

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast **Ideas in academic practice. Mental health and mental wellness.**

Hello and welcome to episode two of the Learning and Teaching @ Newcastle University podcast. In this episode, we have a long form conversation between Paul Fleet from our School of Arts and Culture and Chair of Academic Practice Board of Studies. Paul, will be talking to Michael Atkinson from our Faculty of Medical Science, all about mental health, mental wellbeing. So, over to Paul and Michael.

Hello and welcome. My name's Paul and I'm the chair of the Academic Practice Board of Studies here at Newcastle University. Now the board is a cross cutting board, meaning that it looks after all of our units and faculties in our home and remote campuses. And it's in respect to our support for pedagogical development and recognition. This includes specific educational training and recognition with advance HE, under their fellowship programs. One idea that we had, why don't we have a podcast, where we discuss ideas and academic practice? On the first subject for discussion is one that's not only ever increasingly topical, but fundamentally important. It's the practice of wellbeing and its respect to mental health. We're joined in the session for a conversation with Michael Atkinson. Michael, hello. Tell me about your role in Newcastle University.

Hi Paul, thanks for inviting me to do this first podcast. So, yeah, I'm a lecturer in medical education teaching on the Master's in Medical Education in FMS, and also a mindfulness teacher. So I have a role at the University of teaching the eight week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course that's available for free to all staff and students. And I run one of those each term. So far, I've taught about 70 members of the university, mostly postgraduate researchers, but some undergraduates and members of staff as well. And I also have been running mindfulness sessions on a regular basis for four to five years. And these are just like drop in sessions that are run weekly during term time. In addition to that, my research is primarily mindfulness based, so mindfulness and clinical decision making, mindfulness and resilience. I've got a couple of projects on the go at the moment as well. I also have a national role as chair of the Mindfulness Medical Education Special Interest Group for the Association of the Study of Medical Education, ASME as well. And that's mainly kind of, those are my key roles. I could say more, but I think that's probably enough to get us going.

I think that's right. And I think it's the point there is, it's not just only for students and it's not just something for staff, but it's not just something internal to academic practice. It's encompassing all of those isn't it?

Yeah, I think so, yeah. And I come from, as an academic, I come to this from an academic perspective, as well as a well-being perspective, so I've got that kind of educational kind of approach really, and the MBSR program itself isn't educational

program, it's not a therapeutic program, although it can be therapeutic for those who attend it. It's mainly educational, helping people to develop their own practices, really, so they can maintain their own well-being. And I like to look at these things from the academic perspective, the research and science and bring that in as well. And I think that's really important for an academic audience as well, because often people are looking for an evidence base for what they're doing and what they're partaking in. And the MBSR is a very, kind of, strongly evidence based program and probably the most recognised program internationally as well.

I think you're right now the MBSR, I mean, remind us what that stands for.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

And as you say, needs to be something that, because we're academics, we like this research and evidence base. So how does that actually work in pedagogical practice? Give us some flavour of how that actually works.

So the eight week course involves a lot of experience, so participants, who do come onto the course, are expected to have a home practice. So practicing, say, 30 minutes a day at least throughout the course, and during the course itself, there is a strong emphasis on experiential learning. So we have, I introduce them into a range of different meditation practices. And but also, we look at the science and theory behind mindfulness and well-being. And that's coupled with a kind of discursive approach, really what we have called enquiries to explore people's experiences in the course. And invite them to share whatever's been going on for them, any questions they may have. So it's very participatory in that sense. And that's a really key part of the course to help people to unpack their experience and understand it from the wellbeing and mindfulness perspective.

So it's not just some practice that they go through without really understanding it. It's not just theoretical and abstract. It's kind of a real mix of both, so we really try and embed all of those elements. It's not linking together, isn't it? The linking the elements of the research base with the practice, with the understanding and in a sense being open to it as well. You know, I think, I'd hope you agree here, that it's important we actually create this culture of well-being across University and mindfulness practice can do that. But we are both advocates of this. What would you say to somebody who is cautious and interested on some of those benefits about why it's important?

So can I just ask, are we talking about the MBSR or are you talking about well-being more generally?

Well, why don't we do both? Let's talk about them both.

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think probably best to talk about well-being more generally first and then I can say a little bit about how the MBSR might be a benefit. So I'm just going to outline a few assumptions that I hold. And I just want to note that I'm not looking at these issues as a well-being services expert, but more from an academic and broader philosophical perspective as well. So first of all, I would just like to provide a working definition of well-being, so we kind of got some clarity on that. So well-being is something that we, we all experience. And although for many of us, it might not be a stable and constant state. It might be something that we occasionally feel. We feel a sense of, actually, things are going well in our lives, generally, things are going well at work. And, you know, from time to time, we'll have our dips and come back out with in terms of reconnecting with those qualities of well-being. And so generally, if you look at the literature, wellbeing is defined in terms of psychological well-being, so a kind of internal factors, but also external factors, the environmental factors that contribute towards well-being. So the external factors may be, for example, the quality of relationships that we have, a good sense of health, a sense of prosperity, of functioning with optimal effectiveness and a sense of mastery of what we're doing. And that our lives are arranged in a way that pertain to a sense of fulfilling or purpose, if you like. Another word for that would be flourishing, a sense of flourishing in life. Internal factors may be more around happiness and feeling a sense of joy, perhaps a sense of autonomy over our lives and fulfilment, self-acceptance, emotional health, maturity and just general peace of mind.

My definition of flourishing there. Can we pick up on the flourishing there Michael? Because I think it's a really interesting point. It's not about producing 40000, four star rated journal articles here. It's about flourishing within your own field and within your own being. Is that what we understand by flourishing? It's being content and being confident that what you're doing is to the best of your ability and contributing to academic practice.

Yeah, and I think with that would be a sense, a strong sense of self-efficacy, a sense that actually we are aligning what we're doing with our values. And these are our personal values that might be our academic values, that might be the values of the university. And it might be actually they become synchronised in a certain sense. And we feel things are kind of coming together very well. And in terms of our work and in terms of our home life, and we have. We've struck a quite a nice balance that we can maintain and that enables a sense of actually growth, if you like, a kind of foundation for self-actualisation as one way of which you can see that, I would say.

And how would you define self-actualisation? I mean, that sounds like another key phrase that we need to understand here.

Yeah. Often people refer to Abraham Maslow when we talk about self-actualisation, but it is, and there are other thinkers who talk about this, but it's also kind of understood in spiritual terms as well as a kind of sense of waking up to a life, if you like. Waking up to who we are and overcoming our limitations to an extent, and yet

fulfilling our purpose in life and feeling a real sense that we've grown up, we've matured in a variety of different ways. Yeah, and maybe not fazed by things as much as we would have been in the past. And obviously, this is something that is probably a journey that continues on, and you know, but. Absolutely. There are degrees in which you can develop a sense of self-actualisation over time. And I think those two points, the self-actualisation and flourishing, are just such key indicators in academia, because there are things where we do feel those pressures and do feel are we good enough at what we're doing? Are we doing what is expected of us? And perhaps the emphasis now shift is a bit more in the sense of the ownership of, ok, now, I feel comfortable with that. So how does that work within this mindfulness practice? So that's a very good question.

So just to say a little bit about mindfulness. It is, something that is natural to us. Although it's a kind of esteemed as an ancient practice, it's been around for at least two thousand years. It is something that is very natural to us. You know, if you think about when one as a child, as a child, we were you know, we were living very much in the present moment, not anxious about the future. Not kind of worrying about what we'd done in the past or anything like that. We just very contented in the present moment. And really, mindfulness practice is a way of reconnecting with a natural presence and natural awareness that we have. And you know, that, of course, takes practice, it isn't natural. It doesn't naturally occur in a very stable and long lasting way. So one needs to form of, some kind of intervention, if you like, some kind of practice that allows us to cultivate and recover or uncover these qualities within us again.

So it is about being present. It is about being able to open our minds, open our hearts to our experience and accept experience as it is rather than what we think it should be. And to do that with a kindness towards yourself and a kindness towards others. Yeah. No, that moment that makes perfect sense. But I'm also thinking about how we actually practically do that in our working lives or if we have an educational role, for example, in academic practice, either were contributing to modules or designing programs and curricula. How do we fit that in and how do we make that meaningful rather than just some sort of tool can bolt on? I mean, from my experience, I've tried this new thing, which is, it's a journal! I think I said this earlier, didn't it? I've tried a journal which is called Five Minutes in the Morning. And so before I log on to email, I get panicked by the four million that have come through. I spend five minutes with this and just take those tasks and get involved in the writing. I have noticed a difference. I am a lot more calm at the start of each day because of that. So that's really kind of practical that works for me. Now, that might not work for everybody, clearly, but what are some of the other things that people could think about and consider in this practice?

It's a good point. I just want to pick up on what you just said about the diary. It's a bit like doing a meditation first thing in the morning. It kind of sets. Right! It sets the tone of your day, kind of. We.... you know, because it's very easy to get caught in this kind

of panicky mode or sense we've got a lot to do and we want to get down to that as early as possible. But what that creates is a kind of mental state of rushing, a sense of striving all the time and sense of like we have to get things done and everything's urgent. You know, when you take a pause in the morning or throughout the day, you can just. Just hold. Reign yourself back in and gather yourself back and gather your energies and get a sense of what is important right now. What is the priority? You might find a lot of the things that we might panic about. Will only take a couple of minutes, ultimately, or can be left to another day, you know. So actually just fitting that reflection time in, time out in somewhere. And it doesn't need to be a meditation, doesn't need to be a diary writing. It could be having a cup of tea out in the garden for five minutes or whatever like that. Or just going for a walk without looking at your phone, for example, just as a way of gathering our energies, because we know actually if we if we go full on, we'll soon burn out, you know.

Absolutely.

The quality of your thinking, the quality of your work won't be as good.

So just before we kind of think about the ideas about how we can integrate this, I just want to kind of outline a few assumptions around why well-being is important. Well, I think it's important in academia and how it can benefit us in academia just to set the scene a bit. Yeah. Yeah. So it could be argued that our well-being is fundamental to everything that we do. It's almost like a hidden scaffolding that supports the infrastructure of the university, like the glue that keeps everything ticking along nicely. But perhaps it's taken, easily taken for granted and just by any organisation is just something that actually is just something that happens, you know. But without that, without that glue, without that support, you know, there are a lot of things that could possibly kind of fall by the wayside or go wrong. What I would also say is that, I believe that, we are probably at our best when we are able to maintain stable and enduring sense of well-being. I know from my own experience when I'm happy, when I have got a sense of flourishing, that our relationships are better and more resilience, more cognitively and emotionally flexible, more kind towards myself and others, and my intellectual capabilities seemed to be enhanced and amongst many other things as well. And I would imagine that is same for other people as well. And this is evident.

No, that is true, isn't it? That is true because we can often separate our ideas of work and life as separate things. But actually in the current climate, and particularly with remote working, that's ever more difficult and increasingly blurred. So being able to have that sense of understanding. And you said this a few times now about being kind to yourself. That's actually quite tricky, isn't it? In what sense? It's tricky because we're often as academics and working in academic environments really quite hard on ourselves and we're almost tutored to be critical. So it's difficult to switch that into being kind to yourself.

Yeah. Yeah. And this is something we explore very much in mindfulness field. It's that, you know, we have a negativity bias, if you like. We kind of focus on what's going wrong more than what's going right often. And that's within our own lives. We can be very self-critical in ways that we wouldn't take from others, other people, you know. We can be really harsh on ourselves, even if we feel like we made even a little mistake. We can be beating yourself up about it possibly for days, months even. You know, we carry this. And, you know, one of the emphasis in mindfulness is really striking a balance in one's life. What actually you need to find a way to counter that negativity bias and maybe have a more of a positivity bias. Ok. By actually notice what is going well in your life. You know, you think about diary writing, you know, gratitude. You know, it's often said that actually we often feel rich in our lives, if we realise, and actually know how aware of what we have in our lives. You know that the good things that are around us and within our own resources, et cetera. There's an abundance of positive, positive things that we can draw and feel a sense of. You know, there's the sense of well-being, sense of feeling fulfilled and enriched by life. Well, our life is often coloured by small events that. Exactly. Yeah, with negativity response and which, yeah. So what we have to do in mindfulness and one of the practices is a compassion, practice, loving kindness, practice, where actually we practice wishing ourselves well and. Ok. In various different ways. And there are lots of different kinds of practices like this. But yeah, it's something that really is something that we have to practice in some way for that to occur, in a kind of sustainable way, as I've said earlier.

Absolutely. So let's go into a little bit more detail about how we actually do that. Within, within our working lives, within the idea of academic practice. I mean, we've talked about the diary. You've talked about meditation. You talked about going for a walk. Those are all very self-directed things. I mean, I've even had one person tell me that, you know, before you start in the morning, type your password into the computer slowly. You know, I think I have to be honest that one didn't work for me. I've never misspelt my password as much. I'm so used to that mode of preparation. So I'm conscious this wouldn't work for everyone. But what would be some of the things we could actually put into our practice with students or practice with our colleagues? How could we infuse this into our activities?

I think that's a really good question, and I think this is the start of a conversation and I'm open to ideas here as well. I mean, I've got a few ideas on this and I'm sure there's plenty of work going on at the moment already at the university in this sense. I'd just like to give an example of some work that I'm currently doing so off the back of the Wellbeing for All project, that many of us will be aware of. The MBSR program was developed and my training was funded to deliver this around the university. And there's been many offshoots of that in terms of research and involvement, partnerships and things like that. But, one of the things that is currently in progress is the development of a new module in psychology for third year undergraduates. The MBSRs could become embedded within a module on personal psychology. So, part the rationale for that is that although students might look at topics around wellbeing in various different modules, for example, there's the politics of happiness. Yes. ... in

the part of, for example, and there are various different workshops that go on around the university and different modules. This module almost combines not only the personal development of the students, but also the academic development. So they're not only just learning about mindfulness and well-being in an abstract way. They're actually practicing it as part of their learning journey.

Yeah. And I think it's fairly novel to have a practice...I agree... with that.

And, you know, there are other practices, of course, like reflective practice. There are writing retreats, that people can draw on or create, to take students away or take staff away to take some really good time out, so actually they can focus on what they're doing and really be immersed in their work, in ways that maybe they can't in a cluttered environment at home or, you know, in a daily day to day life at work. You know, sabbaticals, of course, offer that kind of opportunity as well, don't they, where you can really...They do, yeah... go deep into what's important for you.

It's difficult, isn't, when you come back from a sabbatical? Because you got used to taking a little step out of that fast paced world of communication. And I know when I came back from mine, I was determined to try and keep some of that slow thinking time. You know, that chance to actually consider. What many of us got into academia for in the first place to actually have that space to think. Yeah. You know, when we talked about it at the academic board, we talked about, you know, putting reflective practice into modules. We also talked about, you know, sharing materials and discussing those materials within it. So I'm conscious that some people listening we'll be saying, this sounds great. OK, but I've got my curriculum fixed. I've got my modules fixed. How on earth can I suddenly add something else? I think something we're thinking about here is, is including it in the practice of the modules rather than including it in the curriculum. Is that right, Michael? Is that where we're going with some of these thoughts?

Yeah, I just wonder, if you could clarify what you mean by that point about including it in the practice, in the module or whatever?

Yeah. So if you've got a module which asks you to contemplate either a theoretical outcome or a practical outcome or some element of investigation, rather than just trying to do this quickly or straight to the machine and type it out. You're inviting a space where you're asking either an individual or group to consider it in a space, in a very open space, where it's thought about before it's immediately committed to the page. And in sharing resource materials as well, you know, try and encourage students and colleagues to say, I found this great piece of material, rather than just posting it somewhere or attaching it. Why don't I actually talk about it? I remember doing a session with you many moons ago, which was an inquiry led session, and you had materials on the floor and we were invited to go up towards them and pick up the material and then choose to think and reflect and talk about that. And it was a wonderfully open experience, and I think that is part of the movement, I'm most

interested in. That open inquiry, that sense of you don't have to immediately get this processed and finished. That to me, I think is really, not only important, but it's something practical that could fit in with our academic practice.

Yeah, great point, really. Yeah, I really agree with what you're saying there. And I mean, I think it's important to look at this from the teacher and the learner perspective. So, in terms of teaching, I think having a lifelong learning perspective can be really helpful to ensure that you're aware that actually these things take time. It takes time to really learn what we're learning and for it to become deep learning, if you like, a significant learning. And you know, often module is the beginning of a learning process. But it goes on and it's so it's kind of thinking in those long term ways as well. And I mean, guess joining up that thinking with other modules and others things that are going on in the University to connecting things up to, I think, is really kind of important. For signposting students to other opportunities that actually may help them continue what they're learning, if you like. An emphasis on social collator, sorry, collaboration among staff. I don't know, if you're aware of Michael Fielding's work? Yes. On joint practice development, you know, often teaching can be quite an isolating kind of practice. Absolutely. And working very difficult to plan a sessions, plan our courses that actually trying to practice development is about what you were saying about sharing of resources, coming together and planning together and working together. It's so much easier. You can bounce ideas from each other. In my previous role at Sunderland University, where I taught the PGC enforced compulsory education, we talked a lot together. We planned a lot together and it was great fun. We fired each other up and would really risk. You took a lot of risks and we were very creative and it was just a real joy to do that and is so much better than just working on one's own all the time. So I think looking at teaching, the teaching role from that perspective, I think is really helpful, and in terms of learners. I think partly involving them with this process. The students have, they are very resourced. They have a lot of life experience. They have a lot of knowledge to share, a lot of experience to share. And I think often we don't take that into account. So there are opportunities, perhaps, for students to get involved with curriculum design. Yes. And the public perhaps, if you remember the module, the new age module? Yes. Where, the public were invited to kind of create that module and also participate in it. And I was part of that for a short while. It was just a fantastic model for a curricula. So, there's that kind of, so people feel involved. They feel, I've got some kind of ownership, some kind of agency in their learning, I think is really important. I think the other one is yet finding those spaces, that you've mentioned about, those spaces to think. You know, you think about curriculum often, it's often packed, you know. We haven't got...It is... a lot of information is passed on, very academic scholar, academic kind of approach often taken in higher education. Where there's emphasis on transmission of the discipline, if you like. Yeah. But, often the curricula is crowded, you know. A lot of the different stakeholders are vying for their kind of position for what they what think is important in the curriculum. So it's really important that, I think, we evaluate our curricula on a regular basis and find those points and spaces where we can create room for some reflection on deeper thinking. And that might be including some kind of retreat that

might involve some kind of away day of sorts or. There are all those options, aren't there? And it's that balance between, is this an intended learning outcome that so ingrained in either theoretical practice or some sort of transmission of data, where students for the most of their prior education have been told what to do and told how to pass an exam. And they've not actually been encouraged to give that space to think and become critical thinkers. And I think if we're looking at curriculum development from this perspective, we're looking at the top end of the Bloom's taxonomy. We are really looking towards those parts where for a fourth industrial revolution, are going to become ever more important skills. We're looking for people who can critically think, critically analyse, be emotionally intelligent as well.

So it's not about rewriting a curriculum here, is it? It's about finding those places where it might actually be hidden in plain sight.

Yeah. Yeah. Good point. And so also, you know, thinking about, we've got to be good with ourselves as well, you know it. Yeah. We are human beings. You know...Yeah... not the best in our roles, but, you know, sometimes our own personal sense of well-being agency can be eroded, because are working so hard to make the students experience better. But... That is a good point... The impact of that can be, could potentially be negative. You know, if you think about from a neuroscience perspective that ..., you know, we're stressed. If you're anxious a lot of the time that triggers a kind of amygdala response where we have a fight or flight response to life. And that can come from something that is actually real, you know. But it can, it can be, come from our own imagination, our own thoughts. So that amygdala response can be triggered just by thinking about something. You know, for example, a student is, has an exam in two weeks time, but they're really anxious in the present moment. Nothing's happening. Everything's fine in the present moment. They're imagining that this thing is going to be so difficult that actually they are triggering an amygdala response. That means the stress hormone, cortisol adrenaline has been pushed around the body when it doesn't need to be. And that's not good for us. So we've got to find ways in which to counter that and rebalance. And so what we call the kind of parasympathetic response, which is the rest and digest response. And it's something we talk a lot about in kind of mindfulness, is that actually we need to find ways to kind of rebalance ourselves from the fight or flight when it happens, but also proactively, so when something potentially stressful comes that actually we take it very easily. It doesn't get us down or get a stressed or whatever. And part of the research around this is that actually the production of cortisol, the amygdala response actually impedes an executive functioning. This is the brain that's responsible for paying attention, organising, planning, prioritising, staying on task. Cognitive flexibility, stability, emotional regulation, self monitoring, these are all absolutely integral to learning and teaching. And yet they're being potentially prevented from happening because of this response.

Yeah. Which, which counters that sense of, you know, to work harder, I must work faster. To work faster, I must work stronger. It's counter intuitive, isn't it?

Yeah. If we create this space and put reflective and move towards these parasympathetic symptoms that we can often ignore, like skipping lunch and working all the way through. We're not being productive. We are actually preventing that. And as you said, this is backed up from those scientific models. And yeah. And once we know that stress to a certain extent can have a positive effect. You know, much like exercise strengthens the muscles and bones. You know, we do need a little bit. You know, we look at the stress performance curve, for example. But working under stress and pressure for long periods of time can really erode our sense of well-being. And we may find that actually we do crash at some point. We burnout. And this can have damaging consequences for our work, our interactions with others.

Absolutely, absolutely... I mean, absenteeism and presenteeism, which is, which is not what any organization wants really at home.

So why don't we round this up now? First thing, obviously is, thank you, Michael. And this has been a very interesting first discussion. And if somebody wants to chase this a bit further, there's obviously links that can be easily found just by looking at our own home pages, but what would be some areas of thought that you would push somebody who is potentially interested, a little bit curious. Where would you signal them to go next?

In terms of the mindfulness or just generally. I'm going to say both. I'm not going to say no to anything. I should remember that you're going to say both. Awesome. OK.

So I'll just get the mindfulness one out the way, I'm not here to plug it, I'm just here just to say that. No, let's, let's hear it! Let's hear it! On a Friday at twelve o'clock, we have drop-in sessions for 30 minutes and they're open to all staff and students so they can be accessed through the workshop booking system. So let us just say that again, that's open to everybody, yeah? That's open to everybody across all campuses, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. Newcastle.

So we do a meditation practice and we have a little bit of time for some discussion questions towards the end. And we do something different every week. We do have some sessions for students through NUSU and Sports Centre on a Wednesday at 12:00, and I do them with a colleague in psychology, Jessica Combes. So we alternate each week. She's a mindfulness teacher, but also yoga teacher as well. Yeah, and in terms of the other aspects that are available and I think, obviously, the wellbeing services provide a lot of different support. And the university of ours seem very active in considering people's well-being, particularly during lockdown. So those kind of regular emails and articles and etc. etc.. Signposting Services is available there. Apart from that, I think, what's really important is that actually we find places to so, we have social spaces and that's important for us. It's important for our students. If we are predominantly going into an online or blended model that, we need to create some kind of, we need to create those opportunities for collaboration, for student

collaboration, peer collaboration, for staff to stay connected. And I think we can all be active in that.

And just to finish off, I think is a general kind of point that I would make, is that actually, you know, although the well-being services do, do a fantastic job, they have a significant and important role at the university. The well-being can't just be put onto them entirely. You know, they often become overwhelmed. Is that perhaps, I think we can all play a part in this. I would say that there's probably a lot of expertise around the university that can be tapped into, like mindfulness, for example, and it might be academics or other people, professional service people or whatever, who have something to offer. And then just in general, just smiling at people and including them and yeah, being kind to ourselves. That's a powerful thing, a smile. A very powerful thing, indeed. Michael, thank you very much for talking with us. Take care. You're welcome. Thank you very much.

Thank you for downloading episode two. Episode three will be in your feed in two weeks time. So please, like subscribe, download and tell anyone else who you think may be interested. See you soon.