

# Mindfulness Meditation in the Classroom

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Mindfulness is a state of focused attention on the present moment, with a non-judgmental perspective. As an example of contemplative learning, this short communique describes how a 3-minute period of secular, guided mindfulness meditation was included at the beginning of a course in the field of Library and Information Science; the outcomes, practical considerations, and Internet-based meditation resources are included.

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**Note:** Jenna Hartel was the Recipient of the 2016 Library Journal/ALISE Excellence in Teaching Award.

## Introduction

Students enrolled in Library and Information Science programs, like graduate students in many other disciplines, experience high degrees of stress (American College Health Association, 2012; Bell, 2013). As academic librarians Amber Lannon and Pamela Harrison point out, being a university student “is stressful and, consequently, mental and emotional support systems play a crucial role in fostering student well-being” (2015, p. 15). The LIS curriculum in particular can be perceived as a challenging combination of theory and practice that does not always align with the information environments in which students work during their studies and upon graduation (Cherry, Freund, & Duff, 2013; Combes, Hanisch, Carroll, & Hughes, 2011). There is a persistent, pessimistic assumption that the library profession is in decline and that jobs will be hard to find (Allard, 2016; Noh & Ahn, 2014). Furthermore, it remains unclear what the library of the future will be in

terms of an institution and workplace. This combination of open questions can create an uncertain, intense, sometimes competitive setting for graduate students at a formative stage in their careers.

The Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto is committed to maintaining a positive learning environment and takes proactive measures to support student well being. For instance, the Faculty hosts an annual wellness event with a panel of experts; retains an internal counsellor on its Student Services team; and maintains a website of mental health resources called the Help Hub.

Another initiative aimed at creating a positive experience entails mindfulness meditation, which is practiced at the start of each class in the required course Foundations of Library and Information Science. In higher education, mindfulness has been integrated into a set of pedagogical practices known as contemplative learning (or contemplative education). Educators integrate mindfulness into their respective curriculum, each with a different inten-

tion. Some want to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their work differently while others aim to create a connection between research and empathy and compassion (Bush, 2013; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014; Tarrasch, 2015). A champion of contemplative learning in our field is Professor David Levy at the University of Washington. His course, *Information and Contemplation*, allows students to observe and critique their information practice and the emotional responses that accompany it (Levy, 2014; Levy, 2016; Parry, 2013).

Mindfulness can generally be understood as a state of focused attention on the experience of the present moment, whereby the events that arise are observed in a non-reactive and non-judgmental manner (Kabat-Zin, 2005). Initially found in different Buddhist meditation traditions, mindfulness is now integrated into various secular contexts such as health care, education, and business (Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009). A regular practice of mindfulness meditation helps to quiet the constant chatter of the mind and to bring clarity and awareness to the present moment. As such, it can help practitioners overcome constant rumination on the past or the future and flag compulsive and automatic reactions to events (Brown & Ryan, 2003). In the academic environment, mindfulness has the potential to reduce stress and anxiety, leading students to increased academic performance and optimal learning (Bamber & Schneider, 2016; Hall, 1999).

The course *Foundations of Library and Information Science* at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, begins with a warm welcome by the instructor. Then, the lights are dimmed for a 3-minute guided mindfulness meditation using an audio or video format. (Because meditation may be unfamiliar to many students, we anticipated that confusion would arise if students were left unguided.)

We have chosen a secular approach to mindfulness to encourage participation

from students of any faith or philosophy. These sessions of mindful practice gently direct attention to the present moment and its associated thoughts and feelings. From the very start of class, there is a concentrated effort to notice and to let go of thoughts forecasting the future or those that linger on the past. Students also make a conscious effort to recognize all the sounds, smells, and textures at play during these few minutes of stillness. Altogether, mindful practice awakens students to the richness of every passing second, and with this understanding there is usually an increased capacity for acceptance and peace. By incorporating mindfulness meditation into this *Foundations* course, we wanted students to find some respite from the mental exhaustion caused by the stressful demands of the LIS program.

Later in the semester, time is spent on other related contemplative approaches, such as the cultivation of healthy breathing; developing an awareness of presence in one's body; and listening to positive affirmations. In all cases, we used web-based guided meditations in audio or video formats. We dismissed the idea of having the instructor lead the meditations, which might inappropriately position the instructor as a guru.

While our contribution to contemplative learning is modest, we have nonetheless felt that this mindfulness meditation helps students clear their minds in advance of the lesson, and places the uncertainties of the future of libraries and librarianship in a more neutral or even optimistic light.

Although one student abstained from participating in mindfulness exercises based on religious beliefs (and instead listened to music on headphones at the beginning of each class), the response from more than 200 students was overwhelmingly positive. For example, one said that these exercises "did wonders to relieve my stress so that I could concentrate and absorb the lectures (especially at 9am)." Another student reflected on how the mindfulness exercise "grounded me in the middle

of the week” and “made me feel prepared to learn.” One participant appreciated how the instructor “looks not just at our intellectual needs, but she treats us as people with emotions that have to be addressed if we are to have a balanced and successful school/life.” This mindful approach to learning helped students manage what one participant referred to as, “the stress of graduate school.” These positive outcomes were based upon the use of mindfulness meditation in traditional classroom settings; but we believe that the same web-based, guided-meditation resources could easily be made available to students taking online courses.

Two practical considerations are worth noting for educators who may wish to try mindful practice in their own classrooms. First, it helps to have a technology infrastructure in the room which can stream Internet-based audiovisual material *reliably*. A few times our own system malfunctioned in an exasperating manner, which almost counteracted the positive purposes of the meditations! Second, during cases when the class opened with a guest lecturer, we refrained from the meditation exercise so that the visitor could take the lead in setting the tone for the session.

In addition to mindfulness meditation at the beginning of each class, students were also encouraged to refrain from using unnecessary laptops and mobile devices during class time. Surprisingly, most students supported this guideline. Students noted that “everyone was engaged in class and I wasn’t distracted by anyone’s laptops,” and that “it was far easier to pay attention without there being laptop screens all around.”

The complementary techniques of integrating mindfulness practice and creating a less technology-dependent space provided a positive learning environment for students who are under pressure to perform well academically and succeed in their careers.

There are many free mindfulness meditation resources available on the Internet.

Here are a few that have been particularly valuable:

- Guided Meditations from The Honest Guys [<http://thehonestguys.co.uk/>]
- Free Guided Meditations from UCLA Health [<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>]
- Guided Practices from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society [<http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/recordings>]
- Guided Meditations from Tara Brach [<https://www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations/>]

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