

Mindfulness in the Writing Hub: A Tool for Supporting Students

Introduction

Navigating the quarter system at UCSD can be hard as time flies by so quickly and we do not always reflect on the moment. With midterms and writing assignments, we are constantly busy and a bit stressed out. As students, it can be difficult to take time to pause what we are doing and live within the moment. This is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness is a useful approach to help students observe and ground themselves in the moment. It can also be quite useful for dealing with complex emotions. When a student enters the writing center, they enter as a whole person with complex emotions. Our role as tutors is mainly geared toward helping students develop as writers, but connected to that role is helping students as people. Emotions impact the writing process, the tutoring session, and the product of writing (Driscoll and Wells). Within our smaller sessions, we can make an impact on the individual student and hopefully strengthen the structure of support within our university. The university structure does not always support students' mental health concerns leading to this being transferred to other parts of the university structure including the writing center and within sessions (Brown). Over the past year, students have carried increasing amounts of stress while continuing to balance the demands of school, work, and their social life. One specific demand affected by stress is writing. I know from experience that it can be hard to start writing when stressed out, let alone be expressive and vulnerable in my writing. During the last two quarters, my mom has been battling breast cancer. I was constantly anxious about my mom's illness and found it hard to maintain my status both as a student and as a tutor. To deal with my emotions, I sought out different strategies that I could incorporate into my life. Through my research, I found that mindfulness was a helpful approach

towards dealing with emotions and I have recently taken steps to incorporate it into my own life. As tutors, we should take the initiative to help students manage their emotions and develop as writers, while also ensuring that we do not extend into the role of a counselor (Brown). Through my research, I found that incorporating mindfulness into writing center practice offers a unique approach for students to connect with and manage their emotions.

Emotions and their Impact on Students

Emotions are innately connected to our experience as students. As students, we are put into stressful situations on a daily basis, forced to deal with our own personal problems while handling multiple assignments concurrently. Our mental health is often viewed as an afterthought. Taking the time out of our busy schedules or simply getting an appointment can be challenging. We must seek to understand and address our emotions where we can. Emotions and their impact can be further understood by discussing cognitive load and procrastination specifically.

The impact of emotions on students can be understood through Cognitive Load Theory. Cognitive load is the mental effort exerted on a task (Johnson). Johnson makes the argument that students suffering from higher cognitive loads, “had fewer working memory resources available to actually write and learn, and that lack of resources contributed to their already high stress levels.” In terms of how this affects our work, this loss of memory resources harms the writing process and the sessions itself. Therefore, it is important to find ways of reducing this impact on students by employing practices like mindfulness.

Emotions are also relevant to the act of procrastination. Highlighted in writing center scholarship, authors such as Kervin and Barrett note that procrastination is a means of regulating

one's mood. While procrastination is often seen as a problem, authors like Driscoll and Powell articulate that procrastination is a short-term issue that can be made into an opportunity for learning through practices like mindfulness (qtd in Driscoll and Wells). This opportunity can often present itself in places like the Writing Hub, which suggests our sessions should be designed to rethink and retool the place of emotions.

Rethinking the Place of Emotions in Sessions

Often, writing center scholarship has viewed emotions as something to move past in order to begin a consultation (McBride et al.). However, it may be more helpful to seize upon opportunities for students to engage their emotions before launching into the work of the session. As tutors, we are already trained and oriented to this task. Our training as consultants asks us to be non-judgmental and supportive of students, similar to how a mindfulness approach works, which will be explained in a later section. Through the process of supporting students with their emotions, we can help them grow as writers who are aware of how their life can affect their writing. In addition to this part of our training, many consultants already take the time to engage with how students are doing and often reassure them at the start of sessions via the process of rapport building. The actions we can take to promote mindfulness are already connected to our practice. By incorporating the idea that emotions and writing are innately connected, we can assist students in becoming more aware of themselves and improve their process as a writer.

Recognizing Students in Sessions Who May Benefit from Mindfulness

Students may come into the Writing Hub with various levels of stress and a wide range of emotions. This can often be recognized in the introduction and agenda-setting phase of appointments when students outline how they are feeling about their writing. During this part of

the session, students may express feelings of distress as it relates to their grades, the writing process, a quick deadline, or feelings of self-doubt in being a writer (Brown). We should reach out to these students and help them reflect on and nonjudgmentally address these feelings.

Beyond students showing immediate signs of distress, we can also reach out to students who feel positive emotions during our sessions. By knowing some of the reasons why they are feeling positive both in the session and more generally, we can help them replicate these reasons and environmental features into future writing situations and their daily lives.

In some past education sessions, we discussed how to help students experiencing emotional distress. One key takeaway that stuck with me is that we can act as a form of peer-to-peer support; this support can take the form of helping students share their feelings and navigate resources that may be beneficial. I recommend familiarizing oneself with the resources available through UCSD to help students address their mental health concerns and basic needs. As a tutor, this is a key part of our responsibility to help students.

What is Mindfulness and How Can We Use It?

Mindfulness can be a bit daunting to those unfamiliar with it. As a strategy, “mindfulness allows an individual to attend to their current state of being and asks them to develop an awareness of what they need in order to best meet their potential” (Emmelhainz, 3). Developing such self-awareness helps individuals to better achieve a state of wellness because they learn to consciously direct attention to their physical, mental, and/or spiritual needs and to address them” (Emmelhainz, 3). Pertaining specifically to students, mindfulness allows students to reflect on the connection between their academic and personal needs. Within writing situations, students can use mindfulness to see how negative emotional states may lead to procrastination and/or

confusion. By doing this, student's awareness can turn into future preventative actions. Students can also reflect on how they feel during the session. If they do feel any sense of discomfort, we can help change their immediate environment to suit their needs. Perhaps there might be a situation where students feel anxious to be on camera during virtual sessions. We could then accommodate their needs by turning off our camera during the session. In addition to these in the moment benefits, the act of observing and immersing oneself within the moment can also reduce feelings of stress and help sessions run smoothly. Most importantly, students can take the practice of mindfulness beyond sessions and incorporate this into their personal life.

Mindfulness can include a broad range of practices. However, all mindfulness incorporates the observation of thoughts, feelings, actions, the environment, and stressors without casting judgment (Johnson). An easy mindfulness technique to implement is guided meditation and focused breathing. In this case, tutors would ask the students to close their eyes and focus on the act of breathing by either focusing on their breath entering or exiting or by controlling the breath through counting (Emmelhainz, 6). These different breathing activities can ground students in-the-moment to become more aware of themselves (Emmelhainz, 6) and can allow students to acknowledge one's external and internal surroundings without judgment (Johnson). Additionally, a tutor can help a student by asking them to visualize a stressor in their mind and then guide them on an exhale to imagine the stressor floating away (Emmelhainz, 7). This practice would directly contribute to becoming aware of problems and relieving stress, even if momentarily.

Beyond breathing techniques, participants can also complete mindfulness exercises like journaling where they write down what they observe and how they are feeling. In sessions, we

could incorporate this in a similar approach taken towards brainstorming. Normally, we encourage students to free write or express their scattered ideas and then organize them. We could engage with mindfulness in the same way and simply change the focus of the task to reflection. This will help students during sessions and can be beneficial for tutors as well.

Mindfulness is a great course of action for Writing Hub tutors to take because it is easy to learn and implement in sessions. The act of mindfulness is also not too time-consuming and can be done at the start of sessions. During our sessions, we normally ask questions that allow people to reflect on their thought process. We can use similar questions to approach mindfulness and guided questions in a way that is not too invasive and does not push students towards judgment or direct action. Plainly put, we can act as a form of support for students in sessions.

Mindfulness is something that I have tried incorporating into my own sessions. During Spring Quarter, one of my returning students arrived at one of our sessions overwhelmed and distracted. After our initial agenda-setting, I asked if we could take a moment to break from the session. To lessen the focus on them, I said that I did this all the time and that as students a lot of us are feeling stressed, so it is okay to take a break. Then, I asked if we could do a short breathing exercise, similar to the one above. The student agreed and we took some time to be in the moment. By doing this, it gave time for the student to reflect and recenter themselves. After giving us both some time to refocus on the session, there appeared to be a sense of greater engagement and a positive mood on the part of the student. This short example of mindfulness in practice displays how mindfulness can change our sessions for the better. Although my experience using mindfulness was easy, I do recognize that there are some challenges other tutors might face.

Approaching mindfulness in sessions can be a bit challenging because it can feel a bit awkward or personal. To combat this, I would suggest openly addressing those feelings of awkwardness. In these conversations, I think it may be useful to explain what mindfulness is and how it is not usually what students consider when they think about the Writing Hub. To give more context, I think it also may help to acknowledge that mindfulness is becoming a popular and useful strategy for students to engage in during writing sessions. Also, you can express that mindfulness does not take too much time and/or effort. Most importantly, I would stress that mindfulness asks students to share their comfort level and it is entirely optional. I think it is also important to bond over the shared experience of being a student, a role that often is stressful and carries complex feelings. By uniting over our common identity as students and acknowledging the slight feeling of awkwardness, we can encourage students to engage in mindfulness.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is just one tool that we can use to help students manage their emotions. Because every student is different, mindfulness needs to be a part of a broader set of strategies used to engage with students. Personally, the pandemic took its toll on my mental health and so I sought out mindfulness as a way to address my stress as both a student and a person. Mindfulness enabled me to pinpoint the source of my stress and deal with it. At the same time, this practice allowed me to be present within the moment and relieve feelings of pressure. More work needs to be done in finding ways to accomplish the goals of helping students work through their emotions and becoming better writers. Additionally, mindfulness techniques may be a great avenue for consultants and faculty to engage in as suggested by Sarah Johnson, Dana Lynn Driscoll, and Jennifer Wells. At times, this job can be stressful as there is a lot of emotional labor

involved, but it can also be a rewarding experience reducing feelings of stress for tutors (Simmons et al., 22). Being in touch with and aware of our own positive and negative emotions can help us better understand ourselves, understand our role as tutors, and help students as people and as writers.

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