

Principles for Teaching Mindfulness in Pre-Service Teacher Education

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Teaching mindfulness and compassion (M&C) in pre-service teacher education at universities is still an uncharted terrain. It is not totally different from teaching them in other contexts, and hence many of the principles described in standard works (like McCOWN, REIBEL & MICOZZI 2009, WOLF & SERPA 2015 or KABAT-ZINN 2013) may apply here too. But there are also some specific differences and hurdles, e.g.:

- The **target group** is unique (a specific selection of mostly very young adults).
- The **participants' motivation** is not always the wish to learn about M&C (in our case, many just come for getting credits, and some are even assigned to the seminar by the computer system).
- The **academic environment** is not all in favour of topics like M&C (it focusses on cognitive prowess and knowledge reproduction while widely neglecting creativity, skill building and personality development; it often clings to old canonical topics, formats, and methods instead of boosting innovation; it fosters superficial learning attitudes in students and shows low esteem for teaching efforts of professors; etc.).
- The **specific rituals** of universities can be hampering (tests and grading; traditional notions of how courses should run; atmosphere and arrangement of rooms and furniture; impersonal teacher-student-interaction; academic group dynamics, sometimes coloured by self-presentation and hostility; etc.).
- The **subject of pedagogy** is of minor importance for many teacher students (in our case, many of them are primarily identified with their school subjects and are frustrated by how pedagogy is normally presented to them – which can be a burden *or* a chance for introducing a new topic like M&C).
- There can be **individual fears** of lecturers related to introducing practices of M&C (in my case, the fear of being judged as *unscientific*; the fear of rocking the boat too much by introducing meditation, using cushions and sitting on the floor ... and other *odd* concerns).

All in all, the field of the university is not really supportive for topics like M&C. Luckily there are some recent books that show how M&C can be successfully integrated into university didactics (e.g. KAUFMAN & SCHIPPER 2018, BARBEZAT & BUSH 2014) and few studies that investigate their benefits in pre-service teacher education (e.g. SOLOWAY 2016). These encouraged us to accept the challenge of integrating the topics and practices of M&C into regular teacher education at university level. – But what are the appropriate learning objectives and teaching principles of such a seminar? Here is a brief and preliminary proposal.

A. Learning Objectives

1. **Specific** (= regarding mindfulness): Students shall build
 - a) a sustained mindfulness practice, b) an experience-based understanding of M&C, and c) the capacity to apply M&C in teaching and in personal life.
 - the capacity to understand and critically discuss a) the scientific evidence, b) the theory, and c) the spiritual roots of M&C.
 - knowledge on and skills in: a) teaching mindfully and b) teaching mindfulness to future students.
2. **Generic** (= regarding general professional competencies): Students shall build
 - the capacity to a) listen deeply (to each other and to their students), b) read deeply (e.g. seminar literature), c) sense and reflect deeply (their own experience) – as ways of contemplative learning that lay the ground for *teaching mindfully* and for professional *reflection-in-action*.
 - the capacity to interact collegially: to a) engage in dialogue with, b) cooperate with, and c) recognize each other in openness, respect, and compassion.
 - a deep understanding of: a) their future role as teachers, b) their relationships with their future students, and c) the significance of education in human development.

B. Teaching Principles

1. **Establish a firm seminar structure.**
 - Build a safe, clearly defined, and obligatory organisational framework that provides holding for highly individual, non-linear, open ended, and unpredictable processes.
 - Create a welcoming space that becomes familiar to the students by a repetitive session rhythm (stable sequence of steps) and by recurring didactic settings (e.g. *inquiry*) and rituals.
2. **Relax your teaching style.**
 - Allow yourself to be personally authentic: Let your teaching be rooted in your meditative practice and in *being*. In other words: Teach from your heart.
 - Be caring and compassionate, because you are aware of the pervasiveness of suffering (students' and your own) in university and in general.
 - Do not insist on status, do not indoctrinate: Let your teaching be simple, non-hierarchical (humble) and based on common humanity (reciprocal).
 - Listen to the students deeply, accept and recognize them and their unique ways of being and learning – so that they can learn to listen to and accept each other and themselves.
 - Honour doubt and dissent, foster critical discussion, and relax with unanswered questions.
3. **Focus on experience-based learning.**
 - Never forget that students' own mindfulness practice is crucial for all learning outcomes.
 - Leave ample space for exchange of and *inquiry* into personal experience.
 - Respect that own insights, not pre-formulated knowledge, lead to wisdom.
 - Leave seeds that can sprout into future insights – and be aware that everybody will take away something different.
4. **Invite ownership of students.**
 - Invite students to shift from being an object of teaching to being a subject of learning.
 - Invite students to share their experiences with M&C practice (benefits and difficulties).
 - Invite students to take responsibility for their own and the group's process.
5. **Create a field.**
 - Regard the group as a *sangha* (community of practitioners) that develops a strong supportive group field and be aware of a seminar field that may deepen over the years.
 - Be confident in the seminar's long-term reputation and word-of-mouth recommendation.
6. **Observe the impact on the environment.**
 - Let the seminar be a nourishing home base for your students amidst their overall burdening and exhausting studying conditions and invite them to reflect these in the seminar.
 - Have in mind the aim of a long-term cultural change in university and in schools, e.g. by introducing unexpected elements (like meditation cushions, deep listening, kindness, and mutual care).
7. **Mind the whole.**

Be aware that it's about much more than just mindfulness: It's about a deep understanding of teaching, learning, human development, and personal fulfilment. It's about us and our precious lives.

References

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