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## An experiential reflection of a mindful lecturer: exploring enhancement of active learning in higher education

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The practice of mindfulness is described as an awareness that emerges through purposefully paying attention in the present moment, non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Practice usually entails attentional training, which is executed through meditation. Mindfulness meditation involves actively observing the present moment by attending to the breath, moment-to-moment, and without adding any meaning to the feelings and thoughts that emerge. This process assists people who observe the constant flow of information unfolding in the present moment and to systematically develop an ability to accept (instead of judge) the experiences that are encountered. Working with mindfulness meditation practices has been shown to lead to other multi-layered indirect benefits, such as compassion, self-compassion, and equanimity, which are parts of advanced mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Grossman & Van Dam, 2011). Interestingly, while benefits of mindfulness have been explored within higher education contexts, and improvements in achievement and mental health across student populations have been reported (e.g. Bennett, Egan, Cook, & Mantzios, 2018), the potential for teacher development and enhancement of teaching and learning has not been explored.

Researchers have primarily focused on the health benefits within student populations (Bowen & Marlatt, 2009), while similar benefits have been observed in teaching staff when appropriate population-specific practices are put into place (Braun, Roesner, Mashburn, & Skinner, 2018). From simple and quick interventions (Mantzios & Giannou, 2018a, 2018b) to longer mindfulness programs (Beshai, McAlpine, Weare, & Kuyken, 2016; Gold et al., 2010), the evidence of mindfulness practices for health and well-being has been considerable in the past decade. However, are there any direct benefits to teaching and learning of students with more mindful teachers in higher education? In the next section, we put forward one example of how a mindful teacher could enhance active learning during core lectures and big groups of learners.

Within higher education settings, the usual teaching practice is to embed more interactive and engaging material (such as videos, multiple-choice questions, different scenarios or case studies) in between the slides that hold the essence and the key

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theories and practices we teach our students. We assume that our students have an attention span that ranges from 15 to 20 min, although the threshold of attentional capacity has been debated and might be considerably different between students (see Klingberg, 2010). This often leads some students to get bored, become distracted, or mind wander away from the taught material. This practice of mixing interactive and mainstream material in different timeframes, although well thought out, practically is not inclusive and cannot consider the needs of all students' learning and attentiveness. Introducing the interactive materials sooner might be a solution, but then the question during preparation of lecture material becomes at what point do we actually introduce this sort of more engaging material?

The solution that we have found to work is to strip away all interactive and engaging material from the standardized PowerPoint slides that we present to students, and the creation of a second presentation that holds only the interactive material. Using the foundations of mindfulness, especially the ability to observe nonjudgmentally how the present moment unfolds, is a powerful tool in minimizing student mind wandering during lectures and in enhancing the engagement with taught material. For this to happen, the teacher needs to firstly observe moment by moment how engaged students are with the material. Indications of engagement might be whether students are keeping notes, watching the slides every time you change them, being attentive of what is happening in the lecture theatre rather than being on their phone or laptop, talking to classmates. When the time is right, and the teacher observes that the mind of students has wandered away, the second set of slides with more engaging and interactive material can be used to return students attention back to the taught material.

The second foundational element of mindfulness relates to the idea of nonjudgment. Many times as teachers, we attach judgment to non-engaged students during lectures and interpret it as a personal failure in keeping the lectures interesting, or, blame the generation of students who have been brought-up in overly interactive and engaging environments filled with multimedia and technology and display low tolerance levels to non-interactive material. Whatever automatic interpretation (or judgment) occurs, it stops the teacher from applying the primary foundation of mindfulness that relates to the whole idea of being observant, moment by moment, to what is happening within the lecture theatre. Non-judgment of non-engagement of students may well be an element of keeping ourselves as teachers focused on the present moment when we deliver new material to students, and may also enhance the ability of students to remain focused on what is being taught. In other words, when we judge non-engaged students (or do not simply acknowledge that students have limited attentional capacities), we miss the opportunity to reintegrate students to the primary goal of the lecture. Our potential as lecturers and teachers in higher education in improving learning and teaching through mindfulness is yet to be tested, and proposes a novel approach of improving delivery of core material that may not be overly pleasurable to students.

It is our experience that the students are enjoying the attentiveness and interaction that exists with a non-standardised lecture that is using the instinct and observant power of the teacher to reinstate the focus and attentiveness of students. As a teacher, the increased flexibility of responding in the present moment to the perceived mood and visible actions of the students increases confidence and reduces worry of anticipated difficulties, particularly when teaching traditional and less engaging material in

core topic areas. The ability as a teacher to non-intrusively remind students to be present, and indirectly tell them ‘are you listening?’, ‘this is interesting!’ and ‘pay attention!’ without saying anything has become easier and more powerful through incorporating fundamental elements of mindfulness in the way we teach.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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