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Tutor's Column Final Draft

10 April 2019

Mind the Gap: Exploring Mindfulness as a Tool for Tutors, Students, and Everyone In Between

Abstract: Tutors, students, and anyone else involved in academics tend to shoulder oversized cognitive loads. Those who are under stress need tactics for dealing with emotional burdens in order to continue functioning and performing at the highest level. In writing labs and other peer-headed facilities for academic help, tutors can use mindfulness to increase their own emotional capacity while helping students regulate their own emotions as well. Simple strategies and mindfulness practices can be implemented by individuals at the front lines of tutoring centers to accomplish goals of stress relief and emotional health. By implementing simple practices to refocus on the present moment, tutors can facilitate calm, healthy learning environments for everyone involved. This essay will explore mindfulness as a tool within writing centers to decrease cognitive load and increase overall efficiency of tutors and students.

Keywords: *mindfulness, meditation, self-care, stress relief, emotional health*

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Tutor's Column Draft 3

4 April 2019

Mind the Gap: Exploring Mindfulness as a Tool for Tutors, Students, and Everyone In Between

As a new tutor just a few months ago, I was most surprised by the emotional toll that the job sometimes takes. Back to back to back sessions can be exhausting, but I also found that I love buying into a student's life, even if we are only together for a short half hour session. The one-on-one connection that takes place in a tutoring session is fulfilling and productive, but it can also take up precious emotional space for both the tutor and the student. I found myself reeling between sessions in full-schedule days at the writing center. Had I done enough to help the previous student? Were they still stressed and confused about their assignment? If I couldn't help another student, how was I supposed to complete my own homework? In the middle of a state of swirling anxiety, a brand new student would come in with another assignment. I wanted to be functioning at 100%, but the emotional load weighed down my mind and body. I realized quickly that I needed a strategy for compartmentalization. I have found that mindfulness practices have helped me with the day to day stresses of tutoring at the writing center by helping me to keep my emotions centered.

Mindfulness ideology embodies a wide range of strategies centered on grounding oneself in the present moment. At first glance, this might seem unrelated to essay drafting, university studies, and writing center work. However, mindfulness meditation serves as a form of emotional regulation that can increase task efficiency while decreasing cognitive load. In his essay on

meditation as a tool for regulating emotional and cognitive processes, Jones points out that “appropriate awareness...of emotion help[s] to develop proactive coping styles, which are necessary for maintaining emotional balance.” He also states that, when emotions are balanced, cognitive functions can operate at a higher level. Creating space to think and feel can increase cognitive abilities and help students work through their essays and other assignments more effectively. Writing can be an intensely emotional process, so it is important for students to address their emotional needs before sitting down to tackle an assignment. In a similar way, mindfulness strategies can allow writing tutors to better process each session as it happens and therefore provide the best feedback for every student.

So how can we, as tutors, incorporate mindfulness practices into writing centers and individual sessions? What does mindfulness look like? In my experience, it can be anything. It isn't restricted to meditation in the traditional sense. That term might bring to mind images of sitting cross-legged or reciting a spiritual chant. In reality, meditation can vary wildly from person to person. What can you do in the space of three or four minutes to recharge and recenter yourself? You might take a drink of cool water to refresh and rejuvenate your body and mouth. Maybe you have a particular breathing exercise you like. It could be a sheet of scrap paper where you doodle or take a note of what emotions you are feeling. I have a jigsaw puzzle app on my phone that I like to work on. Sometimes, after a particularly difficult or demanding session, what I need is to take a deep breath and complete a fifty piece puzzle. This is a simple action that requires a lot of concentration, yet also gives me room to experience the emotions I'm feeling. Whether I'm tired or frustrated or worried, this quiet activity gives me time to process. After a few minutes, I feel recharged and ready to meet a new student at 100 percent emotional space. Whatever it is, give yourself a moment of quiet solitude. Listen to your body. Address its needs.

If you give yourself a moment of peace in which to compartmentalize, your body will thank you and help you become your most productive self.

Once we have achieved this for ourselves, that leads us to the next, possibly even more crucial step. How can we, as tutors, encourage the students that we meet with to practice mindful behaviors? When students come into the writing center, they bring a variety of internal and external issues, as well as diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking. Putting it simply, every student is different. That's a good thing, though it can also make the task of implementing mindfulness in the session seem daunting. When a student comes in feeling anxious about their assignment and insecure about their writing abilities, expecting a half hour meeting with someone they perceive as an "expert" writer, it probably isn't productive to open the session by inviting them to meditate with you. While it may be something you feel comfortable with, the unfamiliar exercise may very well contribute to the student's overall discomfort.

Fortunately, there are just as many options for using mindfulness to help students as there are for implementing personal mindfulness practices. Just like any other portion of a session, mindfulness practices are an opportunity for the tutor to evaluate the student and make decisions that will fill any needs they might observe. As Johnson says in her column on mindful tutors, "we can fully potentialize a tutor's affective, supportive role...by incorporating mindfulness meditation as a writing and stress-reducing strategy into writing center practices." She adds that this will help students feel more comfortable throughout the session and lead to better learning overall. While mindfulness is a complicated subject that takes time to understand, tutors can encourage these practices without becoming meditation instructors. This can include encouraging students to talk about their concerns and let off steam, taking a moment of quiet reflection, or verbally reminding students of the present moment. For this reason, it is important

that tutors find their own personal mindfulness strategies for in between sessions. Entering a session fully recharged makes it easy to greet the next student in a comfortable and attentive way while looking out for what mindfulness strategies might be useful.

When a student comes in with emotional and cognitive burdens, a recharged tutor can better empathise and help to relieve some of the stress, at least for the short space of time that they have together. Recently, I had a student come in who was vocal about not wanting to be in the writing center. He said that he had no concerns about his paper, and that he had only come in for credit. I asked him how his semester was going, and he was struggling with a breakup and a recent death in the family, which was closely related to the topic he was writing about. He said that he just didn't feel like writing or putting much energy into his schoolwork at all. We talked about everything he was going through for a few minutes before jumping into his paper, and we took some time to pause and think, to empathize together. Once he had released some of his cognitive burden, he became much more open to talking about his paper and we were able to make a few notes for strengthening his second draft. In this way, he didn't participate in a rigidly structured meditation routine, but the session was able to benefit from a moment of reflection. Together, we recentered and moved forward with the session in a more productive headspace than before.

Tutoring and attending school can both be stressful and time consuming, but being able to compartmentalize emotions can lift cognitive load and make room for students and tutors to work more efficiently. Mindfulness practices, which are often simple in nature, are an essential step toward creating mental and emotional space for this work to happen in. Writing center tutors can implement mindfulness into their every day work habits by using simple self-care activities to diffuse stress before, during, and after sessions. Exuding a calm focus on the present moment

will then diffuse to the students that we work with, creating a better internal environment that will benefit them in all facets of life.

Works Cited

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