

Chapter 12

Positive Psychology: Exploring a Mindful Approach to Online Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The application of mindfulness practice in education has been a growing area of interest in research. Some of the benefits of mindfulness practice in education include increased focus and concentration, decreased stress and anxiety, and improved overall well-being. While mindfulness in education has been studied in preschool, elementary, secondary, and tertiary settings, little research has been done examining the benefits of mindfulness in an online learning environment. As online learning continues to be an emerging trend in higher education, it is important for educators to consider alternative ways to support the holistic needs of online learners. This chapter explores the impact of mindfulness resources on the academic and emotional experience of the online learner.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are developing more online courses and complete online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016). As educators design and teach courses online, it is important to understand the components that contribute to the success or failures of online students. In addition to considering curriculum, instructional techniques, and design, it may be advantageous for educators to gain insight into and consider the holistic needs of the online student such as physical, emotional, and practical support. Due to the somewhat autonomous nature of online learning, students may require a higher level of self-efficacy to be successful and stay motivated and engaged in their learning (Chang et al., 2014; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013).

For educators, it may be advantageous to find new tools and resources to help students develop skills that will support them in an autonomous virtual learning environment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). Practicing mindfulness can be beneficial for students to help increase their self-efficacy, keep

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them motivated, optimistic and present, and increase overall well-being (Bloise et al., 2016; Chang, et al., 2015; Crowley & Munk 2017; Hanley et al., 2015; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Schwind et al., 2017).

Online learners may require an additional set of skills that include a positive mindset, self-motivation, self-efficacy, self-reliance, and self-regulation to persevere and succeed in a virtual environment (Dodson, 2017; Wu, 2016). It is becoming increasingly important to view the online student from a holistic perspective and attend to factors that may contribute to poor learning performance, disengagement, and attrition in the increasing population of online learners (Laing & Laing, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Meyer, 2014). There is support in the literature for mindfulness as a tool to improve students' well-being, increase resilience and academic self-efficacy, increase emotional intelligence, and reduce student stress and anxiety (Chang et al., 2015; Hanley et al., 2015; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Schwind et al., 2017). Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness in a pedagogical context as having a positive impact on cognitive, social, and psychological aspects of learning including improving working memory, attention, academic and social skills, and helping to increase self-regulation and self-esteem while helping to decrease stress, anxiety, and fatigue in students, and helping individuals to become more successful learners (Leland, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Trait or dispositional mindfulness in students has also demonstrated to mediate counterproductive academic behavior such as plagiarism, procrastination, and absenteeism in students (Schwager et al., 2016). The growing body of research suggests that mindfulness practice may have a positive impact on the academic and emotional experience for students.

ONLINE LEARNING

Allen and Seaman (2016) examined the current state of online education in higher education in the United States. They sought to discover how many students are learning online and if perceptions of online learning were comparable to face-to-face instruction. Data was collected through a survey that was designed, administered and analyzed by the Babson Survey Research Group during the fall of 2015. Additional information was obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) database covering results for 2014. The College Board's Annual Survey of Colleges was also utilized for comparison data from prior years. Findings from the study indicated that online enrollments continue to increase even as overall enrollment in higher education declines and the number of students that are taking online courses exclusively is increasing as well as students taking some of their courses online is increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Additionally, institutions offering more online classes reported online learning to be superior to face-to-face instruction. Research also finds that online instruction is as effective or more effective than face to face instruction in relation to course structure, reading materials, complementary materials, communication with instructors, engagement, and learning outcomes as students reported greater satisfaction with online courses than face to face courses and that students prefer courses that have an online component (Dahlstrom & Bichel, 2014; Soffer & Nachmias, 2018).

It is evident that online learning continues to be a growing trend in higher education. Online learning can accommodate a diverse student population, freeing education of the constraints of time and place. The demand for online courses and programs continues to increase as more students pursue post-secondary education (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Limperos et al., 2015). Allen and Seaman concluded that more learners are enrolling in online courses, most institutions acknowledge that online learning is essential to the strategic long-term plan of the institution and learning outcomes for online

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