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The meditation course at the University of Michigan begins with a brief yoga session.

HOW OUR CLASSES BOOST STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

Two neuroscientists introduced a course in meditation, yoga and mindfulness at their institution. **By Kevin Boehnke and Richard E. Harris**

Since 2019, we've taught a meditation course for graduate students. The origins of the course date back to 2018 when we saw each other's workspaces. Kevin frequently practises yoga on his at-the-ready mat and Richard's (Rick's) office is saturated with signs of his meditation practice – Buddha figurines (Rick is interested in Zen Buddhism) and gentle music playing in the background.

We had already been collaborating

scientifically, developing studies aimed at optimizing pain management with cannabis. However, seeing each other's workspaces led

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us to start talking about self-care practices. We realized that we both took up meditation during graduate school, in part, to develop healthier relationships with our minds. We feel that this kind of self-care is still crucial for graduate students, given the high rates of anxiety and depression they report.

So, we designed a course that would have resonated with ourselves as graduate students. Instead of a brief workshop, we teach a semester-long, one-credit course in the

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neuroscience department to deeply ingrain the practice of meditation in our students. Complementing – but flipping the focus of – conventional neuroscience offerings, our emphasis is not on studying the brain, but on understanding one's own mind. Each class begins with a brief yoga or 'mindful movement' session followed by meditation practice. Students then share observations about what they have encountered and learnt through their meditation.

Assignments include: meditating for five minutes per day for five days per week; writing in a journal for five days per week; and sending a brief weekly reflection to the course instructors.

To guide discussion, each class touches on science – we might discuss clinical trials for anxiety treatments, for instance. We also talk about non-scientific ideas related to meditation, such as impermanence: the idea that all things constantly change.

Individual experience

We drew this design from non-academic experiences, including Kevin's yoga-teacher training, Rick's interest in Zen Buddhism and Tai Chi, and books on meditation, as well as scientific literature about meditation and health that relates to issues affecting graduate students, such as anxiety and depression. We also received valuable input from Rosa Schnyer, who teaches meditation in Austin, Texas, and had help implementing the first two versions of the course from our mutual friend and yoga teacher Lora Girata in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Our determination to focus on individual experience felt contradictory to classic academic teaching, but the course was quickly approved by the neuroscience department. Students signed up. We were nervous: neither of us had taught a course like this before. How would it be received?

Course sizes have ranged from 5 to 16 graduate students, predominantly those studying neuroscience but also those from other departments. We abide by ground rules for respectful discourse, which are especially important given the personal nature of the practice. Using movement, varied meditation postures and techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing or loving-kindness mantras, and conversation, we coax students to turn their carefully cultivated scientific lenses on themselves.

We encourage observation and interrogation of subjective experience. This has included recognizing anxious thought patterns, discussing chronic health issues and sharing fears of imposter syndrome. The goal is to tune into one's internal monologue and bodily sensations, and to make decisions from that place of awareness. Such decisions might be as simple as pausing for a deep breath or as complex as changing directions



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The University of Michigan, where two neuroscientists run a meditation course.

professionally. This iterative learning process is not something we attempted to measure with exams or conventional core competencies; instead, we observed how our students responded and committed to meditation.

This class format and process is not always easy – neither for us nor for the students. The endless to-do list of grades, grants and publications combined with general internal chat-

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ter (termed the ‘monkey mind’ in Buddhism) often results in mental absence despite physical presence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our meeting format centred around keeping everyone safe. Wearing appropriate protective equipment, we first met outdoors at the local arboretum, then indoors when the weather got too cold, and finally we moved online owing to safety restrictions. Despite their preference for in-person instruction, students remained engaged – both with each other and with the practice.

Students have shared insights, struggles and growth, both in lessons and through personal reflection essays at the end of the semester. Quotes from students included recognizing “how interconnected we really are”, “converting cold apathy into caring warmth”, and the difficulties caused by the “impossibly high expectations” many students set for themselves. During the pandemic, one student described the course as “a rock of respite amidst turbulent times”. Subjective reports

such as this were supported by 30–40% improvements in scores on a scale used to measure the anxiety and depression of the students over the semester.

Looking back on our experiences, we keep returning to three lessons. First, we have to continue steeping ourselves in the practices we offer our students. This allows us to consistently revisit elements of the practice that resonate with us and our students, and then to draw together appropriate resources – both didactic and through community members – to refine our curriculum.

Second, less can be more. We deliberately cut the requirement for conventional academic content, such as reading journal articles. This kept the focus on self-inquiry.

Third, show up as imperfect individuals rather than untouchable teachers. To cultivate a comfortable, shared space, we've learnt that we must actively share ourselves by taking part in discussions and meditations as fellow travellers on the path towards self-understanding.

In addition to supporting our students during a time of great struggle, this class has given us new perspective on our own academic lives. Our students reminded us of our own tight focus on academic achievement, reinforcing our ability to take a step back and a deep breath, and to re-orient towards nurturing ourselves and our communities. For this and their many other gifts to us, we are grateful.

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