Mindful Moments: Using Meditation for Student and Staff Wellbeing in the Classroom

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Abstract
This article discusses the increasing concerns for student mental health within higher education and the specific need for anthropology to consider the effects of our teaching content on student wellbeing. I reflect on using mindfulness in the classroom as a coping strategy for the challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how meditation helped to create a supportive, relaxed learning environment. Acknowledging the limits of this practice, I consider meditation to be one resource within a wider pedagogical toolkit that embraces student-centred learning. My argument does not intend to further burden teaching staff with the responsibilities for student welfare, but instead demonstrates how using pedagogies that prioritise wellbeing can increase student engagement, promote inclusivity and lead to positive transformations for students and staff.

Keywords
Covid-19, mental health, mindfulness, student-centred learning, wellbeing

Introduction

I was introduced to the idea of mindfulness in the classroom while working alongside a friend at a Scottish University. It was 2018 and we were both working as Teaching Fellows on a Health and Illness course while completing our PhDs in anthropology. My friend told me that they always began tutorials with a short mindfulness exercise. To me, the thought of attempting meditation with students seemed unusual and very awkward. When explaining their reasons for the practice, and how much their students enjoyed it, they joked that their Californian confidence and 'hippy' persona was a useful explanation for this quirky icebreaker. Meditating in the classroom struck me as an original idea, but I did not consider using it until teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have now come to embrace this technique as a valuable way to display empathy for the mental health struggles of students; expressing vulnerability as a teacher; and creating a supportive environment where challenging topics can be discussed in the anthropology classroom.

In this article I reflect on the benefits of using mindfulness as a valuable addition to our teaching in anthropology. I describe the different ways that I have included meditation in my teaching, and the responses from students. I use this example to discuss how we might show consideration for student wellbeing through our pedagogical strategies. This is particularly important when the topics we are teaching and learning about in some way mirror our personal experience or when the teaching content might be viewed as 'distressing'. I consider mindfulness to be a useful practice on its own, but a potentially transformative one when used as part of a pedagogical toolkit that embraces student-centred learning. When mindfulness is used in combination with accessible course content; varied assessments including examples of affective learning, it can enhance engagement, promote inclusivity, and improve student wellbeing.

While this article reflects on the benefits of mindfulness, I also address the limits, and I especially recognise the valid critiques of self-help approaches within institutions that are increasingly driven by neoliberal ideologies. I am keenly aware of the irony of promoting individualised self-care practices that frame wellbeing as an individual's responsibility – a narrative that I believe ignores the structural factors and historical injustices that contribute to mental distress for different populations. I also recognise the problematic assertion that student wellbeing ought to be the responsibility of teaching staff, who are already over-worked and often struggling with their own mental health. In light of these complexities, I do not wish to frame meditation in the classroom as a 'magic bullet' that will solve the growing mental

health crisis for students. Instead, I explain how introducing mindfulness in the classroom and my reasons for doing so, increased the awareness and acceptance of mental health problems for us all. This approach to teaching is arguably more inclusive as it assumes that mental health issues are to some extent, shared. It makes a small gesture towards supporting overall wellbeing by considering mental health as something that affects everyone in the classroom, rather than only directing our efforts to those who specifically seek out help.

Viewing everyone in the room as potentially requiring support with their mental health, was made more obvious through the Covid-19 pandemic as staff and students were living through it simultaneously, albeit the effects of the pandemic were not felt equally. But this notion has long been advocated by scholars, practitioners and advocates embracing the 'social model of disability' which offers a critical analysis of the structural factors that lead to the exclusion and discrimination of people with disabilities (Shakespeare 2006). Arguably, UK higher education still rests on a medical model of disability whereby students with registered disabilities are able to access adjustments specific to their needs rather than restructuring our systems of learning to be more inclusive in the first place. Due to the growing rates of later-life diagnoses particularly among neurodiverse women whose symptoms are more likely to be 'masked' (Morgan 2023; Seers & Hogg 2023), the realistic number of students who fall under the umbrella of neurodivergent is increasingly hard to judge. Given this uncertainty, practicing versions of 'inclusive education' can be seen as an attempt to implement a more 'social model' that recognises the challenges students face in the classroom are not simply a result of their individual circumstances. With research suggesting that teachers in higher education are struggling to accommodate disabled students due to lack of training (Bunbury 2020), this argument seems increasingly justified.

In advocating for 'inclusive education' I recognise that this term is of course, vague and cannot be attributed universally (Masuku, Mathe & Sithole 2021), nor can one strategy meet the needs of a diverse group of students with a variety of needs. I address this point further in the article to show how my use of mindfulness was not welcomed by all students due to the different sensory responses it can trigger. Despite these shortcomings, this article considers how we might imbed inclusive pedagogies when teaching sensitive subjects in anthropology, and the importance of recognising student and staff wellbeing in higher education. I hope that the example of meditation in the classroom will allow others to reflect on the challenges of our learning and teaching environments, and the benefits of adapting our curricula to more inclusive and accessible pedagogies that prioritise wellbeing.

Anthropology as a discipline has unique aspects that take its toll on mental health. Fletcher and colleagues (2020) have highlighted how anthropologists experience higher rates of burnout, stress and anxiety than other fields due to the intensity of fieldwork; trauma from witnessing acts of violence; isolation and loneliness; as well as stigma and silence of institutions in addressing post-fieldwork mental distress (Fletcher et al. 2020: 161-162). Anthropological fieldwork can also result in trauma due to the numerous unexpected scenarios that occur without adequate doctoral training (Pollard 2009). These ethical discussions are well-known in our discipline, and yet the effects of anthropological study on undergraduate students is much less talked about. Given that anthropology is a discipline that responds to the changing world around us, it goes without saying that the research material reflects the often dire political, economic, ecological and humanitarian crises around the globe. I consider anthropology's relevance to global issues a strength, and yet the enormity of the grief and injustice that anthropologists bear witness to makes mental wellbeing an important consideration[1]. Using my specific medical anthropology class as an example, I show how anthropology students are often required to read, write, and discuss difficult topics. During Covid-19, students like mine taking medical anthropology classes were encouraged to reflect on the pandemic, which was potentially triggering for many people. I argue that when using student-centred approaches in teaching, which often include in-depth discussions and affective learning through personal reflections, we need to make our learning environments as supportive as possible. Mindfulness is one method that I have found to be particularly successful in achieving this.

A Student Mental Health Crisis

Those who have been teaching in higher education in recent years will know that there is a growing concern for student mental health. Prior to the pandemic, there was wide recognition of a mental health 'crisis' among university students (Evans et al. 2018), with literature describing an increase in the prevalence and severity of mental illness alongside a decrease in help-seeking behaviours (Hernandez et al. 2020). Research suggests that university students might be particularly vulnerable to poor mental health, given that symptoms of depression and anxiety tend to peak at age 25 (Kessler et al. 2007).

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[1] At the time of writing this article, the ongoing genocide in Gaza feels like the most pertinent example of such an injustice.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, research has been following the impact of the pandemic on student mental health in different contexts (Al Mamun et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2020,). Where I teach in the United Kingdom, the impact of lockdowns, the switch to online learning, and cancellation of events including graduations led to increased anxiety and isolation for university students. A UK survey found that over half of students in their sample reported clinically significant levels of depression and anxiety at the time of the survey, which took place a few months following the first lockdown (Chen & Lucock 2022: 15). The study suggests that compared to the general population, students were at higher risk of mental distress during the pandemic and that intervention could alleviate longer-term issues.

Anthropology provides useful examples of how our teaching can be adapted to 'crisis' scenarios. Russel and colleagues (2021) have written about re-designing their assessment structure to include an example of affective learning blog exercises during the Covid-19 pandemic. They explain how these blogs were successful in getting students to analyse and critically discuss medical anthropology content, but emphasise the importance of providing a 'safe' learning environment when adopting affective learning pedagogies (Russel et al. 2021: 41). Importantly, we should add that what counts as 'safe' will not be the same for all students, and Gajaweera (2022) reminds us that so long as institutions continue to uphold ideologies of white supremacy, they will not be 'safe spaces' for students and staff of colour.

In the same way it is necessary to question what we mean by 'safe space', it is also useful to define 'mental health', and to unpack that topics may or may not be a risk to mental health. For the purposes of this article, I consider the simplified definition of mental health as a "state of flourishing within supportive communities and ecologies" (Fletcher et al. 2022: 159), while also recognising that mental health is exacerbated by multiple factors. Due to the complexities of how individuals will experience mental health, and thus how their mental health will be impacted by the material we teach in anthropology, it is important to note that perceptions of 'sensitive material' vary and are unpredictable. This has been shown by Cebula and colleagues (2022), when investigating the efficacy of trigger warnings to highlight potentially distressing content to students. Ultimately, given the lack of consensus on what constitutes 'sensitive', students responding to this study said that the overall style and personal approachability of teachers were considered more effective when learning about difficult material than trigger warnings. In some ways, this argument aligns with discourse on trauma sensitive (Wheater 2022), and kindness-centred pedagogies (Rawle 2021), since there is no way of knowing the ways that students might experience our material as traumatic. These approaches inform my notion of what counts as a 'supportive' teaching environment that prioritises mental health.

Teaching the Pandemic in 2021

In September 2020 I moved from one temporary teaching contract to another. When I started this new job, I was still processing the pandemic we were living through – experiencing high anxiety and fluctuating depression from months of lockdown, while juggling work and caring responsibilities. Teaching continued online, and it took a year for me to meet my new colleagues and students in person. The course I was asked to teach introduced students to theories and debates in medical anthropology with a specific focus on epidemics. It examined the social, cultural, historical, and political factors that have shaped the spread of infectious disease in global contexts, as well as local responses to epidemics and global health measures. The semester ran for 11 weeks between January and April 2021, and was taught to a cohort of 30 students in their final year of study. The course structure was 1 hour pre-recorded lectures, with 2 hour seminars for discussing readings and lecture content. Due to the class size, tutorials were split into two groups and taught online using breakout rooms for smaller discussions. The online nature suited the majority of the students, many of whom were still dispersed around the world and experiencing the pandemic in different ways, and to varying degrees.

Acknowledging that we were now teaching and learning in desperately challenging circumstances, with increasing amounts of stress, and feeling my own mental health deteriorate during this period, I decided to take these real-life situations on board with my approach to teaching the course. The context of the situation, coupled with the fact that I would be asking students to read about, discuss and reflect on what it means to live through a pandemic, emphasised to me that the course content could potentially be triggering for people depending on how the pandemic was affecting them. The exceptionalism of this time seemed like a good reason to try out mindfulness in the classroom.

I began by introducing five-minute mindfulness sessions before my tutorials. In the first week of our online classes, I pitched this to the class as "something different that I'd like to try, that I feel sets the tone for how I'd like our tutorial spaces to be, relaxed and comfortable". The online platform was ideal for this activity, as students were able to switch off cameras and microphones, participating without having to feel too awkward. It also gave them five minutes to close their eyes and take a break from the screen - a rare opportunity given that all their learning had been online for almost a year. I reviewed mindfulness videos in advance, selecting videos I deemed suitable based on their short length, and non-religious messaging. I decided to select only female-sounding voices (since I personally find male mindfulness tracks uncomfortable to listen to), but I tried to include a variety of accents. Videos were then shown to the students through screen sharing, with captions enabled to allow increased accessibility. I then switched my own camera and mic off to join the meditation with the students. Although these sessions were optional, most of the students would turn up promptly for these first five minutes. We even had a student's mum attend these weekly sessions, sitting with her daughter in her bedroom to join the meditation before the class began.

Adding mindfulness was not the only change I brought to this course, but just one element of a wider toolkit designed to create a relaxed and supportive teaching environment. Given the relevance of this topic to our everyday lives, the course was re-designed with inclusivity and accessibility in mind to allow students to learn in the most comfortable way possible. This included a focus on student-led discussions in tutorials, including media content to watch and listen to as well as accessible tutorial readings; designing varied assessments that provided students with autonomy (a group presentation, an essay and a book review), and drawing on affective learning techniques by encouraging students to use their own personal experiences in coursework.

While teaching the course in 2021, I gathered feedback halfway through the semester to get a sense if things were working well or not. I also collected feedback from the University-wide module evaluations at the end of semester. Mid-term feedback was gained from around 60% of students, and 40% at the end-of-semester. All feedback was anonymous.

Student feedback highlighted the way mindfulness helped to make tutorials more relaxing. One student said: "I loved the mindfulness sessions at the beginning, and found the class environment very relaxing and comfortable to speak with my peers which is something which I have found difficult in other online modules". Another student commented that the mindfulness was "very useful", and "very thoughtful". This relaxed environment helped students to participate in discussions and feel valued, with one student reporting: "Meditations at the beginning of the class and the general structure and teaching style made me feel really at ease and not anxious". The reduction in stress was also noted in relation to assessments: "Assessment structure is great –it allows us to properly engage with the course content rather than just stressing about exams".

Feedback also spoke specifically to the learning potential of this atmosphere with one student writing: "I learnt a lot in this module. I especially liked the focus on mental health with 5 mins of mindfulness at the beginning of each tutorial. I've never had a tutor who seemed to care so much". Another said the focus on wellbeing helped to improve engagement: "Our wellbeing and respected participation were at the core of our classes and ultimately served to keep us engaged, make us feel valued, and give us a more rounded experience of the module topics". Another student echoed these sentiments, saying: "I think the calm and relaxed atmosphere of this tutorial makes it easy to speak up without fear, and encourages participation".

Some of the feedback pointed to the uniqueness of this approach in comparison to other classes, with someone saying: "I like the focus on mental health, I feel like this is the only module where I'm not completely overwhelmed and struggling to keep up". Another said: "I have always found tutorials anxiety inducing, and this is the first time that I am comfortable with going to tutorials". Some students mentioned the teaching style specifically: "[The Lecturer] really fosters a comfortable and engaging classroom environment"; "[The Lecturer's] positivity and general openness to points raised make myself (and others) feel really encouraged"; "I appreciate how attentive/understanding you are, especially during Covid. I think everyone appreciates your attitude to our wellbeing".

This overview of feedback clearly shows the gratitude felt by students towards the focus on mental health and wellbeing in the classroom. It shows that not only does mindfulness create a sense of calm for the five-minute exercise, but that it can have lasting effects on the atmosphere in the class overall. Students were aware that this approach to wellbeing was extended into other aspects of the module, making reading lists manageable and accessible; introducing media content to balance the pressures of time spent reading; and by including a variety of choice in the

different assessments. All of these aspects were mentioned positively in overall feedback, and contributed to the feelings that their mental health was a priority.

Using Mindfulness in 2023

Two years later, with some aspects of the pandemic feeling like a distant memory, I taught this course again. Reflecting on the experiences of 2021, I was unsure whether to continue using mindfulness in this module. While teaching had to some extent returned to pre-pandemic formats, the lasting mental health impact remained, with higher levels of anxiety about coursework, and more students than ever requiring additional support for mental health issues from disability services. I chose to continue including meditation in the classroom, but instead of doing it before tutorials, I used it as a way to break up the lecture. I now had some 'evidence' to present to the students as to why I was using it, and the benefits I had observed and experienced previously. I also brought in some more personal context, explaining that these five minutes in the classroom was a rare moment for myself to stop and breathe, which I found very beneficial alongside the stress of being precariously employed in a busy teaching job, combined with caring for two young children. Given that my research includes autoethnographic accounts of my own struggles with a complex mental health disorder (Bradley 2021), this meant that as a teacher my mental health status was not easily concealed from students. I have found that these examples of expressing vulnerability have worked well to remind students of the mental health challenges that staff are facing too.

The feedback on the use of mindfulness in 2023 was also overwhelmingly positive. For the mid-term feedback I received a 67% response rate (21 out of 31 students) with 17 students (81%) mentioning mindfulness specifically as something they enjoyed and wished to continue. But unlike the 2021 class, the 2023 students reflected less on the wellbeing effects, and more about their appreciation for the opportunity to relax, with comments saying: "The meditation break is very relaxing". Students also mentioned the benefits of meditation in helping them to focus on the lecture content, with the following feedback: "The mindfulness really helps to refocus"; "Mindfulness is a very good way to take I the information of the lecture but also really appreciate the awareness of it and making time for it"; "The meditation is very helpful and a nice way to break up the lecture". Some students also mentioned the uniqueness of this practice in the class, saying it helped them to "explore another way of relating to [themselves] and the environment" and one person saying: "Continue the mindfulness breaks! This is really unique compared to my other modules but really helpful and important".

Students in 2023 were still appreciative of the reasons for including mindfulness in the classroom, but from their feedback it appears that the need for an urgent measure to help them cope with anxiety was much less than the group in 2021. This is encouraging, since it suggests that the acute mental distress caused by the pandemic may have subsided for some students, but their feedback still demonstrates that using meditation in the classroom can be incredibly useful - it helps students to relax; to absorb the information of the lecture; and to relate to themselves and others in a new way.

Discussion

The idea that mindfulness can be one part of a pedagogical toolkit, is supported by established literature on approaches to student-centred learning. Students in 2021 commented that using mindfulness in the classroom in was a sign of a 'caring', 'thoughtful' teacher, which in other words means being empathetic towards their wider social contexts. Writing in 1983, Rogers suggests that one of the core attributes of a good teacher is empathy, an idea that has been further supported by literature on effective pedagogies. For example, Blackie and colleagues (2010) argue that caring for the student can create a positive relationship between teacher and student and one that can prove transformative for both parties. For them, caring about the student means valuing the whole person and acknowledging the wider social context of their learning (Blackie et al. 2010: 639-641). This idea is echoed by Baik and colleagues (2019) whose research tells us that student wellbeing can be improved by teachers paying attention to personal circumstances beyond the classroom. Students in their sample commented that teachers could be "more approachable and understanding" (p680). Moreover, these students said they would appreciate mindfulness in the classroom in an effort to improve wellbeing. Using mindfulness in the classroom might be considered an example of what bell hooks (2003) terms 'teaching with love', as she notes, "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning." (hooks 2003: 134).

The benefits of mindfulness to learning within educational settings is well-known. For example, introducing mindfulness workshops within the curriculum can help students to reduce stress and improve concentration (de Bruin, Meppelink & Bögels 2015). However, less attention has been paid to its uses at different times, for example before a tutorial, or mid-lecture as I have used it. While I think there are advantages across both examples, using meditation as a mid-lecture break clearly has the added benefit of helping students to focus and retain information. Of course, this is not the case for all students, and while some research suggests that mindfulness can improve focus for people with ADHD (Van der Oord, Bögels & Peijnenburg 2012), one of my neurodivergent students admitted that they found the mindfulness sessions to be too overwhelming for them sensorily, and they therefore chose to step out of the class during the meditation break. For this reason, it is important to ensure mindfulness is always optional, otherwise it might actually be disruptive to learning, as Mckay (2022) also demonstrates how meditation can sometimes lead to adverse effects.

While mindfulness is not for everyone, and should certainly be used with caution, it has been argued that classroom mindfulness sessions can promote healing, and liberation, particularly for marginalised groups, as shown by Berila in the context of Queer students (2016). Berila argues that mindfulness acts as an example of a 'contemplative pedagogy', which used alongside anti-oppressive pedagogies can deepen reflection, improve focus, and cultivate compassion. They argue that mindfulness in this context can be understood as an act of resistance to aid the collective dismantling of oppression (Berila 2016: p5-8). Contrary to this argument, Gajaweera's (2022) ethnography of non-white Western practitioners' experiences of racism reminds us that being mindful with your 'inner self' is not always a place of safety. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that this use of mindfulness in contemporary classrooms in the global North context, practiced by mostly white educators, is far from the origins of mindfulness practice began (for a deeper history of mindfulness practice, and a critical account of its popularisation in Britain see: Cook 2023; and a recent discussion on mindfulness and culture: Cook & Cassaniti 2022). Anthropology's contributions to mindfulness around the world reinforce the cultural diversity of the practice and are useful for educators to consider when weighing up the benefits and limits of this option in teaching.

At the beginning of this article, I explained the dire mental health situation of students in higher education. However, alongside the worrying rise in mental health issues among student populations, researchers tend to agree that by combining academic, professional, and social activities with health and support services, universities can work to positively impact student wellbeing (Hernández-Torrano et al. 2020). In many ways, what I have described here could be interpreted as an advert for using mindfulness as a way to address student wellbeing. However, this cannot and should not be the case if it puts further pressure on teaching staff. In fact, it should be acknowledged that a common side-effect of being a caring, attentive teacher is overwork and burn-out. This is due to the additional time and energy it takes to design inclusive courses and implement innovative, student-led pedagogies. From conversations with colleagues over the years, I have noted that student feedback frequently describes female colleagues as 'caring' and 'supportive', while male staff are 'knowledgeable' and 'experts in the field'. There are implications of these kind of gendered biases towards teaching staff, as this creates unequal expectations and additional labour for female staff who are expected to be more 'caring' and 'empathetic'. As bell hooks tells us, "Teachers are not therapists. However, there are times when conscious teaching – teaching with love – brings us the insight that we will not be able to have a meaningful experience in the classroom without reading the emotional climate of our students and attending to it" (2006: 134).

The concerns from staff about being framed as 'therapists' that hooks describes, are in some ways further exacerbated by literature suggesting that the difference between 'good teaching' and transformative teaching is caring, empathetic and approachable teachers (Barnett 2008). These perspectives often ignore the responsibility of university management to support the development and wellbeing of their staff through improving working conditions and increasing pay. I would like to embrace hooks' notion of addressing the emotional climate in the room with the deep reflexivity that anthropology allows us – when also drawing attention to the impact that our teaching content is having on us as teachers. My suggestion to incorporate mindfulness is not solely due to the benefit to students, it is also about making visible the vulnerabilities of teaching staff like myself who struggle with mental health problems and are looking for ways to relax and prioritise self-care in our teaching environments, while also recognising that this is a drop-in-the-ocean approach given the wider context of over-work in academia. That being said, like Blackie and colleagues have argued (2010), I consider this approach an effective example of a student-centred pedagogy that has the potential to improve staff wellbeing at the same time. The concluding message is that the efficacy of this pedagogical toolkit I describe is dependent on institutional, structural change that recognises the wellbeing of its staff. As Fletcher and colleagues reiterate, "anthropology departments must create cultures of wellness" (Fletcher et al.

2022: 157). Whether or not the neoliberalization of academic institutions is compatible with wellness, is perhaps beyond the scope of this short article.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened the concern for student wellbeing within universities. While some attention is given to the uniqueness of anthropology as a subject that puts emotional demands on those doing fieldwork, the teaching content at undergraduate level can also take its toll on wellbeing. This is especially true for courses that discuss health and illness, and for classes that encourage students to draw on personal experience through affective learning. This article has reflected on my experience teaching a course that asked students to directly engage with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the strategies I implemented in order to address the mental health issues that students have been facing since. My use of mindfulness in the classroom; alongside accessible, varied teaching resources and assessments; has worked well to create an encouraging, relaxed environment that recognises the wider social contexts and political struggles that we were living in and dealing with. These strategies demonstrate that if student and staff wellbeing is taken seriously in higher education institutions, then introducing a toolkit of pedagogies that prioritise mental health can lead to transformative learning experiences for those working and learning in an increasingly challenging world.

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