The Role of Mindfulness in First Year Psychology Lectures

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“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2006)

“Mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context” (Langer, 1998)

Mindfulness involves the self regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience and the adoption of an open, curious, accepting awareness of experiences in the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004)
MBSR, usually delivered in 8 weekly sessions, has emerged as one of the better known clinical applications of MM (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

MBSR has been shown to significantly benefit individuals with:
- stress (Williams et al., 2001),
- depression (Segal et al., 2002)
- addictive behaviour (Marlatt, 2002)
- anxiety disorders (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992)
Mindfulness Based Education (MBE)

- A powerful tool to decrease stress, deepen learning, enhance academic performance, and promote emotional and social well-being.

See

www.mindfuleducation.org
www.mindfuled.org
www.thehawnfoundation.org
Rigorous studies on college students have demonstrated that training in meditation can lead to:

- A reduction in stress, anxiety and depression
- Improvement in cognitive ability
- Increase in self-esteem
- Improvement in wellness
Mindfulness meditation requires intense training and strong discipline for daily practice.

But, how effective is a brief meditation exercise in improving attention, concentration, engagement during a lecture?
PSYCHOLOGY LECTURE

"Today: The collective unconscious..."
Research Aims & Objectives

- **AIM:** To examine whether brief mindfulness exercises at the start of lectures improve the teaching & learning environment.

- **OBJECTIVES:** To assess whether brief mindfulness exercises can improve students’:
  - attention & motivation
  - psychological wellbeing (e.g. stress, mood)
Method

- Two first year classes: ‘Social Psychology’ and ‘Psychology in Context’ were invited to participate.
- At the start of each lecture: brief mindfulness exercise (3-5 min’s):
  - Sitting Posture
  - Breath Awareness
  - Body Scan
  - Guided Imagery
  - Harnessing positive emotions
Questionnaires

- PANAS (Positive & Negative Affect Scale)
- PSS (Perceived Stress Scale)
- MAAS (Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale)
- SHS (Subjective Happiness Scale)
- Questionnaires (5-point Likert Scales) assessing whether students felt the meditation helped them to:
  - concentrate during the lecture
  - pay more attention during the lecture
  - Stay focused on what was happening during the lecture
  - Feel engaged and awake during the lecture
  - Become aware of how they felt during the lecture
- Questionnaires using open ended questions for qualitative analysis
Results

- N = 83 students
- Gender = 92% female, 8% male
- Mean age = 22 years (range 18-48)
- Discipline
  - 44% Early Childhood Studies
  - 11% Social Work
  - 41% Social Science
  - 4% Visiting Students
Percent of students who said mindfulness helped:

- Concentrate during the lecture: 55%
- Be more motivated during the lecture: 47%
- Pay attention during the lecture: 60%
- Stay focused on what was happening: 54%
- Feel engaged and awake: 48%
- Become aware of how they felt: 52%
Quantitative Results

- 68% reported that a mindfulness exercise at the start of each lecture would be beneficial for future teaching and learning.

- There were no statistically significant increases in psychological wellbeing and mindfulness levels.
Factors that helped positive learning experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness (meditation) exercise</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting topics / Material</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers’ Positive Attitude / energy</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>R4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly/interactive learning environment</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>R5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slides</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>R6</td>
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Student Quotes

- “Meditation at the start of the lecture was very relaxing and allowed you to focus”

- “Meditation at the beginning cleared my mind so I could take in the lecturer”
How students said they found the mindfulness exercise:

- Positive evaluation F=44% R1
- Relaxing effect F=38% R2
- Focus F=21% R3
- Tiredness effects F=17% R4
- Improved Concentration F=11% R5
- Distractions F=10% R6
Study Limitations

- Lack of a control group
- Pre-intervention data was limited
- Mindfulness exercises:
  - often disrupted by late arrivals
  - increased awareness of environmental factors often not conducive to lecturing (e.g. classroom temperature, noise levels)
  - increased awareness of how the student felt (e.g. tired, sleepy)
  - Became repetitive and not as effective
Conclusions & Recommendations

- Mindfulness could be a very useful teaching tool
- However, *how, where and when* this is delivered is likely to influence its effectiveness
- Further rigorous research evaluating forms of mindfulness and including the broader student population is required
- Future studies should evaluate the effects of mindfulness on the lecturers wellbeing and satisfaction with the quality of the lecture