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MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AS A METHOD OF HEALTH PROMOTION IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS – PROPOSAL FOR AN EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGY

Zusammenfassung: Zur Förderung von Lernenden und ihrer Lebensqualität kann das Experimentelle Lernen mit Hilfe von Meditation und Self-Awareness in schulische Curricula eingefügt werden. Ein vom Autor konzipierter Lehrgang in „Mindfulness Meditation“ und „Somatic Awareness“ ist in höheren Bildungseinrichtungen in den USA und in Österreich bereits gelehrt worden. Der Inhalt des experimentellen Lehrgangs umfasste Mindfulness Meditation und Somatic Awareness. Der folgende Artikel beschreibt die Art des Lehrgangs und seinen experimentellen Hintergrund. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass experimentelle Kurse in Mindfulness (Selbstwusstheit) auf eine Weise konzipiert werden, dass sie sich in traditionelle Bildungskonzepte einfügen, ohne diese zu stören oder die Natur von Mindfulness Meditation zu beeinträchtigen. Der Artikel schließt mit dem Ergebnis, dass die Einbettung von Mindfulness in ein Lernumfeld Studenten fördern und die Lernatmosphäre verbessern kann und deshalb unterstützt werden sollte.

Abstract: Experiential learning in meditation and self-awareness can be integrated into educational curricula for the benefit of students' health and quality of life. A course in mindfulness meditation and somatic awareness, designed by the author, has been taught in higher educational settings in the United States and Austria. The experiential course content involved "mindfulness meditation" and "somatic awareness". The following article describes the nature of the course and its experiential content. Controversies regarding the integration of mindfulness meditation into higher educational curricula are discussed. It is proposed that experiential courses in mindfulness can be designed to fit within traditional educational settings without disrupting those settings or compromising the nature of mindfulness meditation. It is concluded that the integration of mindfulness into educational settings can benefit students and enrich the learning environment and should be promoted.

1. Introduction

An expanded conceptualization of health involves perceiving it as a multitude of experiences that are undergoing continuous change. In order to actualize such an approach to health, however, one must gain an *awareness* of the multitude of changing experiences one is a part of at any given moment. Mindfulness meditation is one means of practicing this awareness (Holland, in press). A growing body of empirical research supports the potential contribution of mindfulness meditation to health promotion and quality of life (i.e. KABAT-ZINN/LIPWORTH/SELLERS 1987:159; KABAT-ZINN/CHAPMAN-WALDROP 1988:334; LANGER 1989:176; KABAT-ZINN 1993:268). There has been increasing interest in the teaching of mindfulness meditation in medical settings (KABAT-ZINN, 1993:267), mental health settings (MILLER, FLETCHER, KABAT-ZINN 1995:193), and public urban settings (ROTH 1997:50). A growing number of eclectic health spas have also incorporated mindfulness meditation into their repertoire (ROBINOVITZ, January 16, 2004). This diversity in the contexts and populations across which mindfulness meditation is taught points to the versatility of this practice as a method of health promotion, and suggests its potential for broad integration.

An additional realm in which mindfulness meditation might be delivered for the purpose of promoting health and improving quality of life is in educational settings. By integrating mindfulness meditation into the curriculum of schools and universities, large numbers of students could begin to experience the benefits associated with this form of contemplative practice, and could learn a method of self-awareness that could subsequently serve them throughout their lives.

There has been a growing effort among some higher educators in the United States to promote the integration of mindfulness meditation into the university curriculum (BUELL 1999:3, ROCKEFELLER 1996:5; ASTIN/ASTIN 1999:3). The rationale for this includes introducing students to the health promotion benefits of mindfulness, and promoting learning experiences that can contribute to students' quality of life over time (ROCKEFELLER 1996, p.5; HOLLAND, in press). A number of initiatives to integrate various contemplative practices, including mindfulness meditation, into educational curricula have gained a significant amount of attention in the United States (BUELL 1999:3). These initiatives, while still small and exploratory, appear to be tapping an expanding interest among educators. However, it remains a challenge to identify practical models for integrating mindfulness meditation into educational settings in such a way that honors necessary academic standards while, at the same time, preserving the integrity of mindfulness practice.

What follows is a model of an experiential course that was developed by the author and integrated into two higher educational settings, one in the United States and another in Austria. The course profiled here employed mindfulness

meditation, somatic awareness, and a number of other exercises designed to increase self-observation as its primary content. This description serves as one evolving model for how mindfulness, or other forms of secular contemplative practices, might be introduced into educational settings for the purpose of promoting quality of life and health among young people.

2. Mindfulness Meditation

There are two broad forms of meditation, and while one must be careful not to see them as dichotomous, most forms of contemplative practice across cultures and various traditions tend to correspond loosely to one of these two broad forms. One form emphasizes a single point of focus to the exclusion of all else. This point of focus might be an object, image, thought, prayer, or sound. This form of meditation, referred to as Samatha in the Buddhist tradition, emphasizes disciplined concentration as a means of attaining tranquility and calm. The exclusive focus allows one to close out all distractions and disturbances. The result of such disciplined focus can be a deep sense of temporary calm. The other form of meditation, referred to as Vipassana or “mindfulness” in the Buddhist tradition, has a very different emphasis. Mindfulness meditation involves an *inclusive* approach to one’s ongoing experience, and promotes insight through awareness of the present moment. This awareness occurs through a non-judgmental acceptance of all that arises in the mind and body as one observes oneself. The practice of mindfulness also involves, not an exclusive focus on a single object or sound, but an *inclusive* awareness of all that arises in any given moment. This is accomplished by using the sensations of one’s breathing as a means of staying in the present moment, and from that vantage point, observing the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise and dissipate as each moment passes. The breath offers a practical point of focus since it is something that is always present but changing, and offers a constellation of subtle sensations and movements when experienced through careful attention (HOLLAND, in press). The breath, then, serves as a sort of “hochsitz” for the meditator, a simile drawn from the hochsitz deer stands the author found scattered throughout the Austrian countryside when he traveled through Steiermark to teach a course in mindfulness in Bad Gleichenberg. From this “hochsitz”, the sensations of the breath in the present moment, the meditator witnesses the coming and going of mental and physical sensations. The process of mindfulness meditation involves remaining in this “hochsitz” for the purpose of observation, and gently returning to this place whenever one inevitably and mindlessly abandons one’s observation post and wanders off in pursuit of one of the thoughts, memories, wishes, or fantasies that continuously arise.

The course began with brief periods (approximately 15 minutes) of silent mindfulness meditation. These periods were followed by discussion about the meditation experience and clarification of the nature of the practice. As the course proceeded, these meditation periods were lengthened to a final duration of approximately 45 minutes. During some sessions, additional techniques were introduced to the silent meditation in order to help emphasize the essence of mindfulness. One such additional technique involved ringing a chime at various intervals during the silent meditation, at which points students took note of whether the mind had wandered and, if so, returned the focus to that of the breath.

The purpose of this course is to make mindfulness meditation as accessible as possible, and this initially requires a good deal of structure, example, and discussion, particularly for those who have never practiced meditation. The practice of mindfulness is not limited to formal sitting meditation. In fact, it becomes important to deviate at times from highly formalized methods of silent meditation, and experiment with methods of pedagogy that illustrate the essence and meaning of mindfulness to students who are not yet prepared for long periods of the formal, silent, sitting meditations as one would encounter in a traditional meditation retreat. Two additional methods for practicing mindfulness, drawn from the health promotion program Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (KABAT-ZINN 1993:260), include a guided meditation called a body scan, and walking meditation. The body scan entails focusing one's attention on parts of the body, progressing from feet to head, as guided by the teacher. Walking meditation is a form of mindfulness practice that is done through slow and silent walking, complementing the stillness of the sitting meditation and body scan.

Additional methods of pedagogy aimed at making mindful practice more accessible can be drawn from awareness exercises used in such educational approaches as Gestalt Therapy (i. e. STEVENS 1971, p. 90) or the dramatic arts (i. e. YAKIM 1990:201; STRASBERG 1988:42). The goal, here, is not to simply encourage students to conform to the rigors of formal meditation practice per se, but to begin to understand, through varied and diverse experiential learning, the nature of mindfulness, its benefits, and its accessibility.

3. Somatic Education

Somatic education refers to a process of gaining greater awareness of one's own physical functioning, posture, and movement through sensory-motor learning (HANNA 1988, p. 5; 1990, p. 4). A premise of Somatic education is that self awareness is gained through experiential pedagogy. This self-awareness is facilitated through exercises, movements, and focused attention led by a teacher. As with mindfulness meditation or yoga, Somatic education asks the

participant to become aware of habitual and unconscious sensory-motor patterns, and through awareness, gain greater control over these patterns.

Somatic education is a critical component of the experiential course in mindfulness profiled here. It is important to recognize that mindfulness can be encouraged through a wide variety of experiences, and some individuals new to contemplative practices are going to find some experiences particularly conducive to beginning the cascade of awareness. For this reason, it is necessary to offer a *spectrum* of experiences in the course, exposing students to a number of entryways for mindful reflection. Somatic education, which shares qualities with Feldenkrais, the Alexander Technique, and yoga, involves a physically active form of reflection and awareness. Such an active form of meditation can offer a good entryway to greater awareness for the individual predisposed to this realm of experience, while meditation and other approaches may prove more welcoming for individuals with a different predisposition. The emphasis, then, is on providing a spectrum of experiences that facilitate mindfulness and that allow each student to discover for him or herself which methods along that continuum are most helpful for facilitating the practice of mindfulness.

4. Readings in Mindfulness Practices

Students were given readings that provided overviews of the theory and practice of both mindfulness meditation and somatic education (i. e. KABAT-ZINN 1993:260; HANNA 1990:4). Additional readings were drawn from poetry (i. e. OLIVER 2004:43; RILKE 1989:13), the dramatic arts (i. e. YAKIM 1990:201), and contemplative writers (WILBER 1981:10f.), with an emphasis on universal and ecumenical themes of self-awareness and reflection. Classroom discussion allowed for the juxtaposition of the readings with the experiential learning in the course.

4.1 Classroom Discussion

A significant amount of time was devoted to discussion during each class meeting. Discussion centered on students' experiences with the various mindfulness practices, insights drawn from the readings, and the sharing of different perspectives as students progressed through the course. Classroom discussion also involved reading selected poems that bear a great deal of relevance to mindfulness practice (i. e. RILKE 1989:13) and reflections upon these poems, as well as discussion of readings and awareness exercises drawn from the dramatic arts and other sources. Discussions were led by the instructor, but were kept informal. The purpose of the discussions was to help students articulate the nature of the mindfulness experiences in a reflective, rather than didactic or rote, manner.

4.2 The Course Syllabus and Requirements

The syllabus for the course described the forms of contemplative practice that would be used, and outlined the general rotation of practices throughout the semester. The course has been taught twice in the United States and once in Austria. In the U.S., the course met over a typical university semester, with class meetings twice a week for 15 weeks. In Austria, the course was offered as a short-term intensive, meeting extensively over a two week period. Students in the U.S. and Austria received the same credit as for any other course in their respective schedules.

No papers were required in the course. When taught in the U.S., the course did not have any exams either. When taught in Austria, the course had one exam after its completion. Requirements and grading primarily centered on attendance and the maintenance of a journal to document students' experiences of their contemplative practices, both during class time and during their own individual meditation practices at home. Students were expected to adopt their own meditation practice outside of classroom time for at least the duration of the course. Since the purpose of this course was to promote experiential learning through the pedagogical techniques outlined above, there was a purposeful de-emphasis on traditional didactics, rote learning, and exams.

A student was graded based on attendance, the level of investment evident in his or her journal and personal meditation practice, and participation as evident in his or her investment in the experiential content and group discussion. Once the practice of meditation and somatics was established, some class meetings were used for presentation of research on contemplative practice and health promotion, as well as videotape documentaries depicting applications of mindfulness meditation in community settings. Students were required to hand in their journals at various points during the semester for review and to allow the course leader to gain feedback regarding their experience.

Discussion

The integration of mindfulness meditation into educational curriculum, while gaining increased attention and interest, remains controversial. The controversy often centers on whether experiential contemplative practices like mindfulness can be reasonably adapted to an educational environment that has evolved to promote rote, rather than experiential, learning and pedagogy. Course credit, grades, and teacher evaluations are most frequently based on a presumption of rote learning and didactic pedagogy that pose a challenge to integrating experiential, contemplative courses into the curriculum. Nevertheless, this challenge should not result in banishing experiential learning to the extra-curricular realm. In addition to academic knowledge, other forms of wisdom

must be sought and promoted in the academy. These other forms of wisdom include self-awareness, the ability to reflect, and the tools with which to resist reflexive thoughts and actions. These are all learned perspectives and skills that can contribute to health and quality of life. Mindfulness and experiential courses such as the one outlined here, can help facilitate this learning if students are given access and encouraged to participate.

Another area of controversy regarding this, and other, efforts to integrate mindfulness meditation into educational curricula involves the issue of specific religious content. Mindfulness meditation is a practice that can be said to come from the Theravadan Buddhist traditions of South Asia and Southeast Asia. As a result, there is an infrequent, but recurrent, question whether the teaching of mindfulness meditation in public educational settings could be conceived of as a form of promoting a specific religious agenda. In fact, the practice of mindfulness represents an ecumenical, even secular, practice. Mindfulness meditation represents an exercise of psychological and somatic awareness, and is not dependent upon, or supportive of, any religious doctrine. As such, mindfulness is not in competition with any religious tradition, and in no way conflicts with the beliefs or practices of any specific faith. It is true that mindfulness meditation may be associated with existential or ecumenical spiritual development by some, regardless of religious faith, but it can just as readily be conceptualized as a secular psychological exercise associated with health promotion. When it is conceptualized this way, the practice of mindfulness becomes a matter, not of spirituality per se, but wellness, and its potential role in public educational settings becomes clearer.

As the integration of contemplative practice into higher educational settings continues to receive an increasing amount of advocacy (i. e. BUELL 1999:3; ROCKEFELLER 1996:5; ASTIN and ASTIN 1999:3), the challenge remains to discover various means of making such experiential content accessible within a traditional academic curriculum. The course that has been described here represents one effort to address that challenge. Future efforts will need to explore, empirically, whether experiential courses such as this result in improvements to subjective health, wellbeing, or quality of life. Additional efforts will need to explore how experiential pedagogy such as that proposed here is best evaluated with regards to curricular learning goals and student development. What is being proposed here is not only the integration of experiential learning into traditional educational settings, but the integration of a form of experiential learning with a demonstrated potential to improve health and quality of life (i. e. MILLER et al, 1995, p. 192). Such a proposal, then, is ultimately two-fold, since it promotes the inclusion of a new kind of pedagogy (experiential mindful meditation), and a new purpose for educational curriculum (promoting health and quality of life). It should be noted that at this early stage in the integration of mindfulness meditation into educational settings, the course outlined above serves only as a tentative proposal for an experien-

tial course that will, inevitably, undergo further development and evolution. What remains important, however, is that an effort to integrate such experiences into higher educational settings for the purpose of promoting wellness is underway. This article represents an effort to document one such early effort.

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