

MINDFULNESS IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM: A TOOL FOR SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

The growing complexity of online education requires instructors to be more knowledgeable, tech-savvy, and student-centered. With these skills, instructors can perform the difficult task of capturing and sustaining student engagement within Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). In addition to the stress of creating a dynamic online class, the COVID-19 pandemic has added another level of difficulty and stress to facilitating healthy online learning environments. This innovative methodology paper will study the insightful adult learning theory of Malcolm Knowles as it relates to Master of Science of Nursing (MSN) students. It will also examine current and emerging online learning management systems (LMS), learning platforms, and methodologies. The population of the study consisted of students from a broad demographic at the MSN core curriculum studies for Nurse Practitioner, Nurse Educator, Nurse Leader, IT, and Healthcare Quality Programs. The aim of this study is to identify the effect instructors have on students' stress levels and students' capacity to succeed in dynamic online learning environments. The impact of instructor pressure and stress on students is considerable, and this stress not only creates toxic learning environments for both students and instructors but is detrimental to student success. I will review mindfulness, and the Christian values of kindness, grace, and mercy in consideration of the online student and their effect on stress in the instructor-student relationship. I will further evaluate my experiences in addressing student stressors by these Christian values and explain how these behaviors can change an educational experience. My hypothesis is that online HEI instructors can decrease classroom stress and increase engagement by employing Christian values to facilitate productive interactions with students, thus improving their learning no matter what the LMS.

Keywords: learning management systems, Christian, stress, mindfulness

INTRODUCTION

One of the best-known learning theorists, Malcolm Knowles, identified that the most important mechanism to facilitate adult learning is creating an environment of respect, mutual trust, openness, and acceptance of differences (McEwen & Wills, 2019). Therefore, if the learning environment is stressful or unsafe, the student will not be successful. The question is how to make classroom environments safe. Otto and Harrington (2016)

highlighted that a curriculum based on the combination of faith and learning should respect God and Christ within knowledge.

The fruits of the spirit (the results of his spirit in us) is love (unselfish concern for others), joy (inner), peace, patience (not the ability to wait but how we act while waiting), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is not law? (Galatians 5:22–23, The Passion

Translation, 2020).

By demonstrating the fruits of the spirit, an instructor can transform any classroom learning environment into one of joy and effectiveness.

Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have not always created “safe” environments for learning, making it difficult for students to transition into college-level education. And once the students get into a postgraduate level class, they may have a sink or swim mindset in their program of study. Ignacchiti et al. (2011) studied the effects of stress on postgraduate students, correlating student stress with alterations in students’ immune responses and determined that psychological stress is linked to adverse health outcomes. Currently, 30% of college students say that their college-related stress has negatively impacted their academics (Ignacchiti et al., 2011).

With many HEIs transitioning from face-to-face classroom to online learning, the learning environment has become even more complex. With online learning, the instructor and students do not see each other and cannot interact one on one. The complexity of online instruction affects the instructor’s daunting task to capture and sustain student engagement within the course. Online learning relies on using a learning management system (LMS), which requires instructors to be more accommodating, knowledgeable, and tech-savvy. They also need to be more understanding as many online HEI students have families, full-time jobs, and commitments along with their classwork. These many responsibilities and obligations can cause overwhelming stress in the postgraduate student. The COVID-19 pandemic added a new level of stress and difficulty for both instructors facilitating healthy online learning environments and students worrying over ill or dying family members.

In this paper I discuss Knowles’s learning theory and how it relates to MSN online students and a new and changing online LMS. I further explore how Knowles’s learning theory affects students’ ability to interact and succeed in the online classroom. Finally, I identify the instructor’s role in addressing student stressors and explain how employing Christian values can change the students’ educational experience.

MALCOLM KNOWLES LEARNING THEORY

The word *pedagogy* has been used since the mid- to late-1500s (Leong, 2017), and its literal meaning is “to teach or guide a child.” *Andragogy* is a newer word that refers to “educating adults” (Leong, 2017). Malcolm Knowles, who is often considered the author of adult learning theories, employed the terms pedagogy and andragogy while identifying and documenting the art and science of how adults and children learn (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Knowles’s research identified six assumptions of adult learning.

Assumption One

Knowles’s first assumption of adult learning is that learners need to know why they need to learn something (McEwen & Wills, 2019). Effective MSN instructors must help the student understand the why of a situation. Students may ask, “why do I need to know how to communicate well with my staff?” The MSN instructor teaches students they need to be good communicators and problem solvers to create safer health care environments with better patient outcomes.

Assumption Two

Knowles’s second assumption of adult learning is the importance of self-concept. Self-concept moves a learner from being dependent toward self-directed learning (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In this phase, the student moves from dependency to increasing self-directedness (beginning to transition from pedagogy to andragogy) as they mature and direct their own learning. Self-directed learning is a process that takes place outside of the classroom. In the MSN arena, these learning activities are completed in isolation, as in research, or in a practicum in the student’s particular area of expertise. In these experiences the student takes accountability for their learning by establishing their own needs and resources, setting their own goals, implementing a plan, and evaluating their outcome.

Assumption Three

Knowles’s third assumption of adult learning is that as learners mature they accumulate experiences, which becomes a rich resource for further learning (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In this phase, the student draws on their accumulated life experiences to aid in their learning. As the student

increases their readiness to learn, their priorities change and shift to a more adult paradigm, i.e., from pedagogy to andragogy. These adult students begin to place an increased value on education and are more ready to learn about their role in society. This assumption is significant for the MSN student, as nursing is the most respected profession in the United States (Gaines, 2022). Nurses are required to uphold a standard of integrity and ethics that many other professions do not. A 2020 poll revealed that 89% of Americans rated nurses' ethical standards and integrity to be "high" or "very high" (Gaines, 2022).

Assumption Four

Knowles's fourth assumption of adult learning is that real-life experiences or problems create a readiness to learn in an adult (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In this phase, the student is ready to learn as they assume a new social or life role. When MSN students build on each subsequent activity to achieve their learning objectives, they advance their knowledge. Students at this phase become more independent in their practicum at the MSN level. They are growing to become self-sufficient and ready to start helping others.

Assumption Five

Knowles's fifth assumption of adult learning is that as learners mature, they move from a place of postponed application of knowledge to one of immediate application (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In this phase the adult learner changes their perspective on learning, moving from procrastination to immediate application and subject interest to problem solving. As MSN students mature, they want to implement their new knowledge right away. Nurses do this well, as seen when they learn new evidence-based practice knowledge and implement it into their practice within a reasonable timeframe. They want to see the better patient outcomes this new knowledge can afford.

Assumption Six

Knowles's final assumption of adult learning is that as learners mature, their motivation to learn moves from external stimuli to internal stimuli (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In this final phase, the student draws on their accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid their learning. The learner is now problem centered, wanting to

apply new knowledge immediately, and motivated by an internal desire rather than external factors. As nurses mature in their profession, they must remain current on evidenced-based practice medical knowledge as part of their practice. They become life-learners.

Knowles's assumptions are still current and appropriate in MSN programs at HEIs. The question is, in today's environment of dynamic technology, will Knowles assumptions continue to have validity? Today's educational settings are not only multitechnical and multigenerational but multicultural as well. This paper will explore how Knowles's learning theories can still be applied.

PREPARATION OF THE ONLINE CURRICULUM

There are many steps in preparing a stimulating, thought-provoking curriculum for online HEI MSN programs. When creating an online curriculum, the instructor must perform prep work and research the most current evidence-based practices within their nursing specialty. Additionally, the syllabi, weekly announcements, and discussion questions must create a thought-provoking, inspiring environment for classroom interactivity. The ideas behind interactivity are often associated with gaming or other software programs that require continuous connectivity or involvement. While MSN online HEI programs do not require constant interactivity, there is a considerable need for interaction between the instructor and the students. Considering Knowles's first assumption, that learners need to know why they need to learn something, one can see that through interactivity, students and instructors can discuss why certain information is essential to their present and future life (McEwen & Wills, 2019). Nonetheless, while an online LMS differs significantly from face-to-face instruction, the expected student outcomes remain the same (McMullen et al., 2020). Online MSN students must interact with their instructor and colleagues and need to know and demonstrate their assimilation and understanding of why the course information and objectives are relevant to their practice.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND LEARNING STYLES

Colleges and universities use several types of LMSs for online teaching, such as Blackboard, Moodle, LoudCloud, and Canvas. These platforms

may differ from one another as applications, but they all have similar characteristics. In addition to the essential functions, these LMS platforms allow the instructor to augment their teaching strategies using YouTube, TED Talks, Loom, Zoom, and other social media or videos to engage students in a more profound learning experience. Knowles's second assumption, the importance of self-concept and moving the learner from being dependent to self-directed learning, stretches a student in the online environment, especially students who are not tech-savvy and cannot self-direct in the technological world (McEwen & Wills, 2019). While these LMS platforms are life changing for many wanting an MSN degree, students may find learning in this manner hard to maneuver and even cold and unemotional. When students are accustomed to in-classroom learning and frequent socialization, it may be especially difficult for them to transition to a solitary, self-directed learning environment. The self-directed learning environment relies on the student's ability to learn from watching a video or reading a text, assimilating the information, and using their critical thinking skills to discuss their findings and substantiate their viewpoints.

Moreover, Brookfield (2009) felt Knowles's second assumption to be culturally blind. Brookfield finds the idea of self-directed learning and the thought of the student establishing a nonthreatening relationship with the instructor as a facilitator of knowledge may overlook race, culture, and personal values as a source of instructor knowledge (Brookfield, 2009). Teaching online in an HEI in the United States can involve students from around the world. Instructors need to respect the cultural diversity of their students and have an open mind to other paradigms or ways of thinking. God loves us all equally, "For God shows not partiality (no arbitrary favoritism); with him, one person is not more important than another" (Romans 2:1, Amplified Bible, 2015). By demonstrating Christian values, the instructor can facilitate an environment where all can learn equally.

Additionally, when one considers Knowles's third assumption, that as learners mature they accumulate experience that becomes a rich resource for further learning (McEwen & Wills, 2019), one must remember that Generation X, Baby Boomers, and students with English as a learned

language may find it challenging to learn on LMS platforms because they may not have the technical learning, experience, or knowledge needed to navigate the LMS. When students cannot understand the assignment instructions and do not know how to navigate their LMS to find the resources required to complete an assignment, they become anxious and do not perform well in the class. Struggling students in these environments can feel disconnected from their classmates and instructor, thus causing them increased worry on top of their already stressful life of work, home, and school.

NEW LEARNING STYLES AND EDUCATIONAL PLATFORMS

With the advent of new technology comes new learning styles and educational platforms. The younger generations (Gen Zs and Millennials) are more interested in the self-directed learning style, which the older generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers) and individuals with English as a learned language cannot as easily assimilate (Freeman et al., 2016). While the older generations and individuals with English as a learned language may struggle with Knowles's second assumption of self-concept concerning technology, it works well with Gen Zs and Millennials (McEwen & Wills, 2019), who are now becoming established in the workforce. Their different learning styles are changing how education is delivered because they are tech-savvy individuals seeking more collaborative and self-directed learning environments. Statistica (2019) found that 43% of Gen Z and 42% of Millennials prefer an entirely self-directed and independent online learning environment. Therefore, hard copy books and journals may become a thing of the past. As identified by Pew Research Center (2019), 90% of American adults utilize the internet for gathering knowledge and information.

COMPARING LMSS TO SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES AND MOOCS

Ramkinssoon et al. (2020) surveyed students using the Moodle LMS. When comparing Moodle to WhatsApp (a messaging app similar to Facebook), students preferred usability applications such as WhatsApp over the Moodle LMS. Students felt that WhatsApp's autonomy gave them the instant ability to share knowledge, data, and group chat with up to as many as 256 people at

once. This prompted Ramkinssoon et. al. to suggest that HEIs transition learning platforms from a cognitivism learning theory to socio-constructivist, connectivism, and heutagogical approaches (2020). This aligns with Knowles's fourth assumption that real-life experiences or problems create a readiness to learn as an adult (McEwen & Wills, 2019). In other words, students want to learn how to solve their problems. With a 'teach me how to solve my issues' mindset, these more self-directed students take on greater technological diversity for knowledge acquisition and education.

Skiba (2012) examined new learning methods and focused on massively open online courses (MOOCs). Skiba was interested in exploring this emerging technology within the larger framework of an HEI. The MOOC model is set up to deliver learning content online to any person and as many people who want to take the class. Two Stanford University professors offered courses through the MOOC model to over 100,000 students. They found MOOC to be a dynamic learning model that offers collaborative and social engagement vital to building new knowledge. Also, MOOCs can be an excellent method of lifelong learning. However, these professors found the MOOC model's weaknesses to be inconsistent within the classroom and significantly high student completion rates. In the end, MOOCs are not for everyone, especially learners who like structure and might favor a standard LMS system that is more consistent.

The best online LMS platforms allow students the freedom to critically analyze their beliefs and assumptions with their colleagues and instructor. Sharoff (2019) maintained that learning should be transformational for students, affording them the space to explore ideas and contemplate hypotheses. With Knowles fifth assumption—as learners mature, they move from a place of postponed application of knowledge to one of immediate application—it is easy to see how a structured LMS platform allows students to explore new ideas with each other (McEwen & Wills, 2019). These LMS platforms give students a safe place to discover who they are, to realize their values, and to learn professional morals while gaining new knowledge that can immediately be used in practice. Therefore, it is understandable that mainstream HEIs will maintain their LMS

platforms for the time being.

CONTAGIOUS STRESS

Understanding the different methods of online learning and their complexities, one wonders about the stress related to online learning and how the instructor might reduce student anxiety and stress. Knowles's final assumption is that as learners mature, their motivation to learn moves from external stimuli to internal stimuli (McEwen & Wills, 2019). Therefore, the student becomes self-directed in identifying what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn it. Their motivations could be they want a better job or lifestyle—whatever they decide, it is of their choosing. This desire can move a student toward a career path that creates a life goal for them. Despite the student's desire and motivation to learn, stress can significantly impact their ability to concentrate, learn, or even complete a course. While postgraduate dropout rates are not available, Hanson (2021) found that 40% of undergraduate college students drop out. Applebury (2013) reported that almost half (46.3%) of all undergraduate students (average age 21) felt overwhelmed regarding their academic responsibilities and said they had extreme stress.

Wethington (2000) claimed that stress is contagious and originates from our daily lifestyle and social interactions. These social interactions may be personal conversations, group conversations, business meetings, or even online learning. The American social structure and its limitations shape our interactions, which are guided by well-established rules, traditions, and mandates that create many opportunities for conflict or stress. Wethington further identifies three types of social aspects of the stress process that are contagious: spillover, crossover, and stress trajectories (2000). Bring this idea of stress (whatever the type) being a contagion into the online HEI environment, one can understand how the instructor sets the class's tone. When the instructor is stressed and emotionally unavailable to the students, their stress will spill over into the classroom. By not being mindful of their actions and not demonstrating Christian values, the online HEI instructor can create a stressed-out, unsafe, and even toxic learning environment.

EFFECT OF MINDFULNESS ON STRESS

It is essential to recognize that in online

HEI learning environments complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors may become as stressed as their students, resulting in toxic learning environments. Schussler (2020) discussed the need for instructors to learn mindfulness. When the instructor is acting mindfully, they become aware of themselves and their environment and act more intentionally. However, the instructor acting mindlessly functions on autopilot. The mindless instructor is oblivious to another's viewpoint and can be unaware of themselves, their environment, and even their online classroom. Some of the more well know mindfulness-based intervention programs are Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), Comprehensive Approach to Learning Mindfulness (CALM), and Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques (SMART). These experiential programs can help reduce instructor stress and burnout. In a qualitative study, Jennings et al., 2013, found that instructors can experience a significantly greater degree of efficacy when developing emotion regulation skills through mindfulness-based interventions, which facilitated more productive interactions with students. Mindful action occurs when an instructor combines awareness of self with their environment. In other words, the mindful instructor consistently acts intentionally and compassionately. When the instructor combines mindfulness with Christian values, the instructor can create a win-win environment for student engagement and learning. What If Learning (<http://www.whatiflearning.com>) explores the idea that learning can be reimaged in a distinctively Christian way. Instructors can reshape their practices to examine their classroom habits and ensure that their classroom patterns and practices are rooted in Christian values.

EFFECT OF A CHRISTIAN TEACHING ENVIRONMENT ON STUDENT STRESS

The Christian teaching environment adds an essential layer to employing Christian values in the online classroom, especially in the COVID-19 environment. In this stressful pandemic environment, it is critical for instructors to interact with students in a kind and generous way, showing grace and mercy when possible. "He has shown you, o man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (King James

Bible, 1769/2020, Micah 6:8). When students confide in the instructor regarding a problem, family issue, illness, or difficulty with an assignment, the instructor must connect with the student and, when needed, help them find clarity and meaning in the lecture. Once the students discover they have instructor support, their confidence builds and they flourish in their schoolwork, striving to know more and do better.

CREATING A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

First impressions matter and instructors only get one chance to make an excellent first impression. The instructor's first interactions with their online students are vital and can set the tone for students to flourish using a collegial and facilitative manner. Knowles recognized that when an instructor responds to the student's needs by providing them with the resources they need for learning, the instructor facilitates the learning process (McEwen & Wills, 2019). Class introductions can be videotaped or written and should invite the student to class while allowing the students, in turn, to introduce themselves. Other essential elements to an online class launch include giving a class overview and reviewing objectives, syllabi, and weekly discussion questions as well as providing a weekly announcement to connect with students.

McMullen et al. (2020) recognized that online instructors had to make many adjustments to the way curriculum was delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic year. Nevertheless, the course outcomes and requirements for student success and graduation stayed the same. This can translate into the need for instructors to nurture their students by teaching for success. Some instructors feel that if the student does not understand the information, the students need to use their own resources to find the information they seek for a deeper understanding. However, when students are stressed, they are often in a fight or flight response and rendered unable to assimilate information. When an instructor can reach out to the student in a kind and composed way, the student can refocus on the task at hand. Otto & Harrington (2016) reviewed the idea of exploring the role of spirituality within the classroom. This element can increase student spiritual growth, leading to more positive academic performance and leadership development outcomes. Further, they discovered that spiritual

development is enhanced when the instructor intentionally integrates it into the classroom.

IMPLEMENTING MINDFULNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

Over the last four and a half years, I have demonstrated increased student interactivity in a Christian university on LoudCloud. The population consisted of students from a broad demographic at the MSN core curriculum studies for Nurse Practitioner, Nurse Educator, Nurse Leader, IT, and Healthcare Quality Programs. When I began teaching at the Christian university, they taught the same way as those in a non-Christian environment by following the rules, not bending to life situations, and having little student interaction. However, after six months of watching students consistently struggle, I initiated a new, mindful, intentional, and Christian values-based class format. This format included providing more purposeful weekly announcements, posting a phone number with a note for students to text if they needed help or an appointment, giving the students resources and templates for their APA papers, and creating a deliberate, interactive, Thankful Thursday (classes start on Thursday) scriptural passage and/or prayer. When the APA format was not correct in the student papers, instead of just marking the errors I gave the students feedback and asked them to edit their papers and turn them back in for up to full points. The students were given credit for the additional work they did on their papers.

Additionally, I intentionally implemented a demonstration of Christian values with each student interaction. When meaning is placed on demonstrating and supporting shalom, the instructor can facilitate the spiritual formation in response to God's intentions. Christian instructors should strive to create an atmosphere that seeks to fully integrate holistic, spiritual development (Otto & Harrington, 2016).

I followed the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) process with each phone or text interaction. Students were thankful for the opportunity to interact with me and to be able to fix their papers, but with this opportunity came learning. I asked them to edit the paper and correct their errors, which instilled muscle memory on correctly writing in APA style. The editing made them more intentional in their writing, but they also became more professional writers. When students saw their

grades and reflected on their work, they became more connected to their work and more involved in the lessons, thus engaging more deeply with the class because they felt they had something to offer. With this more mindful and Christian values way of dealing with the class, individual students and their concerns came great rewards instead of stressors.

Once I switched to a mindful, intentional, and Christian values-based class format, student engagement and participation significantly rose as well as postclass student evaluation scores (see appendix A). The evaluation questions were:

- The instructor was engaged in the classroom in a helpful and meaningful way.
- The instructor provided helpful feedback.
- My instructor effectively related his/her experience in the subject matter area.
- I would recommend this instructor.

The evaluation process used a Likert scale with 1 as *strongly disagreed* to 5 as *strongly agree*. Initially the postclassroom evaluations averaged a 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*). However, after transitioning to a mindful, Christian value, enhanced learning experience, these postclassroom evaluations increased to an average of 4.6–4.8. Additionally, the student remarks became incredibly supportive of this type of methodology. The sample of student comments follow:

“The instructor is very graceful and humble in her dealing with me.”

“The instructor has been supportive and considerate through my entire capstone.”

“The instructor was a steady guide that was willing to provide insight to enhance and improve my project.”

“The instructor is astounding, making time to explain feedback and explain the material. I learned so much from this instructor not only academically, but as a human.”

“I personally recommend this instructor as she is a very approachable person.”

CONCLUSION

Knowles's learning assumptions have proven to withstand time, innovation, and technology. The HEI online learning environment provides

excellent opportunities for Knowles's assumption of adult learning to be assimilated into practice. The adult student is driven and ready to learn, knowing what they want to learn and how to learn it. However, stress and caustic learning environments can hamper the students' best intentions. No matter the LMS or style, the instructor can best support their students in a safe environment by responding to their needs and providing facilitative learning. According to Otto & Harrington (2016), "It is critical to have an educational environment that supports spiritual formation, for we understand college is a time when students are trying to make sense of and respond to the calling of God on their lives" (p. ??).

The student comments and postclass evaluation statistics are gratifying to me. Nevertheless, the importance of this evidence is that it showed consistently that when I provided a more intentionally Christian value, mindful enhanced learning experience, students from all demographics felt more connected and became more engaged and thus performed better in the classroom. Whether online or in a physical classroom, mindfulness in the classroom can make a difference in students' health and college careers. An instructor, especially a Christian instructor, mindfully demonstrating Christian values can touch their students' lives in a lasting way. "For we are God's fellow workers [His servants working together]; you are God's cultivated field [His garden, His vineyard], God's building" (Corinthians 3:9, Amplified Bible. 2015).

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Appendix A

Comparison of postclass student evaluation scores before and after implementing a mindful, intentional, and Christian values-based class format.

