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Exploring the Utility of Mindfulness and Self-regulation Assignments for Business Students

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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

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EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF MINDFULLNESS AND SELF-REGULATION ASSIGNMENTS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Introduction

> *So a great intellect sinks to the level of an ordinary one, as soon as it is interrupted and disturbed, its attention distracted and drawn off the matter in hand; for its superiority depends upon its power of concentration – of bringing all its strength to bear upon one theme, in the same way as a concave mirror collects into one point all the rays of light that strike upon it.* Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer, 1893, pp. 127-128)

There are a number of personal habits, disciplines, and activities that are associated with success for both college students and business professionals. Goal-setting, concentration and focus, and the ability to delay gratification have long been known to be key factors. More recent research has shown that mindfulness, self-assessment, and self-regulation are also important to success. However, today's world poses serious, new challenges to the student or professional who wishes to think and learn effectively and to achieve his/her goals.

Previously, a Learning Academy was created to lead volunteer students through a series of self-assessments, worksheet exercises, personal reflections, and group discussions aimed at promoting the habits, disciplines, and activities mentioned above (Roberson, 2017; Polin and Roberson, 2016). The Academy was a success, but the number of students impacted was limited. The purpose of this study is to determine if there is utility in assigning selected Learning Academy content within a business course in order to reach a wider group of students.

Literature Overview

More than 50 scholarly articles and books provided the foundation on which the Learning Academy was based. Here is a very brief overview of a few of those concepts.

Mindfulness is critical to success in any endeavor as it involves making conscious, wise choices. Salomon and Globerson (1987) state that mindfulness is "the volitional, metacognitively guided employment of non-automatic, usually effortful processes (p. 623). According to Efklides (2008) metacognition requires self-monitoring and keen awareness and intentional thought. Self-

regulation is the next important concept, and Zimmerman and Kitsantas (2007) refer to self-regulation as "the hidden dimension of personal competence."

Goal setting is also important, and Latham and Seijts (1999) describe a subtle but important added benefit of goal setting. As one makes progress toward a goal, his/her sense of well-being is increased, leading to increased feelings of self-efficacy. Obviously, effort toward goals requires some degree of delayed gratification. Mischel (1996) discusses delayed gratification and willpower, and he suggests that intentional, self-imposed deferment of gratification and displaying both a concern for the future and a plan to get there are necessary for all mature human behavior.

To what extent are today's students applying what we know about these topics to their thinking and learning, and are they well prepared to function as business professionals? Sadly, there is evidence that today's college students fall far short in a number of areas, the first of which is the amount of time they devote to their studies. Students nationwide report averaging just 14.0 hours per week studying (NSSE, 2015), in contrast with the common rule of thumb requiring 30.0 hours per week for a 15-hour load (McCormick, 2011).

Adding to the challenge, cell phones and other communication technologies encourage students to divide their attention among multiple activities, instead of focusing on one at a time. Rosen, Carrier, and Cheever (2013) found that students beginning a study session averaged only six minutes of study before they switched tasks, usually to some form of technology, staying on the original task only 65 percent of the time. Roberts (2016) suggests that unwise use of technology can negatively impact academic performance, business and professional success, the quality of social and familial relationships, and general well-being. Bowman, Waite, and Levine (2015) recommend that students take technology breaks and engage in self-monitoring and self-regulation. It is essential that today's students – tomorrow's business professionals – learn to harness the power of personal technologies and not become a slave to them.

Methodology

Select assignments from the Learning Academy were assigned to a Principles of Management class, and results were evaluated.

   The mindfulness and self-regulation assignments. Six worksheets and readings were assigned over a 12-week period and constituted five percent of students' course grade. A summary of those assignments is shown in Table 1.

   Individual assignments and discussions. On the day each assignment is due to be completed, there was a brief discussion of the assignment in class. Students retained all of their worksheets until they had completed the final assignment.

   Assignment portfolio. On the day the final assignment was due, students submitted their "Mindfulness Portfolio" consisting of all the completed assignment worksheets, a brief summary of what they learned from each assignment, and an overall reaction to the assignments as a whole.

   Class discussion and debriefing. On the day the portfolios were due, there was a detailed class discussion in which students were asked to share an observation about a positive change they made as a result of the assignments, a goal they had set, and/or an area still needing improvement.

Topics and Readings	Worksheets and Assignments
1 *Introduction to Mindfulness and Self-Regulation* • Overview/purpose of the assignments/readings • Fundamentals of thinking, memory, mindfulness, and self-regulation; the impact of switchtasking (i.e., "multitasking")	In-class *Switchtasking Exercise* *Worksheet 1 – Switchtasking*: Record the numbers of times and causes of switchtasking during study sessions
2 *Self-reflection* • The importance of deep concentration and reflection	*Worksheet 2 – Additional Factors Limiting Concentration*: Identify additional factors (other than switchtasking) that distract attention or limit concentration during study sessions
3 *Goal Setting and Action Planning* • Goal orientation and goal setting	*Worksheet 3 – Plans to Improve Concentration*: Create goals and action plans to improve concentration
4 *Action Implementation and Monitoring* • Metacognition and mindfulness; making conscious choices	*Worksheet 4 – Time Use Inventory*: Reflect upon the number of weekday and weekend hours that should be spent on various academic, work, social, and recreational activities
5 *Self-regulation* • Self-regulation (the "hidden dimension of personal competence"); delayed gratification and willpower	*Worksheet 5 – Time Log*: Record the time actually spent on each of the activities considered in Worksheet 4 and identify the discrepancies between the amount of time that *should be spent* and time that *was spent*
6 *Outcome Analysis and Goal/Action Refinement* • Advanced concepts of self-regulation, goal setting, and planning	*Worksheet 6 – Self-Assessment*: Assess progress, identifying significant successes, small successes, and plans for future improvement
7 *Debriefing* • Group discussion of successes, opportunities for continued improvement, and insights gained	Prepare and submit the Mindfulness Portfolio

Table 1. Mindfulness and Self-Regulation Assignments

Outcome measures. The utility of the assignments was evaluated based on content analysis of student portfolios and student reactions to the assignments. Reactions were measured through an online Student Reactions Questionnaire, and portfolios were analyzed based on four topics: switchtasking, plans to improve concentration, amount of time spent on academic and life activities, and significant successes related to the assignments.

Results and Implications

Student reactions questionnaire. Each participant was asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire measuring their reactions to the assignment including questions about the perceived value and professional relevance of the assignments. Results are shown in Table 2. Twenty-three responses were recorded on the six-point scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The Mindfulness Assignments . . .	Mean	Agree %	Disagree %
1. were quite relevant to my future career in business.	4.90	95.2	4.8
2. were personally interesting to me.	4.57	95.2	4.8
3. were a waste of my time. (reverse scored)	2.29	9.5	90.5
4. made me think.	4.70	95.0	5.0
5. exposed me to ideas that every business student should learn.	4.86	95.2	4.8
6. have not had any impact on my thinking and learning. (reverse scored)	2.38	9.5	90.5
7. have caused me to make significant changes in the ways I think and learn.	4.00	81.0	19.0
8. should be continued in this course in the future.	5.00	95.2	4.8
9. caused me to develop new habits that I will retain after this course is completed.	4.38	95.2	4.8

Table 2. Student Reactions Questionnaire

Content analysis of the portfolios. Student portfolios were analyzed based on four topics to determine the nature of their responses and the most common responses to each assignment. These are some of the observations.

Switchtasking. By far the most common cause of switchtasking was smart phones (including phone calls, text messages, social media, and e-mails) which accounted for 43 percent of total switchtasking occurrences. TV (including video games and streaming services such as Netflix) accounted for 20 percent, and talking and socializing for 10 percent.

Plans to improve concentration. Analysis of students' plans for improvement found that the most prevalent category of plans involved making conscious, mindful choices (43.5% of all plans). Specific types of choices mentioned were study time and location, avoiding distractions,

adopting a healthier lifestyle through better eating and exercise, and adjusting the amount of sleep they get. Other types of plans included putting the phone out of reach for periods of time (30.6%), plans to improve time management (13.7%), efforts to resist distractions and to have stronger willpower (7.3%), and finding a quieter place to think and study (4.8%).

Amount of time spent on academic and life activities. Students were asked to record the amount of time they believe they <u>should spend</u> each week on various school and life activities. Then, they tracked their time use for one week and reported the amount of time they <u>did spend</u> on those activities. Results may be seen in Table 3. Responses revealed students' understanding that they should be spending more time on study and various wellness activities while also believing they should spend less time on electronic and social devices and interactions.

Activity	Number of Hours		
	Should Spend	Did Spend	Difference
More time should be spent on . . .			
Study	28.1	17.3	10.8
Sleep	55.7	49.3	6.4
Exercise	3.2	2.2	1.0
Eating	5.7	4.8	0.9
Family	1.7	0.9	0.8
Less time should be spent on . . .			
Phones/Electronics	14.5	18.6	-4.1
TV	4.8	7.0	-2.2
Friends	7.2	9.1	-1.9
Games/hobbies	4.6	5.5	-0.9
Commuting	2.1	2.6	-0.5
Student Orgs.	1.5	2.0	-0.5

Table 3. Amount of Time Students Spend on Academic and Life Activities

Significant successes reported. When asked to describe the most significant successes that resulted from the goals, plans, and actions they took, changes in study habits and methods was mentioned most frequently (33.3% of all successes reported), followed by planning, prioritizing, and time management (31.7%), limiting distractions and increasing focus (21.7%), and personal improvement (13.3%).

Conclusions

Both student reactions and content analysis of tangible student outcomes support the value of mindfulness and self-regulation assignments used in a business course. Participants in these activities were business students who need positive habits today for the ways they think and work as students, as well as to lay the foundation for their work habits as professionals. Applying mindfulness and self-regulation can serve them throughout their careers.

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