Mindfulness and the Engaged Online Classroom

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In this chapter we share how mindfulness practices can be leveraged to support various goals including creating an engaged virtual learning environment, and to enhance a student's toolkit for self-care and clients as a future practitioner.

Teaching and Learning Goal

The examples shared here are from a Master's of Social Work graduate course, called Social Work Practice with Individuals with Dementia and their Families. The purpose of this course was to introduce social work students to evidence-based clinical practice with clients affected by dementia and their families. There was a three fold teaching and learning goal that we hoped to accomplish by adopting this approach of starting class with a mindfulness practice.

Symbolic Transition:

Classes were held in the evening and many of our students were coming into the classroom environment after a day at work or internship. We felt a need to help our students transition from work into study/learning/teaching mode. For example, students may be entering the classroom after completing another work assignment, driving in traffic, feeding and putting their children to bed. One of the purposes of this mindfulness activity was to serve as a transitional activity that helped our students (and us, the instructional team) shift our focus into our collective learning environment.

Grounding in Times of Uncertainty:

This course started during the unpredictable times when the COVID-19 pandemic became a global reality. We felt the need to be intentional about grounding our students (and ourselves) to the "here and now" as we entered a time and space for learning. Our intention was to help our students hone their ability to focus in the moment, while also expanding their capacity to learn and regulate their emotions (Tatter, 2019).

Skill Building:

The regular facilitation of mindfulness additionally created a space for students to actively learn by leading a mindfulness activity. This activity accomplished multiple skill building aims. First, we were able to impress upon students the importance of self-care as social workers. Second, built as an active learning activity, it was a ready-to-use tool as students enter this new profession. This psycho-social intervention tool was an easily transferable skill to use with their current and future client groups. Teaching and leading mindfulness meditations is a highly valuable skill to use with many groups, and particularly when working with individuals living with dementia and their care partners.

Activity and Results

We were intentional about using a mix of modalities. Our intent was to showcase a buffet of mindfulness practices and ways to demonstrate them (**Table 1**). The hope was that students could see first-hand the variety of mindfulness techniques available, and how one might utilize them.

Table 1: Descriptions and examples of four modalities that can be used in mindfulness practice.

	Modality	Description	Examples of Mindfulness Practice
1	Video with audio (mp4 files)	• As pre-reading material, we shared videos that capture the basics of mindfulness - what it is, why it is effective - including the research and how it can be used as a self-care activity as well as in our work with clients. • In the classroom, we played videos as part of the symbolic transition and grounding activity.	• Sample mindfulness videos: • Johns Hopkins Rheumatology. Reducing Stress Through Deep Breathing (1 of 3) • Family Caregivers Alliance. Relaxation for Caregivers: 03 Triangle Breathing • Johns Hopkins Rheumatology. Reduce Stress Through Guided Imagery (2 of 3)
2	Modeling (teaching team and students)	• The instructional team modeled various mindfulness practices during the class. We used a timer to help keep track of time and demonstrate that such a practice could be accomplished in less than 2 minutes. • Students were encouraged to practice at home and submit their images/videos. These served as artifacts for modeling this practice for their classmates.	• Grounding exercises (focused on senses) • Breath counting
3	Audio (mp3 files or student mic)	• As an active learning strategy, students used their voices to walk their classmates through a mindfulness practice. • Some students chose not to come on camera while leading this activity, and that option may have encouraged more to participate.	• Guided imagery • Body scan • PMR - Progressive muscle relaxation • Sample mindfulness audio: • UCLA Semel Institute Mindful Awareness Research Center. Body Sound Meditation
4	Audio-visual (Gif file or student mic and webcam)	• We also gave students the option to come on camera to model this exercise.	• Box breathing (breathing exercise)

Results - Symbolic Transition:

Teaching online requires an understanding of online pedagogy. For example, one difference between in-person and online education is the lack of a commute to class, which can function as a mind-body transition into a place of learning. Some students might end their workday in front of the computer at their home office, then seamlessly enter into an online classroom without moving from their chair. Mindfulness activities were a useful tool to help facilitate the mind-body shift from a workspace to a learning space.

Results - Grounding in Times of Uncertainty:

The COVID-19 pandemic created uncertainty regarding the future and threats to our physical, social, and emotional well-being. Mindfulness practice can help students acknowledge and be present with their current mind-body space. It can also reveal how best to proceed by facilitating compassion towards oneself and for others, even in times of uncertainty.

Results - Skill Building:

Mindfulness is "paying attention to your attention" and is the cultivation of intentional moment-to-moment awareness, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). One of the benefits of mindfulness is that it can reduce stress. Social workers (and social work students) can feel stress during challenging situations and thus mindfulness practice used for self-care is a skill that can be used throughout their

professional practice. Furthermore, mindfulness is a useful practice for many populations that social workers work with including individuals living with dementia, and for dementia care-partners to sustain themselves emotionally and physically.

Technical Details and Steps

Step 1: Setting the stage during the first class

In our first class we introduced the idea of mindfulness meditation as both a tool for personal self-care and a valuable skill when working with care-partners of individuals living with dementia. The instructor for the course modeled an example of a 5 minute mindfulness meditation activity (**Image 1**). To spur interest and participation in active learning, students were provided an opportunity to lead one mindfulness meditation for extra credit. Each class began with the same routine: a review of the agenda, a 3-5 minute meditation, and then a transition into the course content.

Step 2: Preparing the student mindfulness meditation leaders

Prior to the live class session, students provided the instructional team with any presentation materials such as a video, or a still image. The media was uploaded to Adobe Connect prior to the class and the student was offered an opportunity to come on camera prior to the start of class for practice and assurance the audio-visual aids worked properly.

Step 3: Live Student Mindfulness Meditation Activity

During the activity, students came on camera and were promoted to Presenter to enable their view of the timer. Timers were located in the Presenter-only area of the layout, and therefore were only viewable by hosts and presenters (**Images 2 & 3**). Students led a variety of mindfulness activities (**Table 1**).

What this looked like in Adobe Connect

Image 1: Adobe Connect classroom layout demonstrating a meditation using an image. In this example, students were able to concentrate on a calming image and listen to the meditation modeled for them by the presenter (one of the authors, Lia Marshall). When students led this activity using this layout, student leaders came on camera and were promoted to the Presenter role. In the Presenter role, presenting students had visual access to a timer in the Presenter-only area of the layout to help manage the timing of the activity. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe. Photo on the slide by Lia W. Marshall, 2020.

Image 1 Alt-Text: In this screengrab, the Adobe Connect layout has a video pod across the top of the screen, with a webcam image of the presenter in the center. The image is of a woman wearing glasses who has dark hair. Her eyes are closed. The attendee pod is below the video pod and is on the left hand side. A share pod is in the center of the screen, and is displaying an example presentation slide. The slide has an image of a lake with still water with morning light and trees in the background, and lily pads in the foreground. The text on the slide says "Mindfulness Meditation" at the top and "Be here now…" below. A chat pod is below the slide. In the Presenter-only area on the right side of the layout is a timer.
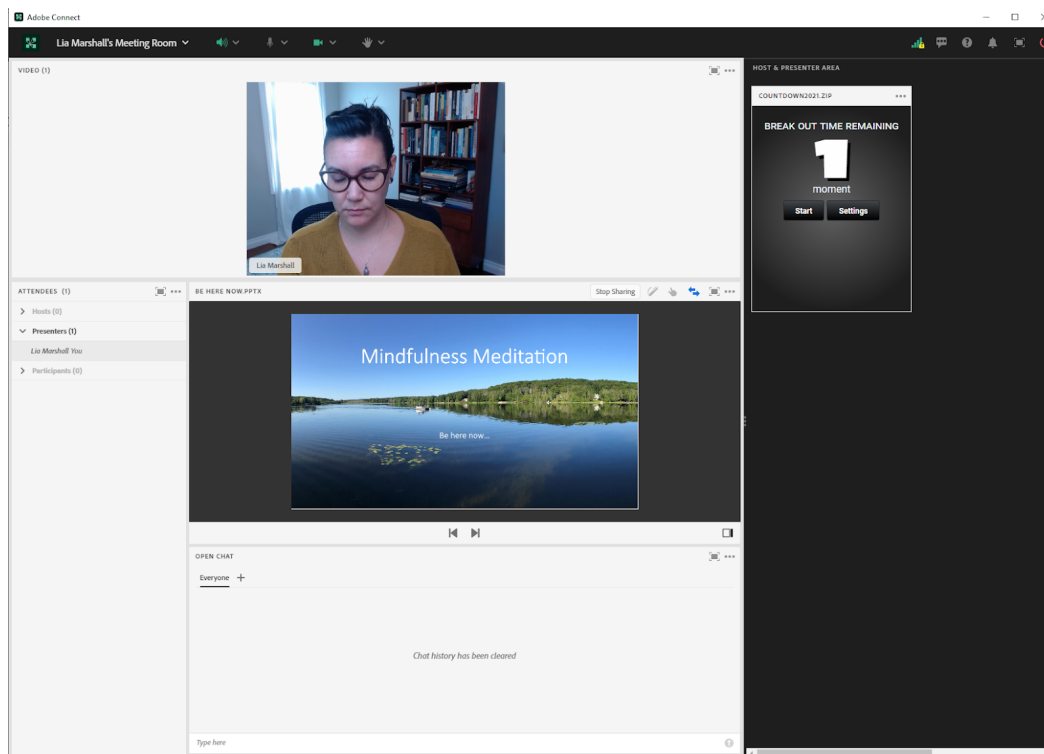
Image 2: Adobe Connect classroom layout demonstrating a meditation using a gif file. The gif file was created by Lia W. Marshall, 2020. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 2 Alt-Text: This screengrab shows a similar classroom layout as in Image 1. The difference is that instead of showing a slide in the center of the screen, there is a gif file illustrating Box Breathing, which includes an animated square that indicates when to breathe and when to hold the breath. The text in the center of the square instructs participants to repeat the box breathing activity for "4 Cycles Through". On the top of the square is an arrow pointing right and the text instructs participants to "Breathe in 4 Seconds", on the right side of the square is an arrow pointing down with the text instructing participants to "HOLD 4 Seconds", on the bottom of the square is an arrow pointing left that instructs participants to "4 Seconds Breathe out ", and finally on the left side of the square the arrow points up and instructs participants to "HOLD 4 Seconds". Following these four arrows that make a box is one cycle through of the breathing exercise.
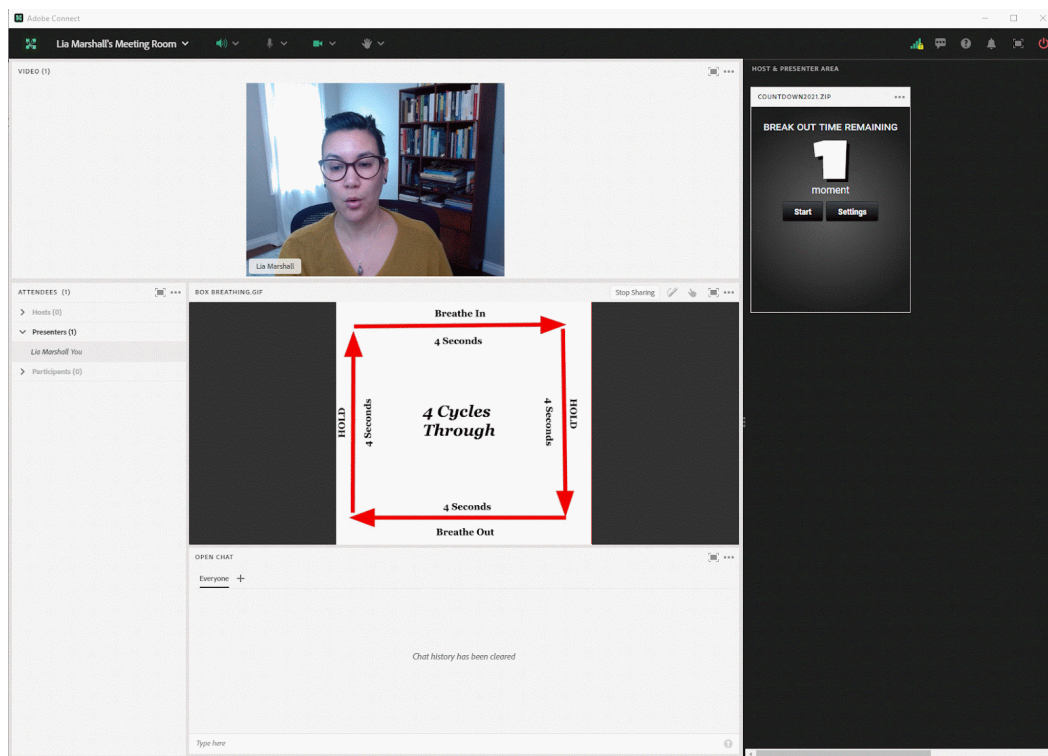
Image 3: Adobe Connect classroom displaying a meditation using audio guidance by the presenter. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 3 Alt-Text: This screengrab shows a similar classroom layout as in Images 1 and 2. The difference is that there is no share pod in the middle of the screen showing a slide or gif. Instead, the chat pod is much larger and includes the space formerly occupied by a slide or gif.
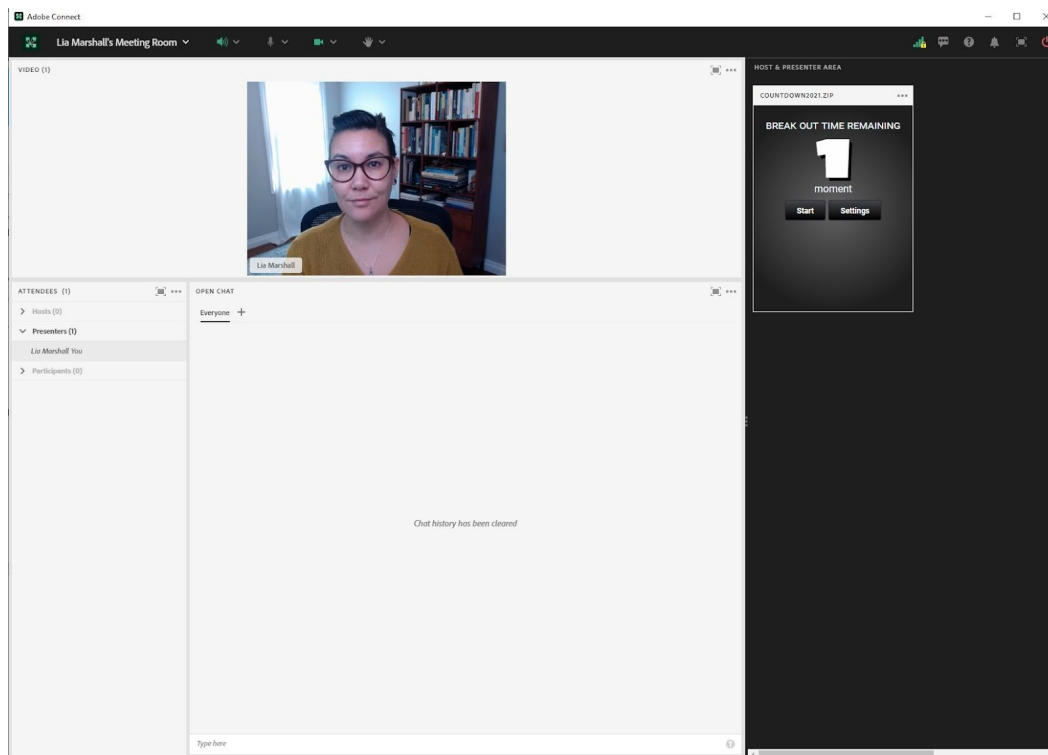
Acknowledgements

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Dr. Aparna Samuel Balasundaram is an award-winning psychotherapist, author and TEDx speaker and is a passionate and results-driven mental health leader. She has 23+ years of global experience across operations, program, and people management, in large corporate and behavioral healthcare settings. She is currently the Global Head for Wellbeing and Resilience for an international organization and is responsible for the design and execution of an evidence based and culturally appropriate well-being and resilience framework, with a special focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, for 35,000+ employees, across APAC, EMEA and the AMERICAS. Her academic and professional interest includes the development of online curriculums and training programs to enhance an engaging and inclusive online learning environment. She has been a Teaching Associate and Guest Lecturer at Columbia University, NY and the University of Pennsylvania, PA. Her educational qualifications include national and international institutes. She is the recipient of New York University's 'Deans Award' for academic excellence, the Press-Ganey Award for Clinical Expertise with Children and Adults, USA and a Special Recognition Award by NAMI, New Jersey (SAMHAJ) for her outstanding contribution to combating stigma and promoting public awareness and understanding about mental health in the South Asian community. Aparna lives in Austin but works remotely across the globe. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA | NYU | TISS (INDIA) | NIMHANS (INDIA) | MCC (INDIA)

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Dr. Marshall is currently the Manager of Course Development and Lecturer at Columbia University's School of Social Work (CSSW) and co-facilitator of CSSW's Institute on Pedagogy and Technology for Online Courses. She has 10 years of public health and medical research administration experience in immunology, oncology and chronic disease prevention and management where she developed an expertise in managing NIH grants, in clinical trial administration, and health policy. Her research interests include older adult well-being, and aging-well-in-place by investigating the interconnections between social isolation, mobility, and the built environment. Her academic interests are in distance learning in higher education and Social Work education as a whole.

Dr Marshall received a PhD in Social Welfare from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a Masters of Social Work from California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) and a Bachelors of Arts in Psychology from the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC). She is passionate about social justice and health equity.