Mindfulness in Honors: An Experiment in Collaborative Learning and Team Teaching

Pascale F. Engelmajer and Massimo A. Rondolino
Carroll University

Abstract: What do students hear when we talk of mindfulness? To reframe unexamined assumptions among students who conceptualize both mindfulness and honors education as "doing more" (more exercises to gain psychological benefits and more work to gain higher GPAs), the authors of this paper piloted a new course in philosophy and religious studies. In this essay, they discuss their collaborative experience designing, co-teaching, and assessing an honors course on mindfulness: its roots in Buddhist thought and practices, its contemporary secular developments, and its potential impact on students' learning and lived experience. Integral to this experiment is also an approach to teaching philosophy and religious studies in the context of a general education curriculum that aims at presenting the disciplines and their focus areas as forms of collaborative experiential learning.

Keywords: mindfulness; collaboration; team teaching; general education curriculum.

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GETTING STARTED

Before reading further about our experience designing and co-teaching a course on mindfulness in honors, we would like you to engage in a short exercise. You may certainly skip the bullet points below and move right to the first paragraph of the main text. Regardless of whether you do this exercise right now or maybe later, we invite you to choose mindfully: be fully present and aware of your actions and of the thinking that underlies

and rationalizes them; feel your breath and your body; carefully consider the words that you read on this page; and, if your mind wanders elsewhere, thank it for doing its job of thinking, and return to the page you are reading.

Now, if you wish to give our short exercise a try, retrieve a piece of paper, a pen, and a timer. Be mindful: do not do this exercise using a device, as it defeats the purpose of being embodied—not to mention the risks of getting swallowed by the virtual whale. If there is another person near you at this time (a colleague or a student) who you think might benefit from reflecting on honors education and mindfulness, ask them to join you for the next ten minutes. Read each bullet point carefully, pacing your breathing, your thinking, and your writing. Follow the prompts without overthinking and read the next sentence or lines only after the timer has rung.

- Set the timer for one minute; write down what is on your mind at this moment, the thoughts, worries, or concerns that you have carried with you as you began reading this article, starting… now.

  Time's up. Let these thoughts go. For example, you can imagine that you put them in your backpack or your desk drawer, and you can pick them up again when you finish this article; for the moment, though, you are putting them aside.

  Take one deep breath and ground yourself in your body.

- Back to writing. Set the timer for three minutes and write down the first three concerns that you have about teaching honors in general and/or mindfulness in particular, in the context of higher education; write down whatever answers this prompt brings to mind, without discrimination or judgment, starting… now.

- If you are doing this exercise alone, you are done—for now. If you are doing it with someone else, choose the one concern out of the three that is for you most pressing (now you can discriminate, judge, and rank); then turn to the person(s) you are doing this exercise with and tell each other about what you wrote; you have three minutes each, starting…now.

- You can now put your paper and timer away at least until the end of the article; thank you for engaging in this exercise.

TEACHING HONORS PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES MINDFULLY

What we just described above is a condensed version of the mindful collaborative practice with which we began every class in the experimental honors topics course that we team taught in spring 2023. Both of us have extensive experience teaching in our institution's cross-cultural and general education curriculum and in its honors program. Engelmajer, a scholar of Buddhism, teaches courses in religious studies. Rondolino, a scholar of comparative religions, teaches courses in the cross-cultural core curriculum and in philosophy. From 2019 to 2023, he was also the director of our institution's Honors Center. Over the years, we found ourselves reflecting on the relevance of our scholarship and expertise to our students' experience and needs and on the impact of our teaching on their overall quality of life. In particular, we both felt a strong desire to reorient our teaching of the humanities as part of an honors general education curriculum in a way that would be most meaningful to our students, right here, right now—as opposed to a more conventionally utilitarian interpretation of education as functional to future success and intellectual, professional, and emotional well-being. Drawing from a growing body of evidence on the positive impact of mindfulness practices in higher education, we set out to pilot a course in philosophy and religious studies that integrates rigorous scholarly approaches with a practical component.

Often, when thinking about honors, students envision additional academically challenging opportunities, experiences, and classes. When they think of mindfulness, they mostly imagine sitting meditations, with a focus on breathing exercises, or engaging in dynamic and physically demanding forms of yoga. Both these attitudes mistakenly enact a "doing more" mentality. We contend instead that "doing more" is often the opposite of being mindful; it conflicts with learning and program outcomes and fails to promote individuals' well-being.

To address these concerns, we included in our course an exploration of both the historical, textual, and social scientific study of mindfulness and the critical study of and engagement with contemporary discourses and practices about well-being and non-judgmental awareness. We also intentionally structured the course as an exercise in collaborative teaching and learning. Each class session opened with a collaborative exercise in mindful thinking, mindful writing, and mindful speaking and ended with a similar

exercise that helped us identify key takeaways from the class, both cognitive and affective. Our overall aim was to bring instructors and students together to work mindfully toward a critical understanding of the historically and culturally contingent discourses about mindfulness and the development of mindful, practical habits.

We must also recognize that this experiment unfolded the way it did because of our idiosyncratic institutional environment. Systemic and philosophical underpinnings necessarily inform and frame what we do, creating or closing pedagogical opportunities, regardless of whether and how we might consider them to be relevant or even necessary to our work as educators and to our students' learning. Our hope is that by including here a critical self-reflection on the particular conditions, obstacles, and opportunities within which we designed and taught this course, we will provide interested colleagues with suggestions for adopting, or adapting, our work and more seamlessly incorporating in their honors communities mindfulness practices and collaborative approaches to teaching and learning.

We work at a small, private, comprehensive university with a liberal arts heritage. The majority of our students pursue professional tracks and take classes in philosophy and religious studies only to fulfill a general education graduation requirement. Our senior leadership, like that at many other similarly sized independent private institutions of higher education, has focused on STEM, health science, and business as the only strategy for survival. This approach is undoubtedly reflective of the dominant current view of higher education as a pipeline into the workforce tasked with developing measurable skills and built on loosely defined notions of quantifiable academic performance. Over time, we have grown acutely aware of the constraints that such a systemic and institutional environment places on students and scholars/educators alike.

Institutionally, we were able to co-teach this class as we did because Rondolino, as the new director of the honors program, established an engaged, mindful community, centered on honors student self-governance and grounded in a collaborative ethos. As part of this transformative process, we now offer honors topics courses that also fulfill general education graduation requirements and that faculty can teach following an open-sandbox model. In this context, we were able to design and run our 2023 pilot course. Due to special status on our campus, honors courses are exempt from the minimum class enrollment quota. This exemption allowed us to teach two concomitant sections and implement a team-teaching model. We created small groups that mixed students from each section. One day a week, we each taught half of

the small groups, rotating them every other week. The other day of the week, we co-taught all students together. We both graded all assignments and, as a panel of two, held final comprehensive oral exams with each student, which also doubled as exit interviews at the end of the semester.

In the classroom, we found ourselves searching for practical solutions to teach honors philosophy and religious studies mindfully, in ways that address our students' present needs, aspirations, and fears. This concern has over time only become more pressing for us as we see students and their families incur large debts to pursue the hope of a fulfilling and financially secure future, thereby driving students to enroll in higher education under the spell of a rhetoric of relevance.

Ultimately, with this experimental course, we strived to make the distinctive theories, methods, and approaches of our disciplines and research areas meaningful to our students' experience. To this end, we challenged students to consider one fundamental, critical meta-issue: what do we mean by mindfulness; who is asking the question; and to what end. At the same time, we also did so by teaching them a range of mindfulness techniques and habits as well as approaches to mental and emotional well-being that they could integrate in their lives outside of the classroom and, ideally, beyond the semester and college.

We divided the content of our course into two parts. For the first six weeks, we examined sources from canonical and para-canonical Buddhist literature. We integrated primary sources in translation with scholarly works on Buddhism and writings by contemporary Buddhists. We read both classical and Mahāyāna Buddhist arguments on mindfulness (Sanskrit/Pāli: *sati*). We complemented class discussions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* with excerpts from critical literature (Gethin, 1998, 2008; Crosby & Skilton, 2008; and Williams, 2008). Our goal was to cultivate with our students an understanding of Buddhist notions of mindfulness grounded in the socio-cultural, historical, and doctrinal contexts in which these texts were produced. Finally, we combined this more conventionally academic approach to the study of mindfulness in a historical perspective with contemporary discussions of the role and function of Buddhist mindfulness as articulated, for example, in the works of Jack Kornfield (1993) and Thupten Jinpa (2019).

In the second part of the course, we engaged with some of the contemporary uses of mindfulness practices in secular settings, such as psychotherapy, neuroscience, and the growing field and business of the science of well-being. We discussed the works of Amishi Jha (2021), Judson

Brewer (2021), Russ Harris (2008), Kristin Neff (2013, 2015), bell hooks (2000), and Oliver Burkeman (2023). We worked with our students to identify parallels and distinctive features among them as well as with the Buddhist arguments for *sati* and its practices (hooks, 2000; Harris, 2008; Neff, 2013, 2015; Brewer, 2021; Jha, 2021; Hood et al., 2021; Yaden et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2022; and Burkeman, 2023).

In parallel, we asked students to read, over the course of the semester, Engelmajer's scholarly yet grounded and highly practical book on mindfulness and to engage in weekly practices and journaling (Engelmajer, 2023). Combined with the regular in-class short mindfulness exercises described above, these assignments created an opportunity for everyone to engage also in an affective, embodied study of mindfulness and its impact.

At the end of the semester, we asked students to complete a short four-question survey that we designed specifically to gauge their perception of how the class and its material influenced their overall attitude toward academics, daily routines, and social life; the practices that they found most helpful; how these impacted them; and what they intended to keep using in their lives from this class, if anything. Overall, the feedback was very positive, with the least enthusiastic response simply acknowledging that the student was already familiar with most of what we covered but nevertheless valued working through it again with the class. Some students expressed an appreciation for learning about the history and the measurable benefits of mindfulness practices, which, as some noted, helped them better understand the significance of their practical application. Others remarked how, though they already knew about mindfulness and some specific practices, the class helped them gain a deeper understanding of what mindfulness actually is in its historical, doctrinal, and psychological contexts; some valued engaging with the practices instead of simply reading about them; and at least one student appreciated being able to engage critically in discussions over the relationship between Western practices of mindfulness and cultural appropriation.

Not all students enjoyed and benefited from all mindfulness practices equally. Some students were open and direct about preferring some exercises over others (e.g., body scan—a meditative practice of mindfully scanning the entire body to help release anxiety, depression, pain, and other distractions—was a class favorite, whilst only some students found regular mindful writing or journaling to be consistently helpful). Although the class as a whole expressed an appreciation for learning the historical-cultural origin of contemporary mindfulness practices, most students nevertheless

found the scholarly content heavy and challenging. Overall, the critical feedback explicitly called for fine-tuning the course content and delivery methods in ways that visibly reflect students' personal preferences. Both of us felt particularly relieved and encouraged by this, as it confirmed a solid course orientation, design, and delivery.

Most students highlighted how the second part of the course was their favorite, with several noting how it had a significant impact on their thinking and on their overall attitude toward their emotions and their social interactions. Notably, most students reported how the class provided tools to work through anxiety and stress and how not to be stressed about being stressed. It also helped them discover new ways to be self-compassionate and improve daily habits; pay attention to the connection between their physical sensations and their emotions; appreciate how to be honest with oneself and become more mindful of one's true values and how to live them more intentionally; and overall become more aware of one's mental health (where one is *really* mentally positioned and what one is *really* doing).

Pedagogically, most students recognized the value and beneficial impact of working collaboratively as a form of mindfulness practice, with a preference for the short opening and closing mindfulness activities. These activities involved exercises similar to those that start and end this article (usually also including a short meditation on breath or a body scan exercise) and a brief structured small group discussion. In their feedback, students noted how these exercises helped them focus on their current thoughts and feelings and become aware of what was on their mind at the start and end of each class. They facilitated interpersonal connections both within and across small groups, opening up to each other even about things that most admitted they would not usually share. Overall, students' feedback on the collaborative structure of the course reflects the positive impact of practicing mindfulness in conversation with others, as it brings everyone to cultivate together, in the present moment, an awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and bodies; of other people; and of their surrounding environment.

Our experience with this course, and that of our students, is consistent with extant research on the benefits of the use of mindfulness as an integral part of an academic program focused both on learning and on quality of life on campus (Owens & Giazzoni, 2010; Simmer-Brown & Grace, 2011; Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Greeson et al., 2014; Srinivasan, 2014; Jennings, 2015; Kelleher, 2017; Bischof et al., 2020; Coleman & Dotter, 2020; Lännström, 2021; and Lampman, 2023). Moreover, we believe that doing so not only is consistent with but would also significantly expand the impact of honors

education as "broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences" (National Collegiate Honors Council).

In the context of an honors liberal arts education, teaching philosophy and religious studies is specifically aimed at bringing about a transformation in our students' approach to learning. Long before mindfulness became a fashionable social and scientific trend—let alone a pedagogical tool that we could, and should, deploy in the classroom—William James (1890) contended that "the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention…is the very root of judgment, character, and will" (p. 424). His view dovetails elegantly with Bertrand Russell's (1912/2001) understanding of critical thinking as foundational not only to philosophical inquiry but to what would eventually be referred to as a liberal education, in which critical inquiry, freedom of thought, and the cultivation of character are the practices with which we can collectively shape the citizenry of tomorrow. For him, philosophical thinking is, ultimately, contemplation. As such, "[it] finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that enlarges the object contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating" (p. 93). As we engage, mindfully, in the discovery of the world and "us" (all that is not "me"), we ultimately also expand the horizon of our ignorance, and with such mindful discovery, we expand our own mind and its critically self-aware reach.

With this in mind, as our ultimate educational goal, we did not find integrating mindfulness and contemplative practices into the classroom disruptive in the slightest, nor excessively onerous to design and plan. On the contrary, as our nods to the views on the matter of giants in the fields of philosophy and religious studies like William James (1890) and Bertrand Russell (1912/2001)" suggest, we contend that this is already part of our training and work as scholars, albeit one that we seldom intentionally and overtly articulate with our students. As Laurie Patton (2011) suggests, we also believe that mindfulness in the classroom does not require more work, nor does it require that we engage in traditional religious or secular rituals. Rather, it forces us to consider "how we frame our classrooms at both their entrance and exit points," eventually bringing our students "to consider what they are doing in a non-instrumentalist way [and] what kind of instrumentalism works well as a form of learning and what kind does not" (Patton, p. 42).

To this end, being able to team teach and to model mindful collaborative work was for us crucial as it allowed us both to draw from our distinct disciplinary training and research expertise and to implement a practice of mindful professional dialogue in the classroom. We believe

that this approach to team teaching can be adapted seamlessly to other institutional realities by running two synchronous sections of the same course, or, whenever feasible, by adopting, for example, teaching-load sharing or peer-accountability agreements. We hope that by sharing our experience developing and piloting this honors course on mindfulness and by being candid about how we leveraged our own institutional structures and practices, we can provide some inspiration and contribute to the conversation with honors faculty, staff, and administrators on ways to incorporate mindfulness and collaborative teaching and learning strategies in the honors classroom.

A MINDFUL CONCLUSION

Now, if you followed our mindfulness practice at the beginning of this article, gather once again your piece of paper, pen, and timer. As we did before, read the prompts without overthinking and follow each instruction before moving on to the next one.

- Set the timer for one minute; write down the most important point that you will take away from this article, starting…now.
- If you are doing this exercise alone, you are done. Take a deep breath and feel how your body inhabits this space.
- If you are doing this exercise with someone else, turn to that person and tell each other about what you wrote; you each have three minutes.

When the second three minute timer is up, stop. Take one deep breath and feel how your body inhabits this space. Again, thank you for engaging in this exercise.

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Authors may be contacted at pengelma@carrollu.edu or mrondoli@carrollu.edu.