meditation teacher led us in a formal meditation. His goal was “to illustrate how mindfulness as a practice reveals greater self-acceptance, resiliency, and the capacity for an engaged and discerning perspective, which promotes loving-kindness, compassion, and generosity.” Sitting down to a new

student with a different assignment and various concerns each half-hour in a writing center shift takes patience and focus. It requires paying attention to the task and to the student in front of you, not worrying about how it went with this student the last time you met or how many more appointments you have to go before your shift ends. As Nel Noddings writes, “I don’t need to establish a lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student—to each student—as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total” (180). After the meditation, we talked about how our interactions with a particular student might have conjured up different images and memories had we treated our shared moment with him/her as if the encounter were total. It was exciting to sense the sort of change we are capable of making by being intentional and present. But, honestly, it seemed like a difficult thing to practice.

In the following weeks, I could sense the positive energy from the retreat day fading. Admitting the difficulty of remembering to be mindful within the daily routine, I decided to launch a project for the rest of the quarter that involved following weekly prompts. I wanted to challenge consultants to think more deeply about their writing center practices and realized that to give it substance, we needed to work on being mindful all day, not just at work; so each week involved one exercise to complete in the writing center and another to do at home, and, again, their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The exercises all aimed to inform the consultants’ philosophical approaches to consultations. The actual exchange wasn’t compromised or altered in any way, so getting permission from students wasn’t necessary.

ELIZABETH: Consultant Perspective

When Katie announced the topic for this year’s retreat, I had a basic understanding of mindfulness although I had never followed through with it as a daily practice.

At the retreat, we had a long discussion about the ways we let certain scenarios inherent to our writing center work negatively affect us. Many of my colleagues admitted to moving from location to location (we maintain five centers in the community) to avoid certain demanding students. Still others said they often become emotionally involved with students, leading to increased stress. Sometimes the student’s topic is so personal that it’s impossible not to become emotionally involved. It’s a type of vocation that is often difficult to leave at work. After the retreat, I was

eager to take what I had learned back to the Writing Center and incorporate a more mindful approach—non-judging, patient, thoughtful responses—into my consultations. Those good intentions soon met with reality, and my best mindful intentions fell by the wayside, so I welcomed Katie’s idea of a focused effort to make mindfulness a regular practice. She distributed weekly exercises and follow-up surveys to the staff, and I chose to participate.¹ To illustrate the project and its level of effectiveness, I will describe my week-by-week experiences with the exercises.

Week One

For the first week’s exercise, we were to allow an extra minute or two after viewing the online schedule to focus on our next appointment, to try to avoid concerns about past appointments and approach each consultation with a clear focus and attention to each student. For my first appointment, I made a conscious effort to honor the student’s stated consultation request: “Fix grammar and punctuation.” Normally, I might bristle at this request, but when the student was seated, I said, “I see you are concerned about grammar and punctuation in this essay. Can I also offer to look at the global concerns as well?” Rather than telling her what we do not do, I framed my response in a positive way, and it seemed to put her at ease and she became receptive to my counsel.

For the home exercise, we were to sit and do nothing, only notice our breathing for five minutes each day. It was a challenge to do nothing, even for five minutes, but when I did, I noticed I was much more relaxed and less stressed.

Week Two

This week’s exercise asked us to limit our 30-minute consultations to 25 minutes and take the extra 5 to re-center ourselves in quiet reflection. I had a student who wanted help with a vocabulary assignment. As it turned out, it was a take-home quiz, and she wanted me to answer the questions for her. When I asked if she had read the assignment, she said no. I felt taken advantage of and resentful. After she left, I had another appointment immediately but took time to excuse myself to take a few breaths so as not to carry my negative feelings into the next meeting. Taking a break, even for five minutes, helped me avoid any negative carry-over from the previous student. It felt odd stepping away early, but it greatly improved the quality of my consultations.

For the home exercise, we were to “put space between things” and avoid rushing from one thing to the next. Although we were directed to schedule extra time on the calendar to make it a priority, it wasn’t

easy. When I did take the time to re-center myself instead of scurrying around, I noticed a marked difference in my mood.

Week Three

This week we were to slow down and experience – rather than just get through or endure – a consultation by taking a few moments to experience the sensory details of the room. Slowing down to observe my surroundings improved my patience with students. One particular student, who is demanding and sometimes verbally combative, came in. Usually, he causes me to tense up. During the day I had practiced focusing on the sensory details of my surroundings, so when this student came, I felt a sense of calm that I hadn't experienced before when working with him. Perhaps by focusing on external details, I was able to let go of my own internal anxiety.

For the home exercise, we were told to “get in touch with your senses.” When I paused to notice things I would never normally take notice of, such as the temperature of my skin or background noises, I felt a growing calmness that improved my ability to concentrate. I have noticed that carrying over the mindfulness practices to home has greatly reduced my anxiety level.

Week Four

For this week's exercise, we were instructed to pause at the end of each paragraph during our consultations, if only for a few seconds, to refocus. I noticed that when I paused while reading a paper with students, they would speak to fill the silence. A few students interpreted my pause as an indication that they had done something wrong in their paper. However, as I remained silent, I noticed students were taking ownership of their paper by making revisions independently of my feedback.

For our home exercise, we were to take mindful pauses, focusing on our breath, while driving or doing other tasks. I noticed I felt much less rushed and more calm than I normally would.

Week Five

I was skeptical when I saw this week's exercise. We were to practice mindful “loving kindness,” sending loving, positive thoughts to each student, even as far as thinking, “I love you.” I failed miserably. After an extremely difficult week, I wasn't much in the mood to send loving thoughts to some demanding students. But I suppose it did help me to begin each consultation with a positive frame of mind.

The home exercise instructed us to set an intention for the day and “make an effort [each morning] to

transition from sleep to conscious awareness by greeting the day with a sense of gratitude.” The more I practiced it, the less the day's chaos negatively impacted me.

Week Six

This week we had the freedom to set our own intentions both at work and at home. I tried to focus on being more patient with students. I reminded myself throughout the day how I might best handle stressful situations or disruptive behavior so I could better compartmentalize my reaction. I definitely noticed that I handled difficult students with more compassion and patience.

Week Seven

This week, in a deliberate effort to avoid judgment, we were to let go of our assumptions of what we felt the students needed. This was challenging! Early in the week, a student came in upset with his instructor's response to his draft, as he felt he had done what the assignment required. After looking it over, I thoughtfully explained the instructor's comments. He became agitated. I paused, reframed my response, and asked questions to make sure he knew I heard him and understood his needs. I stepped back to let him find his own way instead of imposing my opinion on what he needed to do. He was frustrated and upset that so much revision needed to be done, but as I gave him the room to vent his anger and frustration in a safe place, he calmed down.

For the home exercise, we were to put our total focus on meals, bringing awareness to each bite, noticing the texture, flavor, and color of each morsel. This helped me slow down and become more aware of something that I regularly do without a thought.

Week Eight

For the final week, we were to consider how our posture and body language nonverbally communicate with students. I had an interesting consultation with a student who clearly wasn't invested in his work. He'd seemed to expect me to simply correct his paper for him, slouching down in his chair with arms crossed. I started the appointment with a straight back, leaning forward, but when I realized he intended to remain slouched, I sat back too. Once he saw me mirroring him, he sat up and became more engaged. I remained leaning back to indicate I was willing to help from afar, but that he had to take responsibility.

At home, we were asked to try a mindful walking exercise. Walking with an awareness of my body, my movements, and the feel of the ground beneath my

feet helped me to focus on my body and how it nonverbally communicates to others.

KATIE: Final Thoughts

At the conclusion of the project, 100 percent of the consultants who participated in the poll claimed that incorporating mindfulness practices into the writing center had a positive effect on student consultations, at least from their perspectives, which was the only focus for this study. Their responses confirm the research that contends “teachers may derive benefit from learning and practicing mindfulness techniques” (Flook et al. 182).

Some of the benefits experienced include:

Not reacting

“I’ve gained skills in not allowing a student’s problem to become my problem, and I’ve improved my ability to explain the situation as I see it in a calm, constructive manner.”

Staying focused

“I enjoy my job more and am much better at consulting when I focus on the student and the job instead of on everything else that’s going on in my life.”

Listening

“I’m less interested in achieving a result than in listening and better understanding the student.”

“I wasn’t trying to anticipate what clients might need, so I became a better listener.”

Being more patient

“Waiting 3-5 extra seconds not only calms me and shows me a different perspective, but it also lets the students come up with answers themselves.”

Admittedly, consultants acknowledged that some exercises were more effective than others, and some home exercises transferred to their writing center work better than others; some owned up to forgetting all about mindfulness once their consultee arrived. And in the year that has passed since the formal mindfulness project, many consultants have shared a writing center exchange that went well (or better than expected) because they remembered to put space between appointments or re-focused their energy before each consultation. A follow-up questionnaire one-year later asked consultants to reflect on their Writing Center interactions with students since the original eight-week mindfulness project to gauge if the deliberate practice

of mindfulness in their Writing Center work had long-lasting consequences:

- “Two things have stayed with me: I feel I’m better able to focus my thoughts; and it’s helped me be aware of my body language, both on and off work. I consider much more how my physical presence can speak volumes.”
- “I am definitely more aware and conscious of my surroundings, my situation, and myself. That keen awareness allows me to have more control over how I react in stressful situations.”
- “The focused breathing techniques I learned helped me to feel more in control and not get too overwhelmed. I’m much more patient in all areas of my life.”
- “I think I am better able to provide a sense of comfort, ease, and confidence to those I work with.”
- “If I gave a new writing center consultant one piece of advice about being mindful, I would say the job can be surprisingly stressful, but by practicing even one mindfulness technique, you are arming yourself with the awareness and control to help you navigate these issues.”

Mindfulness as a deliberate practice has found its way into our philosophy and way of being in the writing center on a larger scale as well. I have introduced the concept to every new hire since this study and always promote mindfulness as a way of dealing with difficult and disruptive students in a healthy way. In the moment, this means being present and listening rather than reacting and judging. Before and after these consultations, being mindful involves paying thoughtful attention to understanding and articulating the student’s needs, and this practice was implemented in the recent retooling of WCOOnline, which we use to gather and share information. We changed the questions we ask students in both the registration and appointment fields to more directly ask them to articulate their strengths and weaknesses as writers. We do our best to listen more to what they are saying here than imposing what we think once we read their papers. So far, this act of deliberately staying in the moment rather than recalling the last time we worked with the same student or assignment has been successful. Consultants admit that consciously choosing to read what the student has identified as his/her needs as a launching point for the consultation

has provided both a better approach and a good reminder to keep our commitment to student-driven pedagogy.

We have also added space on our online report form to share information between consultants. The goal of this section is specifically to help us handle potentially difficult situations in a calm, non-reactive way. We are in the third quarter with this new system, and judging by this comment from one consultant to another, it is working: “Thanks for providing such helpful comments in the client report form field for ‘any useful information for future consultations.’ You left some insight into the student’s outlook, which made me all the more determined (and gave me guidance) to help me in my consultation with her. I know now that I need to proceed with greatest sensitivity to this student’s feelings.”

Overall, the benefits of incorporating a mindfulness-based practice are two-fold: the students receive focused attention and assistance, and consultants experience reduced stress and anxiety. Thus, the quality of the interaction necessarily improves. We continue to seek new ways to practice mindfulness every day. Our time with students may be brief, but we owe it to them to take whatever measures possible to be completely present in that moment. Learning to be self-aware and self-reflective is a good start.

Notes

1. Weekly mindfulness exercises can be found at MCC Writing Center Faculty Resource page: <http://resource.mccneb.edu/writingcenter/facresources.html>.

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