

THE JOURNEY OF MINDFULNESS INTO ACTION

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Abstract: The rationale of Mindfulness into Action starts from the insight that many personal and societal issues occur due to people being unaware of their taken-for-granted assumptions at a subconscious level. Operating on a reactive state has various drawbacks. In this state, decisions made are less effective because they do not address the root cause of the problem. By using Action Inquiry and Collaborative Inquiry with the application of indigenous traditional practices, Mindfulness into Action helps participants to become more present and aware when having discussions about diversity. It takes them through a process of growing self-awareness and inner transformation. As a result, our participants are able to tap into various faculties of their conscious mind that are normally inaccessible when a person is in a purely reactive state. Thus, with greater clarity, people can make better decisions for themselves, their families, and society at large.

Introduction and aims

Yorks (2005) uses Lewin's introduction of the term *action research* as a label for a way of conducting social science that linked the generation of theory to changing a social system through action. Mindfulness into Action Initiative was awarded the Vice President's Grant for Diversity & Community Initiatives Fund at Teachers College. Mindfulness into Action began as an initiative to address diversity issues from a student perspective with the creation of a "space" for communal understanding of diversity work and shared meaning about what constitutes diversity work. This space was created at weekly meetings applying organizational learning techniques, such as Action Inquiry and Collaborative Inquiry with the application of indigenous knowledge practices.

The aims for Mindfulness into Action are:

1. To address with participants their "taken for granted assumptions" around the definition of "diversity" and what it means to each of the individuals and group as a whole; and
2. To provide space for participants that takes them on a journey within to transform their underlying assumptions. Thus, participants are able to transform individually, in order to work as a collective.

Theoretical Background

Regarding, our taken-for-granted assumptions, or our mental models; Peter Senge (1990) questions if we are prisoners of the system or prisoners of our own thinking. In his book "The Fifth Discipline" he describes mental models as deeply engrained assumptions, generalizations

or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. This information can help in appreciating the forces that are shaping reality and how we are part of those forces and therefore, can affect them. In this way, participants can make that connection in order to change their paradigm through identifying their mental models. Through this initiative, our taken-for-granted assumptions were addressed by organizational learning techniques emphasizing the reflective learning process, such as, collaborative inquiry, action inquiry with single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning. Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks (2000) define collaborative inquiry as a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers arrives to answer a question of importance to them. Through single-loop learning, double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996) and the triple-loop learning (Torbert, 1991, 2004), Action Inquiry facilitates a different focus on behavioral and cognitive change at the individual level, an interpretation of the environment that leads to the revision of individual knowledge structures (Walsh, 1995). As we reflect, we better understand our “agentic” behavior (self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating). Bandura (1986) describes “agentic” behavior in his social cognition theory perspective that views people as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating, not just as reactive organisms shaped by environmental forces or driven by inner impulses, which is in opposition to the conception of humans as governed by external forces.

Methodology

This study has two sources of data that were subject to analysis: 1. Pre-, during, and post-assessment interview protocol, and 2. Journal notes. This study is informed by grounded theory approach. We applied Kathy Charmaz’s systematized instrumental and pragmatic approach of grounded theory in order to get at the essence of this particular occurrence, the transformational experience (2006). For this study, we decided to divide our experience chronologically based on our paradigm shifts that were documented through journaling. We looked back to our journals going through the reflection exercises and application of indigenous knowledge practices. We used NVivo in a textual analysis of our notes to identify major theme and key construct analysis, coding and conceptual integration.

Findings

We reflected during Mindfulness into Action by embodying three principles that have long been the hallmark of adult education practice: *learning from experience, cycles of reflection and action, and self directed learning* (Yorks, 2005). As we went through the reflection exercises throughout the week, we were *learning from experience*. Then, during our weekly meetings we interacted personally and virtually to discuss what we were experiencing which promoted *cycles of reflection and action*. Again, we exercised *self-directed learning* as we continuously interacted from a different paradigm and it involved the full engagement of the participants as a co-inquirer of Mindfulness into Action.

Mindfulness into Action was implemented with participants at Teachers College, people from the community around Columbia University, and at a local high school. This section is divided in (a) a personal description of the process from one of the participants, (b) the evaluation of this initiative with its outcomes, and (c) description of the process with high school students.

(a) A personal description of experiences at Mindfulness into Action. Prior to starting work with Mindfulness into Action I was never fully present in what I was doing. I took on the identity as a “New Yorker” and was proud of my ability to juggle numerous responsibilities (job, school, relationship, and hobbies) and multitasking. I would always be responding to emails and checking my phone, going through life in a rushed daze.

The first shift: When doing the reflection exercises I was resistant and anxious. Mariana told me to take a moment every hour to reflect on how I was feeling and how I wanted to feel. Even though I was pursuing the work that I love with people I enjoyed being around, I found that most of the time when I checked in with how I was feeling I was checking in with feelings of anxiety, feeling rushed, and always thinking of the next task that needed to be completed. I was lost in a consistently growing “to do” list in my mind. I didn’t want to feel this way, I wanted to be present, especially for my loved ones and in my classes, and I wanted to feel peaceful. However, I was resistant to checking in with my feelings every hour because I was so used to being in a rush and not being present! I thought that having to stop and feel my emotions would take away from my productivity.

The second shift: After reflecting on the trends of anxiety and not being present. I began to incorporate more time into my schedule dedicated to bringing on feelings of peace and serenity. I started to meditate 15 minutes in the beginning of each day, take yoga classes 3 times a week, and shut my phone off after a certain hour to be present in my relationship. I still checked in with my feelings and began to be able to identify the situations in my life that were causing me anxiety (travel on the subway, transitions from class to work, interactions with my work supervisors) and those that were peaceful (yoga classes, after meditation, time with my fiancé, reading books I enjoy, etc.).

The third shift: I began to be more proactive and predict the feelings I would have in certain situations. I saw, over the prior two weeks, that whenever I would travel on the subway I would feel very tense and rushed. To plan around this, I began listening to calming music on the subway or have a book to read to bring me feelings of peace and happiness during these stressful times. I started to bring more awareness to my breath when I interacted with my supervisors. I had tools in my toolkit to manage situations in my life that I did not have before. The Mindfulness into Action exercises gave me the gift of presence in my life, with those around me, and with myself. Beforehand I thought my ability to multi task and take on various responsibilities would lead to success and happiness. In fact, it was the opposite because those were not the skills I needed. By being more present, I found that other areas of my life started to fall into place. I became a better fiancé, a better classmate, and better colleague.

The fourth shift: I started to notice the techniques of mindfulness and reflection translating subconsciously into other areas of my life. Instead of seeing mindfulness into action as separate mindful activities where I need to consciously remind myself, I noticed myself being a more mindful individual in all areas of my life: relationships, work, school, and how I treat myself. I was able to see the behaviors of others that used to frustrate me lose their impact over me because I knew it was not in my control.

(b) *Evaluation of this initiative.* Mindfulness into Action facilitates in participants the identification of taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes that allows for a neutral ground where varied perspectives can meet to explore and move beyond the initial positions. New positions allow new solution to make new possibilities for the diversity issues at hand.

As a group, we meet weekly for two hours to engage in Collaborative Inquiry. By using Action Inquiry, and Collaborative Inquiry through various cycles of reflection, and the application of Indigenous ancient knowledge practices, Mindfulness into Action helps participants to become more present and aware. Individually, we use Action Inquiry when we do reflection exercises during the week as pre-work. This required participants to actively reflect for 30 seconds every hour for 7 days prior the weekly meetings and to keep a journal, which is essential for building a synchronistic team. Participants were asked to write in their journals after each reflection. After few weeks, we looked at the journals for a shift in our perception. When looking at the changes in perception, we found four themes: awareness, observation, belonging and authenticity/transformation.

	Themes	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Shift 1	Awareness	Resistance to do reflection exercises	Being aware of my time	Need to set limits
Shift 2	Observing	Consciousness	Emotions back to equilibrium	De-attaching with love
Shift 3	Belonging	Synchronicity	Mindfully in Action	Connecting to the group
Shift 4	Authenticity/ Transformational	Sustainability	Cultivated more consciousness	Disentangle from other's anguish

Table 1: Observed shift in perception in participants

At the weekly meeting we are 15-18 people, students at TC and people from the community around Columbia University. But, we have reached over a hundred people in personal conversations and conference presentations about this Initiative. One of the presentations of this Initiative at a high school resulted in the field trip of 15 high school students to Columbia University.

Conferences where participants presented or are going to present this Initiative:

1. December 5 -6, 2013 - Presented at the 2013 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict representing the 22nd Annual HumanDHS Conference and the 10th Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict 'The Urgency of Educating for Dignity' held at Teachers College.

2. March 8th - 12th, 2014– Presented at the “23rd Annual Conference of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies 'Returning Dignity” held at the Chiang Mai, Thailand.
3. May 3rd, 2014 – Presented at the “Diversity in Research and Practice” Conference with the theme: Connecting People to Purpose and Practice for Progress” at TC.
4. October 23-26, 2014 – proposal accepted to present at “the 11th International Transformative Learning Conference” to be held at Teachers College. Our proposal was selected, after a three-person review, from 215 submissions from around the world.
5. November 20-21, 2014 – proposal accepted to present at “the 15th Conference on Social and Community Psychology”, to be held at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway.
6. December 4 -5, 2014 – proposal accepted to present at 2014 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict representing the 24th Annual HumanDHS Conference and the 11th Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict ‘Work that Dignifies the Lives of All People’ at Teachers College.

(c) Description of the process with high school students. One of our participants at Mindfulness into Action has a contact with a high school. We spoke with the principal and we presented Mindfulness into Action to the students. We presented Mindfulness into Action to 76 high school students, and 17 accepted to join us. Students were so excited about this opportunity that they decided to create a “club”. So, we began replicating the Mindfulness into Action meetings at a high school. A bi-weekly meeting was held after school for 60 – 90 minutes with 17 ESL (English Second Language) students ranging from Sophomore to Senior in high school. We provided the time and space by meeting and sharing reflections, emotions, behaviors and observations while the group of students, research assistant and teacher grew together creating a safe, confidential space coined “circle of trust” by the students and a judgment free zone for each individual to express themselves openly. The aim for each student member of the group is to be able to go within and reflect on their current motional, physical and emotional state and to individually transform the dreams and desires into action steps in the present moment and the future vision that they desire to feel.

Field trip: Fifteen high school students came to TC with the supervision of their high school English teacher. This field trip included a visit to Columbia University and lunch at TC. At the lunch, students reflected about the transformation they have experienced with the process - Mindfulness into Action Initiative. This was a very meaningful moment where the students expressed what this process of Mindfulness into Action is for them and what it has done for their lives. Below some of their comments:

“This program has changed my life. As you know, people have perceptions about me; with this process now I know who I am and where I am going academically. I no longer let people define who I am.” (Latino student)

“Before I had anger issues, now with this program I can observe when I am upset and reflect about what triggered my anger. Now, I am a happy person because I can observe when I am moody and stop it right there...” (African American student)

“This school year I did more homework because with this program I was able to see when I was wasting my time, and I went back to do my homework.” (Latina student)

Most of the students mentioned having a place of belonging and having a safe space to share their experiences. The students also mentioned feeling a positive space among their peers that are involved in Mindfulness into Action. Finally, one student mentioned that teenagers normally do not share or talk to strangers but that through this process they feel comfortable to talk to others and even share about themselves having more meaningful conversations.

Conclusion

During Mindfulness into Action some participants experienced resistance to do the reflection exercises. But once they can observe their own resistance, they would do their reflections. We were able to achieve the aims for this initiative:

1. To address with participants their “taken for granted assumptions” around the definition of “diversity” and what it means to each of the individuals and group as a whole. Participants experienced a shift of perception when they were surprised by observing their taken for granted assumptions.

2. To provide a space for participants that takes them on a journey within to transform their underlying assumptions. Thus, participants are able to transform individually, in order to work as a collective. Participants worked collectively making the field trip a successful experience for the high school students.

The outcome in participants of this initiative is Mindfulness. Langer, often describes mindfulness as a state of constant awareness (1992). This state of neutrality is a moment-to-moment consciousness that prevents individuals from engaging in automatic responses (Capel, 2012). Participants were able to observe the behavioral patterns that were unintentionally sabotaging their lives. Once participants were able to observe this behavior, they were able to move into action to correct it. According to Semple and Lee (2008) the individuals’ conscious decision not engage in automatic pilot enables them to better meet the challenges they may face. When an individual operates in a state of mindfulness they are able to identify underlining meanings and relevant information to solve current issues, resulting in an increase in productivity and peace of mind.

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