

A Journey Through the Creation and Delivery of Mindful Leadership:

Application of Mindfulness in Industry; the Power of the Classroom Container and the Emotional Transformation That Occurs Within It

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Received May 2023

Accepted for publication September 2023

Published November 2023

Abstract

During my four-year academic tenure at Universitas Triatma Mulya Stenden (UNTRIM) - formerly known as Stenden University, Bali - I designed and taught the program Mindful Leadership: Application of Mindfulness in Industry to 3rd and 4th year business and hospitality students enrolled in the Bachelor's of Human Resources Management. This program "minor" (as it is referred to in the Dutch higher education system, due to its 15 study credits and 420 study hours) was my attempt to create an experientially based academic program that integrated foundational practices of mindfulness and emotional intelligence into more contemporary leadership studies. In doing so, it synthesized personal development (contemplative) modalities into three respective units that purposefully overlapped in content: Mindfulness (unit 1), Emotional Intelligence (unit 2), and Leadership (unit 3). From the six-month curriculum conception stage (design journey) leading up to the program's launch in September 2019, right through to its delivery both online (during the COVID learning period) and offline, this program saw both triumph and tribulation; I now reflect upon this, having left my full-time position as coordinator and head lecturer of the Mindful leadership program at UNTRIM.

Keywords: *mindfulness, meditation, social-emotional learning, contemplative practices, holistic approaches, curriculum, mindful leadership, trauma*

My two key takeaways from teaching a higher education personal development program that is deeply immersive in the style that Mindful

Leadership is (i.e. 105 classroom contact hours with lots of practical exercises), are as follows: 1) the power of the "classroom container" cannot be

overlooked and needs to be set with utmost care through the creation of psychological safety by a facilitator/lecturer who has the experience and certification necessary to do so; and secondly, 2) socio-emotional mindfulness-based work learnt within the classroom can be emotionally impactful for students, and thus, can lead to various emotional insights (“epiphanies”) and catharses occurring in those students. In my experience, when such insights and catharses do occur it is imperative that it be handled skillfully by the facilitator, otherwise it may be de-stabilizing for a student’s mental health.

These two assessments have been made from my own subjective standpoint after three and half years of coordinating and teaching the Mindful Leadership minor (teaching four separate cohorts per year) and witnessing recurring patterns in how the Mindful Leadership curriculum and pedagogy impacted students who underwent the program. Despite the aforementioned challenges, I was also constantly amazed by the positive outcomes and feedback the students provided throughout the program. By late 2020, Mindful Leadership became the most popular minor for any NHL-Stenden (Dutch headquarters) satellite campus to implement; it garnered radically successful results and consistent high-level student satisfaction ratings – this was captured in the module evaluations and qualitative feedback my team and I collected. Not only did it make me feel like the students genuinely appreciated the work that we were doing with Mindful Leadership, but it also provided us with evidence that the students’ learnings were indeed benefiting them. However, it left me with somewhat of an ethical dilemma: at what cost? For although the work done in the classroom appeared to be beneficial, the activities could lead certain students into emotional distress: old patterns of challenging

emotions and traumas could re-surface from the inner emotional work that was being done. Often times, this made me question both my skill as a facilitator, and also, whether it was safe and appropriate to create a container where, as I refer to it earlier, emotional catharsis could occur (e.g. in the form of crying, breaking down, or visibly expressing emotions being felt in a visceral way, sometimes even leaving the classroom space). This is atypical of the kind of learning that goes on within a university classroom or lecture hall. But does that mean it is inappropriate? How does a facilitator of this work draw the line between what is appropriate and what is not? Further, is it safe to teach this level of emotionally impactful work within such a setting? I will attempt to answer these questions, however, I continue to contemplate them even still, and am currently doing further research on the matter.

During my graduate student years studying Contemplative Inquiry (part of the Curriculum Design & Instruction Master’s of Education) at Simon Fraser University, we discussed and studied closely the power of the “classroom container” – a vessel and space that forms in the classroom (McGregor, 2004a). This can be defined by a combination of tangible elements (the four classroom walls, furniture style, set-up and placement, colors and lighting, etcetera) and more intangible elements, like the classroom rules or guidelines, learning outcomes, and the interpersonal relationships between students and teacher that are both implicitly and explicitly stated (McGregor, 2004b). The “classroom container” continued to be an important point of consideration in my early academic teachings of emotional intelligence university courses (at Taylor’s University from 2016-2018), but it was not until I started teaching Mindful Leadership at UNTRIM that I really began to realize the true

impact of it and how much it can affect the success, outcome, and “psychological safety” of a personal development program, such as mine. Organizational behavioral scientist Amy Edmondson defines team psychological safety as “...a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmondson, 1999, p 1). Although much of her studies are referring to working teams in corporate environments, I believe it is no different in classroom learning behavior as the classroom container also represents a type of interpersonal team dynamic. Furthermore, Edmondson’s studies denote a positive correlation between increased team psychological safety and active learning behavior. Her studies demonstrate that any sort of learning is most optimized when psychological safety is present (Edmondson, 1999). In the early days of teaching Mindful Leadership (pre-COVID from September 2019 - March 2020), I did not spend as much time “setting-up” a psychologically safe space as I now know was necessary; although there are indeed many practical elements to Mindful Leadership with a plethora of class activities, the foundation of the program is theoretically based, as it is, after all, an academic program. For this reason, I did not think the experiential learning would impact the students in the same way that, for example, doing deep meditation practice or inner emotional work in an immersive retreat would affect its participants. Having spent over a decade participating in mindfulness meditation retreats, as well as many intensive emotional intelligence trainings, I knew the patterns of emotional undoing that can occur when this kind of deeper inner work is done. Very often, it can indeed lead to all kinds of emotional catharses, and many facilitators and retreat leaders taught me that by design they are meant to do this.

Aware of this, I spent much time in the design stages of the curriculum considering what was an appropriate level of “depth” for my students to traverse to, both intellectually and emotionally. Such traversing would be done through the teaching of contemplative modalities such as: meditation & yoga; self-reflection & journaling; E.I exercises & games; Authentic Relating [ART] communication; team building & team bonding. I reasoned that with it being a university classroom it probably would be best to keep the experiential content of this program at an “elementary” or entry-level. Partly because these students were (mostly) all beginners to mindfulness-based emotional intelligence material, in particular, meditation; but also knowing the effects of this kind of work, I felt that taking the students beyond an entry-level stage of each modality might be too confronting either emotionally or existentially.

Once the curriculum was designed and I was teaching it, I soon learnt that this kind of reasoning was my naivety and perhaps futile attempt to try and control the socio-emotional learning journey that transpires once the classroom container is “set-up”. Moreover, what I soon observed was that the mindfulness-based emotional intelligence exercises at any level, entry-level or not, are powerful when the students commit themselves and when the container is set safely and securely. Because of this, even teaching mindfulness-based emotional intelligence practices at the most elementary stages can lead to deep insights in students that result in what I would call emotional “epiphanies”. Such epiphanies for the students could be either inspiring or confronting (or both) and were often the catalyst towards the kinds of emotional catharses that I am referring to. That being said, students often reported that the epiphanies and subsequent catharses (or vice versa) that resulted

from such class activities and learning, would lead them into gaining new insights. Some students even reported back that these experiences proved to be emotionally “transformative” for them. As grandiose as that may sound, in many a module evaluation I read or heard this word being used to describe the result of the inner work being done within the classroom container. However, in order for the classroom to be a safe space for such epiphanies and catharses to occur it was imperative the classroom container be “set-up” with the appropriate boundaries to create a sense of psychological safety in the students.

To understand this, I first needed to remember how building a safe and secure classroom container is not just about creating the appropriate physical space for learning. Although we did indeed put effort into the creation of an experiential and interactive learning space (with moveable desks and white boards, ambient lighting, and comfortable seating i.e. bean bags), from my experience, the psychological safety really came from establishing clear classroom guidelines. These allowed the students to feel safe and welcome to share what was occurring in their learning process, with the rest of the class. This is important in the Mindful Leadership program because the learning is largely inter-subjective and emotionally-based (socio-emotional learning) and therefore there is a certain vulnerability required in the sharing of the insights gained from the emotional development done within the classroom container. What I found in these early teachings of Mindful Leadership, when I did not establish clear class guidelines for a more safe and secure container, was simply that students did not want to share anything personal from their learning process. Very often, we would do class exercises like mindfulness meditation, reflective journaling, or the self-management exercise –

Think, Feel, Act – and at the end of activity the class discussion would mostly be composed of silence. If I invited a student to share their insights, they would often refuse or keep their sharing to the bare minimum (I made sure that I never forced anyone, only encouraged them). Later upon inquiring with various students, they would tell me in confidence that they did not want to share such personal information in-front of their peers for fear of being judged. Many students reported finding basic emotional intelligence exercises as “confronting” because they required revealing a level of personal honesty and vulnerability that they had not revealed before in front of a group of 23 other strangers (a total of 24 students in one cohort).

Based on this student feedback, I assumed that the more secure or “fortified” the classroom container was, the more psychologically safe students would feel; and if the students felt more safe, they would be more willing to disclose the insights and learnings gained from the class activities. A few months into teaching Mindful Leadership, I changed my approach and started to set the classroom container more intentionally with clearer guidelines of how we show up in the classroom. I would set-up the container with conditions called “group norms”. The class and I would agree on the following:

1. Confidentiality - we respect confidentiality about our personal stories
2. Respect - we respect each other, our values, our ideas, and our boundaries
3. Listening - we practice active listening and let others finish speaking
4. Feedback - we ask for permission before giving advice and we give feedback in a mindful way

5. Vulnerability - we express what is hard/scary/uncomfortable to say
6. Help - we ask for help when needed
7. Responsibility - we are committed to taking radical responsibility for our words and actions
8. Non-judgment – to remain respectful and non-judgmental towards each other’s learning processes

At the beginning of each module period, I discussed this list with the class and then allowed them to add in any more group norms they saw as appropriate. We would all come to an agreement to uphold these expectations and hold each other accountable if they were not upheld. This set of agreements were the beginning conditions that formed a container in which to abide by. I also allocated more time in this first week to get to know each other through icebreakers and other exercises that strengthened the burgeoning relationship forming between the students and myself. This added to the foundational psychological safety that the group norms already provided. In doing both these things, I began to receive very different results. My assumption appeared to me to be correct: that in setting-up of the classroom container more intentionally it directly impacted how much the students could and would “open-up.” They seemed to be more comfortable revealing their internal emotional ongoings and insights into their own inner workings, especially in those pivotal first few weeks of the program. Of course, like in any classroom space, as the students got to know each other better throughout the program, it became easier for them to voluntarily disclose their inner observations and emotional learnings; my consistent observation was that if the container was set with trust, safety, and accountability

(which is what I refer to as “fortitude”) in week one, then by about week three or four (out of the total 9 week module period) the majority of the class felt quite comfortable to share in-depth emotional insights with increasing clarity. Many students gave me the feedback that when they shared vulnerably and the class was open and accepting, it felt almost “therapeutic” and allowed them to gain deep insights into their own inner workings and emotional processes. This kind of acceptance between peers would organically strengthen over time and “tighten” the security of the classroom container. A student’s vulnerable sharing of their insights or realizations gained from a class activity could very often lead into a full learning discussion amongst peers. As a facilitator-style lecturer, I felt in these moments that it was my job to not interfere with emergent learning being had within these student-led discussions, but simply to guide it non-intrusively back into the learning objectives for the day without stifling any tangential or informal learnings being had. For me, this was one of the most gratifying and awe-inspiring experiences of running this program. It taught me that when facilitating this kind of socio-emotional-based content, one needs to know when to stand back away from the curriculum’s learning outcomes or lesson agenda, and to simply let the student’s express themselves. These expressions of their own inner observations became the classroom teachings for the day and formed crucial learning points throughout each module. Overall, it demonstrated to me how the greatest wisdoms gained from this program rarely came from the lecturer at the front of the room, but rather, would percolate from the secured learning space of the classroom container itself. Overall, the lecturer’s job in Mindful Leadership, as I saw it, was to facilitate or guide the emergent learnings within that space.

In hindsight, I would surmise that both the emotional epiphanies and emotional catharsis that many students were experiencing during Mindful Leadership, were a necessary part of the learning journey in order to create emotional growth. As mentioned, some students described this emotional growth in the module feedback as “transformative.” But, as stated earlier, at what cost should this come at? For in coordinating the Mindful Leadership program I noticed it could often take an emotional toll both on the students and the facilitators – myself included. Although I had not planned for it, the power of the classroom container often led to us into deeper emotional territories than I had anticipated. Sometimes this could be in the forms of challenging emotional patterns and even traumas arising for the students. I found it both highly challenging and confronting to hold space for students who were having an emotional catharsis linked to past traumas. This was likely because of the fact that even though I was a highly qualified mindfulness trainer, I lacked a certain level of trauma-informed awareness having not received certification or training in this modality. In these moments I felt out of my depth and it was difficult for me to gauge when witnessing an emotional catharsis in a student, whether it was something that could and should be handled within the classroom, or whether this was a more serious matter intended to be handled by an external expert (e.g. psychotherapist). Sometimes the student’s trauma was revealed in class itself, usually post-activity, during a debrief discussion; however, more often than not, it was shared with me in privacy one-on-one after the completion of the class. I therefore felt highly responsible and morally obligated to create conditions within the classroom that would diffuse trauma as opposed to retraumatizing them. Without trauma-informed training, this was a risky and uncomfortable task. I,

of course, would refer them to the right professionals, such as the university counseling team, shortly afterwards. But I found at times the level of emotional distress that resulted via emotional catharsis from class activities to be disconcerting. Returning to the question of classroom appropriateness, Mindful Leadership was never intended to be a group therapy program, and yet in moments like this, it ventured into that. I would also argue that it is not appropriate for the Mindful Leadership facilitator (or any lecturer) to play therapist for students in a university program, and this is, perhaps, where a line should be drawn. To do so in the heat of the moment, however, can prove to be difficult and it requires preliminary team discussions and planning to navigate such matters, prior to the teaching of the program.

In sum, I believe it is safe and even necessary to teach this level of emotionally impactful work that university programs like Mindful Leadership provide, within a classroom setting, so long as the container is set-up with psychological safety and the facilitator is appropriately qualified. Part of this qualification would be for the facilitator to be trauma-informed and most preferably certified in a modality of trauma awareness. Other qualifications would include mindfulness-based certification (e.g. MBSR training) and a background in psychology. All of these contribute to the understanding of how to navigate the emotional inner work being done in the classroom, and knowing where to draw the line of what is appropriate for an academic setting. My own experience in facilitating this kind of socio-emotional learning is that it is powerful work with a high level of responsibility (as is any teaching position for that matter) that requires nuanced and specialized facilitation skills.

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Author Bio

Remington Cooney is a university lecturer, coordinator, and coach and has designed two highly successful curriculums in mindfulness and emotional intelligence: Mindful Leadership (UNTRIM, 2019) and Life Skills For Success & Wellbeing (Taylor's University, 2017). Remington currently runs Mindful Leadership programs in the Asia Pacific Region, training high-level achievers in the corporate world on how to integrate mindfulness into their busy working lives, in order to help maintain their productivity without getting burnout. Remington holds a master's degree in education and also works as an adjunct lecturer for UNTRIM's Mindful Leadership program.