Dare to Share the Silence: Tools & Practices of Contemplative Pedagogy in a Library Brain Booth

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Abstract. A research study at a rural, public university revealed interest among college students in engaging in mindfulness and contemplative practices within their university library. This study also identified a gap between interest in contemplative pedagogy among faculty and their engagement in contemplative practices within this newly-created library space, The Library Brain Booth. This study shares the results of visits to the Library Brain Booth by both first-time and returning participants. It also provides mean usage time at each of the following stations which were created to support mindfulness and contemplation: biofeedback, color-relax, game-relax, light-relax, read-relax, silent-relax, sound-relax, audio-meditate, prompt-meditate, video-meditate, gratitude-express, and virtual reality-immense. The results of the study are intended to support the explicit promotion of metacognition and mindfulness in the academic process, both through mindfulness activities within the library for students, and through contemplative pedagogy in information literacy instruction.

Keywords: Contemplative pedagogy, contemplative studies, academic libraries, information literacy, mindfulness, undergraduate students.

1 Introduction

In this research study, we aimed to identify willingness to engage in mindfulness and contemplation practices among college students in their university library. This study also aimed to identify interest in contemplative pedagogy in the workplace for educators, including librarians. Mindfulness as an academic activity was promoted to the campus community through an innovative and newly-created physical space within the university library, entitled Library Brain Booth, providing participants with activities and tools that could support exploration of mindfulness and contemplation. These activities and tools were chosen for both their accessibility to a diverse and novice audience as well as for potential

popularity or novel interest. The stations created were biofeedback, color-relax, game-relax, light-relax, read-relax, silent-relax, sound-relax, audio-meditate, prompt-meditate, video-meditate, gratitude-express, and virtual reality-immense.

We created the innovative Library Brain Booth space to address an important gap in our educational and workplace environments, which is the known benefits of practicing mindfulness as a metacognitive activity toward academic and workplace success. With willingness to engage in mindful practices as an academic activity established, further research could be supported that would explore the ability of specific tools and activities to impact academic success and cultivate mindfulness among students. It could also support efforts for librarians to partner with departmental faculty to embed contemplative pedagogy into information literacy instruction and measure its impact on both students and faculty.

2 Literature Review

College students must navigate between two major factors affecting their performance and wellbeing, namely, coping with stress [1-3] and dealing with distractions to sustain productive cognitive activities [4]. Contemplative pedagogy offers methods that support the development of student attention and emotional balance as well as techniques that support creativity and course content learning [5].

Mindfulness is a mental state of focused attention in the present moment without judgmental perspectives. Scholars and practitioners have discussed mindfulness theories and practices at-length [6-10] and its positive effects on the human wellbeing [11-12].

The literature suggested that mindful practices could have a positive impact on student learning [6, 13-14], on reducing emotional exhaustion and improving workplace satisfaction and effectiveness [15-16], and on supporting mental health [11, 17].

Engagement with mindfulness and contemplative pedagogy supports such proven activities as intentional brain breaks, emotional self-regulation, and singular focus.

Intentional brain breaks: taking as little as a few minutes to give the brain a break from thinking, can lead to better focus and better academic study outcomes [6, 18].

Emotional self-regulation practice [11]: educators ask students to engage in courageous conversations both in- and outside of the classroom. Teaching contemplation and mindfulness is a way to prepare students to more successfully engage in those conversations while also teaching the cultivation of patience and compassion for diverse viewpoints [19].

Singular focus: many students struggle with attempting to multitask as well as foster strong, singular focus when it is needed for short or sustained periods of time. Mindfulness training has quite immediate impacts on attention and focus [19-20].

Some scholars and practitioners have gone even further by designing and conducting ongoing mindfulness training in the classroom across curriculum to support an attentive, present-centered, and non-reactive mental mode [13, 21] as well as by development and standardization of mindfulness qualities scale for college students [22].

Lately, librarians have started to pay attention to mindfulness and to engage with mindful practices [20, 23-24]. Just a few university libraries have started to dedicate time and spaces to mindfulness activities. Most of these libraries focus primarily on meditation. Our project is the first one to involve a broader spectrum of mindfulness activities, which offer intentional brain breaks to students, faculty and staff.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Question

The study's overall research questions are as follows: Among the campus community is there interest and willingness to engage in mindful practices within the library's academic setting? Will participants return? If there is interest, what is the mean duration of use for each station?

3.2 Quantitative Approach

We designed a LibGuide for the Library Brain Booth to provide overall information for all participants, and a contemplative pedagogy section for campus educators. Drawing data from the LibGuides statistics section, the viewing rate of the LibGuide was 1,191 views from August 29 through December 31, 2016, with most views occurring in September.

Shortened Google url's linking to the LibGuide were created to track views via clicks. The shortened url's were used in targeted promotions to three campus groups: college students, staff, and faculty, including librarians. Email communications were sent via the opt-out campus system. 32 students, 16 staff, and 51 faculty viewed these emails.

Additionally, small printed flyers were created with a unique url to share with students via tabling events during freshmen orientation, multicultural welcome events, and on library whiteboards. The viewing rate of this unique url was 128 students.

We also provided a voluntary student sign-up form at those tabling events who wished to be added to an email group for direct communications. A total of 120 students signed up.

3.3 Qualitative Approach

We designed a moderate participant observation study [26], influenced by focused ethnography [25], where the primary data collection format was video recordings of each

session. The video camera was visibly perched above eye-level at the front of the room. Researchers were stationed outside of the classroom, serving as identifiable, limited participants [26]. Researchers obtained informed consent and answered questions outside of the classroom. Participants could invite us into the space for support at any time.

We did not have any interested parties who declined to participate in the study. Due to the continuous video recording in the Library Brain Booth classrooms, those who wished to use the Library Brain Booth stations were required to provide their informed consent to enter the classroom and be video recorded for the study. Although we did not have any participants decline to participate in the study, there were printed opt-out flyers with links to freely-available online mindfulness resources to support those who declined.

We designed the study so that the total number of visits to the Library Brain Booth would be tracked via the required signed consent forms collected. One-time or returning participants were confirmed using these forms, which included printed name and date.

It was determined that video data analysis would be centered on recording aggregated station visit lows, highs, and means as well as observations of participant interactions.

The Library Brain Booth was hosted twice weekly for two-hour sessions. We hypothesized that classroom set-up might impact Library Brain Booth station usage, so two different classroom locations were chosen and in both only natural outside light was used. One classroom hosts individual mobile desks. Two to four desks would be grouped together for each station. The second classroom has long tables in rows not easily moved. Seats were arranged on both sides of a row with one to two stations available in any given row.

3.4 Limitations

Participants did consent to being audio recorded, yet most informing dialogue between participants and researchers took place outside of the designated classroom space at the point of getting informed consent. Since this study, audio recordings have been collected.

Based on early observations of the video data, it was determined that a follow-up study would be required to introduce one tool at a time or to discuss multiple-station usage with participants through interviews or focus group settings. All station visits of any length were initially recorded, yet required time to engage with activities and tools was diverse. A visit of any length could not be decidedly determinant of either preference or ability to support mindfulness practice for everyone. Absence of a visit to a station could also not concretely be concluded to be due to a lack of interest, and could be attributed to lack of time or lack of awareness. Defining what constituted activity or tool engagement without asking participants directly was also not deemed appropriate. Additional study using interview or focus group techniques is necessary.

4 Results

Overall, the results showed significant interest in mindfulness tools and activities within an academic library setting among college student participants in the Library Brain Booth. Interest in mindfulness tools and activities in the workplace among college staff and college faculty could only be demonstrated through engagement with digital promotional material.

4.1 Participation

One-Time and Returning Visits Recorded

In the fall of 2016, from the first day of operation on August 31 through the week of finals on December 14, we tracked attendance by completed informed consent forms.

The total number of visits to the Library Brain Booth in fall 2016 was 240. Of the visitors, students made up the largest percentage at 95% (n=228), along with 3% (n=8) staff and 2% (n=4) faculty. We did not have any community member participants.

We were also seeking to understand if interest transcended the initial novelty of the space. Of the total participants, 12% (n=28) returned on at least one more occasion.

4.2 Station Usage and Duration

We prompted participants to stay for any length of time during the operating hours. Thus, no participant could participate more than 120 minutes. We also informed them that they could come outside of the classroom to ask us questions or to seek station support. It was intentional to be outside of the space and to not provide direct instruction. We also encouraged them to move station furniture or tools as they desired, including to combine station offerings.

We note that given the lengthy visits of many participants, especially among returning participants, the overall limited operating hours of the Library Brain Booth may have been a significant factor on returning participants. Efforts to offer both purposefully shorter sessions and an open, dedicated space with circulating materials are underway because of this study.

Table 1. Library Brain Booth Station Tools¹ and Duration of Time Spent by Low, High, and Mean.

¹ Tools purchased based on affordability and recommendations. Products are noted, but are not endorsements. Biofeedback: emWave™; Light: Lightphoria Lamps™; Sound: SONEic™; Prompt: Growing Mindful™; Virtual Reality: Tepoinn™, Samsung™, and Freefly™.

Station Description. Combined use of station tools together is also noted.	Low	High	Mean
Biofeedback. This station featured four mobile heart-rate variability biofeedback units and with operating instructions. Combined with: Color-relax, read-relax, gratitude-express, game-relax, and prompt-meditate.	1	21	5
Color-relax. This station featured coloring pages, both those freely available online and in commercial coloring books. Colored pencils and colored felt, odorless markers were provided. Combined with: Biofeedback, light-relax, sound-relax, and video-meditate.	1	39	9
Game-relax. This station provided a wooden labyrinth puzzle, several decks of cards, and a rotating selection of commercial board games and puzzle games. Traditional puzzles were not included. Combined with: Biofeedback, noise-relax, and virtual reality-immense.	1	29	7
Light-relax. Two light lamps were set-up along with instructions and manufacturer's cautions. Combined with: Color-relax, read-relax, gratitude-express, game-relax, and prompt-meditate.	1	19	6
Read-relax. A rotating selection of the 30 curated books was offered each session. Signage notified participants that all were circulating and specially cataloged for easy searching. Combined with: Color-relax, read-relax, gratitude-express, game-relax, and prompt-meditate.	1	29	7
Silent-relax. Silent participation was not required. For participants who wished to use the space in silence, sound-isolation headphones were provided. Because silent-relax was always done in combination with other activities, the data represent station combination of these: Combined with: Prompt-meditate, game-relax, light-relax, and read-relax.	4	12	7
Sound-relax. Featured two plug-in sound machines with headphones. Combined with: Color-relax, light-relax, and participants' own projects.	1	60	9
Audio-meditate. A CD player and headphones were provided with four guided meditation CD's. Combined with: Was not used in combination.	2	12	7
Prompt-meditate. Printed mindfulness prompts, including mindfulness activity cards, were provided for an electronic-free option. Combined with: Biofeedback and light-relax.	1	17	3
Video-meditate. Two laptops, with headphones, were provided along with signage listing several free online guided meditations. Five guided meditation DVD's were also purchased for the library's collection and noted on the signage. Combined with: Color-relax.	2	16	5
Gratitude-express. Large sheets of paper and markers were laid out on tables with some of the sheets blank and some containing a "Gratitude Log." Combined with: Biofeedback.	1	20	6
Virtual reality-immense. Four goggles were purchased for device compatibility. A list of VR-friendly immersive experience video links and manufacturer's instructions were provided. Participants had to bring their own or borrow a participant's smartphone. Combined with: Biofeedback.	1	35	8

4.3 Participant Observations

An anonymous comment card was available for participants to voluntarily provide written comments while in the Library Brain Booth. A total of 74 comments were received. In comparing the written comments with the video data by date, we could not associate individual station usage to participant preference or benefit with any degree of certainty.

“It was cool although I didn’t stay long, felt more relax [sic] & at peace.”

“I feel a lot lighter, not as tight, I don’t feel that tension, however slight, in my head or body. It’s great to get my mind off of everything, even just for a few mins. Biofeedback was my favorite! :)”

Interactions Among Participants

The Library Brain Booth was not a dedicated silent space, and this was communicated to participants. Unless participants arrived together, interactions were extremely limited. Even those who arrived together were seen to separate and participate silently. Interactions tended to be of a necessary nature in that a participant either wanted to share the same station or needed another participant to move to access a station.

The biofeedback and virtual reality-immersion stations were observed to have more interactions, and participants were seen assisting each other, sharing phones and VR videos.

While activity around a station by more than one person was found to pique interest among other participants, it was more common to see participants actively disengaging from others in the space. Disengagement was observed as turning one’s body or averting gaze, not acknowledging the arrival of others, and closing eyes where activities permitted.

Classroom Design

No discernible difference was observed in station usage, participant interactions, or time at stations across the two classroom configurations. Layout did impact station discovery.

In the classroom with individual seating, participants were observed walking haphazardly for longer periods of time before pausing to view or engage with stations. In the classroom with table rows, participants were generally observed to access the stations in a left-right, front-back order, except for returners who directly headed to stations of interest. Rows required more interaction to access a tool being blocked by another participant.

The researchers have received verbal requests for meditation benches and yoga mats. We acknowledge the potential interest in design elements or equipment that would delineate it from a traditional library space. Written comments included: *“Nice idea-better layout might be chairs facing individual stations/desks w/ barriers; Cool idea-maybe add something to the room so it’s not just desks; Pillows, blankets of color!”*

5 Conclusions/Discussions

The overall goal of providing mindfulness activities within the university library setting is to introduce metacognition more explicitly, particularly to college students as part of the academic process and to faculty and staff in the workplace. It is hoped that situating metacognition via mindfulness will normalize the practice and lead to greater exploration of its positive impacts on academic and workplace success for students, staff, and faculty.

Looking at the literature on library programing [27-28], and given the voluntary, incentive-free, no-credit nature of the Library Brain Booth, we established that the number of participants (n=240) demonstrated significant interest among college students. Exploring the potential time burden placed on students to learn outside of the classroom through a broader, critical examination of library offerings is warranted. Toward that end, we have just concluded a spring 2017 study offering direct, microlearning opportunities.

A shorter visit duration at the Library Brain Booth or at a station was not deemed to be less beneficial to participants, especially as we reviewed comments such as these: *“Perfect little break from school; Wonderful experience. Nice little break!; Great for a break!; Just scoped everything out. Next time I’ll choose one.”*

We cannot conclude that the space must be silent. For example, participants were rarely observed to speak in the Library Brain Booth, but the sound of voices may be viewed negatively or differently than nature sounds or white noise. We believe that preference for sound is important to explore and may have impacted initial or returning participation.

Overall, some tools and activities were observed to be easy to learn, but may not support our aims to promote mindfulness and contemplation. An illustrative example of this is coloring pages. While we recorded lengthy coloring sessions and devoted attention among some participants, others were observed to frequently scan the room or their phones. Explicit connection to mindfulness practice and the role of metacognition in academic efforts was found to be crucial in situating the tools and the Library Brain Booth mission.

One way in which we believe we can accomplish making metacognition more explicit is to capitalize on the observations made about participants’ choices for station combinations, and support shorter visits. We observed some activities and tools to be complementary. We plan to present those combinations more explicitly and intentionally. For instance, given the ease of use of color-relax, game-relax, light-relax, read-relax, and sound-relax, we plan to promote pairing these with biofeedback, audio-meditate, prompt-meditate, and video-meditate with stronger messaging around intentional brain breaks.

Finally, our study also showed an existing gap between engagement with digital tools centered on contemplative pedagogy and in-person faculty participation. A follow-up study focused solely on engagement with contemplative pedagogy, aside from faculty’s own

mindful practice, would better identify this gap. We encourage librarians to conduct follow-up studies in this area. We believe that librarians are well-positioned to adopt contemplative pedagogy in their information literacy instruction and to serve as resources for departmental faculty, who may be willing to explore its use in their courses. As a workplace effort, we argue that further study is warranted to support professional development and support our holistic selves at work to support caring, patient, and inclusive work with students.

The final publication will be available at link.springer.com

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