



## The Munich Model Brings Mindfulness and Meditation to University Students

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### Abstract

*How can we best foster creativity in students, in addition to the cognitive training of the brain and intellect? Meditation is a catalyst for creative processes. Since 2010, the innovative Munich Model has enabled more than 1,635 university students to learn the theory and practice of mindfulness and meditation through for-credit (ECTS) courses, as part of their curricula at both Munich University of Applied Sciences and Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. The program also teaches students to incorporate these practices in their own professional work as psychologists, teachers and social workers. Each semester, 150 students, from 9 fields of study at four faculties attend the program's courses including Mindfulness in various contexts, meditation techniques, neuro-scientific research as well as classes exploring spiritual teachers and their concepts, the implementation of mindfulness and meditation specific to each degree program, and films showcasing the research and efficacy of meditation and mindfulness practices. Research has shown that the regular practice of meditation can improve not only abilities like concentration, compassion, stress management and the regulation of emotions, but overall physical and mental well-being in general – all of paramount importance to students, particularly as they impact both performance and creativity. These practices calm the mind and body, and functionally change the brain. Students receive regular grades and ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits for partaking of these courses, earned through active participation, the practice of meditation exercises at home, observations noted in a daily journal and personal reflection through a term paper. Faculties as well as student groups from universities in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Italy have shown interest in the program, and have asked for support in developing their own for-credit meditation programs.*

### Keywords:

In March of 2010, I offered to teach a summer term, credit course\* called 'Mindfulness and Meditation' at the Munich University of Applied Sciences, with space for up to 15 participants; 65 students applied. This inaugurated the Munich Model – an example for the sustainable implementation of mindfulness and meditation at university. Since then, the Munich Model has continuously grown. Each semester 150 students attend the program's courses, instructing Mindfulness, and Meditation (ie: Zen, Vipassana, Christian and Transmission Meditation.) Classes exploring spiritual teachers and their concepts, and the implementation of mindfulness and meditation, specific to each degree program, are also offered. Additionally, students discuss articles and films introduced to showcase the research and efficacy of meditation and mindfulness practices.

To date, 1,635 students have participated in these classes, as a regular part of their curricula for studies in Social Work, Elementary, Special Needs and Teacher Education, Nursing, Psychology and General Interdisciplinary Studies at both Munich University of Applied Sciences and Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. What is particularly special is that students receive regular grades and ECTS for participating in these courses, earned through active participation, the practice of meditation exercises at home, observations noted in a daily journal and personal reflection through a term paper.

Research has shown that the regular practice of meditation can improve not only abilities like concentration, compassion, stress management and the regulation of emotions, but also overall physical and mental well-being – all of paramount importance to students, as these skills impact both performance and creativity. These practices not only calm the mind and body, but also functionally change the brain. It has been observed through research using MRI brain scans that meditation reduces stress, influencing the size of the hippocampus and the amygdala. A regular meditative practice can change our own perception, thinking and behaviour patterns in a constructive and permanent way.

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The current educational system is focused almost entirely on cognitive training of the brain and intellect, to prepare students for their future work. In his famous TED-Talk 'Do schools kill creativity?', author and educational expert Sir Ken Robinson highlights the importance of also fostering creativity in young people. He says that creativity is necessary for the development of relevant original ideas, which often have their origins in the interaction of different perspectives [1].

In recent years, student groups and faculties from universities in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Italy have invited me to speak about the program, teach meditation courses, and help these schools to develop their own accredited meditation programs. The first students I taught are now themselves teaching the Munich Model's initial mindfulness classes, to give me more time to focus on fine-tuning the program and bringing this model to universities wherever interest is expressed. A network of Munich Model students enables them to exchange experiences they gained in a meditation and mindfulness project (in the context of an internship or thesis) and to discuss their own research. In addition, I hold free public lectures and films on the lives and works of spiritual teachers like Yogananda, Blavatsky, Krishnamurti, Thich Nhất Hạnh and others.

Teaching through various degree programs, and having read 1,300 meditation diaries, each 25-40 pages long, I can say from my own perspective that the courses offered through the Munich Model help students to deal in a healthier way with the hectic and uncertain nature of life today, the overall pressure to perform and the often very high workload in their studies. In March 2016, an undergraduate student generated a survey via online questionnaire for participants of the winter term 2015/16 courses. The answers clearly indicate that the students recognize the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. Students were asked if: "Meditation at university is a meaningful and successful enrichment for students and should be offered on a larger scale." Affirming the Munich Model, 86.1 per cent of the answered: "I completely agree."

### **Conditions for participation and content of courses**

Anyone who wishes to participate in a course or in an additional meditation offering through the Munich model must be in a stable mental condition. Only the "Meditation II" and "Meditation III" courses through the "Social Work" degree program require previous knowledge in the field of mindfulness and/or meditation. This prerequisite is met by the successful completion of the basic "Meditation I" course, or on the basis of a successfully completed external meditation class. Students can register for nearly all the meditation courses online. The Munich Model's website ([www.hm.edu/meditationsmodell](http://www.hm.edu/meditationsmodell)) indicates how many students have already applied for the available seats in each course, and how many of them have received a seat.

In the practical part of the courses students learn different mindfulness and meditation exercises. The theoretical input of the course consists of scientific studies, background knowledge about the different approaches of meditation and the possible ways of implementing mindfulness and meditation in the social occupational fields.

Each course is two semester hours, which means in total 90 minutes (2x 45 minutes). We start with a sitting meditation that focuses for example on the breath, the spot between the eyebrows or the inner recitation of a mantra (a word, line or syllable). In the beginning of the semester this exercise lasts only a few minutes. It expands over the semester until it becomes about 15-20 minutes. We then have a short feedback round: the students tell more about their experiences during the meditation - what went well and what were the challenges?

Depending on the course and degree program, each lecture deals with a specific topic. Practical exercises and theoretical input may vary. Every lecture ends with a short sitting meditation. I use a singing bowl to guide the practical exercises: striking it one time reminds the students to return to focusing on their awareness, in the case their mind is wandering; three times indicates the end of the exercise.

The duration of the course in the "Social Work" degree program is three semester hours. The participants have an additional day of mindfulness (a block course). In addition to the theory part of the course, we eat and cook mindfully and in silence.

It is not possible to explain all content of the following courses in full detail in this article. Further references are available on the website of the Munich Model (Category "Literature and films" and "Free downloads").

#### Practical exercises (selection)

- Mindful communication



- Mindful eating/cooking
- Mindfulness and breathing exercises
- Ajna meditation
- Bodyscan
- Walking Meditation
- Meditation on sound
- Loving kindness/ compassion Meditation
- Maranatha Meditation
- Other techniques (e.g. Vipassana Meditation)

#### Theoretical input

- Research on mindfulness and meditation (especially neuroscience)
- Fields of implementation for mindfulness and meditation (specific to every degree program)
- Background knowledge about approaches to mindfulness and meditation
- Spiritual teachers and their concepts

#### Other topics (selection)

- Thoughts and emotions
- Health and stress
- Happiness / Compassion / Altruism
- Religion and spirituality
- Time (past, present/ moment, future)

#### Films (selection)

- Monks in the laboratory
- The Altruist Revolution
- Free the Mind
- The Dhamma Brothers
- InnSaei – the power of intuition

### **Gaining competencies and Certificate of performance and grading**

The main goals in the curricula are:

- Being aware of one's own thoughts
- Increasing concentration
- Strengthening self-confidence, self-efficacy, well-being and regulation of emotions
- Constructive stress management

Students are graded on the basis of attendance in the course, regular participation, the writing of a personal meditation diary and a written reflection about possible and meaningful ways of implementing mindfulness and meditation in their future professional field. The students are also invited to practice the presented exercises at home. They write down their experiences in their meditation diary. The structure of the entry is:

- What: Which exercise
- When: Day/Time
- Where: at home, in the park, in the train, at the station, etc.
- Other: potential additional materials (e.g. Timer/App and Smartphone, cushion)
- Length of time: flexible
- Personal well-being before and after the exercise

The particular goal of the diaries is that the participants gain more insight in their own meditation practice: When and where do I like meditating? Which time? Why? Which exercise is good for which time and in which situation?



It is not necessary to do every exercise at home exactly as many times as the other exercises. Usually certain exercises emerge that become favorites as they generate a higher state of well-being. Likewise it's not necessary to repeat an exercise many times. Overstretching the practice time is not recommended; sitting meditation should be for example 15 to 20 minutes, once or twice a day.

In the middle of the semester all meditation diaries are handed in. I read them to check how the students felt about the exercises, whether they do them in the correct way and, to share general feedback that these diaries generate in upcoming lectures. All information in the meditation diary is, of course, strictly confidential. After introducing the exercises in the course, the students have enough practice and knowledge to practice at home. As there are meditation forms that should only be practiced with the guide of an experienced teacher for a longer period of time, it is recommended that students who prefer these forms contact serious meditation schools.

### **Perspectives**

The establishment of a meditation program at university requires a lot of sustained effort to convince decision-makers; some don't immediately see the value of mindfulness and meditation in the context of university education. What can be persuasive is profound knowledge of the available research. Pedagogical considerations are also important. The expanding of a university's curricula may be necessary in order for such a program to be implemented successfully. Another point to be considered is whether or not mindfulness and meditation courses are offered as an adjunct to studies, on a voluntary basis or as required courses. Learning objectives, assessment criteria, grades and credits (ECTS) must all be taken into account. The Munich Model demonstrates what's possible.

\*A course for which European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) or course credits may be earned, contributing to a student's final grade]

For more information: [www.hm.edu/meditationsmodell](http://www.hm.edu/meditationsmodell)

### **References:**

[1] Sir Ken Robinson, *Do schools kill creativity?*, [www.ted.com/talks](http://www.ted.com/talks), 2006 (min.13:20).