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Contemplative WAC: Testing a Mindfulness-based Reflective Writing Assignment Across Courses

Jared Featherstone

Abstract: *This qualitative study examines the effects of the Mindfulness Journal Assignment (MJA), a semester-long integration implemented in five different university courses, to understand its potential for teaching and learning. Of particular interest were the patterns found in the reflective writing of students engaging in the MJA and the connection of those patterns to both classroom and Writing Across the Curriculum learning objectives. The most frequent themes occurring in the 111,906-word dataset were metacognitive awareness and self-regulation, both of which are significant for learning transfer and WAC. The findings of this study are promising in that the inclusion of a contemplative writing assignment is associated with positive habits of mind, such as metacognition and openness, which are prerequisites for common university course objectives such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and transfer. The development of these fundamental, domain-general skills makes this type of assignment an appropriate intervention for the emerging Contemplative Writing Across the Curriculum movement.*

After using iterations of the same mindfulness-based reflective writing assignment in different university courses and noticing its holistic impact, as evidenced in student writing, I began to see potential for this intervention in the emerging Contemplative Writing Across the Curriculum movement. The basic components of the assignment are listening to a 12-minute guided mindfulness meditation and then freewriting for at least five minutes about the meditation experience once a week for the duration of the semester, followed by a final reflective essay that reconsiders their entries collectively. Among the wide range of themes to emerge in the data and analysis is the interconnected nature of mindfulness, metacognition, transfer, and Writing Across the Curriculum. This exportable, content-neutral Mindfulness Journal Assignment (MJA) is worthy of further study in that it shows potential for use by other faculty to meet learning objectives, enabling more educators to integrate contemplative pedagogy into their courses. The current study examines the effects of the MJA, a semester-long integration implemented in five different university courses, to understand its potential for contemplative writing across the curriculum. Specifically, the current research addresses the following questions:

1. What patterns and themes can be seen in the reflective writing of students engaging in the MJA?
2. How do these themes connect with common learning objectives and Writing Across the Curriculum?

In addition to well-known benefits of potentially reducing stress and anxiety in college students (Bamber and Schneider 29), mindfulness interventions have also been found to strengthen fundamental learning faculties such as working memory and attention (Jha). Related, essential skills that correlate with success in most academic disci-

plines are those associated with metacognition (Nilson; Schraw; Zimmerman and Bandura). Metacognition is commonly understood to have two basic aspects, awareness and the self-regulation enabled by awareness (Schraw 115-116). Mindfulness has been associated with both aspects of metacognition in both empirical and theoretical scholarship. Tomasz Jankowski and Pawel Holas, through analysis of existing neuropsychological data and theoretical views of mindfulness, define the processes and skills of mindfulness using a framework of metacognition (76-77). In considering a specific metacognitive application of mindfulness, Ravi S. Kudesia, Markus Baer, and Hillary Anger Elfenbein studied the effects of “mindful metacognition” on the ability of undergraduate college students to solve problems. In two studies, the researchers confirmed that these skills enhance students’ ability to move beyond initial, derivative solutions to more insightful or creative solutions (6-7).

Though she does not emphasize meditation as a means of training, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer, in studying the role of mindfulness in teaching and learning for decades, has identified numerous educational benefits resulting from mindfulness, including the potential enhancement of problem-solving ability (Langer, “Mindfulness”; Langer and Moldoveanu). She encourages instructors to facilitate mindfulness to increase student awareness of and responsiveness to variation and perspective, a shift that would move students beyond mindless rote methods that limit learning and enable students to overcome self-limiting mindsets (“Mindful Education”; “Mindful Learning”). Both increased awareness and problem-solving abilities have application in the development of students’ writing.

Barry J. Zimmerman and Albert Bandura’s study concluded that self-regulation had a positive influence on student performance in a writing class and that such practices that develop self-regulation should be taught in the classroom (855-859). Connections between metacognition and writing were also demonstrated in Douglass J. Hacker, Matt C. Keener, and John C. Kircher’s pilot study that used eye-tracking technology to monitor student writers and concluded that “writing is applied metacognition” (170). More recently, Raffaella Negretti studied the relationship of metacognition, writing, and learning in college students through qualitative analysis of student journal entries produced over the course of a semester. She found that metacognitive awareness changes students’ understanding of writing tasks and enables them to self-regulate (170-173).

The field of writing studies, after some decades moving in other directions, has renewed attention to the cognitive factors that underlie writing. The 2011 Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, for example, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, focuses on cultivating certain “habits of mind” in college students. Among those habits are “metacognition,” “flexibility,” “openness,” and “engagement.” Patrick Sullivan argues that the development of these habits should be at “the center of our teaching practice” (149). In addition, research has explored the effects of many of the same qualities in terms of the “dispositions” of student writers (Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg; Driscoll and Wells).

Along with student dispositions that are effective across learning contexts, research has also identified important fundamental concepts, termed threshold concepts, that, when learned, can enable students to both engage in a particular discipline of study, as

in *Writing in the Disciplines*, and also to apply knowledge in new contexts, as in *Writing Across the Curriculum*. Linda Adler-Kassner, Irene Clark, Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Blake Yancey describe five threshold concepts, four of which hinge upon mindfulness, though the connection is not explicitly acknowledged in their work (20-40). The relevant concepts are “writing always occurs in context, and no two contexts are alike,” “reflection is critical for writers’ development,” “genre awareness contributes to successful transfer,” and “prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, and beliefs set the stage for writing and shape new writing experiences” (21-40). Underlying each of these threshold concepts, critical to learning and academic performance, are metacognitive awareness and self-regulation, echoing the findings of Zimmerman and Bandura, Susan Nilson, and Langer (“Mindful Education”). As noted earlier in this article, metacognition and self-regulation are closely associated with mindfulness practice (Jankowski and Holas).

Both metacognition and mindfulness have also been studied in connection to another phenomenon relevant to both the field of writing studies and *Writing Across the Curriculum* programs: transfer. Significantly, Gregory Schraw’s influential research concludes that metacognition is “domain general,” meaning that it can be developed and applied across a variety of contexts, such as different academic disciplines (113). More recently, work by both Rebecca S. Nowacek and Elizabeth Wardle identifies metacognition as a habit of mind necessary for successful transfer of writing skills from one context to another. Building on this connection, Gwen Gorzelsky, Dana Lynn Driscoll, Joe Paszek, Ed Jones, and Carol Hayes interviewed and analyzed the writing of 123 students from four universities to identify the specific subcomponents of metacognition. Based on their findings, they suggest that instructors explicitly teach these subcomponents to scaffold students toward “construction metacognition,” a skillset that enables them to employ metacognitive skills effectively across a variety of writing tasks and contexts (233-236). These learning outcomes are consistent with the International Network of WAC Programs (INWAC) Statement of WAC Principles and Practices that encourages instructors to develop both rhetorical awareness and genre awareness in students, both of which require metacognition. Another intersection of metacognition and WAC can be seen in the WAC Clearinghouse’s emphasis on writing to learn, with reflective response papers and journaling identified as common writing to learn assignments, in which the use of writing is not simply a transactional means of communication but “a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding,” as a core approach in WAC pedagogy (Kiefer, Palmquist, Carbone, Cox, and Melzer).

Reflective writing, such as journaling, is also identified as a natural and effective part of contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat and Bush 104, 125-132), a modern movement featuring first-person, subjective, experiential work that trains real-time awareness and enables personal insight (Barbezat and Bush 6) and often includes the explicit integration of contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation. In recent years, the systematic integration of contemplative pedagogies into writing instruction has become a distinct subfield of writing studies, as discussed by Alexandria Peary (7-9). Peary specifically emphasizes the use of mindfulness to develop real-time, present moment rhetorical awareness and awareness of the “intrapersonal rhetoric” that underlies writing and thinking (35-39). Mindfulness builds metacognition and can result in “a detachment

that readies the learner for critical thinking” (5). Part of Peary’s rationale for mindfulness as a natural fit for composition pedagogy, one that aligns with INWAC’s “writing as rhetorical” principle, is that “First-year composition pedagogy is replete with different goals of awareness: our students regularly practice rhetorical awareness, genre awareness, audience awareness, disciplinary awareness, and process awareness” (13).

Christy Wenger also argues for a contemplative writing pedagogy integrating mindfulness and yoga, emphasizing present moment awareness of the body to fully engage with the writing context, and countering the oppressive disembodiment characteristic of academic writing (*Yoga* 44). Wenger also emphasizes the role of “attention literacy” (“Teaching Attention” 55), developed through mindfulness practices, as a productive addition to writing curricula because it is “a literacy necessary for student success” (“Teaching Attention” 58). Both Marlowe Miller and Karolyn Kinane, explaining the distinction between contemplative writing practices and traditional journaling or reflective writing, note that it is the combination of reflective writing or journaling with a contemplative practice, such as mindfulness, that distinguishes this pedagogy. Kate Chaterdon acknowledges the link between these contemplative writing pedagogies and transfer: “If the implementation of contemplative writing practice can help students develop a greater metacognitive awareness, then it stands to reason that it can help students to transfer their writing knowledge” (52).

Despite the emergence of contemplative writing pedagogy and the strong link across mindfulness, metacognition, and transfer (Gorzelsky, Driscoll, Paszek, Jones, and Hayes; Jankowski and Holas), few empirical studies have been conducted on contemplative writing. No empirical studies have been published on the contemplative writing assignments and their potential as a WAC initiative. The current study addresses this research deficit by offering findings and methods to build upon in the Contemplative WAC movement.

Research Design

Context, Courses, and Participants

The study analyzes the reflective writing of 54 students, ages 18-24, enrolled in five different courses at a large, state university. Participants varied in terms of major, writing ability, ethnicity, and gender. The courses included in the study were first-year composition (15 students), contemplative literature (15 students), writing tutor education (19 students), contemplative writing (two students), and a project-planning workshop for students in the honors program (four students). Common learning objectives across the courses included critical thinking about the course content, personal reflection and application of course content, writing process awareness, genre awareness, and clarity of written communication. While writing was a feature of each course, the approach varied. The first-year writing course focused on the production of texts in various genres; the contemplative literature focused on responding to a range of contemplative texts; the writing tutor education course prepared students to be effective writing tutors through immersion in theory and practice; the contemplative writing course involved students reading the writing of contemplatives and writing about first-hand experiences with

contemplative practice; and the project-planning course focused on the process awareness and production of research papers. The courses also varied in delivery with three face-to-face, one hybrid, and one online. I was the researcher and instructor of record for four out of the five courses in the study. I am a professor in the writing department and director of the university writing center and also an experienced practitioner and trained teacher of mindfulness meditation.

Given these features, the study aligns with the practices of action research, specifically the “practitioner as researcher” model developed by Estela Mara Bensimon, Donald E. Polkinghorne, Georgia L. Bauman and Edlyn Vallejo to establish an approach that not only involves participation in the intervention but also the ultimate goal of fostering institutional change. In the current study, I am the researcher who is a professor and meditation instructor examining the effects of my own interventions on students for the purpose of improving the quality of learning in my courses and, potentially, across courses in a variety of disciplines. The rationale for the practitioner-researcher approach is twofold. First, the combination of writing, teaching, and meditation expertise in one researcher is not common. Second, outsourcing any one of these interventions would disrupt the continuity of the course and the consistency of data interpretation. Lastly, as Negretti argues, only the course instructor could know whether the student journal entries were authentic responses or simply attempts to recapitulate course content (in this case, the meditation instructions or exchanges from class discussion). Aligning with this reasoning, the student writing under examination in the current study was produced to meet the requirements of the researcher-practitioner’s semester-long contemplative writing assignments in various courses.

Although these courses all have a significant writing component, the subjects of study are quite different. The idea was to test the potential of the Mindfulness Journal Assignment in these courses for export across a wider variety of courses in the curriculum. In my role of researcher-practitioner, I was able to identify and analyze the pedagogical implications of the findings because of my particular dual training in both writing and meditation instruction. After this initial phase, the MJA can be shared and, if need be, adapted for use more widely across the curriculum.

Mindfulness Journal Assignment

The Mindfulness Journal Assignment (MJA) was developed and refined over five years as it was implemented in a variety of courses. Each iteration of the assignment included mindfulness meditation instruction, journal entries, and a cumulative reflective essay spread over a semester. The meditation instruction was given through real-time classroom interaction, through pre-recorded online guided meditations, or through both classroom and online delivery. Both the online and face-to-face meditations followed the standardized instructions used in both Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction and Koru Mindfulness, which train a non-judging awareness using sensory anchors. The classroom mindfulness practice took place at the beginning of each class with the researcher both leading and taking part in the meditation. The in-class meditation sessions were timed using the Insight Timer app. The online guided meditations, both 12 and 24-minute

versions, were pre-recorded and hosted on Soundcloud for students to stream or download. These online meditations also followed standard mindfulness meditation protocol.

The journal entries were submitted periodically over the semester, and feedback was given to students through the course management system. The journal entries were free-write exercises taking place immediately following a mindfulness meditation practice. In some classes, students were asked to do additional entries focusing on connections to course content. The cumulative reflective writing pieces were assigned as a final journal entry toward the end of the semester or as part of the final exam for the course. Grades for the assignment were based on completion and depth of thought, and not on specific content criteria, in order to minimize leading or influencing the content.

While there were some variations of the assignment language and scope, according to the course context, the essence of the assignment remained the same over the courses. The following language was used for the majority of students in the dataset:

You will keep a journal of your experiences with mindfulness meditation. Each weekly practice session should have a corresponding journal entry. So, at a minimum, your first Meditation Practice Journal will contain seven reflections (1-3 paragraphs each).

Here's the process for each session.

1. Find a place in which you are unlikely to be interrupted or distracted (bedroom, forest, backyard, etc.) for the duration of the practice. Silence phones, tablets, laptops, TVs, or other devices.
2. Sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed but alert. Meditation is not sleep. You can sit in a chair or on the floor with a cushion. Follow the instructions. (Please let me know if you are confused by any of the instructions).
3. Listen to the [guided meditation](#) (about 12 minutes) and follow the instructions.¹
4. When the session is over, freewrite for 1-3 paragraphs (or more if you are inspired) about your meditation experience. Try not to over-think or edit your natural pattern of thought. (We'll have time for that later). You can write about how you felt, what was difficult, what you noticed about the way your mind works, the particular patterns of thought you experienced, emotional content, moods, any insights that arose for you during the session. Record the time and date of this entry.

Data Collection and Analysis

All student writing for the MJA was submitted through the university's online learning management system. Once IRB approval for the study and student permission for use of their work was secured, the data was exported and uploaded to NVivo, a software

1. The guided meditation can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/zentones/12-minute-guided-meditation>

system for coding and analyzing qualitative data. In total, the data set consisted of over 670 journal entries and 37 final papers, totaling 111,906 words of student writing.

After reading the entire data set without coding, I then read the data set a second time, coding for emergent themes. During this stage of the project, I had not yet narrowed my research questions, so I employed an open coding, more recently described as initial coding (Charmaz), which seeks to “remain open to all possible theoretical directions suggested by your interpretations of the data” (qtd. in Saldana 115). During the coding process, categories were created, revised, and combined as more examples made the distinctions clear. In addition, it was clear that a single passage might embody several codes, so I decided to allow for overlapping codes. For instance, the “body awareness” code may be evident in the same passage for which “increased focus” and “self-regulation” are present. In this way, the codes show both large umbrellas, such as “metacognition” and “self-regulation,” along with subcategories, such as “suspension of judgement,” which might overlap with both of the larger categories.

These emergent themes were refined based on patterns noticed in my initial reading, my experience of teaching the courses, and my experience as a certified mindfulness meditation teacher. In this stage I was moving through one of the “second cycle coding methods” identified by Johnny Saldana as “pattern coding” which organizes but also begins to “attribute meaning to that organization” (235). In order to determine whether a passage should be coded with a particular theme, I had to consider the context of the passage and interpret the student’s intended meaning. Being the teacher of most of these courses who interacted with these students in the classroom proved useful in helping me understand more abstract or obscure writing. My perspective was also relevant in that the informal and introspective nature of the writing might not be as readily understood by someone who has not engaged in the practice and teaching of mindfulness for many years. As noted in the Research Design section, my background and role motivated the “practitioner as researcher” (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo) approach to the project.

Results and Discussion

The coding process revealed a number of consistent, emergent themes in the data set. Themes are mostly self-explanatory, though the two common components of metacognition, “metacognitive awareness” and “self-regulation,” were decoupled in the coding process because they did not always emerge simultaneously.

Table 1 summarizes the appearances of themes from the most frequent to the least frequent.

Table 1

Emergent themes found in student journal entries and self-reflections

Emergent Themes	Number of Appearances
Metacognitive awareness	602
Self-regulation	389
Body awareness	347
Stress reduction	316
Personal Insight	221
Awareness of environment	194
Noticeable increase in mindfulness	176
Difficulty with practice	175
Distracted by thoughts of future tasks	165
Applied outside meditation context	114
Increased focus	108
Suspension of judgement	66
Judging self or practice	65
Tolerance of discomfort	49
Improved work habits	45
Goal setting	37
Focusing on past	33
Connection to coursework	31
Awareness of technology	13

Metacognition and Learning

As Table 1 shows, the two most frequently occurring themes to emerge from the 111,906 words of student text analyzed are “metacognitive awareness” and “self-regulation,” the two central aspects of metacognition. This frequency is significant in that it points to the fundamental quality of metacognition, a skill closely associated with mindfulness (Jankowski and Holas), transfer (Nowacek; Gorzelsky, Driscoll, Paszek, Jones, and Hayes), and the habits of mind identified as key to effective writing (“Framework”). Also, it is worth noting that many passages coded for metacognition were also coded for other themes in the data set, reinforcing the fundamental and generative quality of metacognition. Metacognition, which takes many forms in this data set for both learning and stress reduction, does appear to be “domain general,” as Shraw’s research indi-

cates (113). Here is an example of a passage coded for “metacognitive awareness” and “distracted by thoughts of future tasks.”

I found myself thinking a lot- making a list of final assignments I need to do, planning my day, thinking about finals, thinking about how I have to call my parents. It was like complete chaos. One thought led to another thought which led into another thought.

In the following passage, the student has recognized a mind pattern and how this recurring thought pattern affects daily life, a realization that shows ways the assignment might fit well into contemplative pedagogy’s goal of creating first-person, experiential learning that moves students toward personal insight (Barbezat and Bush).

...it led me to think about how often I plan what I’m going to say in my life. I do it before many, many conversations. I order my thoughts before I say them, and spend much of my life acting out a script I’ve composed for myself.

In an excerpt from a late-semester entry, a student is able to notice a change in thinking after engaging with the MJA, showing the way that mindfulness can help students transcend “self-limiting mindsets,” as described by Langer (“Mindful Learning”; “Mindfulness”).

I considered how I thought at the beginning of this year and discovered that it is much different than my current thinking process. I used to be prone to stress and to micro-analyzing situations that didn’t deserve that type of analysis. Now, I am able to take a step back from stressful situations and look at them in a grand context. Assignments that I am worried about...I can now put on the shelf of priorities in my mind.

In this passage, we can see the interplay between real-time awareness of thinking and a reflective awareness that looks back at prior mental activity. The MJA, unlike traditional journaling or reflective essays, seems to enhance both immediate, real-time awareness and distant, reflective awareness, and to put those two shades of metacognition in conversation. As Peary notes, one of the most powerful benefits of a mindfulness-based writing pedagogy is that it grants more access to real-time rhetorical awareness. As Miller and Kinane separately note, this real-time awareness, as opposed to the more common past-tense reflection, is one of the distinguishing features of contemplative writing pedagogy.

The fact that metacognition features so prominently in the text from the MJA could be support for the complementary nature of mindfulness and writing in enhancing student learning. In using an assignment that includes both mindfulness and reflective writing, we are reinforcing the development of metacognition, establishing the ground for development and learning.

The frequent appearance of the “self-regulation” theme is also significant, considering the research on its influence on learning and academic achievement (Nilson; Zimmerman and Bandura). Once students are aware of habits of mind, learning processes, and hindrances, they can take steps to change or improve. This benefit of mindfulness has wide potential application in disciplines that rely on problem-solving skills, a link shown in studies by Kudesia, Baer, and Elfenbein, and Langer and Moldoveanu. The

following student journal excerpts show the reported effects of the practices on academic self-regulation.

When I am in conversation with others, or am sitting in class and realize I am no longer focused on the professor's lecture, I take a moment. Deep breath in, deep breath out, deep breath in again, releasing the thoughts, I bring myself back to focus. ...this new ability is spilling over into other parts of my life...when I am trying to study, I realize when I am just reading over material and not actually learning.

The following passage shows overlapping themes of “self-regulation,” “improved work habits,” and “suspension of judgement” as they specifically apply to writing. The suspension of judgement shown here is an example of the productive detachment noted by Peary and evidence that mindfulness-based writing assignments may help cultivate the habits of “openness” and “flexibility” called for in the 2011 Framework for Postsecondary Success in Writing.

I have noticed since completing the mindfulness training I am open to allowing my thoughts to completely fill a page before moving on to assessing and proofreading my work. This change in my outlook enabled me to more easily read my own writing, as well as the writing of others, without being immediately judgmental.

I think that I've learned to not judge myself as much, which is something that I can apply to tutoring sessions. By not judging myself I can also learn to not judge others. It is important to keep an open mind while tutoring, meaning there can be no judgments going on in my brain.

Importantly, the second excerpt explicitly describes the transfer of non-judgement, a habit cultivated in the MJA, to the separate context of tutoring sessions at the writing center.

In addition to the central role of writing to learn featured in the MJA, the connection between mindfulness and the common learning objective of increased critical thinking, a link noted by Peary (5), might be of particular interest to writing across the curriculum programs. In order to think critically, one must first be aware of one's current thinking on the subject, for, as Schraw and Rayne Sperling Dennison found, there is a significant relationship between awareness and self-regulation. For any university course attempting to get students to move beyond inherited or unexamined notions about the subject matter or the world, the MJA's two-level approach to metacognition, real-time awareness during meditation and long-term reflection in the journals, might be applicable. The following journal excerpt shows the potential growth in critical thinking that might result from the MJA.

When confronted with an idea I initially disagree with, I take a step back and think if it's strong despite my own views. This mentality makes conversations more productive, makes me more tolerant to different ideas, and allows me see what areas I need improvement on without it being the end of the world.

Again, this data excerpt shows the power of contemplative writing pedagogy in that the student's personal insight and increased ability to think critically about their own cognitive patterns has significant applicability toward a learning objective of criti-

cal thinking. In addition to being personally relevant and applicable to course learning objectives, the insight captured in such entries is domain general in that it is not bound up with particular course content, leaving the possibility of transfer to other contexts.

Focus and the Management of Distraction

Another high-ranking theme in the MJA data set was “increased focus.” The common pattern was for students to become aware of the state of being unfocused early in the semester and then, later in the semester, after more meditation and reflection, experience a noticeable increase in their ability to focus, a trend that reinforces Wenger’s argument for the inclusion of attention training in writing courses (“Teaching Attention”).

However, I’ve been noticing that I’m more concentrated in our in class meditations. I find my wandering less and less and I can realize that I’m thinking more quickly. In meditation practice the other day I noticed I improved on being able to focus and stay alert while also being calm and less tense.

In the following passage, we see the overlapping themes of “increased focus,” “self-regulation,” and “improved work habits,” but, most importantly, we see the attention skills developed in the MJA being transferred to the context of another course. The student’s newfound attention literacy is a noticeable change that occurred within a single semester.

I always had to make an excuse to get up because I was mentally agitated in anticipation for the whole three hours. However, I found that by the end of the semester I was able to sit through the entire three hours with only the ten minute class break in the middle. I didn’t fully notice this effect until the end of the semester, but when I did it felt like a revelation.

Again, these are far-reaching skills that could apply in any academic discipline. In addition to prioritizing commitments, students are also faced with the difficulty of managing the pervasive distraction of smartphones and social media (Turkle; Twenge). “Awareness of technology distraction,” often emerging with a form of “self-regulation” reveals another domain-general skill that would benefit both students and faculty in university courses.

Near the beginning of the session, I felt my phone vibrating somewhere on my bed. It took some willpower to resist the urge to check who was calling me but I managed to do it.

One other difficulty that I faced was not using my cellphone... My mind kept jumping to what I might be missing. I was getting the occasional vibrating notification but did not check to see what it was.

My biggest distraction has always been my phone. Although I still reach for it when I’m doing my work, I am able to notice when I’m doing it, and stop myself.

Significantly, the last excerpt above indicates that the student has transferred new habits, the ability to self-regulate technology use and maintain focus, from the context of the MJA to a separate study context.

Personal Insight

The code of “personal insight” was used to capture expressions of insight that resulted from mindfulness and/or reflection components of the MJA. The appearance of this theme resonates with the more traditional name for mindfulness meditation, *vipassana*, or insight meditation. Interestingly, these insights were present even in courses that had no explicit contemplative theme or discussion of realization.

I had never felt so aware of my presence outside of thought. ... I was able to have an outside perspective of the fight without being overly subjective... While focused on my breathing, I realized that I got overly defensive about something and was too prideful to admit it... it made me realize that a majority of fights/arguments I've gotten into in my life are almost entirely because of my pride or how easy it for me to get defensive and accusatory. This revelation will most likely stick with me for the rest of my life and make me reconsider the way I conduct myself in moments of disagreements.

I also learned that I place my worth in academic “success.” I believe that if I do not complete my homework every night, I will fall behind, and then I will receive poor grades. I allow myself no grace or relaxation because I am too determined to finish what I had started. Meditation, though, has taught me that taking a physical and mental break is healthy, rewarding, and ironically increases my productivity throughout the rest of my day.

Again, the passages show the potential of personal insights cultivated in the MJA being transferred to other personal and academic contexts. The personal and academic are not separated as traditional university learning contexts might encourage (Wenger, “Yoga Minds” 44-45), but they are integrated, the goal which contemplative pedagogy seeks to achieve (Barbezat and Bush).

Applications to Contemplative WAC

One of the motivations for designing the MJA and conducting qualitative research on student submissions was to explore the possibility of the MJA as an exportable, customizable WAC assignment that could be used in a variety of disciplines to deepen learning and facilitate transfer. In several ways, the study results indicate that the assignment has this potential. First, the learning-related themes appear across all five courses. Second, both the existing literature and the results of the current study point to a productive overlap among the concepts of mindfulness, writing, metacognition, and transfer. By including both mindfulness training and ongoing reflective writing, the MJA pushes students to think more critically about themselves, the course subject matter, their daily life experience and to integrate these artificially separated spheres. They are able to notice and move beyond unexamined writing and thinking habits. They are able to access ideas and insights outside of their previous range.

The MJA data also shows promise for meeting common learning objectives in university courses, such as critical thinking, process focus, problem-solving, and transfer. The enhanced metacognitive skills and personal insights lead students to think more critically about themselves, the subject matter, and their surroundings. By increasing

awareness of their thinking, environment, and academic habits, students become aware of the thinking, reading, and writing processes they engage in, many of which were previously unexamined. As the data indicates, this increase in awareness is often paired with a newfound ability to make positive changes through self-regulation and to transfer skills to new contexts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study was designed to be a starting point for a more systematic study of contemplative writing pedagogy and its potential for developing important, transferrable skills and habits that meet core learning objectives of university courses. Future research might strengthen claims made here by testing such an assignment in disciplinary courses not related to writing studies to see if the results are similar. In addition, future research might gather data related to course content, such as test answers or essays, to see if an increase of metacognitive skills trained in the MJA show up in other work for the class and if a more course-specific transfer can be discerned.

More broadly, future research should corroborate the qualitative findings with direct measures of relevant outcomes, such as metacognition, through student work, interviews, or surveys. A validated scale such as Schraw and Dennison's Metacognitive Awareness Scale or Kirk Brown and Richard Ryan's Mindful Attention Awareness Scale could be used as a pre- and post- measure to assess the results of the MJA more objectively.

In order to gain a clearer sense of the correlations between the assignment and the qualities or skills evident in the emergent themes, future research could further standardize the components and delivery of the assignment. Because the assignment and its role in the courses was under development when the data was being generated (the courses took place over four years), there was some variation in application, like the amount of meditation time required of students and the number of journal entries collected. Along with this standardization would be the need to have a control group of students in the same courses who did not receive the MJA intervention, enabling a comparison of effects.

Lastly, the MJA itself could have, by design, influenced the content of the journal entries. Although the writing prompts did not provide any specific language that was replicated in the journal entries, some direction had to be given in order to help students understand broadly what they might address in their entries. In the following passage from the instruction, one could argue that themes of metacognitive awareness, personal insight, difficulty with practice, and suspension of judgement could, to some degree, be the result of the prompt and not the mindfulness practice: "You can write about how you felt, what was difficult, what you noticed about the way your mind works, the particular patterns of thought you experienced, emotional content, moods, any insights that arose for you during the session." Though this study examines the assignment as a whole, which includes the practice and writing prompt, it could be useful to look for ways to trace the effects of the component parts in order to understand exactly what led to the results found.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study are promising in that the inclusion of a contemplative writing assignment is associated with positive habits of mind, such as metacognition and openness, that are prerequisites for common university course objectives such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and transfer. The development of these fundamental, domain-general skills makes this type of assignment an appropriate intervention for the emerging Contemplative Writing Across the Curriculum movement.

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