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Developing Mindful Leadership among Learners

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Abstract: Contemplative education offers practical means to facilitate adult development and growth. Its use in an educational leadership course resulted in opportunities for learners to explore and develop their leadership capacity.

Keywords: contemplative education, mindful leadership, mindfulness, adult development

The Value of Contemplative Education

Contemplative education is a growing field of academic study and practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). It merges introspective practices, experiential learning and academics to help learners engage on academic, social, and personal levels. The practices learned in contemplative education are based in many traditions and known by many names: mindfulness, introspection, reflection, meditation. The benefits of these practices include increased concentration and attention; increased mental health and psychological well-being; increased connection, generosity, and loving kindness; deepened understanding of the course material; and increased creativity and insight (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Furthermore, “brain-imaging studies suggest that it (meditation) triggers active processes within the brain and can cause physical changes to the structure of regions important to learning, memory, emotion regulation and cognitive processing” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, 29). Adult educators in a variety of contexts would benefit from experience with the tools of contemplative education. Research into their relevance and effectiveness in adult education contexts is needed.

Developing Mindful Leadership

Mindful leadership practices were added to an online graduate introductory course on educational leadership. The purpose of the course was to expose learners to a broad spectrum of leadership theory and practice to expand their understanding of the complexity of effective leadership and its potential impact (Northouse, 2015). The course also focused on learners developing an understanding of themselves as leaders. To aid learners in this process, a mindful leadership component (Marturano, 2015) was added. Marturano (2015) provided several exercises designed to help leaders incorporate mindfulness into their leadership activities and philosophies. A companion website provided recordings of guided mindfulness practices. Throughout the semester, learners practiced mindfulness exercises and reflected on and shared their experiences in a discussion board.

Methodology

Nine learners (out of 17) agreed to participate in research to examine the impact of incorporating mindfulness practices in the course. Data included discussion board posts, journal entries, analysis papers and video recordings of synchronous meetings and discussions. Learners participating in the research also completed a survey about their experiences with the mindfulness exercises.

Initial Findings

Preliminary analysis indicates that incorporating mindfulness practice in an online leadership course was effective in helping learners develop and explore their identities as leaders. Prior to taking the course, 63% of survey participants reported the role of mindfulness in developing leadership skills was slightly important (25%) or not important at all (38%), based on a 5-point Likert scale. At the end of the course, 75% reported the role of mindfulness in developing leadership skills to be extremely important (50%) or very important (25%). Participants reported a range of intensity in practicing mindfulness from once a week to daily, with 50% reporting they practiced 2-3 times a week. Their level of commitment or intention to practice ranged from 50% reporting very strong to strong intentions and 50% reporting intentions that were weak or neither weak nor strong.

An exercise on developing leadership potential was valuable in helping learners to uncover what was preventing them from reaching their full potential. After describing her reflection, one learner shared this insight, “as a leader, that is my biggest obstacle to overcome – the sense that I need to carry situations around with me until they’re solved, which makes me shy away from leadership responsibility in the first place...I’ve known this tendency to worry for a while, but I don’t think I’ve realized how much of my worry may not even be mine.”

For another learner, this exercise helped her to see beyond her self-imposed leadership limitations: “As an introvert in a very extroverted field, I started to recognize that I have been limiting my potential because I have been hiding under what I feel is appropriate for my personality type...This exercise had me thinking about ways in which I could think "big" about what I want to pursue with my future. Instead of limiting myself with a role that I used to believe was what I would do, it helped me think through ways in which I could open myself up to dreaming about the possibilities of pursuing something that may seem a little bit out of reach.”

Additional findings indicate learner’s experiences with mindfulness lead them toward identifying ways to achieve life-work balance, developed their skills in interacting positively with others, and increased their capacity for compassion. As one learner reported, “mindful leadership is essential to the overall health of the leader. If the leader is connected to themselves, they are able to be present in relationship with others. Mindful leadership equips leaders with the concept of themselves, which in return, allows them to lead in a healthy way.”

Recommendations

Barbezat and Bush (2014) provide guidance on using contemplative practices in education. In addition, it is important for the instructor to clearly articulate the purpose behind the practices. Participating in the practices along with students is highly recommended, as well as participating in sharing/reporting out on the experience, especially struggles. Providing learners with the opportunity to share their experiences with others and learn from each other’s insights and challenges is also a key component of successful contemplative educational practice.

References

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