

Education for mental health case study

Film Studies

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Context

The 'Film History: 1930-1945' module is for first year Film Studies students at King's College London. Students learn about international developments of the film industry during this period. A mindfulness mediation practice is led by the senior lecturer within each session.

Mindfulness meditation is secular form of mediation derived from Buddhist practices and involves 'beginning in the moment'. Things like yoga, tai chi, gardening etc can be mindful practices, ie an activity that involves focusing on what you are doing. In a sedentary environment, like listening to a lecture, it is easier to be distracted from the present, hence mindfulness mediation can be used to help bring focus to the present.

A mindfulness mediation practice was implemented into the 'Film History: 1930-1945' module sessions by Dr Tom Brown for the following reasons:

- + To promote engagement. During lectures and film screenings students were often checking their phones, which was not only distracting for themselves but also other students, making it difficult for them to be fully engaged.
- + Preventing distraction. Previous techniques to prevent these distraction behaviours were to 'tell students off' and to set rules for film screenings eg, 'how to be good film-watching citizens,' eg, being respectful to others around them. The module leader found these attempts to be negative and not helping in reducing unwanted distracting behaviours.
- + Improving focus. The idea is that mindfulness could be a positive way of helping with focus, reducing distracting behaviours and have other wellbeing benefits.

"Students get very distracted during film screenings... it's difficult framing these screenings as a scholarly thing, rather than just watching a movie...It's hard for students to watch a film without checking their phone regularly."

Tom Brown, module leader

Outcomes of module

The mindfulness meditation exercises aim to:

- + help students pay better attention during lecture
- + improve students' focus
- + reduce phone-checking behaviour
- + reduce anxiety and stress.

Examples of mindfulness activities

Focusing on breath

Body scans

Paying attention to sounds

Key module information

Typical intake	70
Format*	Lectures and seminars; Face-to-face
Level of study	Undergraduate first years
Status	Optional
Credited	Yes
Assessment	Participation (15%), one 2000-word essay (25%), one 3000-word essay (60%)
Assessment feedback	Comments and grades
Location*	Lecture hall
Teaching staff	Senior Lecturer
Duration/ frequency	Weekly, Jan-March

*This information refers to usual circumstances (not under Covid-19 restrictions)

Development of module

The module leader, Tom Brown, has incorporated mindfulness practice into his lectures since 2018 which stemmed from personal experience of engaging with mindfulness and learning through his wife:

“My wife is a primary school teacher, who uses mindfulness interventions with the children, where it has been really useful, less commonly used in secondary education and universities... but felt it would be useful in university setting.”

Tom Brown, module leader

The mindfulness activities have continued to be part of the module after receiving positive feedback from students eg students reporting enjoying the activities, feeling included in the classroom when meditating together, and that it has helped their attention.

Tom has experimented with varying the timepoint at which the activities are delivered e.g. start of lecture, or just before screening. Found it works better mid-way through lecture as a pause and reflection.

Challenges

- + Mindfulness is not to all students taste, and therefore can lead to disengagement in some cases. It is also not appropriate for students with certain mental health issues. Students are told they do not have to participate if they do not want to, therefore, giving students a sense of autonomy. Students can leave the classroom if they don't want to do it.
- + It is difficult to encourage other academics to implement, despite presentations and sharing positive student feedback. Other academics don't feel comfortable delivering mediation practice or don't feel it is a part of their remit as lecturers. Only staff who had personal experience with meditation or Buddhist philosophy were interested.
- + Delivering the exercises can feel awkward at first:

“Guiding students through meditation, asking them to listen to your voice and listening to breathing is awkward at first and a bit embarrassing but I got used to it and got over it, and found it to be a positive thing on the whole.”

Tom Brown, module leader

Advice for other academics from module leader

- + When framing mindfulness to students, describe the personal benefits, explain that it is a methodology for attention, and it is something to enhance their learning ie, students who are able to focus better will do better.
- + Practice makes perfect- try it out.
- + Recordings of mindfulness are a good starting point if teaching staff are not comfortable guiding students themselves.
- + Acknowledge the discomfort of running mindfulness activities but know that the benefits outweigh initial discomfort.
- + Send students links to free mindfulness sessions and more information about benefits to promote engagement.
- + Some good resources - The Buddhist centre; www.livingwell.org.au

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