

“YouareImportant” Project: One Experiential Learning in Mindfulness in the Educational Context

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Abstract

Using Experiential Learning in Mindfulness, students from the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria's higher vocational technical courses in Clinical Secretarial and Social and Community Intervention were able to experience Mindfulness content and exercises in the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year, as part of the Internship course. This active learning project took place in ten online training sessions over three months, involving four teachers and twenty students. At each session, all the students anonymously evaluated their experience and progress, giving feedback. To summarise, the students gradually became aware of the aims and potential of Mindfulness in their teaching and learning process in Higher Education, with a preference for mindful breathing practices and daily gratitude. The results suggest that the project could be replicated with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Keywords: Higher Education; Innovation; Mindfulness; Pedagogical Practices.

1. Introduction

The concept of Mindfulness was translated from the words "sati" and "empali" and is understood as a particular and intentional mental state that centres attention on the present and facilitates awareness and self-perception (Leahy et al, 2013). It originated in Buddhist psychology and was introduced in different contexts by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who described Mindfulness as a psychological procedure that enables a relational quality of attention to experience. The person must observe every situation with interest, acceptance, without judgement, with genuine awareness of the present moment: 'here and now' (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). From the perspective of

Meikeljohng (2017), interventions based on Mindfulness significantly improve working memory, attention, academic abilities, social skills, emotional regulation and self-esteem, as well as facilitate the stabilisation of adverse emotional states. According to Meikeljohngin and Robinson (2015), other benefits of Mindfulness can be considered, particularly in the educational context, in terms of behavior, focus on tasks and self-regulation, which consequently reduces emotional distress and brings progresses in academic performance.

According to Pereira (2019), research identifies the need to use these practices in educational contexts, from preschool to university. Learning to manage stress and emotions is one of the main objectives of Mindfulness-based programs in education (Da Silva & De Lima, 2023). From Ergas' (2015) perspective, this makes it urgent to restructure the education available based on greater attention and focus on the student's inner world and not just on learning. Based on the literature, it is understood that Mindfulness, from a cognitive/emotional point of view, has a positive impact on the training process of students at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the future professionals of the labor market in the 21st century.

In terms of innovation and creativity, it allows processes to become truly student-centered, facilitating applicability and flexibility in learning in practical contexts. It favors maintaining focus/attention and reducing stress (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016; Sobreiro, 2016; Serrão, Rodrigues & Ferreira, 2022). Integrating the practice of Mindfulness into the educational context of a HEI can strengthen students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016).

In this sense, an online educational program called *TuésImportante (YouareImportant)*, was created, to reduce stress based on mindfulness, applied to students of two Higher Professional Technical Courses (CTeSP's): Clinical Secretarial (School of Health Sciences of the Polytechnic of Leiria) and Social and Community Intervention (School of Education and Social Sciences), in order to reinforce their emotional and stress management skills. Regarding the professional profile of each course, it is known that: a) The CTeSP in Clinical Secretarial Studies aims to train professionals to plan, manage and carry out secretarial activities in health and/or rehabilitation institutions (Decreto Lei nº 11670/2019); b) The CTeSP in Social and Community Intervention aims to train professionals who can intervene in the most diverse areas of Social Work, contribute to community development, act and work with different audiences, in the most varied contexts.

The projet took place in the academic year 2022/2023, at the Torres Vedras Training Centre due to: (1) the proximity of two courses from different Organic Units of the same IHE's; (2) the feasibility of this at level 5, where the last semester takes place only in a real context, with a closer relationship to the labor market (equivalent to one academic semester); (3) the applicability of the practice to students whose professional profile prepares them for working

contexts. Those are real-life experiential contexts that require students to deal with different people, borderline situations that require emotionally appropriate responses.

This experimental Problem Base Project was based on Experiential Learning in Mindfulness, according to Kolb's Model, supported by the second edition of the Pedagogical Innovation Projects (Kolb, 2015). In experience-based learning, experience is central to the learning process and develops in cycles, one of each cycle consists of four stages: concrete experience (doing), reflective observation (reflecting), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (re-doing). Through repetition of this cycle, individuals can constantly improve skills and knowledge (Kolb, 2015).

1.1. Aim

This study qualitatively investigated the meanings of an educational experience based on an Experiential Based Learning Methodology (Kolb, 2015).

The project includes different Mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques, used by the students on a regular ten-week basis in the second year Internship course of two Higher Professional Technical Courses at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria: Clinical Secretarial Course and the Social and Community Intervention Course (Kolb, 2015).

2. Method

2.1. Study Design

The YouareImportant project followed the project methodology - Experiential Learning - 'learning by doing, collaborating', in order to capture students' attention, involving them in reflecting on real-world problems, making them acquire and apply new knowledge, as well as developing or systematising problem-solving skills (David, 2008 cited by Efstratia, 2014, p. 1257). In this methodology, the teacher appears as one "facilitator" of "knowledge" and "socio-emotional competences", and should know what students have learnt from experience" (Ibidem). This methodology allows for collaborative and experiential learning in a group of students who "work together to solve a problem, complete a task or create a product" (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012, p. 486). It is considered that the development of a Mindfulness-based stress reduction training project will provide this joint creation.

The participants took part in a project that included a regular training process in informal and formal Mindfulness techniques. It should be noted that there were two distinct moments: a first moment centred on the group of teachers and the acquisition of training in this area; a second moment of interaction and joint work between teachers and students.

2.2. Participants

The students eligibility criteria were cumulatively: (1) active enrolment in the 2nd year Internship course of the two CTesP courses; (2) signing an informed consent to participate voluntarily in the project. Purposive sampling was used in this case in order to select cases rich in information and different narratives in terms of contact with the world of work and dealing with the public, while still in the context of the Internship. The sample consisted in one group of twenty students from two CTesP courses at the Organic Units of the IES Politécnico de Leiria, making a total of 24 participants. The majority of participants were women, and the average age of participants was 23.5 years. There were 2 male and 18 female students with an average age of 23.2 years old.

The group of teachers (four teachers) were all teacher's belonging Polytechnic Institute of Leiria: two belong to the Department of Health Sciences and Technologies and one to the Department of Nursing Sciences of the School of Health and one to the Department of Social Sciences of School of Education and Social Sciences.

2.3. Procedures

The project - YouareImportant - took place over a 10-week period (between 20 February and 1 June 2023), using the Zoom videoconference application. This period includes the Mindfulness training carried out by the teachers (totalling 30 hours of each teacher) and the 10 sessions with the students.

The fact that it was carried out online made it possible for students and teachers to be in different geographical contexts, as the internships took place in different parts of the country.

With regard to the timing of the sessions with students, the consensus was that they should take place in the morning, before lunch, during the internship period, making it possible to collaborate with internship sites. All 10 planned sessions were held and evaluated anonymously, using one online survey, which was answered voluntarily. Between sessions, autonomous work (practising the techniques learnt) was the responsibility of each student. All the information about the projet was shared in WhatsApp group and Moodle platform of the 'Internship' course.

2.3.1. Structure of the planned training and sessions

Through their training and experience, the teachers selected a range of informal and formal practices to apply to the students. The first and the last sessions were dedicated to presentation and conclusion. The progress sessions followed the agenda: briefing on the previous session; feedback; presentation of the day's practice; homework proposal; evaluation of the session. In Chart 1 it's summarized the total of the training.

Chart 1. Structure of the Planned Mindfulness Training

Sessions	Organisation of sessions
1	Project presentation; Team Presentation; Signatures Consents and Introduction of First Formal Body Scan; Assessment
2	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Body Scan Attention to the Body and Breathing; Final Sharing and Evaluation
3	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Introduction to Body Scan Practice paying attention to Thoughts, Emotions and Physical Sensations; Assessment
4	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Emotions and Physical Sensations; IThree-Dimensional Breathing Practice; Assessment
5	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Introduction to Mountain Practice; Assesment
6	Sharing Experiences; Practical Mountain Meditation; Introduction to Gratitude and Blessings Meditation; Assessment
7	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Tree Meditation Practice; Assessment
8	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review; Lake Meditation Practice; Assessment
9	Sharing Experiences; Practical Review Lake; Repetition Practices Selected by the group: Three-Dimensional Breathing and Blessing Practice; Sharing and Assessment
10	Project Closing; Final Assessment and Gratitude Practice; Gratitude to the group

Source: Own elaboration

3. Findings

The average attendance at the sessions was 9,5 students and always 2 teachers. The session time (50 minutes) was adequate, the sequence and resources available on online platforms were also appropriate. The practices recorded in audio by the teachers, allowing portability, was differentiating. Sharing thoughts and feelings during the sessions, it's difficult for the majority of the students, who preferred writtin in Zoom and WhatsApp chats.

From what we were able to find out, regarding prior knowledge about Mindfulness, the teachers had no prior contact with the practice. About the students, three indicated that they had already contact with the practice by saying: *“I had already practiced and left (...) was good to get back to it”* (P 12). The rest of the group, indicated that they had never contacted with this Practices ou topic: *“I have never tried Mindfulness”* (P1).

In session 1, it was possible to identify that students attributed to the project the characteristics/words: *“interesting, introspective, informative, knowledge, reflexive (...)”* (P 1, 5, 10).

In the last session, participants expressed themselves by saying: *“it helped to improve their daily lives, personal and professional”* (P3); *“the practices are inspiring, motivating”* (P4).

We can summarize the Informal and Formal Practices that Impact the group, with strong potential to be used in Educational Contexts.

Mindfulness Informal Practices

To summarize, among the informal practices proposed, those with positive feedback in the reality of the workplaces, with potential for replication in Educational Contexts were the daily practice of Mindfulness and the daily practice of gratitude. We heard: *"thanking someone or ourselves is special"* (P9). Another participant said: *"Mindfulness is freedom from "autopilot". It helped me deal with problems in the health unit where I'm doing my internship"* (P2). The group understood mindfulness can be integrated into almost daily life routine, personal and professional daily routines. We can listen: *"My meals take now much longer than 15 minutes, ...I take care of my meals with presence and attention"* (P 16).

Mindfulness Formal Practices

Among the formal practices proposed, the one that gained impetus and seems to have been integrated into the students' professional and personal reality, especially among those who at first were not so open to the project were: the practice of three-dimensional breathing and the practice of a brief body scan, namely: *"The fact that I realised I could breathe better was differentiating (...) the body scan is also incredible, and can be replicated anywhere or in any context. It's excellent"* (P 1). Another participant said: *"Tree meditation was amazing,it will be my new daily exercise when i finished the course...it's great "* (P2).

In fact Lake Meditation was the less interesting formal practice for our students. They reflected about the meditation and said: *"it's difficult to be focused on this meditation...maybe with some more training! But it's the most difficult. If I can delete one practice from the projete, maybe this, was the one to delear"* (P 14).

4. Conclusion

Both from the teachers' and students' perspective, there were positive results, in a short space of time. Everyone gave very positive feedback at the end, regarding the practices and the project itself. The group of participants positively evaluated the YouareImportant project, they considered the project, a great opportunity to "stop" in an organized way, for at least one hour/week, dedicating time to integrating the regulatory practice of Mindfulness during curricular unit Internship. Therefore, and due to the nature of the training, it will be important to replicate it in future editions in a face-to-face format. Addressing face-to-face it will facilitate the opportunity to focus on the participants inner world and experience.

The regular basis given to the process, the consistent use of practices, at each person's pace and time, were aspects valued by the students and dictated the keys to success/completion. The fact

that participation was not included in formal learning, but rather in non-formal learning, was considered a great added value. It was possible to learn about the range of formal practices and informal practices preferred by the group, highlighting the mindful attitude, the practice of gratitude and/or blessings, the use of three-dimensional breathing and rapid bodyscan. From the initial structure projected, it is considered that the practice of meditation with visualization should not be part of sessions in this context/format, specifically the Lake Meditation.

It is urgent to develop more exploratory research in Mindfulness, specially in Higher Education contexts, where projects like the one we present, can support future researches. This type of Pedagogical projet and experience can support experimental design in Mindfulness topic.

Therefore, it seems decisive to mantain this practice in level 5 training degrees, it´s also needed in undergraduate, postgraduate or master's degrees (Javadzade et al., 2024; Vuijk & Buil , 2004).

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