

Building Student Relationships

Introducing Mindfulness

Improving student engagement
and student teacher relationships

PLP601: Professional Learning Project
Assessment 1 Project Process Plan

Master of Education Innovation and Change

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24/06/2018

Contents

Background

The problem

The practise of mindfulness

Changing faculty relationships with themselves and students

The outcome and ongoing development

Workshop components

Trip into Class - Mood before delivery of content

Class Introductions

Action Plan

References

Background

Epidemic levels of stress are crippling higher education students, with staggering numbers of around 70% claiming psychological distress, and one in three contemplating self-harm or suicide (Rickwood et al, 2016). In the creative industries we are seeing up to 40% of students enrolled with learning or behavioural issues (Cutri, 2018). Headspace CEO John Trethowan says undergraduates are often experiencing “life’s big transitions... greater financial responsibility... and more risky behaviours”, putting them at higher risk of mental health issues that are often undetected due to less contact with parents (Trethowan, 2018 p. 1).

Research suggests that 46% of teachers experience high daily stress which impacts health, sleep and quality of life, students show lower level social and academic performance, which costs billions of dollars each year in teacher turnover (“Teacher Stress”, 2016). Sources of high level stress include excessive workloads, workplace conditions and expectations, poor student behaviour, management, targets, adapting new curriculum, efficacy, self esteem and status, public perception and lack of inclusive decision making in educational reforms (Cross, 2018).

Interventions that can help reduce stress for both teachers and students include; organizational cultural change, individual change, mentoring and induction programs, social, emotional learning and wellness programs (McCallum et al, 2017). All of which are costly, take time out of learning and teaching, require specialists and extra curricular programs and, can be used as a replacement for good management not dealing with the root cause of the problem. The Workplace Health Association of Australia has stated that such quick fix practises can be “the antithesis of best practice” (Kane, 2016 p. 3).

The problem

At SAE Qantm Perth, a new campus that has experienced record growth, staffed with professional and productive creative media teachers, we have experienced a reasonably happy workplace. More recently we have seen student numbers outgrow the new space, staff numbers being reduced and work loads increasing, what was a positive working environment has

become negative. New student attrition rates have increased over the last 10 years, a TEQSA study on the characteristics of education providers in relation to attrition states this number is over 25% ("Characteristics of Australian higher education", 2017). Cited in the Improving Retention report by the Department of Education and Training Australia, reasons for the increased attrition include a lack of student engagement and teacher student interaction, lack of student support, and personal factors such as financial, social, emotional, health and life events ("Improving retention", 2017).

SAE management is now on a drive to improve staff morale with a patchwork of staff and student events, professional development allocations and workshops, with a more attentive presence and opinion on academic delivery and outcomes. This, from the outside looks proactive and some events have a positive impact, but ultimately faculty are well aware these are only quick fixes, and the systemic issue is that of cost cutting and increased profit. I have no doubt that we are on the threshold where the focus on profit begins to diminish learning and teaching, resulting in student dissatisfaction, poor outcomes and increased attrition.

The practise of mindfulness

In an effort to improve staff morale and student engagement, I was asked to collate my classroom practice and to further research my methodology that results in almost 100% attendance and pass rates. This lead to me developing the Building Student Relationships Faculty workshop, which I will discuss later.

When I first started the practise of mindfulness in my classroom I wondered how far I could take it, to find where the line between academia and self awareness crossed. Research lead me to the mindful classroom, I was pleased to see a Daniel Barbezat seminar speaking about focus, discernment, witness, judgement, no judgement, the difference between relational and systemic, and, the rubric of mindfulness (Barbezat, 2018). I found the developing epistemology of mindfulness as intriguing as the challenges of embedding the practise into higher education. There have been many studies on mindfulness and mindlessness. Practising mindfulness has shown increased creativity and decreased burnout (Langer, Heffernan & Kiester, 1988). On the

other hand, Langers (1997) *The Power of Mindful Learning* stresses that mindlessness, what I would call blind faith can hamper deep reflection and continued learning (Langer, 1997).

One of the most beautiful introductions to mindfulness I have seen was in the Daniel Barbezat (2016) talk on *Contemplative Pedagogy*. In his opening dialogue recognising the audience diversity and celebrating community he asks the audience to, “select someone silently and wish that person well”, Barbezat (2016) continues, “may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, free from danger, may you have ease and well being...” The audience was silent, through the video you can feel the contemplative awareness enveloping the auditorium, the introspective experience gave way to rapturous applause and genuine laughter that kept the audience engaged for over an hour (Barbezat, 2016).

Intentionality is at the core of mindfulness, creating a holistic learning environment where the whole student is at the centre of the learning, how their experience and thoughts, beliefs and reactions are given the opportunity to inquire, and the support to discern their own meaning in the learning, rather than accept the path already trodden (Barbezat & Mirabai, 2013).

Mindfulness has copped a bad wrap and can be seen as some hippy movement that belongs in an ashram and not in education. It can be difficult to see how words like love, trust and openness, the exploration of interiority, of interrelationships and contemplative practice belong in the rationale world of academia. My journey into self awareness has lead me to meditation retreats in Indian ashrams, I owned a spiritual centre and ran meditation and healing workshops, and I continue to walk the path of mindfulness. This experience allows me to delve deep and share this space, i’m comfortable here. Faculty can find the practise foreign and do ask the question, can this approach really work? Once they experience a workshop or observe my classroom, see my students outcomes and witness our relationship, I believe mindful practise could be implemented.

Changing faculty relationships with themselves and students

Day after day faculty would be discussing the struggle in engaging students, the question most asked was “how do I help students connect with the content?” I empathised with the problem,

but was struggling with the definition of connecting students to content. We called a meeting to discuss and more clearly define the problem. A robust and passionate exchange led to the possibility that students struggled to find relevance in the content, that positive student teacher relationships were not established and students' sense of belonging to the institute was not cultivated. Most of the faculty was receptive to making change, including management felt we had defined a significant problem. The Intrapreneur in me saw an opportunity to change the vision, to improve teaching and learning at an institutional level. I also realised the importance of change management on a local level, ambiguity from some faculty members meant it would take constant clear communication backed by research, and leading by example for this project to demonstrate how it could benefit students and improve staff morale.

Building the faculty workshop required me to collate the activities I had been using over the years to help my students engage, communicate, collaborate and achieve the required outcomes. I began to find that the most successful activities were not activities associated with the content but rather, activities that helped students relate their own experiences to the content. Recounting stories of when a strategy or technique was used successfully or failed and why, reliving a life changing experience that inspired them to study at SAE or relating directly to one another's experiences... This inquiry into the relevance of the learning led to students gaining a deeper connection to the content (Langer, 1997). This is when the penny dropped, the better you know your students, the better they know and trust their teacher, the better we can contextualise learning and teaching.

Adopting mindfulness in the classroom may seem like it could take extra effort, some teachers may say I can barely deliver all of the content in time, and I'm exhausted. But, what I have coined "The Circle of Reciprocal Engagement", is an exchange of energies, building the bonds trust and belief, the antithesis of delivering mind blurring content and exhaustion. I leave my classes feeling exhilarated and energised, appreciative applause and congratulations at the achievements are a common occurrence at the end of my classes.

The aim is to run the faculty workshops at the beginning of every trimester, just like I would my first class. After the first workshop the response from faculty was both overwhelming and extremely touching. Family tragedies to incredible fortunes, recounting the most funny, loving and sometimes intimate experiences, attendees likened it to an introspective therapy session

saying they felt better understood and lighter. The workshops all ran over time, had 100% attendance and now, faculty contribute to a Building Student Relationships Activities spreadsheet. After faculty performed the Introductory activities with their new cohorts, feedback was that a sense of trust and openness was established and that student confidence and engagement had increased. We have monitored increased submission and attendance rates for trimester 1 students, I will present this as part of the monitoring process in the assessment 2 portfolio.

This sums up the relation between mindfulness and learning well, “At the heart of contemplation is the same quality that is at the heart of all great scholarship: profound attentiveness to the phenomena that one is trying to understand (Barbezat & Mirabai, 2013).

The outcome and ongoing development

The workshop was so well received by faculty, management made the decision to give teachers permission and autonomy to introduce classes in new and non traditional ways, a budget was allocated and every teacher had permission to spend up to 2 lessons building student relationships. The workshop was filmed for faculty to review. I will present the take up rate, activities facilitated, faculty surveys and recommendations, and the video in the assessment 2 portfolio.

I developed an Introduction Activities spreadsheet that has many entries of faculties activities, feedback and recommendations. I will collate this information and present to faculty with statistics on attendance, submissions and attrition rates, compared to past years. This will be presented in the assessment 2 portfolio.

Over the coming year I plan to introduce more contemplative practises in learning and teaching, the Dean of SAE has shown interest in this research and has indicated he would like me to present my findings nationally. I will present more contemplative practises, and a reflective document on my process, product and person in the assessment 2 portfolio.

Workshop components

(To be presented in the assessment 2 portfolio)

Trip into Class - Mood before delivery of content

Day one, first class a new cohort, as I enter the lecture theater I trip, roll and pretend to hurt myself. I know, it sounds dramatic and over the top, well it is. The effect is that every student stops whatever they were preoccupied with, and in an instant, in the first moments of their new class they feel something simultaneously. I have made an emotional connection with every student that they will never forget. I brush myself off and then say, "Have I got your attention?". I laugh, the surprised faces of students, some in shock, some laughing at my misfortune, some embarrassed for me, but all of them in the moment, instantly start laughing, intrigued at where this is all going. Not every teacher is willing to be the class clown for a moment, but everyone understands the impact such an act has on making an instant connection with a new cohort, and faculty have begun to experiment with different approaches.

Class Introductions

This should take up all of the first lesson, the facilitator and every student gets to talk about themselves, personal experiences, what and why they are studying, hope to achieve in life, speak of a life changing experience, good, bad, how this has affected them and the learning taken from it. The idea is to empower students to take ownership of their learning and teaching, engender belonging, trust in themselves and the teacher, and successfully completing one of the most nerve racking tasks of any new student, a presentation, all within the first class. This is also an opportunity for the teacher to attentively take notes on the students life, likes, dislikes, hopes and fears, benefiting the student by giving the teacher insight to further individualise and contextualise the delivery of content (Shan, 2011).

Action Plan

Building Student Relationships workshop 18T2

Objectives	Tasks	Success Criteria	Time Frame	Resources
Improve Faculty Student relationships	Develop and run Faculty Building Student Relationships (BSR) workshop. Develop Faculty Feedback surveys Faculty enter class	Faculty Feedback surveys results Faculty implementing of Introduction Activities Number of faculty entering class	18T2 Week 1 - Develop and run Faculty Building Student Relationships (BSR) workshop. 18T2 week 9 - Develop Faculty Feedback surveys	Work allocation to develop and run workshops. Allocation for staff to attend workshops Google Apps.

	introduction activities into sheet. Review and present findings to faculty and management. Review and continue developing and delivering BSR workshops Edit and upload video of workshop for faculty to review	introduction activities into sheet. Attendance and submission rates Faculty monitoring students Faculty entering implementing intentionality and awareness techniques for their own well being. Video is shared and driving further discussion	18T2 - 19T2 Faculty enter class introduction activities into sheet. 18T2 week 15 / 18T3 week 15 Review and present findings to faculty and management. Deliver updated BSR workshop 18T3 week 1 18T2 Workshop video uploaded	Access to faculty for research, feedback and attendance. Commitment from management to see through a 1 year development and monitoring period.
Improve Staff Morale	Faculty entering their own intentionality, wellbeing and mindfulness practices into sheet. Social events Autonomy to develop and deliver Introduction activities Allocation to develop and attend workshops Open and frank discussion regarding challenges and success	Have faculty continued the mindfulness practice entered in survey Social event attendance, having a choice of type events, entered in survey Have faculty had time to develop activities entered into sheet End of trimester review and development meeting feedback Faculty only meeting	18T2-19T2 Faculty entering their own intentionality, wellbeing and mindfulness practices into sheet. 18T2-19T2 Social events 18T2-18T3 Allocation to develop and attend workshops 18T2-19T2 Open and frank discussion	Faculty work allocation to develop and practise mindfulness Allocation for staff to attend workshops and social events Google Apps. Access to resources and budget. Commitment from management to give faculty autonomy to run the activities Management consider a faculty only meeting
Improve Tri 1 students experience and attrition rates	Develop and Implement BSR activities Develop student feedback surveys Implement more social events. Make students aware of student services. Practise inclusivity and care.	Student Feedback surveys results Faculty Monitor student attendance and engagement. Collate and present results. Review Social calendar Meet student services and discuss challenges	18T2 - 19T2 week 1 Develop and Implement BSR activities 18T2 - 19T2 ongoing Monitor student attendance and engagement. 18T2 - 19T2 end of trimester collate and present results.	Faculty work allocation to develop activities. Allocation for staff to attend workshops Google Apps. Access to resources and budget. Commitment from management to give faculty autonomy to run the activities

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