Mindfulness for student life and future professional practice

Teresa Dluzewska and Dianne Kirby, University Counselling Service
University of Newcastle

The authors report on the development of mindfulness training for first year undergraduates enrolled in a pre-professional psychology course. A combined lecture and tutorial focused on mindfulness practice and self-regulation in the context of transition and building personal resilience for study and future professional practice. Collaboration with academic partners involved tutor consultation and training in mindfulness meditation, transition pedagogy and health promotion.

Introduction

Capacities for self-regulation contribute to successful transition to university and across the student lifecycle towards graduation and beyond. In terms of first year adjustment, students embark on three closely inter-related journeys; personal, social and academic (Kirby, Dluzewska & Scevak, 2010). Tasks for mastery during the first year include learning about university systems, culture and student roles; acquisition of academic and study skills and building foundational discipline knowledge (Lizzio, 2006). Students enrolled in professional degrees are also motivated by desire to develop career-relevant professional skills while employers seek graduates who have generic capabilities such as self-management and teamwork. Ultimately, first year transition can be viewed as a vehicle contributing to whole-of-person development, part of the lived experience of ‘becoming’ (Gale & Parker, 2011).

First year cohorts are diverse and the transition experience of each student is unique. At the University of Newcastle (UoN) three-quarters of students are ‘returners’; that is, 20 years and older. Almost one third of students originate from low income backgrounds and many are first in their family to attend university. As a diverse group, first year students deal with many challenges aside from the demands of university. For example, school leavers are negotiating identity issues related to emerging young adulthood (Cote, 2006). Mature age students often balance learning with family and work responsibilities; and are more likely to study part-time and alone (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

Meta-analysis of mediators of student retention and academic performance reveal that initial emotion regulation and social adjustment enables early retention so that students can acquire academic skills that relate directly to their performance (Robbins, Oh, Le & Button, 2009). Robbins et al urge universities to explore practical, cost effective ways to integrate self-management skills in first year courses. Kift (2009) recommends adoption of third generation strategies where skills development is embedded within curricula through partnership of professional-academic staff.

Recent studies indicate a higher prevalence of moderate distress in tertiary students, with financial concerns a common known stressor (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm, 2012). Psychological distress is associated with poorer mental health and lower academic performance and may reflect ongoing stress linked to student roles (Stallman, 2010). There has been growing awareness of the need to respond constructively and proactively to student mental health issues, particularly since many students fail to access support services in a timely fashion (Martin, 2010).
In response to findings about student distress and wellbeing, Stallman (2011) designed and taught a strengths-based resilience module offered to 247 undergraduate first year psychology students. Students found the intervention useful and applicable to coping with their daily lives. Post-graduate students also appear to value opportunities to develop personal resourcefulness required to manage the institutional, academic, personal and professional responsibilities they encounter during their higher degree candidature (Mowbray & Halse, 2010). Clearly skills in self-regulation and management are applicable across the student lifespan.

As a feature of self–regulation, mindfulness skills contribute to stress reduction and coping capacities during the first year of university study (Palmer & Rodger, 2009). Mindfulness practice has also been shown to improve attention and information processing central to learning and academic outcomes (Shapiro, Brown & Astin, 2011). Used as a common focus for first year cohorts, learning mindfulness skills has the potential to influence cognitive and academic performance and psychological well-being (Shapiro et al) so that collective coping effects institutional habitus in positive ways (Mullen, Fish & Hutinger, 2010).

Introduction to mindfulness practice also offers an opportunity for first year psychology students to acquire skills for future professional practice. This is because mindfulness meditation forms the basis of several well-known therapeutic interventions such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and there is growing evidence that mindfulness-based interventions are helpful in the treatment of mental health conditions and disorders. For example, one meta-analysis reports that Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has moderate and consistent positive effects on mental health and coping (de Vibe, Bojorndal, Tipton, Hammerstrom & Kowalski, 2012). Mindfulness ultimately contributes to self-management and self-care as a health care provider (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

The intervention

Working towards good student outcomes is part of the traditional role of student affairs professionals, a role consistent with positive psychology practice (Mather, 2010). Any intervention is more likely to be effective when provided by a learning support network of professional and academic staff modelling shared values of care coupled with high expectations about student potential for whole-of-learner development. Following consultation with the coordinator of a pre-professional psychology first year course, tutors were engaged as collaborative partners. The tutor group participated in a briefing session about the nature of first year transitions, student success and wellbeing, and mindfulness research and practice.

Brief mindfulness meditation training was introduced to first year undergraduates as part of a broader intervention designed to build student resilience and wellbeing during transition. Mindfulness meditation is based on a 2,500 year old Buddhist tradition. Mindfulness is a translation of ancient Pali words “sati” and “sampajana” which when combined mean attending to present experience with care and discernment (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 4). There are many conceptualizations of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).

Students were introduced to some of the core concepts of mindfulness meditation and to current evidence of effectiveness. They were invited to practice mindfulness during their lecture and tutorial session with follow-up daily practice recommended. Time was allocated
at the beginning of subsequent tutorial sessions for reflection about mindfulness practice and to note strategies adopted for personal resilience, with reflexivity employed as a learning tool (Hedberg, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Introducing mindfulness and its cultivation to first year students has potential multiplier effects for adjustment to university, adaptive psychological functioning, learning focus and future professional practice. This Nuts and Bolts presentation reports on the design, delivery and initial outcomes of a pilot mindfulness and resilience-building intervention embedded in an undergraduate pre-professional first year psychology course.

**Session outline**

Whole group discussion (5 minutes): What have you observed about the self-regulation capacities of your first year students?

Presenters (10 minutes): Briefly describe the mindfulness training program and share resources and outcomes to date.

Small group discussion (10 minutes): What self-regulation supports currently operate for first year students at your campus? How do such initiatives contribute to the success of students?

Presenter and whole group discussion (5 minutes): Summarise themes. What have we learnt? What else could we trial?

**References**


