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Course: D625, Topical Seminar: Active Listening

Semester: Summer 2016

Paper: Active Listening in Teaching Mindfulness: From Theory to Practice

Capstone Statement #6

For me, this artifact represents the moment when all the learning from previous program coursework came together in a meaningful way. I am very much a girl who prefers practice over theory. So seeing my personal learning philosophy – humanist tenets with a hefty dose of social constructivism – culminate into practical instructional design was extremely rewarding. I felt I could design courses (mindfulness and otherwise) that could affect and transform people in a positive way. To describe it from a canine perspective: This old dog had read books about the philosophy of barking on command, but being able to belt out some choice howls on cue ... now that was truly turning theory into practice.

The class utilized books by world-renowned adult educator Jane Vella. She had traveled all over the map, working with global entities to solve educational and societal problems. Vella is a huge proponent of social constructivism and believes people should solve problems themselves with the instructor acting solely as facilitator and helper.

Part of the appeal of Vella's work is how she expertly summarizes all the necessary steps to truly put students at the center of the learning process. From her 12 principles of Adult Learning to her detailed outline of dialogue education (including the Learning Needs and Resources Assessment), I feel she gives me everything I need in a well-organized package.

The module I developed was an introduction to mindfulness meditation workshop. It was a one-session module to expose participants to the meaning and actual practice of

meditation. I'm still proud of the design, but I haven't had a chance to facilitate the course in real life. Re-reading the outline makes me want to approach a community college about teaching a life-long learning workshop. I would love to see how the design transfers to practice. Although if I were to design the class today, I would include more time for reflection within the class itself.

This old dog was becoming so confident, she was now ready to teach a Mindful Mutt class.

Artifact #6

Active Listening in Teaching Mindfulness: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

Mindfulness instruction and active listening complement each other in terms of theory and practice. In this paper, the principles of active listening, as well as the work of Vella in designing and implementing dialogue education, are examined in the application of teaching mindfulness. The Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning are examined as applied to mindfulness instruction – these include needs assessment; safety; sound relationships; sequence and reinforcement; praxis; respect for learners as decision makers; ideas, feelings and actions; immediacy; clear roles; teamwork; engagement; and accountability. The principles are then combined with Vella's Seven Design Steps (Who? Why? When? Where? What? What for? And How?) and utilized in a mindfulness meditation workshop.

Mindfulness is an area of study that lends itself easily to the information and techniques learned in this class. The entire premise of active listening is reflected in the most widely utilized definition of mindfulness by Kabat-Zinn, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (McCown, Micozzi, & Reibel, 2010, p. 64). The books and articles we have read clearly mirror these words, whether it was Vella’s (2002) experiences in Africa or Proctor & Gamble’s listening to employees to improve morale and profits (Stengel, Dixon, & Allen, 2003).

Mindfulness is all about listening: to other people, nature and most importantly, to ourselves. Using the techniques and tools offered by Vella augment methods of teaching mindfulness, which are already keenly aware of the importance of active listening in a group setting, with participants’ experiences being the catalyst for discussion. McCown, Micozzi, and Reibel advise that:

the core model for group dialogue ... is based not on speaking, but rather on listening. Again, this emphasizes the stewardship and service attributes of the teacher – and of all participants. From the start, they can be invited to listen mindfully to the one who is speaking, watching the state of reactivity within themselves – particularly urges to comment, contradict, “one-up” the other, or “fix” the other with advice or consolation. They are urged to listen first and speak as much as possible from their own direct experience. The teacher will explain, and participants will come to understand that listening, watching and authentic speaking provides the ideal dialogic environment for exploration (2010, p. 113).

Vella speaks of instructors taking on a new role in dialogue education (2002); mindfulness instruction mirrors this concept: “Rather than lecturing to program participants, the attention and skill of the teacher should be directed towards listening to the rich, information, laden insights, and examples provided by participants” (McCown et al., 2010, p. 115). The mindfulness facilitator is then urged to weave these experiences into the instruction (McCown et al., 2010), just as Vella would do.

But just hearing the other person speak is not enough. Active listening must involve empathy. We need to relate to the other person and truly understand the underlying feelings and biases that have motivated the person to speak. Rogers called this “listening with understanding” (1991, p. 105). He claimed we can do this by paraphrasing what the other person said before making our next point (Rogers, 1991). This ensures we have truly looked at the conversation from the other individual’s point of view. Comer, Drollinger & Warrington transformed theory into practice when they looked at AEL’s (Active Empathetic Listening) impact on the success of salespeople. They found AEL to be “superior to mere active listening in the effective performance of the personal selling process” (Comer et al., 2006, p. 161).

The principles of mindfulness instruction and active listening have been part of my teaching to a point, but at a very elementary level. Of course, I have done my best to actively listen to participants’ questions and comments in a meaningful way, but not until reading about empathetic listening, Vella’s Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning (2002) and the Seven Design Steps (2008) have I discovered a foundation on which to elevate my instruction in a manner that will truly enhance the learning process.

Therefore, I decided the best way to show these principles in action is to explain how the methods and techniques will be incorporated into my practice.

Principle 1: Needs Assessment

The Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA) is probably the most important tool I will take away from the class. As Vella explains:

How can we discover what the group really needs to learn, what they already know, what aspects of the course that we have designed really fit their situations? Listening to learners' wants and needs help shape a program that has immediate usefulness to adults. The dialogue begins long before the course starts (2002, p. 5).

Reading about Vella's (2002) experiences and seeing how the LNRA, or lack thereof occasionally, made an immeasurable difference in the effectiveness of her trainings proved to me how invaluable this step is in ensuring effective and applicable learning. According to Vella, everyone's perception of a given subject is going to be unique, so it is important to find out what those perceptions are and how the instruction can be designed to reflect those ideas and keep the learners engaged (2002). As Vella notes, participants feel valued and appreciated by being part of the LNRA process, so they bring positive thoughts and engagement to the actual training (2002).

But Vella (2008) stresses an LNRA "*informs* a course design – it does not *form* it (p. 20). Students do not have the final say in the content of training, but rather a consultative role (Vella, 2008). The instructor ultimately decides on the curriculum. I have noted this point in the LNRA for the attached mindfulness training session.

My concern is convincing decision-makers that the LNRA is a necessary step. I may have the opportunity to teach mindfulness classes at a new meditation center, but I am predicting the owner may not see the value in taking time to do this in a paid capacity, especially in a start-up operation. Convincing him of the need will probably be difficult, but my hope is that I can assure him of the return on investment.

My future mindfulness LNRA's will ask, most probably in email form, what participants want to take away from a session: a broad understanding of mindfulness and definitions of terms; or particular tools that are useful for stress, anxiety or pain management; or how to start a practice, etc.? I know this information will allow me to tailor programs to meet specific learner needs.

Principle #2: Safety

To me, safety is the most important component of the actual class or module being taught. Through her own experiences, Vella learned that individuals "have shown that they are not only willing but also ready and eager to learn when they feel safe in the learning environment," (2002, p. 9).

To create safety in mindfulness classes, I always begin by telling the group about the personal health issues that led me to explore mindfulness in the first place. By showing my vulnerability, students begin to realize they can share their experiences without judgment from me. I work to establish trust by (1) sharing my years of experience practicing mindfulness and (2) showing them the outline for the day. These actions create trust because, according to Vella, students feel safe when they can recognize the competency of the instructor, as well as the design of the class (2002). From this point forward, I will also add Vella's (2002) technique

of sharing the Achievement Based Objectives (ABOs) and learning tasks up-front so learners can feel confident in the design and know their LNRA input has been incorporated.

I will also be adopting Vella's (2002) technique of using small groups to create safety. In the past, I have utilized at least one dyad discussion per session, but the other conversations have always been in large groups. So I am hoping that, as Vella has discovered, "you can hear the difference in the sound in the room as learners find their voices in the small group" (2002, p. 9). Small groups are part of my mindfulness module below.

One of Vella's (2002) ideas that I have used consistently in my work with elementary school children, but not as much with adult learners, is positive affirmation. While I feel quite comfortable doling lavish praise onto my 3rd and 4th grade students, I have always been a little reticent doing the same with older learners. I am not really why this is, but I will definitely begin using an adult-appropriate technique, to ensure I do not appear condescending or insincere.

Principle 3: Sound Relationships

I feel confident already in my efforts to create sound relationships in my mindfulness workshops. Although I have lectured more than I will be doing in the future, my style has always been one that invites questions and concerns. I don't have the personality to portray an intimidating demeanor, so my style has always been very relaxed and one that has teacher and student at the same level in the learning hierarchy. My overseeing of the small groups should also help me support the building of peer relationships – by encouraging all to speak and involving myself if there are power issues.

Principle #4: Sequence and Reinforcement

Sequence and reinforcement are principles I hadn't thought enough about before this class. My mindfulness sessions have always begun with the simple activity of mindfully eating chocolate, an easy and fun way to experience the subject first-hand. Subsequent activities were in a logical sequence, but I had never ensured they went from easy to more difficult.

In the seminar that follows, I have worked to include sequence and reinforcement: the participants practice mindfulness meditation for three minutes, then five, and then ten. In between, we talk about tips to make the process easier. Allowing participants to practice three times also provides reinforcement and the chance for them to see what works and doesn't work in their attempts. And I will be ready to change or repeat the learning task if students are having difficulties. This fits in well with Vella's theory that making changes based on learner needs "puts the adult learners in the position of decision makers as to what tasks are appropriate" (2002, p. 12).

Principle #5: Praxis

Teaching mindfulness allows ample opportunity for praxis, which Vella describes as "action with reflection" (2002, p. 14). As learners experience forms of mindfulness, whether it be eating, meditation or focusing on sensations in the body, they are all practicing first-hand what I have just described in words. Then we always come together afterwards (from now on, this will be done in small groups) to reflect on and discuss their experiences. Vella terms this "moving practice to praxis," (2002, p. 15). I will definitely continue using this tool, but look more closely at developing meaningful, open-ended questions to elicit the best reflection. And I will include more inductive work, which Vella defines as "anchoring the new content into their context" (2008, p. 62). Inductive work connects the learner to the new subject by tying it to

real life experiences and personal feelings (Vella, 2008). I have included inductive questions in my seminar outline.

Principle #6: Respect for Learners as Decision Makers

Respect is a principle I have always strived to show mindfulness learners – but respecting them as decision makers is not something with which I had felt comfortable before the class. As a new instructor, having the entire program laid out in a very detailed curriculum has made me feel more confident and prepared. Participation and activities are a vital part of my program design, but inviting, perhaps insisting, that students be part of the decision-making process will be new. As Vella (2002) explains eloquently, “the learning is in the doing *and* the deciding,” (emphasis added) (p. 16). The LNRA is clearly a way to invite learners to participate in the design process. But allowing changes in the curriculum as we go, based on their current needs, will show the participants they are in control just as much as I am.

Vella’s ideas are very much in keeping with the pedagogy of teaching mindfulness. An outline that is subject to change by the students is called an “empty curriculum.” McCown et al. claim “the heart of the pedagogy of mindfulness is co-creation. This co-creation highlights the preference for drawing as much as possible of the material to be used in making teaching points to the group out of the group itself,” (2010, p. 115).

Principle #7 Ideas, Feelings, and Actions

Vella writes that learning needs to involve the cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects to be truly effective (2002). I am lucky mindfulness instruction deals with all of these consistently. We deal in ideas (definitions, techniques and theory); feelings, as we talk about stress and how the various mindfulness methods are felt by the learner; and actions, as they

experience mindfulness first-hand in the various activities and practice. My goal after this class will be to ensure the participants are more involved in the learning of the cognitive aspects, rather than my lecturing alone. And I want to delve much more deeply into the affective aspects of learning, beyond general reactions to the activities in which they engage. I want to find out what truly brings them to the classes, what's going on in their lives that can benefit from these practices, and what barriers they see that may potentially keep them from developing a practice once they are on their own. As Vella learned with the Zambian priests and visiting missionaries, it was only when they involved their feelings that true learning took place (2002).

Principle #8: Immediacy

Immediacy is a principle I will be applying in a more cohesive manner after the class. The LRNAs will definitely help me develop a program in which the learners decide what skills they want to learn, which will help ensure their immediate use. My struggle is that so far, the mindfulness sessions I have facilitated have all been introductory classes. So, do I introduce participants to several techniques, with the thought they will then choose one that is right for them? Or do I work with them to learn one technique with sequence and reinforcement, hoping they can apply this skill immediately, with the desire that their mindful appetites will be whet to learn more? I'm thinking the answer is somewhere in the middle. We can learn about the general foundations of mindfulness, but focus on one technique they can take with them to implement immediately. This what I have done in the seminar outline.

Principle #9: Clear Roles

I do not see an issue with defining roles in mindfulness instruction. It becomes clear after just a few minutes that we are there to be guides and facilitators, not “professors”, as Vella (2002) calls traditional lecturers. This will probably be more of an issue if I teach an English class at Ivy Tech. Students will be expecting a professor, not someone who views our roles as equal. But through frequent dialogue and an engaging, non-intimidating demeanor, their paradigms will hopefully be changed.

Principle #10 Teamwork

With the inclusion of learning tasks completed in small groups comes the principle of teamwork. I know from my own experience how important peers can be to the learning process. I have been in training sessions with coworkers where it is difficult for me to stay focused if others in the group do not think the teaching is useful. Just like children, adults are strongly influenced by peers, in both good and bad ways, so it is important for the instructor to support the building of effective and respectful teams. As Vella confirms:

In a team, learning is enhanced by peers. We know that peers hold significant authority with adults, even more authority than the teachers. Peers often have similar experiences. They can challenge one another in ways a teacher cannot. Peers create safety for the learner who is struggling ... (2002, p. 23).

I will work toward ensuring all members have a voice, by asking participants who are quiet if they have an opinion to share, and work with any team members who are using humor or other tactics to distract their peers.

Principle #11: Engagement

Engagement in mindfulness instruction completely depends on whether the person chooses to be in the session or if the training is mandatory for all employees. Intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn which comes from within the individual (Elias & Merriam, 2005), is the key factor. An example from my practicum in the fall proves my point. We held two holiday workshops for government entities. The city's program was voluntary, and we had a group that was very much engaged in the process and thoroughly enjoyed the activities, even writing down notes of ideas they could take with them. The county session, on the other hand, was mandatory. There were some who were open to the concept of mindfulness, while others thought the whole program was hocus-pocus, for lack of a better term. The naysayers did their best to disrupt the session, constantly making jokes and trying to coerce their co-workers to join them.

The techniques learned in this class will make me better able to engage those less interested – by eliciting feelings through small group dialogues and learning tasks. In a mandatory program, there will probably always be those not engaged, but my hope is to lessen those numbers through an emphasis on including the affective aspects of learning.

Principle #12: Accountability

Accountability, to me, is one of the most important principles of adult education. Only when the student transfers learning to his or her own context does it become truly meaningful. So how can we as instructors ensure this happens? The first step is to ensure accountability to the learners (Vella, 2002). This can be accomplished by utilizing an LNRA to confirm learners are guiding what they need and want to learn. These needs can then be reflected in specific ABOs

and learning tasks (Vella, 2008). I will also, as exemplified in my mindfulness seminar outline, follow up with students after the session to see if they have questions or problems.

If facilitating a multi-session program in the future, I will also include accountability checks between workshops. Peer-to-peer accountability will be of utmost importance in the seminar below. The analogy of a work-out buddy is appropriate here – studies show that individuals who partner with another to exercise have a better chance of reaching their fitness goals (Nies, Vollman & Cook, 1998). I believe the same is true for mind workouts.

References

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Mindfulness Meditation for Stress Reduction

Step 1 – Who?

The participants will be employees at Professional Billing, a local business that processes billing for area medical practices. There will be 20 participants. From the office manager, I have learned that most employees are between the ages of 25-55 and 80% of them are women. Management has decided the training will be mandatory for all employees.

Step 2 – Why?

The organization has recently had to lay off two employees as a cost-saving measure. The owner/CEO clearly sees that this has taken a toll on her remaining staff. Employees are anxious about possible additional lay-offs; plus, the downsizing has meant more work for the remaining staff, which is also increasing stress levels. The CEO was introduced to meditation by a friend, and she thinks it can really help her staff. She also hopes it will help her bottom line, as healthcare costs, as well as absenteeism rates, have been increasing since the lay-offs. She is insisting on my teaching mindfulness meditation, as opposed to other forms of mindfulness. Although I realize the issues at this organization are much larger than can be solved with a short session on meditation, I can't pass up a job opportunity for my new mindfulness business, Do You Mind? So my job will be to design a meaningful session that meets the expectations of the CEO, as well as provides practical and useful meditation techniques to employees.

Step 3 – When?

The CEO has insisted on a two-hour session. That is not much time – usually my introduction classes are two hours. Here, the CEO is asking me to introduce mindfulness AND give her employees enough information to start a meditation practice. The session will take place on Tuesday, July 12th: 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Step 4 – Where?

I have convinced the CEO to allow me to conduct the training at an off-site venue. I have chosen a very serene room in the city convention center. The room contains space for several small discussion tables, as well as room for meditation practice.

Step 5 – What?

- Brief introduction to mindfulness
- Benefits of mindfulness
- Definition of mindfulness
- Explanation of mindfulness meditation
- Practice of mindfulness meditation

Step 6 – What for?

By the end of the two-hour session, participants will have:

Mastered a one-sentence summary of mindfulness.

Practiced mindfulness meditation 3 times.

Signed a contract, if they choose, to meditate a certain number of minutes per week.

Step 7 – How?

I will conduct an LNRA by emailing staff to discover: On a scale of 1-10, what is your average stress level? Do you feel more stress since the lay-offs? If so, how are you dealing with it? Are you new to mindfulness and meditation? What would you like to learn? I will explain that the CEO will make the ultimate decision regarding content, but that she and I are very interested in hearing staff's ideas and thoughts. After the LNRA, I will consult with the CEO and make any needed changes.

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

1. Introduction and hands-on activity: mindful eating of chocolate or strawberry.
2. Introduction of myself and sharing of ABOs and learning tasks – PowerPoint.
3. Large group discussion of what keeps us from being mindful all the time. How has the reorganization affected you?
4. Instructor explains the stress response in the body and how mindfulness can help lessen stress reactions – PowerPoint and props.
5. Benefits of mindfulness – PowerPoint.
6. Definition of mindfulness from Jon Kabat-Zinn -- PowerPoint.
 - “Mindfulness is the awareness that arises through paying attention in a particular way – on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”
7. **Learning Task #1:**

Inductive: Divide into small groups of four and re-read Jon Kabat Zinn’s definition of mindfulness (copies on table). Discuss the question: What do you think the hardest part of this definition will be to implement and why? We’ll hear all at 9:40.

Input: Explanation of mindfulness meditation (it’s not completely emptying the mind of thought; it’s simply focusing on the breath and being aware of thoughts that enter your mind and gently letting them go without judgment) – PowerPoint.

Implementation: Practice: 3 minutes of mindfulness meditation.
8. **Learning Task #2:**

Inductive: Divide into pairs. Discuss: What are examples of thoughts that crossed your mind during the meditation? Were you judgmental with yourself because you couldn’t control your thoughts? We’ll hear some at 10:15.

Input: Give information about returning to the breath when minds wander and tricks for letting thoughts go – PowerPoint.

Implementation: Practice: 5 minutes of mindfulness meditation.
9. **Learning Task #3**

Inductive: Divide into small groups and discuss: Did instructor's ideas for letting thoughts go work for you? Think of an image that you'll try in order to let go of thoughts. We'll hear some at 10:40.

Input: Give a mini-lesson on detachment and taking on the role of observer: observing without judgment – PowerPoint.

Implementation: Practice 10 minutes of mindfulness meditation.

10. Discuss the 10-minute practice in a large group. Did it get easier or harder? How else can I help you?

If participants feel comfortable, they will commit to practicing meditation for a certain number of minutes each week by signing a contract. I will match them with an Accountability Buddy – they'll check on each other's ability to stick with the contract and discuss problems, distractions, etc. I'll send emails during the month and also be available for texts or emails to answer questions. I'll be back in a month to talk about how to keep their meditation practices ongoing.