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Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices: The Voice of the Student

Research Paper – October 2015

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Abstract

There is a large spectrum of Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices (MCPs) which are gaining traction in the classroom. Many of these are aimed at reducing stress, reflecting on different points of view, expressing empathy, appreciating diversity and reducing absenteeism to name a few. Some of these practices hold promise to possibly improve attention, concentration and memory capabilities. However, there is no agreed consensus for what students want from MCPs (if anything), if they enjoy them, and if they want to engage in them. Further, it is likely that given the personal nature of MCPs, any findings are likely to be discipline and environment specific, if not specific to the cohort, or even the individual, warranting each educator to determine where their unique students stand.

This paper draws motivation from previous empirical research, and the desire of the authors to capture the students' voice on what they want, and what they think works. The environment is a BSc in IT programme in Dublin, Ireland. Students were invited to participate in a mindfulness and contemplative practice workshop in which a number of MCPs were explored with faculty guidance. The MCPs were tailored using results of a pre-workshop questionnaire completed by students, with inspiration drawn from the Tree of Contemplative Practices (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2015). During the workshop various practical sessions were led and results were captured through a post-workshop questionnaire. Results show a significant interest in MPCs, a range of motivations for engaging in them, and diverse practice interests. Overall, a high level of student engagement is a substantial outcome.

This paper looks to inform educators seeking to introduce simple contemplative pedagogy practices in the classroom, hopefully making their first attempts more fruitful by allowing them to take into account their students' perceptions and desires. This can be determined by running their own workshop with their own students, or by using the results from ours, and making adjustments as required.

Keywords

Contemplative Practices, Mindfulness, Meditation

1. Motivation

The motivation for this study is drawn from previous work by the authors (Glanville et al., 2014), the objective of which was to implement a Mindfulness Meditation Practice in the classroom. The focus was on ease of implementation and minimal disruption of existing teaching plans while exploring the impacts of this practice in terms of student concentration, opinion and experience. The practice itself was a two minute one-pointedness session which took place at the beginning of each lecture in one module attended by of a cohort of approximately 60 second year students enrolled on a BSc in Information Technology programme. The conclusion provided some very positive and surprising results, particularly in terms of student engagement and buy-in. The participants expressed a desire to take part in more meditation/relaxation activities as part of their learning (Figure 1) and as such, was a key outcome.

The current research is an investigation into what the students perceive as useful in terms of the many and varied MCPs available, what students find enjoyable, and if they want to

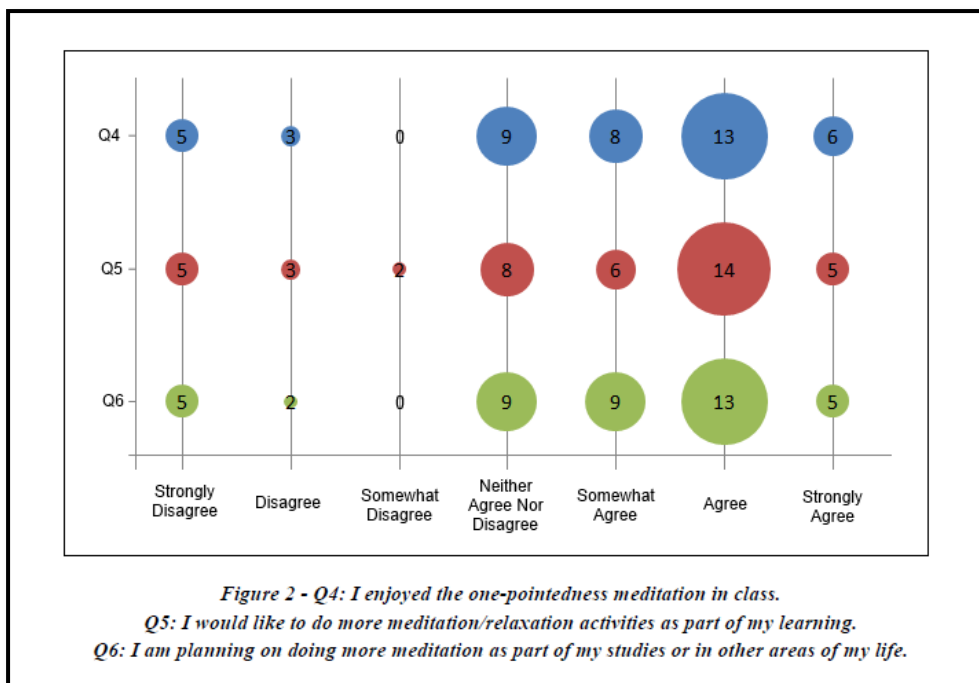


Figure 1 Previous Empirical Research: Desire for more (Glanville et al., 2014)

engage further in MCPs. We set out to capture the students' voice in the form of a semi-structured questionnaire, the feedback of which the informed a practice-based mindfulness workshop to ascertain what works best for our students, and what our students want from

such practices. These results are envisaged as forming the basis for a continued programme of mindfulness formally incorporated into the programme curriculum.

2. Literature Review

Mindfulness can be defined as the meditative act of paying close, non-judgmental attention to the features of present-moment experience such as breath, bodily sensation, and thought (Repetti, 2010). Mindfulness is a process that allows an individual to view a situation from several perspectives, therefore, with different individual outcomes. According to experimental studies provided by Langer (1989), giving people more choices, offering different perspectives, and giving alternative forms of instruction can promote mindfulness. Liberman and Langer (1995) found that individuals had greater recall of details in a story after reading a text from different perspectives. Brown and Langer (1990) stated that mindfulness is purposefully not linear; it asserts that problems and resolutions should be viewed from several vantage points with several possible outcomes. Mindfulness often refers to specific practices used to focus a person's attention – meditation, yoga, breathing, single-pointed concentration on an object – and is characterised by intentionality and non-judgmental observation of experience (Broderick & Jennings, 2012).

Contemplation, however, is a holding of something (e.g. a question, an object, a line of poetry) within the being, within the body/mind. A contemplative stance suggests this intention of an internal holding or beholding. The terms “contemplative practices” and “mindfulness practices” are used interchangeably as the practices (e.g. ikebana, tai chi ch'uan, mindful walking, yoga, observation of nature, observation of the breath, silent sitting) are shared. Mindfulness and contemplative practices allow the individual to create subjective outcomes, based on their perspective examination of an activity or task. An allowance for the individual to generate their own subjective outcomes is a challenging notion in higher education where objective results may be expected. Langer (1997) contended that when students have the freedom to define the process and explore possibilities, they rid themselves of an outcome goal orientation and thus are not limited to one particular answer. Because the students do not have a particular “correct” answer or format, they have the freedom to explore alternatives that otherwise may not have been considered. The individual does not have to concentrate on “Can I do it?” but “How do I do it?” As a result, student productivity and creativity can be increased.

The platform for mindfulness is a collaborative and supportive system of teacher and student interaction. This is idealistic and perhaps puts an obvious constraint on its success, but nevertheless, research suggests mindfulness practices are linked to educational goals and warrant consideration.

From an educational goal perspective, research shows that contemplative practice, even if performed for short periods, improves attention (Jha 2007; Tang et al. 2007), cognition (Zeidan 2010), and cognitive flexibility (Moore, 2009). Mindfulness is both a state, and a process. It is not uncommon to hear of educational processes, policies and practices adopted which have unintended (mindless) negative consequences on students and staff experience (Haroun and Howard-Kemp, 2012). The true effect of mindfulness in higher education is still generally misunderstood and underexplored, perhaps because of its experimental and interpretive status. This shift is being advanced by thousands of professors and academic administrators, many of whom are part of the new Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (www.acmhe.edu), which itself is part of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (www.contemplativemind.org).

Mindfulness education appears to have a positive impact on academic performance by helping students focus, be more organised, plan ahead, perform better on exams, and think critically. The pressures of higher education come not only in the form of assessment and examinations, the lives of our students are filled with external challenges where mindfulness could play a role in alleviating some of these stresses.

3. Research Design and Approach

An interpretive methodology was selected for this study as the emphasis was to make sense and meaning from the research investigation. Creswell and Millar (2003) describe the interpretive approach as a method of seeking knowledge that resides “inside” the individual as opposed to “out there” beyond the individual – the voice of the student.

Data was collected using mixed-methods, an initial participant semi-structured questionnaire to inform the selection of mindfulness practices for a workshop, participant observation during the workshop practices, and a post-workshop semi-structured questionnaire to draw out tangible conclusions.

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the student perception of MCPs?

2. What outcomes do students desire from engaging with MCPs?
3. What types of MCPs do students enjoy and perceive as useful?
4. Do students have a desire to learn more about MCPs, particularly in a faculty-led manner?

A pre-workshop questionnaire was designed to capture the voice of our students¹ on what their perceptions of MCPs are, what they believe the perceived benefits of engaging in practice would be, and what MCPs they enjoy. We then used this data to select the appropriate practices for a workshop at a later date. A post-workshop questionnaire was used to capture feedback from workshop participants with a view of implementing future mindfulness workshops that are aligned to the ‘student voice’. We also interacted with and observed students during the workshop. Results of these questionnaires and observations are discussed in the next section.

4. Results

4.1 Pre-workshop Questionnaire

The Pre-workshop questionnaire (PreWQ) revealed interesting data about student opinion on MCPs. A total of 24 out of 40 students responded to the questionnaire (60% response rate).

Question 1 was: *Are you familiar with mindfulness and contemplative practices? 1 (very unfamiliar) → 5 (very familiar)*. The average response was 2.4 indicating that students have some familiarity with MCPs. This may be partially due to the fact that these students were introduced to MCPs last year as part of the previous study.

Question 2 was: *Have you ever practised any form of meditation or contemplative practice? 1 (Never), 2 (I have tried a few methods), 3 (I practice regularly)*. The average response was 1.6, reflecting seven 1’s and ten 2’s (0 students replied with 3). Again this is likely due in part to students taking part in last year’s study. This is important for interpreting the remaining questions as we can proceed knowing that the average student does have some experience with MCPs but is not in regular practice.

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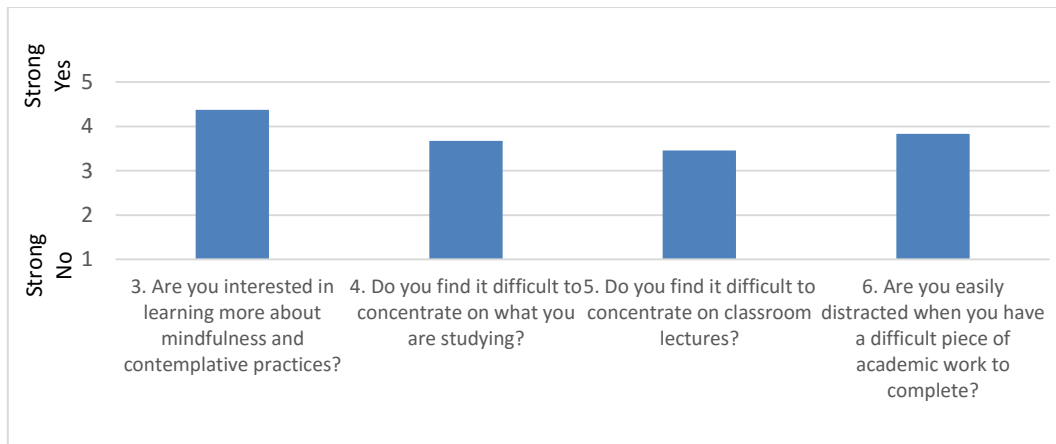


Figure 4.1 Average student responses to questions 3-6, pre-workshop questionnaire

Figure 4.1 shows the responses to questions 3-6. Q3 revealed that students want to learn more about MCPs, and had a strong motivation to proceed with our voluntary MCP workshop with 54% of students responding with a strong yes (5), and no students replying below 3 (indifferent). Questions 4-6 revealed that students perceive difficulty in concentrating on studies and/or lectures and that they can be easily distracted when completing academic work.

Question 7 presented students with six options shown in table 4.1, of which students could select as many as required to complete the statement: *Do you think any form of mindfulness and meditation might...*

Option	Percent responding
<i>...focus my attention on academic studies</i>	50%
<i>...help increase my grades</i>	25%
<i>...enable me to become a better communicator</i>	25%
<i>...help me get to know myself better</i>	46%
<i>...increase my confidence and self-esteem</i>	42%
<i>...help me motivate me to finish what I start</i>	50%

Table 4.1 Student responses to question 7, pre-workshop questionnaire: *Do you think any form of mindfulness and meditation might...*

This question revealed that students perceived help with ‘focussing attention on academic studies’ and ‘motivate me to finish what I start’ most, followed by ‘get to know myself better’ and ‘increase my confidence and self-esteem’. ‘Help increase my grades’ and ‘enable me to become a better communicator’ gathered the least responses. It is interesting that students’ ranked ‘help increase my grades’ lowest, and serves as evidence that students may have holistic motivations for engaging in MCPs. Also the fact that that ‘focusing my attention

on academic studies' was ranked highest correlates well with the high levels of difficulty in concentration and/or distraction revealed in questions 4-6. Again, this can be taken as evidence that students perceive genuine shortcomings in their own academic practices which they think engaging in MPPs can help with, and is considered significant.

A low response in 'enable me to become a better communicator' is interesting, particularly as only 1/3 of students responded yes to a question asking *Do you like talking through your problems and worries with others?* It seems that our students do not rank themselves highly in communication, and don't think that MCPs will help with this.

Finally, students were asked: *Are you interested in attending a Mindfulness Workshop - 'The Students Voice'?* The workshop was scheduled at a time when students are not normally required to be present in college. 63% responded 'very', 29% 'possibly' and 5% 'no'.

4.2 Mindfulness Meditation Practice Workshop and Post-workshop Questionnaire

The workshop was open to all students in the cohort, not just those who participated in the pre-workshop questionnaire. 27 students attended, including 12 who completed the PreWQ. This is a demonstration of positive student engagement with MCPs, particularly as we expected an absolute maximum of 22 students (92% of 24 responding that they were interested in attending). These 27 students represent 68% of the cohort, all who devoted free time to attending the workshop.

Based on the results of the Pre-WQ, we selected the following MCPs to introduce students to, adapted from the Tree of Contemplative Practices (Contemplative Mind, 2015), found in Appendix 1.

- Creative Collaboration (telling a story through pictures)
- Body Expression (silent mime activity with another)
- About Time (focused on time, or living in the moment)
- Stillness (quiet thoughtful creativity)
- Creative Writing (writing a letter that will never be seen)
- Focus & Appreciation (focused attention on an object)

18 students who attended the workshop completed the post-workshop questionnaire (PostWQ) (response rate 67%). In the PostWQ students were asked their opinions on how much they enjoyed these MCP activities, what they thought was useful, and which they would like to explore further. Figure 4.2 shows these responses.

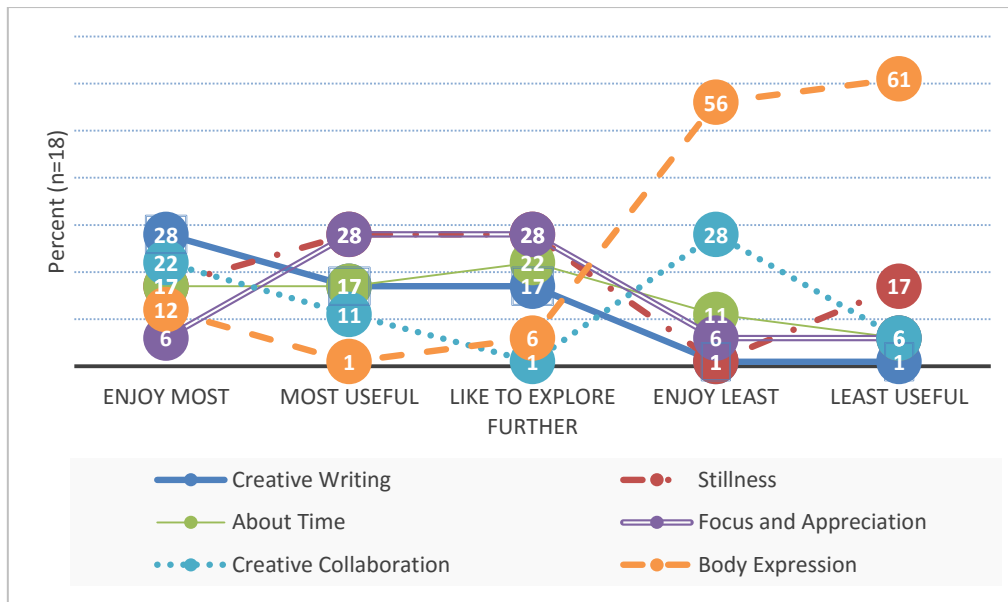


Figure 4.2 Student responses to what MCPs they found useful, what they enjoyed, and what they would like to explore further (post-workshop questionnaire).

The most dramatic response was that 56% of students enjoyed body expression least, and 61% found it least helpful. Both stillness and focus & appreciation were ranked as most useful as well as garnering high interest in further exploration. Interestingly, the activity that was enjoyed most was creative writing, but this was mid-table in terms of desire to explore further. It is also noteworthy that focus & appreciation was ranked joint first in both ‘most useful and ‘like to explore further’ despite ranking lowest in ‘enjoy most’. In fact there is little correlation between what students enjoyed most and what they would like to explore further. There is a much higher degree of correlation between what students found most useful and what they would like to explore further. Thus in terms of further exploration, perceived usefulness is more important than enjoyment.

Figure 4.3 shows results of questions that were intended to gauge interest in learning more about MCPs, and desire to participate further in guided workshops.



Figure 4.3 results of questions intended to gauge interest in learning more about MCPs, and desire to participate further in guided workshops (post-workshop questionnaire).

Despite only 17% of students stating that they were already practicing some form of mindfulness or contemplative practice, response to the workshop overall was surprisingly positive. All but one student reported that they would like to practice MCPs in the future and all students indicated that they are interested in exploring MCPs further, with faculty guidance. All students also reported that they would consider attending another workshop looking at the practices already explored in more detail, and that they would also consider attending a workshop looking at different MCPs. This clearly demonstrates that despite being novice practitioners, our students not only have an appetite for more, but have open minds towards exploring new practices.

4.3 Observations

As with most observational research write-ups, interpretations are presented subjectively but are useful in providing additional context to the quantifiable results. This section specifically discusses the observations by the researchers during the workshop, and over the six practices conducted. Interestingly, the post-workshop questionnaire revealed what was observed during the practices themselves. As seen in Fig. 4.2, 56% of students enjoyed body expression least. The researchers observed a sense of ‘awkwardness’ from some of the participants when conducting this exercise, which is perhaps understandable as the participants did not necessarily know each other well, if at all, which may have created some anxiety when carrying out this exercise. The participants seemed to engage with the activities where they had to physically do the least. For example, when asking the students to relax, and close their eyes, they did this very quickly and the room became silent, when the activity was over there was a sense that it was too short. This was noticed both in the stillness and focus & appreciation practice which correlates with the positive results revealed

in the post-workshop questionnaire results. The participants created a calming atmosphere with very little prompting, and were very open to engage with the activities which was a very encouraging result. Through observation, it was clear that this workshop had a positive impact on the participants, and at very least, left everyone with something to contemplate.

5. Conclusions

We present conclusions as answers to the research questions.

1. What is the student perception of MCPs?

The student perception of MCPs is positive, despite most students not actively practicing, and only being moderately familiar with them. Out of 40 students, 24 responded to a voluntary pre-workshop questionnaire with 92% indicating that they would attend a voluntary MCP workshop on their own time. In fact more than this attended the workshop (27 out of 40). There are extremely positive indications of desire to explore MCPs further, and with faculty guidance. (see Question 4 for more).

2. What outcomes do students desire from engaging with MCPs?

Students showed the strongest desire for MCPs to help them with focusing attention on studies, and on motivating them on finishing what they start. They also had strong desire for getting to know themselves better and increasing confidence and self-esteem. There was least desire to improve communication and surprisingly, to help increase grades. This is seen as evidence that students may have holistic motivations for engaging in MCPs. Finally, we uncovered evidence that students want MCPs to help them with self-perceived shortcomings in their own academic practices.

3. What types of MCPs do students enjoy and perceive as useful?

Creative writing was the most enjoyed MCP and overwhelmingly body expression was the least enjoyed. Focus & appreciation was deemed most useful, closely followed by stillness, with body expression again being overwhelmingly the least useful. There was little correlation between what students enjoyed most and what they would like to explore further, with a much higher degree of correlation between what students found most useful and what they would like to explore further.

4. Do students have a desire to learn more about MCPs, particularly in a faculty-led manner?

In the pre-workshop questionnaire, students indicated a strong desire in learning more about MCPs. This was backed-up with a strong attendance (68% of a 40 student cohort) at a

voluntary workshop taking place at a time that they were not required to be on campus. Of the 18 students who completed the post-workshop questionnaire all but one indicated that they were interested in exploring MCPs with faculty guidance and in practicing MCPs in the future. All 18 students would consider attending another workshop looking at the same MCPs in more detail as well as a workshop exploring new MCPs. Interestingly, perceived usefulness is more important than enjoyment in determining what particular MCPs students would like to explore further.

Overall, questionnaire responses, response rates, high attendance at a voluntary workshop outside of class time, and the level of engagement observed all indicate an extremely high appetite for incorporating MCPs in students' academic lives. Future work will involve carrying out more workshops, determining more about student desires and requirements, and ultimately piloting a formal incorporation of MCPs into the curriculum.

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Appendix 1

The tree of contemplative practices (Contemplative Mind, 2012)

