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Mindlessness in the Undergraduate Public Relations Classroom: Concepts, Consequences, and Recommendations for Change

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Mindlessness in the Undergraduate Public Relations Classroom:
Concepts, Consequences, and Recommendations for Change

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In recent years, the concept of mindfulness has received increasing attention in popular culture. There is also great interest in applying the mindfulness philosophy in education, to foster a climate of student introspection and improved performance. A mindful approach would seem especially valuable in the undergraduate PR classroom, where faculty members struggle to keep the attention of Millennial generation students who are technologically savvy but easily bored and often unprepared in basic skills. This essay briefly examines mindfulness as presented in popular and scholarly literature. It presents mindfulness as a strategy for engaging Millennials with subtleties of PR that might otherwise be lost in the rush toward degree completion. The essay concludes with seven recommendations for applying mindfulness concepts in the public relations classroom.
Introduction

Every faculty member has had experiences similar to these:

- You look out into your classroom and see a number of students who can’t make eye contact because their attention is focused on an electronic device, hidden in a book or below the desk.

- While teaching a public relations writing course in a computer lab, you walk around the room to review students’ work and come across a student who is busily shopping on a consumer website.

- With your course final exam less than ten days away, your e-mail box begins to fill with queries from students about grading policies contained in the syllabus you circulated 15 weeks ago.

- Members of a student public relations team bring the draft of a campaign proposal to your office. A quick glance shows ‘reference support’ is comprised entirely of claims cut and pasted from the client’s website.

The common thread running through all of these situations is mindlessness. Our undergraduates are studying public relations in order to gain an understanding of professional concepts and develop the ability to put those concepts to work in the marketplace. But it seems, at least anecdotally, that increasing numbers of undergraduates are just going through the motions. They’re approaching learning and practice in a mindless way. Or, put simply, they’re not giving thoughtful consideration to what they’re doing and why they’re doing it.
As public relations educators, our response to the mindlessness exhibited by undergraduates should not necessarily involve more academic rigor, more courses, or more punishments for thoughtless behaviors. Instead, we need to be more proactive to stimulate mindful thinking in the same way that we stimulate thinking about professional concepts and applications.

For this essay, a review was conducted of popular and scholarly literature on mindfulness and mindfulness education. An assessment of this literature allows for the presentation of ideas for more thoughtful teaching approaches we could take in the undergraduate public relations classroom. If we can succeed in making PR students more mindful and reflective about their learning, it is likely they will produce higher quality work – which will ultimately improve students’ preparation for the many complex demands of the workplace.

Concepts

Mindfulness and Mindlessness Defined

If you surrender completely to the moments as they pass, you live more richly those moments – *Anne Morrow Lindbergh*

Mindfulness has been interpreted in a variety of ways. At its most basic, it involves “being awake and aware – being tuned in to yourself, to others, and to the environment” (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012, p. 4). To be mindful means to be thoughtful in the present moment, and to allow that thoughtfulness to guide future actions in a disciplined and beneficial way. Mindfulness means focusing on *the processes* of life and work more so than the outcome (Serafin, 2007). It’s about the trip, not the destination.
Mindfulness is not a religion, though it has its roots in Buddhist meditative practices. The Dalai Lama, Pema Chödrön, Thich Nhat Hanh and other ordained Buddhist teachers have translated its Eastern concepts to foster growth of the practice in Western culture.

Mindfulness is not a health care regimen, though its use has been supported by a number of high-profile medical professionals. Clinical evidence shows mindfulness practice fights obesity, diminishes the propensity for alcohol and drug abuse, and reduces anger, depression, hostility and stress (Axelrad, 2013; Bazarko, Cate, Azocar & Kreitzer, 2013; Caldwell, Baime, & Wolever, 2012; Wupperman, Marlatt, Cunningham, Bowen, Berking, Mulvihill-Rivera & Easton, 2012).

Mindfulness practice has been called “a time-tested antidote to operating in autopilot,” (Levasseur, 2012, para. 11). Mindfulness is the act of being rooted in the present moment, open to new ideas, and liberated from the “tyranny of old mindsets” extensively chronicled by groundbreaking researcher Ellen Langer (1989).

Mindlessness, on the other hand, involves distracted behavior. Individuals who engage life mindlessly are more focused doing than being. In the mindless workplace – and the mindless classroom – connections between otherwise disconnected phenomena are ambiguous. There is excessive reliance on “categories and distinctions created in the past” that separate rather than unite (Langer, 1989, p. 11). A workplace or classroom where mindless behaviors are commonplace is a
place of stress, confusion, and disorder. People who work there take actions that are, in the words of David McRaney’s 2011 book, “not so smart.”

Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Practice

To our detriment, society often encourages mindless behaviors because these behaviors offer the appearance of confidence and assertiveness. Ultimately, though, mindless behaviors are unproductive because they cannot foster creativity, collegiality and respect over the long term.

In today’s business world, perhaps no one more exemplifies mindless forcefulness than businessman/ media celebrity/ political gadfly Donald Trump. Figure 1 compares some of Donald Trump’s celebrated but mindless ideas for business success with less popular but ultimately more appropriate mindful concepts from other sources.
### Figure 1
(Mindless) Business Advice from Donald Trump and
(Mindful) Tips for Coaching and Flexible Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindless</th>
<th>Mindful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be tenacious.</td>
<td>Listen to the needs of your employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is not a group effort. If you're in charge, then be in charge.</td>
<td>Support your people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put your blood, sweat, and tears into your work.</td>
<td>Have fun!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power through everything—even the crap.</td>
<td>Be compassionate to yourself and your clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stick to your guns, and ignore the haters.</td>
<td>Approach coaching (and life in general) with non-judgment; openness; curiosity, and compassion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No matter what stage of your career, you need to look like you've made it.</td>
<td>Attend to the present in workplace interactions (thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, happenings- both on your part and on the part of your client). Be curious about everything that arises, turning towards the ‘difficult’ as well as the ‘easy.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring your ego with you in full bloom. It’s not enough to look successful; you need to act it as well.</td>
<td>Take a systemic approach. Be mindful of the wider systems in which you and your clients operate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never give up!</td>
<td>Don’t be overly attached to outcome, for yourself or your clients.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All verbiage above taken as direct quotes from sources shown below:


Consequences in Higher Education

You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no other life but this. — Henry David Thoreau

Because this essay addresses the subject of mindfulness in the undergraduate public relations classroom, it is concerned primarily with the thoughts and actions of the Millennials (sometimes referred to as Generation Y). This demographic group of about 80 million young adults born between 1978 and 1994 represents the majority of today’s university undergraduate students (Epstein & Howes, 2006). Ten years ago, the Millennial generation was already identified as the largest generational birth cohort in history (Leo, 2003).

Not all scientists accept the categorization of students by generational group (Hoover, 2009). At least one communications industry professional has pushed back against broad negative generalizations about Millennials that are discriminatory and “inaccurate assessments of reality” (Teicher, 2010, para. 16).

Still, it is common for scholarly and popular literature to portray Millennials as mindless – lazy, ignorant, and lacking in communication skills. On the other hand, there is also widespread agreement that this generation of adults excels in particular knowledge and skills that are indeed quite mindful.

Members of the Millennial generation tend to be articulate and creative (Atkinson, 2004). They are technologically savvy, having grown up with computers (Abaffy, 2011). They appreciate the value of mentoring and networking (Hays &
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2011 study of Millennials working in college student media found almost half preferred to learn new skills from a peer rather than from a professor (Swanson, 2011). Millennials seek rapid career advancement and desire a strong career/life balance (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Generally, all of these attitudes and practices would constitute mindful interaction.

At the same time, however, many Millennials are known to engage in behaviors that are disconnected and mindless – often, because of being sheltered by parents all their lives (McAlister, 2009). Hansen (2014) wrote about poorly prepared university students who engage in classroom incivility and “begging for extra credit” (Hansen, 2014, para. 11). Abaffy wrote of Millennials requiring information “cut into bits of what they need to know” and delivered only when they need to know it (Abaffy, 2011, para. 17). Other researchers claim Millennials are prone to challenge authority and are more focused on personal rewards than on sacrifice for the common good (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Sheahan, 2005). Popular media content such as the 2000 feature film Dude, Where’s My Car and the 2009-2011 British TV show Young, Dumb, and Living off Mum give dramatic expression to the concept of mindless behavior among young adults.

Millennials are said to be greatly deficient in basic mathematics, written communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills (Gamire & Pearson, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). While lacking in basic skills, Millennials are so dazzled by social media technology that they often cannot use it efficiently or appropriately (Sosnow, 2011). The incessant use of technology has
contributed to impatience, high expectations, and shortened attention spans (Ford, Jenkins, & Oliver, 2013).

“Generation Y processes information selectively due to the abundance of MTV images and resources at their fingertips. They can’t take it all in so they don’t take it all in, and they bring these behaviors to work,” Kehrli and Sopp wrote (2006, p. 113).

Helicopter parenting, a phenomenon in which an over-controlling parent intervenes in the adult child’s academic and social interactions, exacerbates mindless behaviors. Recent studies cited in Schiffrin, Liss, Miles-McLean, Geary, Erchull, & Tashner (2013) and Hunt (2008) attest that helicopter parenting stunts students’ emotional development, interferes with the transition to responsible adulthood, and even inhibits the transition to the workplace as parents insist on accompanying their child to job interviews and negotiating for salaries.

One university president recently complained that his institution is being “hijacked” by the extreme behaviors of mindless students (Strauss, 2014, para. 1). Throughout higher education, it is common to witness administrators and faculty grumbling about the many problems they attribute to student mindlessness. In 2009, a public relations undergraduate blogged about classrooms filled with students sitting in “zombie state” and asking “irrelevant questions” (Zombie nation, 2009, para. 7).
Recommendations for Change

Unconscious habits and assumptions aren’t destiny, but if we don’t bring them into focus then the force of these habits will continue to chart our course – Aran Levasseur, Educator and Mindfulness Advocate

An entire area of scholarly and professional research has developed around the subject of encouraging more mindful thinking and action in schools. Richard Burnett and Chris Cullen initiated the Mindfulness in Schools Project in 2007, “to encourage, support and research the teaching of secular mindfulness in schools” (The Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2014, para. 2). This effort and others have shown mindfulness has great potential to improve student performance “because of its effectiveness in reducing emotional distress and promoting emotional balance, improving attention, and contributing to motivated learning” (Broderick, 2013, para. 9). Worldwide, thousands of efforts have been undertaken to bring mindfulness concepts into individual classrooms and schools.

Mindfulness is not a concept that is absolute, as in either you have it or you don’t. A student can be mindful one minute and mindless the next. Likewise, learning environments that appear mindful can still quickly collapse into disorder over a particularly challenging issue or troublesome situation. But even a simple recognition of the value of mindfulness surely would have benefit in any classroom.

It follows that mindfulness would also be important in the teaching of undergraduate PR students who are being trained to enter a profession in which “a strategic communication process . . . builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (What is public relations?, 2012, para. 4).
Throughout its development, PR has been recognized as a profession intent on controlling and responding to the communication while developing favorable attitudes about organizations and the issues they represent (Elliott, 2012; Newsom & Scott, 1985). Mindful thought and action should be the foundation of any PR professional’s work.

The seven suggestions that follow were gleaned from a variety of expert sources and could help PR faculty members move from recognition of the need for more mindfulness to thoughtfully acting in ways to bring it about.

1. Understand the Student Mind

The scanning mind is used to perceive our environment, alert us to what’s happening around us, and help us tune in to our feelings and the emotions of other people. The focused mind is used for problem-solving and task completion. It’s impossible to scan and focus at the same time. A mindful PR faculty member could encourage students spend time *thinking about thinking* before student use thinking to address a perceived problem (Boyatzis & Yeganeth, 2012).

2. Take a Collaborative, Non-Linear Approach

When showing students how to approach a conflict or problem, a mindful public relations faculty member could look for ways to encourage collaboration that deviate from traditional Western analytic top-down thinking. The Western approach carries the assumption that there’s only one correct answer (Tremmel, 1993; Schön, 1983). In reality, this is seldom the case. A mindful PR faculty member could help students ask: *What other options are available? Have they been recognized and explored? How can we work together to find answers?*
3. Embrace Complexity

Maybe instead of trying to make things as simple as possible for our students, we should embrace complexity and urge students to do so also. A mindful public relations faculty member could realize that not every situation requires an immediate answer. “Conflicting information confuses us only when we’re trying to reach a definite conclusion. But if we’re not trying to reach a conclusion in the first place – if we just observe and pay attention – we may actually have a fuller, more accurate reading of whatever we encounter” (Mattis-Namgyel, 2011, p. 58). In some public relations situations, perhaps we should teach students that careful attention is more important than immediate action.

4. Expect Ambiguity

The practice of PR is, by nature, ambiguous. Opinion is always in flux. Demographics are always changing. There are always more facts unknown than known. A mindful public relations faculty member embraces and expects ambiguity, and encourages students to do so, too. PR professionals must be taught to accept the fact that even the best laid plans cannot guarantee particular outcomes. “We need to support those leaders who know that the problems are complex, who know that to understand the full complexity of any issue, all parts of the system need to be invited in to participate and contribute.” (Wheatley with Frieze, 2010, para. 8).
5. Educate Clients and Publics

Every PR professional has suffered with clients who thought market research was a waste of time, or that public relations meant “more sales tomorrow.” To allow for a more mindful relationship with their future clients, and to ensure the continued viability of our profession, it’s important that a faculty member educate students about these PR realities. The more students know about educating clients and publics, the more prepared they are to mindfully communicate what public relations can and cannot do.

6. Work for a More Mindful Media

Media professionals’ creation of mindless media content and the embrace of that content by consumers is a 21st Century epidemic. The result is “attitudes and behaviors not necessarily in the best interest of the audience” (Serafin, 2007, p. 180). The youngest members of our society are the most vulnerable (Healy, 1991). Public relations faculty members are right in the middle of the epidemic, because we’re teaching students who graduate into the marketplace where they propagate numerous “false promise” media messages (Carroll, 2012). A public relations faculty member has an ethical obligation to show students how to step back from the spin, constantly evaluate the very nature of the work, and create a climate for more responsible media communication.

7. Balance Work and Life

This final recommendation is likely to present great challenge. It is easy for PR professionals to become caught in Western cultural expectations that dictate a technical, rational approach to work at the expense of all else. These same
expectations assign value by quantity of output instead of quality of interaction. A mindful PR faculty member learns to balance work and life by saying no to requests that do not need to be fulfilled and communication that does not need to be made. It’s good for us to model this healthy work/life balance for students, as well.

Conclusion

Public relations trade publications and scholarly literature are filled with guidance about how to think strategically, write effectively, and assert confident leadership. Rarely does one come across any counsel to mindfulness. (For one example, see Ford, Jenkins, & Oliver, 2013.)

Are public relations educators taking the Donald Trump approach, as in, be in charge, stick to your guns, and power through everything? This is not a perceptive approach for our profession, and it will not allow us to continue producing large numbers of qualified, capable PR graduates.

The time has come to step back, reflect, and consider how to apply mindfulness in the teaching of public relations concepts in our classrooms.
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