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Mindful of the Future: Improving Student Assessment

Abstract

The assessment process and the ability to reliably evaluate a learner's progress is fundamental to education (Biggs, 2003; Trotter, 2006), furthermore the chosen modality asserts an undue influence over the consequent learning behaviour of students (Hamdorf and Hall, 2001).

This paper proposes that the effective use of mindfulness as a metacognitive skill in the assessment process in third level education can alleviate critical issues with student engagement, performance and retention.

The paper captures the impact of mindfulness on current academic practices through a series of narrative inquiries. The data is taken from a range of discipline bases and highlights a myriad of approaches from an academic perspective.

It concludes with guidelines for faculty and students to enable them to deploy the practice of mindfulness within the assessment regime and in support of learning.

Key Words: Mindfulness, Assessment, Stress, Transition to higher education, Feedback
Introduction: Moving towards Assessment of Learning

Craddock and Mathias (2009) provide an insight into the myriad of stresses faced by learners when undertaking assessment, ranging from feelings of dissatisfaction with their work to being wary of written examinations. The concept of disillusionment and frustration with the process is captured by Taras (2002), whereby the perceived threat and tension embedded in a summative examination allays any ‘good’ attached to in-class and formative work undertaken. The nature of formative assessment may alleviate some of these concerns by offering a student centred focus, one that is seen as non-threatening. Jenkins (2010) suggests that formative assessment should be embraced as an everyday occurrence and should replace the summative processes that are there only to inform (feedback) to the student cohort. Active engagement on behalf of the learner is crucial if this is to be a success (Zepke and Leach, 2010), this is reflected in the concept of self-efficacy explored by Llorens et al (2007), it was noted that learners belief in their own abilities and the resources to complete a given task increased their motivation and engagement (resembling the notion of self-perceived competence, (Fazey and Fazey, 2001) – thus it is imperative that such internal belief structures are engendered in practice through appropriate learning supports.

There is a need to map incoming students’ expectations of higher education in a way that overrides the myriad of orientation perspectives that vie for a students’ attention. The transition requires that the institution be involved in an open dialogue with these fledgling learners, one that captures and acts upon their perceptions and experiences of this new educational environment (Zepke and Leach, 2010).

Mindful Approaches to Assessment

Debilitating stress and anxiety related or caused by the assessment process in particular have a noted impact on both an individuals’ health (physical and emotional) and upon their assessment performance (Aheneiku, Nwosu, and Ahaneiku 2000; Struthers, Perry, and Menec, 2000; Putwain, 2008). It is unfortunately a commonplace issue amongst students in Higher Education (Andrews and Wilding, 2004) where evidence suggests a direct link with a decrease in their cognitive functioning (McDermott and Ebmeier, 2009). This habitual assault on the transitional learner, where assessment regimes remain in stasis, equates to a ‘mindless’ approach (Langer 2012), presented in an authoritative manner, one is disinclined to question it, becoming over reliant on the status quo.
The overarching concept of mindfulness practice (MP) is one in which an individual may engage in a process of focused awareness of any given experience. This is undertaken in a manner that is wholly non-judgmental. This self-regulatory mode of attentiveness involves both sustained attention and the inhibition of elaborative processing. It is a skill that may be developed and learnt over time and applied in differing contexts.

Kabat-Zin (1990) defines mindfulness as a process, one in which a quality of attention is brought to a momentary experience. This mode has leveraged its meditative roots to inform the clinical practice of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), originally pioneered in the treatment of chronic pain. A psychological perspective (Langer, 1997) informs us that the process goes further – there is an active and continuing engagement in the realisation of new experiences, where preconceived notions must be relinquished to enable one to act upon new observations. In this manner it may be used to identify and appraise how one may deal with contributing factors impacting behaviour and emotional distress.

There is a noted prevalence within the literature of mindfulness in the clinical environment (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, and Burney, 1985), this has begun to migrate into non-clinical examples with the alleviation of stress and promotion of emotional well-being (Williams, Kolar, Reger, and Pearson, 2001) and further afield in the promotion of memory, visual processing and cognition (Zeidan et al. 2010; Cahn and Polich, 2006). It is also deployed in the work environment where it has had positive effects on working relations and adaptability. MP undertaken with law students (Rogers, 2009) has been used to aid deliberation and practice, enabling students to appraise their own thoughts and directions with regard to making judgments independent of facts. Mindfulness as a mode of mental training has the ability to reduce the impact of stress (Zeidan et al, 2010), similarly the ability to regulate emotions has demonstrated an impact on enhancing cognition (Moore and Malinowski, 2009).

The ability of the learner to disengage from distractors and focus upon tasks is fundamental to easing cognitive dissonance and enhancing their learning process (Teasdale, 1999). Emotive tasks such as those found in the assessment process can inevitably hinder one’s performance. The act of mindfulness to disassociate the inherent anxieties attached to high stakes assessment will enable the learner to apply a level of cognitive control that leads to clarity, focus and consequently an improved performance - this is commonly referred to as decentring or non-elaborative awareness.
Narrative Inquiries and Directions for Mindfulness Practice

The pilot study focuses on a series of narrative inquiries involving faculty (≥7) from a range of disciplines (≥4). The intention is to elicit the nature of academic engagement with MP and whether a perceived impact may be discerned in the student cohort. These inquiries explore faculty’s conceptions of MP and how it manifests in their teaching practice. A particular focus is upon the noted stresses related to the assessment process; whether in-class assessment for learning or more summative approaches and how MP may offer support to the learner. A sample analysis of institutional assessment protocol is presented as a counter point.

The preliminary findings indicate that structured activities based on the concept of mindfulness support learners in focusing upon task orientated activities; providing clarity of thought, action and enhancing performance. MP techniques in session provided an additional toolset to the academic, where used it was noted to have a visible impact on engagement and dialogue with the student cohort.

In conclusion it is recommended that MP should be promoted and encouraged to develop self-regulation of attention and non-elaborative awareness – to aid insight and clarity for learners, and improve their own assessment and engagement approaches.
References:


