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MINDFUL ACTION RESEARCH
A Values-Based, Scholar Practitioner Approach
MINDFUL ACTION RESEARCH
Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce both outside readers and Claremont Lincoln University (CLU) students to mindfulness as part of the action research process at CLU. The paper includes a literature review of both mindfulness and action research that then concludes by suggesting three ways that CLU students can apply mindfulness as a skill in their own action research projects. Readers will find that mindfulness is an ancient practice that can also help facilitate modern action research projects.
Introduction

How can people enable change that is consistent with their core values? Moreover, how can a group of people make collaborative change happen in a manner that addresses their mutual concerns? The Claremont Lincoln University (CLU) Capstone Action Project (CAP) provides students with both the theory and skills to facilitate intentional, values-based, and collaborative change. In an effort to introduce both outside readers and current CLU students to the university’s action research model, and as part of an effort to integrate CLU’s core skills of mindfulness, dialogue, collaboration, and change with the CAP, this paper will do the following:

1. Define both mindfulness and action research
2. Describe why mindfulness and action research are important
3. Consider possible ways that mindfulness can serve as a technique for action researchers.

By defining and describing mindfulness and action research separately, then considering how the two concepts might work together, the authors hope to situate CLU’s CAP within the larger context of work being done in two generally separate disciplines: mindfulness and action research.
Section One: An Overview of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an ancient concept present in many religious and philosophical systems, including Christianity, Sufism, Jainsim, Hinduism, Buddhism, and mystical Judaism. In contemporary times, it has received new attention, sometimes connected to its religious or spiritual roots, and sometimes in secular or scientific manifestations. We will define mindfulness in its historical context and then within its modern one.

Mindfulness in Historical Context

The concept of mindfulness is thousands of years old, and is present in practices as varied as Sufism, mystical Judaism, Sikh meditation, and Christianity. The concepts most present in Western practices (both philosophical and secular) come from Buddhist roots, including both Tibetan and Indian schools of thought, with an emphasis on right practice that reveals the true nature of the self and reality (Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011). Much of the current literature on mindfulness practice begins with Buddhist practices, particularly as seen through the work and practice of Thomas Merton, and then John Kabat-Zinn and his contemporaries (e.g., Maransky, 2007; Rinpoche and Das, 2009; Thondup, 1998; Das, 2001; Rinpoche, 2001; Hopkins, 2001; Gyalchock and Gyaltsan, 2005; Wallace, 1992; Salzberg, 2002). Yet, individual religious and philosophical groups still support scholarship and practice in practices connected more directly to their original traditions. See, for example, primary texts and guides including work by the Dalai Lama, older texts including the writings of Swami Vivekananda, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Bhagat Singh Dr. Thind, literature which illuminates particular points of view, such as The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden and The Conference of Birds, explications of Sufi verse and Jewish mystical practices, introductory texts for novices by Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chödrön, and Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, and spiritual autobiographies in which practitioner becomes teacher, exemplified by many of these writers and others.

For many, one of the most accessible and potentially transformative aspects of mindfulness practice is that because it is available to all, and because it is a practice and not a discrete skill, we each have the capacity to learn, and then to help others. Indeed, our most well known teachers of mindfulness and compassion (including the Buddha in Buddhism and Mahavira in Jainism) could have gone on to moksha but instead decided to remain among their communities to offer what guidance their own experiences had taught them. In a way, all who undertake this practice are in community with others, and as one of us gains additional or renewed perspective, we have both opportunity and expectation to share it with others. Unlike other spiritual or ethical practices (like text study, journaling, song or movement, alms or charity, fasting, retreat, or pilgrimage) mindfulness transcends social position, education, access to material goods, or age and ability. One need not become certified or degreed to pursue greater understanding of mindfulness practices, and fellow practitioners can always lend their perspective to others. In a sense, all practitioners are lending
their experience to an ancient, worldwide, and interdisciplinary action research project that transcends culture or context.

Spiritual autobiographies are part reflection and part teaching tool; they document the journey practitioners take as they become more deeply reflective, more adept, and better able to articulate their experiences. They write to illuminate their experience and help others continue to participate in and build the wider field.

One current criticism of mindfulness as it is manifest in the US is that practitioners resemble consumers who can choose from a variety of teachings and texts, disconnected (according to critics) from any primary tradition. And yet, when we study the traditions alongside and informed by one another, we see that there are in fact postures, teachings, illuminations, and ideas pertinent to our daily lives—in all of these religious and philosophical systems. While it is helpful to be respectful of the traditions from which various practices come, we need not hesitate to participate if we are not religious adherents.

Many of these practices emphasize the concept of “right practice” that reveals the true nature of self and reality (Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011). In many of these traditions (including Jainsim and its emphasis on ahimsa, or non-violence, Buddhism and its emphasis on compassion, and Sikh meditation practices that seek to clear one’s mind, connect to God, and undertake to serve others), compassion is both another facet of mindfulness, and a powerful awareness that can lead to transformative work—in self, and in community. As we learn more about how compassion practice can reframe our experiences and daily lives (see also Rogers, Jr. 2014 and 2016; Dreitcer, 2001; and Jinpa, 2015), an area of growth in mindfulness teaching has included an emphasis on education, leadership, and social and professional transformation. For example, leadership scholar and consultant Schuyler (2012) describes a tradition that focuses on compassion and relieving the suffering of others. In both its contemporary manifestations and in its historical antecedents, mindfulness is assuredly one tool for ameliorating suffering. In one case, the focus is on alleviating the suffering of self. In another school of thought, the focus is on alleviating suffering for others through compassion.

Mindfulness in Modern Perspective

John Kabat-Zinn is generally credited with popularizing the concept of mindfulness in the West. After studying with Buddhist teachers, he founded his Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts medical school, and went on to understand his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction work to fit within a scientific (less religious) context. The “revival” or popularization of mindfulness—inspired for many by Kabat-Zinn’s work—also draws upon earlier voices working in the West. Kabat-Zinn suggests that at its root, mindfulness is about non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness. However, he rejects a simplified definition of mindfulness. In his 2015 interview, he explained that his definition is meant to serve the same function as a Zen koan that provokes
more questions from the learner instead of creating an operationalized definition (Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

Besides the work of Kabat-Zinn and others that emphasize mindfulness with special reference to its Buddhist roots, other secular interpretations of mindfulness have continued to develop as well. This tradition focuses on a mindset of “openness to novelty” (summarized in Litman-Ovadia, Zilch-Mano, and Langer, 2014). In contrast to Kabat-Zinn’s koan-like definition, mindfulness is now being operationalized as it is benefits are researched in numerous practical contexts. Some of these contexts include:

**Medicine.** The University of Massachusetts medical center continues to be a major voice in mindfulness research, as well as in training nurses, physicians, and others who work in healthcare. The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University’s School of Medicine has also produced a substantial body of research and teaching tools on mindfulness, compassion, neuroscience, and health benefits. The Mayo Clinic has also done research that enumerated several positive correlations with mindfulness as a therapeutic tool. Applications included (a) managing chronic pain, (b) coping with cancer, (c) preventing depression relapse, and (d) maintaining a healthy weight (Mayo Foundation, 2013). Given the past several decades of mindfulness research in medicine, practicing physicians, therapists, and other healthcare providers are frequently aware of how mindfulness intersects with their own work and can have positive impact on their clients’ lives.

**Workplace Effectiveness.** Readers on LinkedIn or other professional social media outlets will not have to look far for articles that cite the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace. For an example of workplace expressions of mindfulness, see David Gelles (2015) Mindful Work: How Meditation is Changing Business from the Inside Out, which highlights how companies now see encouraging mindfulness as a way to take care of their employees. He also highlights how mindfulness affects empathy and compassion at work, and he responds to concerns that practicing mindfulness might actually reduce our drive for success. Gelles’s voice in the field, and application directly to the lives of practitioners who might not have accessed mindfulness in their own religious or ethical traditions, exemplifies how mindfulness is a topic of interest to increasing numbers of individuals interested in personal and professional success.

**CLU’s Definition of Mindfulness**

While one might not expect an ancient tradition to be part of a fully-online graduate university program, mindfulness is a core element in CLU’s curriculum, and it is a required course of graduates in ethical leadership, interfaith action, and social impact, usually as the first course of study. CLU emphasizes two critical elements of mindfulness: being fully present and practicing compassion. To this end, CLU defines mindfulness as “focused awareness in the present moment and cultivation of compassion in self and others” (Claremont Lincoln University, n.d.). This emphasis on mindfulness
as a foundational skill for CLU is appropriate as the school focuses on preparing students for an increasingly connected global reality. CLU believes that mindfulness can provide both the clarity and the compassion to navigate such a complicated and increasingly-connected reality, by encouraging students to become more intentional and less reactive.

Section Two: An Overview of Action Research

Now that we have provided readers with an overview of mindfulness, we turn our attention to action research (AR), which is a methodology that prioritizes change as its raison d’être. First, we will consider the historical development of AR. Then, we will consider the contributions of AR.

Historical Development of AR

Kurt Lewin is often associated with the earliest stages of AR work. Lewin was a social psychologist who fled Nazi Germany and came to the United States in 1933. He is credited with AR aphorisms such as “Nothing is as practical as a good theory” and “The best way to understand something is to try to change it” (quoted in Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 18). As part of his concern for practical theories and change, he was especially concerned with moving researchers away from being external observers and focusing their energies on solving real problems. Practical solutions and change are still key concepts in AR.

In the 1950s AR gained traction in the teaching profession in the United States, but then went into decline, especially as AR became associated with radical social movements in the 1960s (Smith, 2001). However, AR was taken up in the UK and continued to develop there, as teachers were encouraged to become reflective on the work they were doing and how to improve it.

Greenwood and Levin (2007) describe three main trends in the development of AR.

1. Industrial Democracy, which began with Kurt Lewin’s work and was reformulated into industrial management systems used in Sweden, the U.S., and Japan.
2. Participatory Action Research, as a response to inequality, especially in the American South during the 1960s, attempting to move stakeholders “from passive to active voice” (p. 30).
3. Human Inquiry and Cooperative Inquiry, with an emphasis on doing “research with people instead of on people” (p. 33). Key researchers in this strand include Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, who worked together to create The SAGE Handbook of Action Research which is now in its second edition.

All AR methods share a basic process of cycling between reflection and action. They address the internal concerns of stakeholders who participate in the project (the “action”) while also recording and communicating both the process and the new understanding gained as a way of benefiting both internal and external stakeholders (the “research”).
In the late 1970s, Donald Schön and Chris Argyris drew upon the work of Piaget and Dewey to build the idea of a “reflective practitioner” who practiced life-long learning. Schön’s 1983 *The Reflective Practitioner* explored how professionals can think about their thinking. The purpose of this meta-thinking was to improve problem solving via ongoing reflection. For Schön, professionals include managers, architects, and therapists, to name a few. Their problems are the stuff of every day work: how to design a school where classrooms are both functional and inspirational, or how to help a young resident psychiatrist support his patient. Schön notes that professionals must be able to balance their goals with various unknowns that arise moment by moment. Dealing with uncertainty and being able to “puzzle” through work situations enable professionals to do their jobs well.

*The Reflective Practitioner* facilitated the development of reflective practice as an ongoing skill that could be strengthened into something akin to virtuosity for professionals (such as architects or psychiatrists). As it turns out, part of reflective practice that has been picked up by all those after Schön, from middle school coaches to Chinese language school directors, is the ability to turn one’s mind to the problem with creativity. Schön calls it naming and framing; he writes,

> When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the ‘things’ of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them. (1983, p. 40)

We note that “problem setting” is an inherently interactive process, according to Schön. This quality may be why so many professionals in the caring professions and those which fall into the category of what might be called “human endeavors” (teaching, working with the very young or very old, coaching, facilitating, developing strategies for dialogue and peace-making) have adopted and adapted Schön’s initial premises. By the 1990s, teacher educator programs had successfully incorporated the notion of “reflective practitioner” to describe masterful teachers who used reflective practice artfully and consistently. The concept of “reflective practice,” has included, over the years, ideas including “reflective thinking,” “critically reflective practice,” “critical thinking,” and “critical reflection.”

Reflection-in-action was used by teacher educators in both reflective practice and in action research; both fields and ways of teaching utilize Schön’s original context to help pre-service and novice teachers develop the ongoing, continuous practice of reflection-in-action in their teaching and in their personal professional development. In *Curriculum Action Research: A Handbook of Methods and Resources for the Reflective Practitioner*, James McKernan extends the concept of reflective practice and applies it to a form of research. He posits, “the unifying theme is that all action research is a form of reflective inquiry governed by rigorous principles, or canons of procedure” (1996, p. 31). Like Schön, McKernan also likens the practice of reflective action to “the skills of the graffiti artist,
dancer and composer” (p. 49), that are developed through inquiry and experience. For McKernan, the entire point of inquiry is understanding, which can lead to action towards improvement. If systematized, reflective practice can develop into a form of inquiry that leads to original research—this can then be applied back into teaching practice.

Reflective practice then becomes a model and example for how mindfulness is now seen as deeply valuable and applicable in so many settings. And, it provides an example of how once something becomes interdisciplinary, it becomes widely available, and also enriched.

Mindfulness can also continue to be deeply connected to its source, even as it becomes more widely useful. For example, for religious adherents, it can remain undiluted and confessional in nature. In addition, teachers and spiritual people can continue to be informed by nurses and architects—these connections and points of intersection are a natural development of a vibrant, living field.

**Contributions of AR**

By emphasizing solving real-world problems, AR prioritized the role of the scholar-practitioner and challenged the belief that knowledge is available only to the ivory-tower scholar. No longer satisfied with understanding alone, AR suggests that true knowledge links understanding with action. AR is often collaborative between research and participants and puts a strong emphasis on the democratization of knowledge, benefiting both the researcher and the community where the research takes place. Put simply: AR prioritizes solving the problems of the community where it is located rather than simply addressing the concerns of the researcher alone.

Because of its emphasis on collaborative knowledge building that privileges neither the professional researcher nor the stakeholder group, AR is reminiscent of Parker Palmer’s object-centered classroom, where neither teacher nor student dominates the conversation. Instead, instructor and learner both work together to understand the phenomena at hand (Palmer, 2007); they are co-participants in each other’s learning. The co-creation of knowledge also evokes a worldview that can be found at the center of Frederic Laloux’s *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. Laloux argues for post-postmodern, participatory organizations (which he calls “teal”). In such organizations, hierarchy is not simply rejected outright. Rather, hierarchy cooperates with members of the organization, consulting with those who will be affected by their decisions.

**Carrying Out Action Research**

Mcniff (2014) offers six steps for carrying out AR. These steps illustrate the cycling between reflection and action that is the dance of AR. To carry out AR, practitioners should:

- Identify an issue that needs attention or investigation.
- Be reasonably clear why it needs attention.
• Show to oneself, and probably others, what the issue and its contexts look like.
• Imagine what can be done about it.
• Try out a possible strategy and see what happens.
• Change practice and thinking in light of the evaluation. (p. 15)

The correlation between these steps and mindfulness will become evident in the following section.

**Section Three: Mindfulness as an Action Research Technique**

How might mindfulness serve as a technique in AR, and more to the point, is it even appropriate to do so? Correlations between AR and spiritual practices have been observed previously by Coghlan (2004). Additionally, Grenwood and Levin (2007) explained that AR is open to any social science method as long as they are in line with the AR’s basic values of participative knowledge construction. So, the philosophical openness of AR to a variety of methods and techniques allows us to consider mindfulness as a possible tool for AR. Further, as early as 2000, members of the action research community were actually calling for mindfulness training to facilitate the needed reflective skills of action research (Leitch and Day, 2000). This call for self-awareness could be seen in Torbert’s (2006) call for “first person research/practice” skills that had been absent in the first five centuries of development in the natural and social sciences. First-person skills included a “moment-by-moment awareness of ourselves” (p. 209). The connection between awareness and AR was also expressed by Hilary Bradbury, who summarized action research as “the effort to become more aware of, and choice-ful about how we live and work” (2015). Therefore, to the extent that mindfulness facilitates awareness, it can be a helpful technique for action researchers.

**Practical Steps for Using Mindfulness**

So if mindful awareness is necessary for action research, what exactly do action researchers need to be aware of in order to facilitate change? We suggest mindful action researchers should focus on personal values, the gap between values and context, and compassionately connecting with the values and concerns of change-project stakeholders.

**Researchers must be mindful of their own values.** The correlation between mindfulness and self-aware spiritual practices makes it a helpful research tool for the early stages of an AR project. Why? Because the early steps of an AR project focus on the practitioner’s awareness, as illustrated by McNiff’s (2014) first four steps quoted above. For CLU students, the first question to ask when beginning an action research project is not simply “what is the problem?” but also, “what are my values?” Micniff and Whitehead (2011) explain that values play a critical role in the AR process, which begins with the researcher asking questions such as “What is my concern,” and “Why am I concerned?” Likewise, practitioners should evaluate the significance of their work in relation to the work’s fidelity to their own values.
Researchers must recognize the gap between their values and their current context. Practitioners must extend their awareness to the reality around them - their community, their organization, their civic group, etc. To do so, researchers can ask themselves another question: as we consider our current context, where do we sense a brokenness between our values and our context? Those places now become possible locations for our action research projects. As we identify the gap, we pay attention to it. Rather than ignore the gap or simply cover it in false assumptions about reality, we exhibit “bare mindfulness” to dispel illusions (Gunaratana, 2011), and follow Brene Brown’s admonition that courageous and authentic living requires “minding the gap” (2015, p. 172). We ask ourselves, “What is going on here? Why? How does it make me feel?” The added understanding of what we perceive to be the problem is important to keep in mind because we need to communicate our perception of the gap as well as dialogue about how our participants perceive the gap as addressed by McNiff (2014). While McNiff’s language appears to be unilateral from the researcher’s point of view, CLU projects will encourage a more participatory approach. By being mindful of our values and paying attention to the gap between values and context, CLU’s scholar-practitioners engage in the naming and framing process described by Schön (1983). For example, students who value education may find themselves distressed by roadblocks to degree completion experienced by non-traditional students in their community. Working with a group of local stakeholders to address a specific roadblock can then become the focus of a capstone project. Practicing mindful compassion can help researchers connect with the issues that are most important to stakeholders. Collaborative and Participative models of AR emphasize working with participants and their chief concerns, not the concerns of the researcher alone. Because the CLU project emphasizes a collaborative approach, students do not stop at identifying their own values and the problems they see around them. They then connect with local stakeholders and dialogue with their values and how those stakeholders see this issue. Then, they work together to make positive change happen. Thus, the compassion gained through mindfulness serves as an energizing force to help researchers move beyond their personal priorities to engage the real concerns of their stakeholder groups. Since CLU prepares students to serve as change agents in human endeavors, and since the human condition includes so many forms of suffering, opportunities for mindful and compassionate AR abound.
Conclusion

Mindfulness is an ancient discipline that has modern applications and benefits. For researchers, it certainly enables Torbert’s (2006) “first-person research” and empowers the awareness necessary for values-based action research. Additionally, mindfulness can inspire a compassion that helps researchers connect with their stakeholders and work with them instead of on them.

Twenty-first century AR practitioners can confidently combine modern AR methods with the ancient tradition of mindfulness, and should look forward to adding value in not only their current, professional contexts. As more scholar-practitioners apply mindful AR and record their experiences, the academic and professional dialogue regarding mindful AR will be enriched. CLU hopes to see its students make significant contributions both to the knowledge base of scholar-practitioners who will read their CAP reports and to positive change in their personal communities or organizations.
Works Cited


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