

# "I felt a wide range of emotions about what I was reading": Mindfulness in Online Social Justice Education for Undergraduates

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## Abstract

This project examines online educational practices that weave together social justice education and mindfulness. An Ecampus course for undergraduates, *ED 219 Social Justice, Civil Rights and Multiculturalism in Education*, incorporated a mindfulness curriculum in the form of weekly videos and reflections (McIntosh, 2022). This research explored the students' perceptions of mindfulness videos and their learning of social justice and multiculturalism in education. Findings reveal that mindfulness helped students learn multicultural content through extending learning beyond the cognitive intellect to emotional development. It offered resources to deal with negative responses such as denial, discomfort, apathy, or superficiality. It encouraged racial awareness such as exploration of self-identity, choice to confront bias, recognition of privilege and oppression, and noticing of toxic experiences. Furthermore, mindfulness supported content by developing compassion, slowing down with breath, body awareness, and integrity. The specific strategies in the online videos that supported student learning were the instructor's presence with exemplar stories, the instructor's articulating their own mindfulness practice, and providing links to relevant books and texts. Students connected mindfulness to their future careers, own health and wellbeing, and as a specific tool for learning in classes.

## Literature Review

Research studies on social justice courses suggest that students experience a range of emotions when studying social justice and antiracism (Aronson & Meyers, 2022; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019; Picower, 2021; Souto-Manning & Emdin, 2020). In a study on whiteness and emotionality, Matias (2016) questions how students could:

“...be committed to antiracism—moreover, racial justice in any form—if they cannot: (1) feel their emotions, (2) recognize their emotions, (3) understand from where these

emotions stem, nor (4) develop the emotional ovaries to withstand the ups and downs of discussing race?” (p. 3).

As Matias argues, we cannot teach antiracism if we do not understand and regard our emotionalities. To tackle racism or survive it, we need to embrace the totality of our emotions—both the difficult ones such as shame, fear, or hurt, in addition to love, care, and hope. As humans, we cannot pick and choose our emotions and merely attend to the positive ones. To be strong and fierce enough to feel the spectrum of emotions is essential to antiracism. In our experience as educators, for example, some students may feel afraid that they will be called racist. Others may get angry and insist that racism does not exist. And some students may feel frustrated that White people deny racism because they have experienced it every day of their lives. With such emotional investment around the idea of racism, students may be blinded, subversive, defensive or checked out of conversations if they cannot process their own emotions about this topic. By ignoring or misconceiving our emotions, Matias (2016) says, we are “tightening the shackles of racism even more” (p. 3). To do the work of antiracism and social justice, it is imperative that we teach our students how to recognize and self-inquire about their emotions.

One approach to learning is *socio-emotional learning* that incorporates social interaction and emotions as an overall focus of development, healing and wellbeing. Socio-emotional learning often focuses on socialization and emotions, yet without a broader critique of societal contexts (Anderson et al., 2022; White et al., 2022). However, Ginwright (2016) uses the term “radical healing” to indicate the political nature of practices that build capacity and wellbeing for the common good (p. 8). Our environments may threaten our collective identities such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, and thus a community response is needed to combat injustice and oppression. Social justice workers and activists

tend to have focused outwardly to make change in communities with little regard for their own wellbeing and happiness. Ginwright claims that some activists reject an inward focus on healing because they think it will not change the material realities of inequity. Furthermore, inwardly focused healing practices have not often been linked to social justice action. Ginwright (2016) identifies mindfulness as a healing strategy that helps students cope with trauma and grief and leads to joy and peace in their lives. Mindfulness involves practices developed over time (e.g., focus on breath or body sensations) to help keep one's attention focused on the present moment again-and-again without any judgement of what arises (Hanh, 1975). But Ginwright (2016) warns:

“mindfulness education without an aim to transforming inequality can be dangerous and counterproductive [...] these efforts must also consider how the broader environment promotes and/or inhibits social emotional growth and development” (p. 34).

There are macro-societal factors that breed poverty, violence, and inequity, so a focus on healing from these conditions without focus on changing the macro-factors may be fruitless in the long-term (Hyland, 2016). The inequitable and racist fabric of our society creates stressful and toxic conditions. Thus, a top priority is to transform society to reduce or eliminate racism and oppression that harms individuals and groups. This should be partnered with healing practices, like mindfulness, in education that are important for wellbeing and justice (Berila, 2016).

Researchers have increasingly claimed that mindfulness has an important role in social justice, antiracism, and teaching (Fleming et al., 2022; McIntosh, 2022; Ragoonaden et al., 2021). Berila (2016) puts forth specific anti-oppression pedagogy in higher education using mindfulness. Berila identifies specific needs for grounded contemplative work in social justice, such as incorporating the body, unlearning internalized

oppression, mindful listening with humility, coping with resistance, and building empowerment in communities. Berila recognizes that open and honest classroom conversations to explore antiracism and oppression can be emotion-laden and difficult, thereby warranting specific practices for developing self-inquiry and compassion for oneself and one another.

Recent shifts to asynchronous teaching due to COVID-19 and the increasing number of online education programs have further complicated social justice teaching and its need for specific practices to foster authentic discussion, embodiment, and compassion (Bolyard et al., 2022). Bolyard and colleagues (2022) describe various challenges of online discussions such as disproportionate participation, passive or low-quality engagement, superficial conversations, feeling surveilled by the instructor, intense feelings, and limited time for delving into discussions (Bolyard, 2022). To address these challenges, based on their research, Bolyard and colleagues suggest four pedagogical approaches for social justice courses:

1. Support leaning into discomfort through developing safe or brave spaces with ground rules that students vote on through technological means (e.g., Padlet, which is an online post-it wall for comments or questions).
2. Encourage active listening with an awareness of who is silenced and through use of peer mediators, instructor presence, or discussion board guidelines.
3. Be open to inquiry through explicit use of question-asking and prompts (e.g., follow-ups, probing, revoicing) modeled by instructor responses and expected in peer-facilitated dialogues.

4. Foster trust through sharing power by making the instructor vulnerable (e.g., share honest stories) and allowing students to set goals and make choices.

In sum, these are specific practices that help to build collaborative, brave, inquiring, and emotionally vulnerable and supportive spaces for social justice learning. There is little literature on how to foster specific practices for emotional self-inquiry and wellbeing, embodiment, relational dispositions, compassion, and social justice learning in an online environment. Mindfulness in social justice education needs to be explored in online learning at the university level.

In university classrooms, the approaches suggested by Bolyard and colleagues (2022) are supported by mindfulness in various ways. Mindfulness helps learners develop more open and nonjudgemental thinking during the study of challenging and provocative topics (Berila, 2016; Ragoonaden, 2020). Mindfulness is about noticing the present moment without judgment: noticing emotions, thoughts, or sensations and then letting them go without attaching value. Mindful practices develop self-awareness so that learners gain insight into their positioning in a stratified society and their privilege or non-privilege. Knowing oneself deeply then allows listening and recognizing perspectives different from one's own. Ragoonaden (2020) emphasizes that "where students are able to recognize, to understand, and to be accountable for their own reactions can provide a medium for culturally safe, authentic discussion" (p. 32). Furthermore, through mindfulness, students learn compassion for self and others to be able to treat individuals with kindness and understanding instead of critique or rejection (Germer, 2009). Students learn tools to work through trauma and oppression, and thereby tolerate discomfort rather than get stuck, which is necessary for focusing on the future and on transformation towards a better world.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to analyze the videos and mindfulness curriculum that was part of the Ecampus section of ED 219 *Social Justice, Civil Rights and Multiculturalism in Education* to identify potential areas for pedagogical improvement. To study the effectiveness of the online mindfulness curriculum (see Table 1), we collected data on the students' perceptions of the mindfulness videos and their learning of social justice and multiculturalism in education. Our specific research questions were as follows:

1. How does the online mindfulness curriculum help students understand multiculturalism content?
2. How do the following aspects of online mindfulness videos help students' learning?
  - a. Instructor presence
  - b. Instructor stories and personal examples
  - c. Mindfulness practices
  - d. Text connections to sources/book
  - e. Link to future career/workplace (i.e., K-12 schools)
  - f. Ideas for our own health/wellness
  - g. Tools for learning processes

## Research Design and Methods

### Participants

Students who enrolled in the Ecampus section of ED 219 were automatically identified as potential participants during winter, spring, summer, and fall 2021. Recruitment took place at the end of the term, when students were asked to give consent for the use of their assignments as data. Recruitment was purposely planned for the end of the term to avoid influencing the way students completed their class assignments, their evaluation in the course, and the relationship between the students and the instructors of the courses. Recruitment happened during the last week of classes when students were given a link to the Qualtrics survey that contained the consent forms to sign if they agreed to participate. Given

that they completed their class assignments regardless of their participation in this study, signing the consent form was all that the participants needed to do to be part of this study. Twenty-five students consented and participated over the four terms of 2021.

Student assignments for the course were used and analyzed as study data. The instructor gathered data from students who provided consent from the Canvas site after the end of the term. She ensured that all data was compiled with the level of confidentiality indicated in the IRB protocols, and she took all necessary steps before making data accessible and initiating data analysis.

As our approved IRB protocols indicate, we identified the participants by name to determine who gave consent for the use of their class assignments and to retrieve their assignments, but no other personal information was collected.

To protect students' privacy, names were removed from the data and a code number was used throughout the study.

**About the course**

Students watched an instructional video each week and engaged with the mindfulness practice. Then they had a weekly mindfulness reflection question that asked what new awareness they had learned and how it applied to their learning of multiculturalism. There was a prompt for the students to offer personal stories about how the video related to their life.

Table 1 depicts the video-based mindfulness curriculum, topics, and activities. Appendix A provides the contents of Video #1 and a portion of the transcript of the first mindfulness video.

**Table 1: Mindfulness Curriculum in the Videos Week-by-Week**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Exercises</b>
1	What is Mindfulness? Equity & Empowerment through Access to Well-being	The Breath: Inhales and Exhales
2	Sitting with Discomfort & Recognizing Emotions; Staying in Difficult Conversations	Mindfulness: Body Scan and Noticing the Body
3	Integrating Mind & Body; Racial Trauma	Mindfulness: Grounding Exercises
4	Finding Strength and Resilience in the Center	Mindfulness: Centering Practices
5	Belonging: Groups/Linking to Ancestors	Mindfulness: Belonging/Community
6	Resiliency/Interconnection with Nature	Mindfulness: Body to be Grounded
7	Stabilizing Attention; Directing Energy	Mindfulness: Attention and Energy
8	Teaching from the Heart; Practices of Self-Compassion	Mindfulness: Compassion, Heart center
9	Empowerment Tools and Agency	Mindfulness: Freedom and Joy
10	Liberatory Practices	Mindfulness: Resiliency and Creativity

## Data and Analysis

Course assignments included written reflections, Canvas discussions, weekly reading reflections, final papers on their self-assessment of their learning, mid-term and end-of-term reflections on effectiveness of activities in the course, and reflections on mindfulness activities. For the primary sources of data about mindfulness, we asked questions to investigate the students' perspectives on how mindfulness supports their learning in the course. Data came from weekly reflection assignments and the midterm evaluation, where students had to answer the following questions:

- 1. Reflection:** What self-awareness and concepts did you learn in mindfulness practice this week and their connection to multiculturalism? Also, please discuss or tell a story about a specific aspect of mindfulness videos that made an impact this week (e.g. instructor, personal stories, meditative practices, texts, multicultural content, future career links, health/wellness, learning).
- 2. Evaluation:** How have the mindfulness videos we have been doing in this class helped you engage in this course?

The data analysis of student assignments consisted of three phases (Charmaz, 2014):

### Structural coding

The first reading and coding of the data involved a broad lens directly tied to the research questions, with codes such as: multicultural content, learning processes, components of pedagogical videos, and developing self-awareness. Given the nature of the data (i.e., student assignments posted on Canvas), this phase primarily included word-by-word and line-by-line coding. Larger entries involved coding by incidents, which are bigger chunks of data. This method enabled us to take our large set of data and organize it in

individual tables by research question or topic. Structuring the data into smaller pieces of data (i.e. the individual tables) was helpful to prepare the data for further analysis. This phase involved collaborative work across team members to discuss our interpretations, refine analysis, and nuance the coding scheme.

### Inductive coding

The second phase of coding took a more focused approach. Once the data had been structured into tables for each research question or topic, we proceeded to analyze each subset of data individually. During this second round of coding, we read through each table and identified emerging codes and themes from the data excerpts. We also undertook axial coding in which we looked at relationships across codes, trying to understand how some codes may be a major or minor category. We developed a coding tree in which we came to understand the overarching patterns and the sub-patterns. Axial coding helped demonstrate the texture of the data set, i.e., what is readily visible, what is more hidden, and how patterns overlap and fit together.

### Synthesis to identify themes

In this last phase, we were deeply immersed in each section of the data and collaboratively constructed our own unique understanding of our data. We read through each one of the tables one more time and synthesized the findings of each research question or topic, paying attention to the themes that were more salient and comparing the results of each dataset. This phase also involved regular collaborative work and meetings with the researchers to cross-check, uncover biases, and develop insights together.

Through various phases of analyses including memo-writing, regular collaborative team meetings, and revisits with the data, we refined the coding schemes and understandings of the data to be able to make assertions in response to our research questions about how online mindfulness videos impacted 1) students' learning, 2) understanding of multicultural content, and 3) the role of the pedagogical tool itself. In our table of codes, subcodes, and data excerpts it was useful to display graphically which were the most repeated and frequently discussed themes so that we could see their dominance in terms of repetitions and length of entries. Because they were repeated so often and with the most articulated reflections, we considered these codes to be the most salient. These most salient findings are presented in the next section.

## Findings

### **RQ1: How does the online mindfulness curriculum help students understand multiculturalism content?**

The course textbook authors Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) say to use reactions (and emotions) as an entry point for further self-inquiry and exploration. When and where do students have reactions and emotions to the textbook content that they could further explore? Themes are explored below:

#### ***Intellectual and emotional learning***

Students became aware of and in touch with emotions regarding their socialization and indoctrination. There was surprise, disbelief, and anger about all that they had to unlearn. One student said clearly:

“I intellectually understood the assertions made by the authors, and I had no trouble accepting their arguments but I still felt a wide range of emotions (including anger, shame, guilt, and, worst of all: apathy) about what I was reading. The most severe anger I felt was directed towards my

parents and elementary and high school teachers. I could not understand why they had either taught me lies or tried to indoctrinate me.” [SU21#3]

Another student described how she was coming to recognize what society had “ingrained into us.” One of the dominant insights that was learned academically through textbook reading, but also through experiencing a range of emotions, was the concept that we have been socialized through a racist and oppressive society. For example, one student described a startling incident with an offended Spanish instructor and his straight, cisgender, upper-middle class, male classmate whose nationalistic, white-centric views were “programmed into his mind and reinforced by almost every life experience he’d ever had.” They described not only textbook reading but also life experiences that startled them, made them feel agitated, or surprised them because what they had taken for granted could be analyzed and reframed through an anti-oppression lens that they were learning.

#### ***Naivete and denial***

Students could recognize in themselves and others that pretending racism doesn't exist or that it's a thing of the past is actually a defensive mechanism that perpetuates racism in society. One student described this as “wishful thinking” in which she kept seeing equality in her own views because she so badly wanted to believe in equality, wishing it would be enough. Another student had to spend some time contemplating his own privileges and began to recognize that people of color have experiences that he would never understand from firsthand experience. It took contemplative work to realize what being part of the dominant group means and how it creates blind spots.

#### ***Discomfort***

As they recognized the ways in which they (or their family and friends) enacted colorblind ideologies or simplistic views of race in society, they often became uncomfortable. They often felt

guilty or ashamed or challenged by the work of analyzing and discussing racism. A range of emotions surfaced, such as guilt, shame, embarrassment, avoidance, or surprise. The course curriculum described actions that may be well-meaning but perpetuate oppression, (e.g., failure to take others' perspective, using insulting language, staying silent when witnessing discrimination, and assumptions that all have the same experiences as them). Students could recognize that they (and their loved ones) had been perpetuating racism through their actions unknowingly.

### ***Apathy or superficial attempts***

Students began to recognize how fighting racism and oppression requires a commitment and deep level of activism. Yet they often knew friends, family, or acquaintances who put up lawn signs or made meek efforts to look anti-racist. Students began to recognize fear or anxiety as the basis that prevented authentic efforts to be activists in more meaningful ways (e.g., to make systemic change, go outside of comfort zones to push for change, reduce their power or resources to make a situation more equitable for others, or intentionally add diversity to their close networks).

### ***Self-exploration of identity***

Students became involved in a process of recognizing and naming their identities, privilege, internalized oppression, or experiences of oppression. As they processed through guilt, fear, or ignorance, they became stronger in their ability to speak to their identities through unclouded lenses. For example, one student described her process of

“making an active effort to acknowledge my privilege as a cisgender, white woman who grew up in a middle upper class environment and using that to keep my judgment from being clouded or skewed.” [SU21#4]

### ***Conscious choice to confront biases***

Students realized that it requires a conscious effort to confront their own biases. This required dropping their defensive mechanisms and proactively taking up the charge. This meant that they needed to actively work towards deactivating any reactions that might prevent proactive steps towards anti-racism. Some examples of proactive steps provided by students were: speaking up for equity, demonstrating compassion for experiences of oppressed people, minimizing defensiveness to promote dialogue, or changing their own offensive jokes or language. Students learned that being proactive requires work and effort on a lifelong basis.

### ***Recognizing privilege, racism, and oppression in their life experiences***

Once they learned concepts, students could remember and reflect on experiences they've had and how oppression or privilege were embedded in those experiences. They often told stories or described experiences but retold the stories through analysis using anti-racist and anti-oppressive lenses. One student said the following:

“I am a white heterosexual male. Although I am not in the places of power implementation, I am part of the longest standing group of oppressors the world has ever known.... A black man called the [radio] show and told about how when he learned to drive his car, he was taught to put his wallet on the dashboard before he even put his seatbelt on or started his car. He phrased this as something that White people would not have ever known, and even though I have never segregated myself from any races or types of people, I had never contemplated this.” [SP21#1]

Reflection and re-analysis were important parts of unlearning their initial socialized views of the world and becoming awakened to how racism and oppression have been carried out in daily life.

### ***Hard times***

Students often remarked that mindfulness was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial protests of this time period (2020-2022). It seemed that this course and its healing pedagogy could not have come at a better time for many. One student said, “I have been going through a lot recently, and I am the type of person to push everything down and act like I’m okay until it finally builds up and all comes out in the form of sadness.” [W21#3] By having mindfulness and contemplation as a sanctioned part of this course, students felt like self-care wasn’t extra or unimportant. The weekly mindfulness components validated their regular self-reflection and tuning into their emotions and hardships. The course texts and its contextualization during hard times brought up a lot of struggles for students, and they responded well to curriculum-required aspects that asked them to tune in and care for themselves.

### ***Open heart, compassion, and belonging***

Students developed enhanced capacity for tuning into their heart center and developing compassion for others. This heart-focus is vital to the work of social justice and to steering actions towards healing. One student suggested, “having the ability and forethought to keep your mind and heart open to all walks of life, positions, situations, backgrounds, etc. will be incredibly beneficial.” [SU21#4] Another student connected this focus on heart and love as a connector between herself and others: “Understanding ourselves and our inner thoughts is important to begin to understand others. Sort of like that saying: you can’t love someone else until you love yourself.” [W21#2] They described understanding that humans are hard-wired for connection and thus forced separation can be a form of trauma. One student said, “Connection and belonging are so important to multiculturalism because it is important that we recognize that we are all connected to a larger entity. We are all a part of humanity.” [W21#3]

### ***Slow down and breathe***

Students often commented about how they were learning to stop and take a breath when emotions or thoughts were coming at them quickly. One student said that she didn’t have to feel guilty about taking a step back and breathing because it was required of them by the mindfulness modules. They learned how to pause for breath when emotions activated and they were inclined to react. They also connected this to their teaching of others; they could instruct others how to pause and take a breath when activated. They often did the mindfulness exercises between reading course materials and then engaging with others. In this way, they could let the material sink in and pause to be reflective and present when interacting with classmates or others.

### ***Cultural perspectives on the body***

Students gained embodied insights into multiculturalism. They learned how the body is viewed by people from different cultures or who have had different experiences. Some communities do not esteem academic rational knowledge (as Western masculinist cultures do) above the sensory, intuitive, or spiritual knowledge that comes from engaging as a physical being in our natural world. And those who have experienced ongoing fear or anxiety from intergenerational racism and misogyny in our U.S. system may have bodies whose neurology is altered by the protective physiological mechanisms needed to stay alive or safe over many years (Menakem, 2015). One student said, “I learned that our experiences shape who we are. Sensations, traces, and experiences of the body form our identity and determine how we act in certain situations.” [W21#3] They also learned about how trauma (which can happen due to racism) can be evident in the body for some people. Students of color described their own anxieties, reactivity, and depression that are related to experiencing oppression, discrimination, and pervasive messages of not belonging in a white-centric masculinist society.

## ***Integrity***

Students learned that mindfulness practice can help integrate who they are authentically on the inside with who they behave like on the outside. Is their inner authentic essence the same as who they are projecting to the world? One student remarked that without self-reflection,

“we will project a version of ourselves to others that is not an accurate representation of how we actually are as a person. This is also why this practice is connected to multiculturalism. Practicing this mindfulness technique will give us a sense of integrity as well.” [W21#3]

Multiculturalism extended far beyond the reading of a textbook, as students self-inquired about what was surfacing for them.

## **RQ2: How do aspects of online mindfulness videos help students learning?**

### ***Instructor's presence***

Each week, students watched a video of the same instructor talking to them in a relational way, telling stories, showing books and photos, and talking in relatable ways about mindfulness topics. The videos took on the form of weekly talks that are personal in nature. Students listened to the instructor as a person they could relate to and agree with. The reciprocal nature of the reflective assignments asked students to discuss aspects of the videos that resonated with them, and therefore there was a dialogic back-and-forth to the listening and responding each week. Students listened to the lessons in the videos by the instructor and said that: “it reminded of,” “is similar to,” and “opened eyes to” aspects in their lives. In this way, they personalized what the instructor mentioned and applied it to their own lives.

### ***Instructor's stories and personal examples***

A key pedagogical move utilized in the videos is the telling of instructor's stories to exemplify

concepts and to offer a space for openly sharing. The instructor's stories offer a level of vulnerability and openness that students can respond to with their own stories. For instance, several students commented on the instructor's story and family photo of her grandmother that served as an intuitive ancestral guide in her life. It reminded students of interconnection between our individual selves and broader culture and humanity. In turn, students told inspiring stories of their connection to ancestors and broader humanity that served as motivation and guidance in life. A number of students also discussed the instructor's story about a moment of waking up when fear was driving her decision making. They responded in turn with their own stories about realizing that fear was driving decisions and could pause to take a step back and calmly process and discuss these emotions. Stories were shared across the instructor and students about their growing ability to pause and notice the emotions in the body, then to be present with those emotions, and act from a place of self-realization and calm. Together, these stories paint a powerful picture of how the little moments (i.e., just noticing emotions; connecting to ancestors) amount to something important.

### ***Mindfulness practices***

Students were asked to reflect on the mindfulness video for each week. In their discussion posts and responses to peers, many students chose to describe aspects of the actual practice. A common approach was to focus on the action and reaction of the body when doing mindfulness, such as describing the posture, the breathing, the attention to each part of the body during exercises like the body scan, a sense of unity, noticing traces in the body, warmth, and energy flow. Similarly, many students commented on the state of relaxation and rest that they felt during the mindfulness practices. These physical effects were often paired with states of the mind that allowed students to connect, refocus, ground themselves, pause and reflect, escape, recenter, and be

attentive –all of which seemed to be important during their learning of course content.

For some students, however, the effects of the mindfulness practices went beyond learning. Students opened up and discussed aspects of their personal lives that were relevant to class discussions about multiculturalism. They mentioned the mindfulness portion of the course in conversations about grief practice, trauma, and strength finding. Thus, mindfulness proved to have a positive impact on students' reactions and emotions to sensitive topics discussed during the learning of social justice and multiculturalism in education, especially for those who revealed oppressive experiences. On the other hand, students who might not have discussed oppression as experienced personally claimed that the mindfulness exercises allowed them to be more open minded and empathize with the experiences of others. Some explicitly mentioned the opportunity to be in touch with their emotions, to take time to reflect, to pay attention to opposite forces, and to practice self-compassion. With reminders to be more gentle and less hard on themselves, students used the mindfulness practices in ways that brought affirmation and support in class, naming old patterns and seeking out change, and ultimately focusing on the future they hope to help create.

### ***Text connections to sources/books***

Students remarked about feminists of color authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde who made an impression on them and shared insights into women of color's experiences of racism and oppression. They discussed authors such as Brené Brown who brought a sociological perspective to connection and introspection. They referred to Thich Nhat Hanh who offered mindfulness contemplative insights from an Eastern Buddhist perspective. They enjoyed the read-alouds on video such as when the lead author read poetry to them. They kept quotes that meant a lot to them. And they related the material to their own texts, such as anti-racist publications by

Ibram X. Kendi. In all, students responded positively to the interdisciplinary nature of the texts used in these modules and could choose which ones resonated with them most.

### ***Link to future career/workplace***

With a few exceptions (e.g. discussing work in customer service), most of the participants in this study discussed the application of mindfulness practices into one's workplace in relation to their own teaching experiences (not surprising, as most students taking this class are majoring in Education). From those, participants linked their mindfulness practice to their K-12 teaching experience in 3 main ways: 1) to deal with the difficult work of being a teacher and the emotional implications on their own wellbeing, 2) to be able to provide a better learning environment for their students, and 3) to extend the mindfulness practice to their students and help them regulate their emotions in class.

In the first case, participants described experiences that made teaching hard, such as the emotional impact of their students' behaviors, or how addressing difficult situations could be "draining." For that, the use of mindfulness was considered a helpful tool to recognize one's reactions to certain circumstances and to "restore the self." Similarly, participants who were teachers understood the need to embrace mindfulness to better assist their students. As one participant put it, "We need to all train ourselves and be ready to help these children." [SP21#1] Some examples of this include being prepared to notice trauma-induced behaviors in students, to consider future students' situations and needs as unbiased educators, and to support students from different backgrounds, among others. Lastly, the participants' accounts for how mindfulness could help their students included a variety of examples of how teachers could extend their practice to students. Some examples from the data describe the incorporation of mindfulness in the curriculum and in daily class activities to give students the tools and resources to verbalize their needs, to

provide the students with social-emotional skills, to alleviate anxiety, emphasize the present, or deal with emotional upsets. In addition, some commented on the possibility of using mindfulness as a way to create a bond between the teacher and the students, as well as to encourage connections with others.

### ***Ideas for own health/wellness***

One of the most dominant categories of connections that students made was to their own health and wellness. They connected mindfulness to the following areas: a) relationships, b) family, c) societal, d) current events, e) medical health/wellness, f) geographic, and g) coursework. They discussed the usefulness of mindfulness for their dormitory life, roommates, and the stress from school. They often mentioned their overwhelm and the many aspects of life that they had to juggle. Relationships with boyfriends, girlfriends, or significant others were a frequent area in which they used mindfulness to help them notice emotions, calm down, and have clarity when relating to loved ones. They often discussed their efforts at self-improvement with recognizing emotions, which had been typically suppressed, and how they were validating these emotions now. They discussed a number of issues that were provocative and triggering such as politics, geographic conservatism, violence, the news, and family events in which pausing to breathe and recognize emotions seemed to help.

Mindfulness helped with developing confidence in their self-identifications and self-image. For example, some women who held a negative body image of themselves and used mindfulness to build a more positive relationship with their body. Sometimes students had unprocessed grief from family trauma or childhood situations and the mindfulness modules helped them begin to recognize their hurt inner life. Very often, students discussed their conditions such as depression, anxiety, epilepsy, attention deficit, or addictions. Some already knew about mindfulness strategies

but many were learning them for the first time. One student said,

“I’ve been diagnosed with PTSD [...] Even yesterday at work we had [an incident at work that gave me flashbacks]. I noticed this feeling, stopped, took a breath, and helped her. Mindfulness can center the body for moments like this.” [F21#4]

Many students described ways in which mindfulness and stopping to take a breath were becoming part of their daily life in incremental ways. They turned to nature and appreciated it in new, mindful ways to promote wellbeing. They approached their families in less reactive and calmer ways. They learned that sometimes they were simply moving too fast through life and becoming inundated with stress. They were learning to slow down and find ways for the breath to enhance the qualities of their life. The use of mindfulness for handling emotions associated with social justice spread to other arenas of their life and seemed to offer enhanced quality of life beyond the curricular content at hand.

### ***Tools for learning***

Reflecting on how the mindfulness topic was connected to the course content of the week seemed to give students agency as learners. Many identified specific techniques from the mindfulness videos that helped them learn. A common theme came from the recognition of the course content as emotionally challenging. From that standpoint, students described mindfulness as a tool that guided them to think critically, gave them the words to describe feelings and phenomena, helped them reflect on personal and hard subjects, as well as to tune into their emotions and sense of wellbeing to be more self-compassionate when discussing their experiences in relation to the course content. Mindfulness provided students with an opportunity to calm and reflect on what they were learning, to better their focus, to ask themselves questions, to be open minded, to take perspectives carefully, and to use

mindfulness as a tool to decompress and channel thoughts before writing reflections. As a result, students claimed to gain clarity before posting, making reflections easier and clearer, and engaging in deep discussions about social justice and multiculturalism in education.

**Summary of findings**

This research explored the students’ perceptions of mindfulness videos and their learning of social justice and multiculturalism in education in an

Ecampus course that incorporated a mindfulness curriculum in the form of weekly videos and reflections (McIntosh, 2022). In courses like the one in this study, where students embark on self-explorations that might be challenging at many levels, mindfulness can provide the emotional support that is often missing from traditional learning. Tables 2 and 3 below describe the research questions and themes related to each question that were covered in the findings.

**Table 2: RQ1 Overview of Themes and Key Ideas**

<i><b>RQ1: How does the online mindfulness curriculum help students understand multiculturalism content?</b></i>	
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Ideas</b>
Intellectual and emotional learning	Get in touch with emotions regarding their socialization
Naivete and denial	Recognize in themselves and others pretending racism doesn’t exist or that it’s a thing of the past
Discomfort	Felt guilt, shame or discomfort as they recognized the ways they, family, or friends enacted colorblind ideologies or simplistic views of race
Apathy and superficial attempts	Realize fighting racism and oppression requires a commitment and deep level of activism rather than meek efforts
Self-exploration of identity	Recognize and name identities, privilege, internalized oppression or experiences of oppression
Conscious choice to confront biases	Drop defensive stances and proactively take up the charge to combat oppression.
Recognizing privilege, racism, and oppression	Remember and reflect on own experiences and how oppression or privilege were embedded in those experiences
Hard times	Describe mindfulness as important for healing during COVID-19 and racial protests
Open heart, compassion, and belonging	Enhance capacity for tuning into heart center and developing compassion for others
Slow down and breathe	Stop and take a breath when emotions are coming quickly or the body is reacting
Cultural perspectives on the body	Gain embodied insights into multiculturalism and learn how the body is viewed from different cultures or because of different experiences
Integrity	Practice to integrate the internal self with external behaviors and positioning

**Table 3: RQ2 Overview of Themes and Key Ideas**

<i>RQ2: How do aspects of online mindfulness videos help students learning?</i>	
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Ideas</b>
Instructor presence	Watch a video of the instructor talking in a relational way, telling stories, showing books and photos, and talking in relatable ways
Instructor’s stories and personal examples	Hear instructor’s stories that encourages openness and vulnerability to tell own story
Mindfulness practices	Reflect on mindfulness in their discussion posts and responses to peers, and describe aspects of the actual practice and application to their daily life
Text connections to sources and books	Respond to interdisciplinary texts used in videos and keep what was meaningful
Links to future career/workplace	Link K-12 teaching experience: 1) deal with the difficult work of being a teacher, emotion and wellbeing, 2) provide a better learning environment for students, and 3) extend the mindfulness practice to students to regulate emotions in class
Ideas for own health and wellness	Connect mindfulness for calm and wellbeing in: (a) relationships (b) family (c) societal (d) current events (e) medical health/wellness (f) geographic (g) coursework (h) roommates and dorms, and (i) romantic relationships
Tools for Learning	Connect to course content to give students agency as learners and identify specific techniques that helped them learn

### **Conclusions & Limitations**

The data revealed ways in which students used the mindfulness curriculum to complement their learning of social justice and multiculturalism in education, from using mindfulness techniques to better digest course content and the emotional reactions to sensitive topics, to empathizing and connecting with others, to finding connections with their lives outside of class. The participants’ reflections after each week’s mindfulness exercises showed increasing awareness about the positive impact of mindfulness in the classroom. Being in a class where mindfulness was part of the curriculum helped them acknowledge its importance at the personal, educational, and professional levels.

Limitations of this study include the small number of participants (n=25) and our inability to follow up with participants to ask for explanation about what was not comprehensible to us. Some

students were more articulate and lengthier in their assignments than others. We were limited in analyzing only what was written, and we could not follow-up to ask for more explanation. Likewise, we wonder whether the participant selection process was self-limiting in that students from particular sub-groups or social identities may have chosen not to consent, thereby skewing the data in specific ways. However, there was representation in the data from participants from a number of different identity groups. In the future, research should be designed to include following up with students and to elicit their input on the analysis. To better understand what features support or inhibit anti-oppressive learning, researchers should explore specific features of online learning such as discussion boards, instructor feedback on assignments, or technological tools to gain student input and collaborative goal setting.

The authors hope that online instructors will benefit from this study by transforming their instruction to include healing techniques, self-inquiry pedagogies, and body and contemplative pathways to learning. When content is challenging and multifaceted, instructors especially need to engage the holistic selves of students and understand the emotional and spiritual components of learning deeply.

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## Appendix A

### Mindfulness Video #1

- I. Introduction to the Mindfulness Instructor (Kathryn McIntosh)
- II. Describe the structure of the videos: concepts, resources and books, mindfulness practice
- III. What is mindfulness?
- IV. Why is it in ED 219?
  - a. Stability over emotions
  - b. Provocative topics in social justice
  - c. Future work as an educator (ease your own tension; learners with trauma)
  - d. Compassion versus stark discipline or behaviorism
  - e. Ever-changing and diverse world indicates need for tools to help stay in social justice conversations
  - f. Expand learning to include diverse ways of knowing (i.e., body, spirituality, intuition)
  - g. Physiologically good for health, wellbeing, and cognitive learning
- V. Mindfulness Practice

### Transcript of the mindfulness practice:

So let's do some initial mindfulness practice. It's really important in doing mindfulness practice that you're comfortable but alert. So I tend to do it sitting up, although sometimes I am laying down and that's fine. The main thing is that you are alert because mindfulness is about reflection. It's about paying attention to your sensing and your inner landscape. Possibly it will be relaxing, but the idea is not to fall asleep. Please put yourself in a position where you think you have the best chance of not falling asleep. It may end up being relaxing or it may not be relaxing because you may surface a response, an emotional body response that isn't particularly relaxing. So it's about attention. It's about reflection on your inner landscape. I'll give you a moment to find a comfortable position. If you're sitting, you may want to sit on a cushion of some sort. I just have a regular old couch cushion that I am sitting on here. Just to give yourself a little bit more comfort and wiggle room. As you sit here for this first mindfulness module, we'll just be sitting here for a few minutes. This won't be an extensively long practice today.

As soon as you're ready, you may choose to close your eyes or just have a soft gaze. A soft gaze might mean just looking down a bit, maybe sort of half closing your eyes. You may fully close your eyes, which is often what I do. And I practice mindfulness daily several times a day. I do it in the middle of the day, as well as when I first wake up and before I go to bed. It's a way of checking in with myself and what's been going on. It's a way of slowing my body down so I can be fully present. And it's a way of noticing the little triggers or the little activations that happen and tuning into that, then having a resource to let that come and go out of my body. With eyes in a soft gaze or with eyes closed, let's just start with breathing. This is a breathing mindfulness exercise. Breath is one of the key life force energies as human beings, and is very important to energy coming and going from our body. Let's inhale and exhale. And inhale and exhale.

You may find that your rate and pace of inhaling and exhaling is different than mine. I'm going to ask you to just continue to inhale and exhale at your own pace. Notice where the air enters your body, notice where the air exits your body. This could be at the tip of your nostrils, into your sinuses. This could be in the back of your throat, the parting of your lips, soft pallet in your mouth. Perhaps you notice the breath in your throat or into your chest.

Inhaling. Where does the breath enter? Exhaling. Where does the breath exit? Perhaps you'll notice the inhale and the exhale in your chest, perhaps moving down into your ribcage and your belly. Continue to notice if thoughts float in and out of your mind: It's what our minds do. And sometimes it's called monkey mind. What our minds do is: Thoughts enter and they want to distract us. Let them enter and flow away. No need to hang on to them. No need to try to push them away. This is what our minds do. Let the thoughts flow in and flow out without any need to comment without any need to latch on to those thoughts.

## About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

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### Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit strives to be leaders in the field of online higher education research through contributing new knowledge to the field, advancing research literacy, building researcher communities and guiding national conversations around actionable research in online teaching and learning.

### Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit responds to and forecasts the needs and challenges of the online education field through conducting original research; fostering strategic collaborations; and creating evidence-based resources and tools that contribute to effective online teaching, learning and program administration.

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