

A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Nursing Faculty Engaging in Mindful Practices

Lisa-Anne Hagerman
Conestoga College

Loela Manankil-Rankin
Nipissing University

Jasna K. Schwind
Toronto Metropolitan University

Mindful practices have been found to decrease levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, while enhancing resilience and coping in those who engage in them. The beneficial effects of mindfulness on improving physiological and psychological well-being are well supported within the literature. However, little has been done to learn how faculty in higher education, specifically in nursing, may experience the effect of mindful practices. The purpose of this study was to explore nursing faculty perceptions of how mindfulness may influence their teaching-learning practices as well as their daily lives. Fourteen full-time and part-time nursing faculty participated in a three-part mindfulness training workshop series delivered over 6 weeks. Upon completing the workshop series, seven of the 14 nursing faculty participated in a focus-group interview about their experiences engaging in the mindful activities during and in-between the workshops. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry method was used to analyze participant accounts. This process entailed crafting a composite story that was sent to the participants for member checking. The composite story was analyzed using the three levels of justification: personal, practical, and social. Two significant patterns emerged: (1) Integrating mindful practices into personal life, and (2) Integrating mindful practices into the teaching and learning situations. The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how engaging in mindful practices may enhance the personal and the professional well-being of faculty in higher education, and thus support their teaching-learning encounters.

Authors of mindful practices suggest that the benefits of practicing mindfulness and self-compassion include strengthened resilience, lowered levels of stress, and reduced anxiety, to name a few (Ergas, 2019; Escuriex & Labbé, 2011; Germer & Neff, 2013; Raab, 2014; van der Riet et al., 2018). Research into the benefits of mindful practices, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2013), and mindful self-compassion (MSC) (Germer & Neff, 2013), reveal a positive impact on physiological and psychological well-being (Raab, 2014; Schwind et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2017). Though the benefits of mindful practices on reducing levels of stress while enhancing resilience and well-being are evident within the literature, the challenge rests in identifying strategies to support faculty in higher education, specifically in nursing. In this article, we explore the experiences of nursing faculty who participated in a mindfulness training workshop series and their perceptions of how mindfulness may impact their personal and professional lives.

Literature Review

Mindful practices have their roots in the mindfulness meditation traditions of Buddhist philosophy and teachings (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; McNulty, 2021; Schwind et al., 2021). In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced to western society mindfulness and mindful practices to address pain and stress of individuals living with chronic pain, whom western medicine was unable to help. Subsequently, he developed his now world-renowned Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

program (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Schwind et al., 2021). Research into the benefits of mindfulness-based practices such as MBSR, MBCT, and MSC reveal a positive impact on physiological and psychological well-being (Germer & Neff, 2013; Raab, 2014; Schwind et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2017). Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). It supports the ability to be present in the moment with a balanced awareness of any internal experience, “positive, negative, or neutral—with acceptance and equanimity” (Neff & Germer, 2013, p.29).

Mindfulness in Higher Education

Although mindful practices have entered the field of education, the focus on the impact for both students and teachers (Hanh & Weare, 2017) is starting to evolve (Green, 2018; Lemon & McDonough, 2018; Montero-Marin et al., 2021; Schwind et al., 2021). This research shows that educators who engage in mindful practices experience reduced levels of stress, burnout, and an increased ability to cope with uncivil behaviors. Mindfulness enhances physiological and psychological well-being and quality of sleep (Hagerman et al., 2020; Montero-Marin et al., 2021; Schwind et al., 2021). When faculty engage in instructor-led mindful practices there is an increase in improvements in well-being in comparison to self-taught mindfulness practice (Montero-Marin et al., 2021). Mindful practice training promotes curiosity and coping during stressful times and the ability to engage in teaching and learning activities

(McNulty, 2021; Neff & Germer, 2013; van der Riet et al., 2018).

Study Design

Following research ethics board approval, recruitment emails and electronic posters were sent by the study research assistant to all full-time and part-time undergraduate nursing faculty. Upon obtaining informed consent, 14 full-time and part-time faculty from the Bachelor of Science of Nursing and Practical Nursing programs attended the three-workshop series on mindful practices in higher education. The three workshops were offered at two-week intervals. Each workshop was approximately 3 hours long.

The first workshop introduced the concept of mindfulness: definition, historical background, and research findings on its role in education. Following, participants were offered different mindful practice activities to try with the guidance of the workshop facilitator, such as mindful breath, counting the breath, mindful contemplation on poetry or sacred text. In the second workshop, topics and practices included loving kindness meditation, mindful living, mindful eating, and mindful movement/walking. The third and final workshop explored the “Narrative Reflective Process: Self as Instrument-of-Care” (Schwind et al., 2012) to demonstrate the interconnection between personal and professional self, and how mindful self-awareness may contribute to authentic presence in the classroom. Workshop three concluded with a lifeline activity, metaphor reflection, metaphor letter, and a wrap-up discussion on how participants could bring these mindful and creative practices into their classrooms.

In the weeks between the workshops, participants were provided with handouts and encouraged to engage in home practice for approximately 10 minutes each day, applying the mindful activities learned in the workshops. All participants were offered support during this time by the workshop facilitator. One week following the final workshop, a focus group comprised of seven participants shared their experiences of attending the three-session mindful workshop series and how the experiences impacted their subsequent teaching-learning practices.

Method

A narrative inquiry approach was used to collect data and to understand and interpret participants’ experiences. Narrative inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a qualitative method that assumes people live ‘storied lives,’ where the inquirers engage reflectively with the situated lives of the participants. Thus, to inquire narratively means to open ourselves to the experience in an embodied way, which includes imagining how the experience may have felt for

the participants so it could be retold by the inquirer in light of the inquiry puzzle and re-presented with a deeper understanding (Clandinin, 2013; Manankil-Rankin, 2016). As Lindsay and Schwind (2016) suggest, narrative inquiry “is a collaboration between a researcher and participants” (p. 15).

Using the three-dimensional space of experience framework for analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006), the inquirers grasped the experience by reflecting and inquiring into it from the dimensions of temporality (time), sociality (intersection of the internal and social conditions), and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, Lindsay & Schwind, 2016).

Data Presentation: Composite Story

To protect the anonymity of the participants in the focus group, the inquirers crafted a composite story in form of a fictional character named Ashley who became the voice of the participants’ experiences. To ensure the proximity of all seven participants’ lived and told stories of experience, we used their actual words interwoven into a singular voice (He, 2003; Lindsay et al., 2012; Manankil-Rankin, 2015; Manankil-Rankin et al., 2021; Schwind et al., 2015). The first step in building the composite story involved reflecting on what each contributor in the focus group shared about their experiences of mindful practices. The inquirers reflected on how each informed the inquiry puzzle. Each participant formed a thread of the story using their actual words. Weaving the threads together, patterns of experience emerged. The patterns of experience became the foundation of the composite story—a story that opened the door toward three levels/cycles of justification: personal, practical, and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). The final step in creating the composite story was sharing Ashley’s story with participants for member checking.

In the circle of personal justification, the narrative inquirers reflect in an embodied way on how Ashley’s story resonates with their personal stories as faculty (Manankil-Rankin, 2015). After reading and re-reading the composite story, the dominant patterns are identified. The next step of the narrative inquiry analysis process, the practical justification, expands the perspective to include extant literature as it informs the selected dominant patterns and explores how these enlighten the inquiry puzzle (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). The social justification is the last and the broadest level of analysis where the inquirers consider the impact of the selected patterns on the broader context of the profession and the society at large, answering the usual research questions of “So what?” and “Who cares?” This third step of the narrative inquiry analysis process leads to the final product of the research text (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). Throughout the three levels of justifications, Ashley's story is prominent and informs the unfolding depth of understanding the narrative of experience (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016; Manankil-Rankin, 2016).

Ashley's Story

I had already been exploring aspects of mindfulness more for personal reasons; the problem is my body doesn't respond the same. I found the workshops really, really good, I really enjoyed the different techniques. [The workshop facilitator] provided a wide range of ideas on how mindfulness could be incorporated into life. Some of them worked and some of them didn't. For example, when I'm out in nature, I find it easier to be in the moment than I do in my everyday life.

When the question was asked "Where's your breath?" I just kept asking myself that question. I would check in really quickly and say, "Where's my breath?" That's been very, very helpful. I find it hard to focus on my breathing unless I set an alarm. It gives me the ability to check out of the hustle and bustle if I know that I am going to have a reminder of when I need to check back in.

My big 'Aha!' moment was when [the workshop facilitator] said that thoughts were like leaves on a river, and that you could acknowledge them and then let them go. Because I would fight with myself to not let any thoughts in. But [the workshop facilitator] gave me permission to acknowledge the thoughts and let them go. That's been huge!

As I think about how I might employ these [mindful practices], I think about being an example to students around listening, being attentive, and being in the moment instead of the next assignment, the next presentation. My students this morning had two exams. It may have been beneficial for them to raise awareness about trying to relax, in order to think more clearly. I think that if it [mindful practices] benefits me, why shouldn't it benefit the students as well. Stress management is big for students, and something like this would be really helpful for them.

Mental health is such a big issue today on campuses. I think there is a need to continuously pay attention to our mental health and to have the knowledge and skills to help students who are overly anxious. A little bit more discussion and research on mindfulness and its benefits for mental health for students and faculty would be helpful.

I would be interested to experiment with using different approaches. It is about finding [mindful] strategies that feel effortless, natural, and organic. For example, colouring books, crayons, or Play-Doh could be used through the entire lecture if the strategy was congruent with the topic of the lecture. Another mindfulness activity could also be "writing a letter" to

oneself, but not have them [students] share it. A mindfulness strategy in the simulation [lab] experiences could be to provide them with an opportunity to regroup, catch their breath, and become mindful in the moment. I wonder if this strategy would allow them to notice things better when they went back into the scenario?

To establish a habit, [as faculty] we would need support and encouragement. It's an ongoing project. This was a really good opportunity to nurture ourselves, and we need to do more of this; perhaps once a month, talk about mindfulness where we share our common experiences through stories. It was a great way to engage with my colleagues on a different level other than just through coursework.

Analysis: Levels of Justification

Three levels/circles of justification, personal, practical, and social continue the movement from field text to research text. The composite story (Ashley's story) flows and coalesces within these three levels/circles of justification. These justifications mutually inform and further deepen the phenomenon of interest (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). The movement from the composite story through the levels of justification takes the inquirers to the research text aimed at a holistic perspective of the phenomenon under investigation (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016).

Personal Justification

Two patterns emerged when the inquirers engaged with the participant field texts. These are: (1) Integrating mindful practices into personal life, and (2) Integrating mindful practices into teaching and learning situations.

Integrating Mindful Practices into Personal Life

Ashley shared the need to create the conditions that encourage mindfulness, such as being in nature and even being disciplined with time by setting an alarm: "In everyday life, I find it hard to focus on my breathing unless I set an alarm. It gives me the ability to check out of the hustle and bustle, if I know that I am going to have a reminder of when I need to check back in."

For Ashley, mindfulness practice is a way of approaching moments. The alarm helps Ashley re-focus and connect with their breath. This action grounds and relaxes Ashley and allows them to think more clearly when acknowledging thoughts as they surfaced in the moment.

Ashley highlighted the moment as significant learning, when in the workshop they consciously acknowledged their thoughts and then let them go. Ashley felt supported by the facilitator's guidance, what

Ashley refers to as receiving “permission to acknowledge the thoughts and let them go.” The use of mindful practices, as Ashley suggests, could be shared with students to also support their mental health.

Ashley’s story resonates with our stories through the identification of how mindful practices need to be brought into daily life. Mindful practices take time to become a habit and part of one’s everyday life. In fact, living mindfully is a way of life, and not a so-called “silver bullet” when addressing the feelings of overwhelm, stress and anxiety. As faculty, our lives are continuously challenged by distractions that arise both within our personal and professional lives. Thus, we acknowledge the importance of focusing on breathing as a daily practice that supports the habit of being mindful and present in the moment.

Integrating Mindful Practices into the Teaching-Learning Situations

In the classroom experience, there are opportunities for students to focus in the moment through aesthetic activities. Ashley inquired whether using mindful practices as part of a simulation activity would facilitate the ability to have a sharper awareness of what is occurring within the scenario. To “provide them with an opportunity to regroup, catch their breath, and become mindful in the moment. I wonder if this strategy allows them to notice things better when they went back into the scenario?” Ashley’s experience brings to the foreground the need for mindful practices, not only in the classroom, but also in students’ development in clinical practice. It highlights that the act of being mindful of one’s thoughts and surroundings may help students focus on the task at hand, and thereby increase their awareness and perception of their environment. If the breath relaxes, then the breath may also bring focus, which would bring about clarity of thought during assessment and application of nursing interventions for nursing students.

Ashley also identified strategies for integrating mindful practices into the teaching-learning situations, which include the use of crayons, Playdoh, and writing a letter that may help bring students to a mindful state of presence. These aesthetic ways illuminate the need to shine a light on the part of ourselves that is provoked by artistic expression. It heightens our aesthetic ways of knowing (Chinn & Kramer, 2018; Schwind & Manankil-Rankin, 2020).

Ashley’s story reminded the inquirers about the times they engaged their students through art; to teach nursing concepts such as relationality. We experienced that our students naturally moved into this aesthetic space of expression to communicate something deep within their being, which may never have been expressed using written words (Schwind, 2003). Art is a way of expressing the tacit within oneself and mindfulness

creates the space for this aesthetic way to be used to facilitate a deeper understanding of an experience within the teaching-learning context. As Ashley stated, “I would be interested to experiment with using different approaches. It is about finding [mindful] strategies that feel effortless, natural, and organic.”

Practical Justification

Ashley claimed that:

Thoughts were like leaves on a river, and that you could acknowledge them and then let them go. Because I would fight with myself to not let any thoughts in. But [the workshop facilitator] gave me permission to acknowledge the thoughts and let them go. That’s been huge! As I think about how I might employ this [mindful practice], I think about being an example to students around listening, being attentive, and being in the moment.

Mindful practices in Ashley’s experience involve a consistent pattern and approach to forces that interfere with the peaceful flow of one’s state of being. It suggests that thoughts not only enter one’s mind, but that they can also be released, to return to the state of being present in the moment. The critical element in Ashley’s story is the way mindful practices experienced in the personal realm may flow into the experiences within the teaching and learning realm. As such, being mindful becomes part of the person, where the person and the professional responds as an integrated whole to the life stressors.

The rhythm and flow that Ashley shares in their story highlights the importance of seeing the patterns within the intertwining of personal and professional life. For faculty in higher education, and specifically in nursing, this process is an essential component to their development as educators, who have the potential to role-model and foster relationally centered compassion in students. Ashley’s story supports this potential. However, Ashley also notes that faculty need support in achieving these mindful qualities:

To establish a habit [as faculty], we would need support and encouragement. It’s an ongoing project. This was a really good opportunity to nurture ourselves, and we need to do more of this; perhaps once a month, talk about mindfulness where we share our common experiences through stories.

This study adds to the current literature by reinforcing the integration of mindful practices into day-to-day life and professional practice. Establishing the rhythmic flow of mindful practices requires space in which to occur. Through a consistent, invitational, and intentional weaving of mindful practices within the

professional and personal lives of faculty, an organic rhythm and flow emerge. Weaving of mindful practices is consistent with Sheehan et al. (2017), who discuss rhythm as a practice of regular activities that frame one's life. The integration of mindfulness streaming from a faculty's personal and professional lives provides a frame for regularity of activities that form habitual practice. This habitual practice sets the structure for relating to others in a way that is mindful. This potentiality opens oneself to relating and co-creating knowledge and action rooted in mindfulness. As Ashley pointed out, mental health is a considerable component in everyday life of faculty and students, and mindful interaction may contribute to this phenomenon being experienced in the educational landscape.

Mental health is such a big issue today on campuses. I think there is a need to continuously pay attention to our mental health and to have the knowledge and skills to help students who are overly anxious. A little bit more discussion and research on mindfulness and its benefits for mental health for students and faculty would be helpful.

Finally, Ashley identified a social component to the development of mindfulness when faculty come together to share their experiences. Ashley notes that the faculty, as a community, requires support in engaging in mindful practice that comes with creating space and time to meditate, for example. After all, Crain et al. (2017) suggest that stress at work impacts home life. Ashley highlighted this reality when they said "to establish a habit [as faculty], we would need support and encouragement. It's an ongoing project."

Social Justification

Ashley claimed that support is needed in the nurturing of the growth of the rhythm and flow of mindfulness within the self. This support comes from an educational institution that provides a culture of mindful practices for its faculty and students. The institutional climate plays an influential role in impacting the health and well-being of those who work within its physical and virtual walls (Hartrick-Doane & Varcoe, 2020). Transforming the work and learning environment requires a change to existing rituals in how individuals perceive themselves and how cognitive models guide their decisions (Porter-O'Grady & Malloch, 2018). Achieving the integration of mindful practices into personal and professional life requires institutional support and strategies to nurture the consistency of practice. Ashley calls for a reshaping of the institutional policies and the relationships within the professional place through techniques, such as ongoing meetings to share stories. A way to continually reconstruct

experiences around mindful practices is to maintain an ongoing infusion of this practice amongst the faculty.

Final Thoughts For Now...

Applying the narrative inquiry analysis process to Ashley's story highlighted the potentiality for dynamic and organic flow of mindful practices that could be integrated in personal and professional life. The person and the professional self cannot be separated, as the development of habitual practice in one realm influences the other. Awakening of mindful practices in both realms requires a culture of support and openness to this way of being. We learned that mindful practices within teaching and learning situations requires institutional support to be sustained. The professional context influences a person, thus intentional policies that nurture mindful practices may create the needed time and space for developing these qualities in faculty, as well as in students. We recommend that educational institutions make possible the emergence and sustainability of mindful practices. A recommendation that extends beyond the field of nursing to include undergraduate and graduate students and faculty in other disciplines (Schwind et al., 2017).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing, nursing faculty, and students highlight not only the vital role of mindfulness in decreasing levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, but also how it can improve learning and clinical practice (Aloufi et al., 2021; Germer & Neff, 2013; Long & Neff, 2018; van der Riet et al., 2018; White, 2014). Strategies that support the development of mindful practices within nursing faculty and the subsequent impact on student learning is an area that requires further research. Attending to the integration of mindful practices in the teaching-learning space has the potential to promote the development of mindfulness in students, which may emerge from the role-modeling by their faculty.

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LISA-ANNE HAGERMAN, RN, Ed.D, is a Professor of Nursing at Conestoga College, Kitchener, Canada. Her research focuses on transition to practice, technology enhanced learning, and how mindful practices support nursing faculty and students. Lisa-Anne has completed two AMS/RNAO fellowships and one RNAO leadership fellowship in mindful practices and is the Compassionate Care scholarly lead at Conestoga College.

LOUELA MANANKIL-RANKIN, RN, PhD, is an Associate Professor with Nipissing University School of Nursing focusing specifically in the Scholar Practitioner Program. She is an advocate of Narrative Inquiry as a foundational learning frame for becoming a nurse as well as a research methodology for understanding the situated lives of people. Her educational interests are reflective practice, curriculum design, program evaluation, practice readiness, and evidence-informed practice. Her website is <https://theartofexperience.ca/>.

JASNA K. SCHWIND, RN, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing at Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada. She explores *humanness-of-care* within education and praxis and supports student learning and knowledge development by implementing various creative self-expression approaches in the classroom, including Narrative Reflective Process. She also engages students in mindful practices to enhance their self-awareness, presence, and a sense of well-being.