Introducing the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching and Learning Companion (The TLC)

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Abstract

Background: Reflective practice is a key skill which can enable the development of teaching competence among Mindfulness-Based Program (MBP) teachers.

Purpose: In this article, the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching and Learning Companion (TLC) is introduced. This new tool is based upon the established teaching competence assessment tool, the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC). The MBI:TAC has enabled benchmarking of international standards of MBP teaching which helps ensure high fidelity to MBP curricula and contributes to the overall integrity of the field. This in turn, underpins the potential of MBPs to be effective interventions for the enhancement of participants' mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusions: The TLC aims to facilitate MBP teachers' development by enabling active reflection focused on the key features of MBP teaching skills.

Introduction

This article introduces the rationale for, and potential uses of, a recently developed tool designed to aid reflective practice for teachers of mindfulness-based programs (MBPs). The tool is called the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching and Learning Companion (the TLC).

Development of the TLC

The TLC is structurally based upon the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC). The MBI:TAC was first published in 2013,[1] and is now widely used to assess the competency of teachers of MBPs in both research and training contexts. It has been translated into seven languages and is used by training organisations across 14 countries.[2] The MBI:TAC is divided into six domains of demonstrable skills needed to teach MBPs: (1) coverage, pacing and organisation of session curriculum; (2) relational skills; (3) embodiment of mindfulness; (4) guiding

mindfulness practices; (5) conveying course themes through inquiry and didactic teaching and (6) holding the group learning environment. The MBI:TAC has enabled benchmarking of international MBP teaching standards, which helps ensure teaching integrity (i.e. high fidelity to MBP curricula and teaching competence[3]). This underpins the potential of MBPs to be effective interventions for the enhancement of participants' mental health and wellbeing internationally.

The need for a reflective version of the MBI:TAC became apparent from trainee feedback within teacher training organisations, including our own, and from a survey examining

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how teacher training organisations internationally used the MBI:TAC.[4] Trainee MBP teachers noted that although they were strongly encouraged to reflect on their teaching practice and development, there were no tools specific to MBPs to help them. Second, the international survey found that 95% of respondents (N = 79) had individually adapted the MBI:TAC to help their trainees reflect upon their teaching practice.[4] Third, the MBI:TAC had been reported to be an intimidating tool for MBP trainees. This was both due to its necessary length and detail; and also because it was designed as an assessment tool and the concept of 'assessment' was reported to evoke a pressured, fearful response for some trainees which interrupted learning.

The TLC was developed by Griffith et al,[5] and the aim is to offer a simple tool that can be used by MBP teachers at various stages of development, from trainees who have just started teaching, to experienced teachers. The TLC is based upon the MBI:TAC's structure of six domains – each with a number of key features, and so far has been translated into two languages.[6] These domains and key features were 'translated' to a format that is simple and easy to use, with the key features framed as points for reflection rather than as standards to aim for, see Table 1 for an example taken from domain 2: relational skills, which offers a comparison between the MBI:TAC and MBI:TLC descriptors. Great care was taken to make the tool as easy to use as possible, with the guidance emphasising how the user can use it with self-care at the forefront. The tendency to negatively self-judge one's development and skills as an MBP teacher is highly prevalent. The TLC, whilst encouraging teachers to acknowledge that tendency, invites them to allow themselves to be at the stage they are, not where they think they 'should' be. This aligns with the spirit of MBP teaching which is a training process aimed to enable participants to work with challenges from a non-judgemental present moment orientation. Additionally, because the TLC maps onto the MBI:TAC, it can be used as a first introduction to the domains of the MBI:TAC, without the emphasis of assessment which is necessarily embedded within the MBI:TAC.

How the TLC Works

There are two sections in the TLC that can be used independently or together. In the first section, the teacher is invited to reflect upon and 'map' where they feel they are with particular teaching skills represented within each key feature. Six tables are presented – one for each domain. Each table has reflective questions aligned with the key features. Users indicate their felt ability in regard to each key feature on a scale from 'Yes, definitely' – indicating that they feel confident in their capacities for that key feature to 'Not sure' – indicating that the key feature is new to them, or that they have not yet had the opportunity to put it into practice. In this way, the user can systematically reflect upon and map their process as a teacher across the domains and key features.

Underneath the tables, users are encouraged to write down notes under the headings 'Strengths' and 'Areas of development', along with a strong encouragement to always put something down under 'strengths' to enable balanced reflections. As, in our experience, MBP trainee teachers tend to focus on where they need to improve rather than acknowledge their current teaching skills. This enables the user to clearly see areas in which they feel they have strengths, and areas for development. The TLC then also offers practical methods for focused skill development within each domain.

In the second section, there is a guide on how to reflect upon any particular challenging experiences which the user may have encountered while teaching an MBP. This section of the TLC is based upon the model by Atkins and Murphy,[7] which is well suited to the MBP teaching context. The TLC invites the user to engage in a reflective process which systematically unpacks what happened during a challenging teaching moment. This includes a close look at any assumptions that the teacher may have made about the situation and to identify helpful learning from the reflective process. To aid the user, an example of a challenging teaching situation is given and worked through using a slightly adapted version of the Atkins and Murphy[7] model.

Potential Applications of the TLC

A clear potential application of the TLC is within MBP teacher training. By offering a framework for reflection which directly maps onto the specifics of MBP teaching, it is ideally suited to supporting the process of early skills development. Introducing trainees to the TLC before the MBI:TAC also has advantages, as it serves as a shorter, friendly introduction to the key features and six domains of the MBI:TAC. Once trainees are familiar with the TLC and wish for more detailed descriptors of the key features, they can move on to the MBI:TAC.

The TLC may also have an important role to play in mindfulness supervision.[8] The supervision process is integral to MBP teacher training programs[9] and are usually one-to-one sessions where the trainee can bring any learning themes to be explored with their mindfulness supervisor. Four areas of potential use of the TLC were identified[7]): (1) the tool helps a staging process (i.e. introduce the TLC before the more detailed MBI:TAC); (2) take away the pressure of assessment; (3) encourage a specific focus on non-judgemental but honest self-reflection and (4) empower supervisees to be part of their learning process and the direction of supervision. The TLC also can ensure that the whole territory of the teaching process is systematically addressed over time within supervision, rather than relying on the supervisees self-report of the areas they are already tuned to.

Finally, the TLC is available as a book chapter in 'Essential Resources for Mindfulness Teachers',[10] and to enable repeat use, it can be freely downloaded from the publisher's website.[5] The growing evidence base for MBPs confirms their transformational potential. However, successful implementation

Table 1. Comparison between the MBI:TAC and the TLC descriptors, based upon Domain 2: Relational skills.

MBI:TAC Domain 2: Relational Skills	MBI:TAC descriptor: Domain 2	The TLC descriptor: Domain 2[5]	The TLC reflective question[5]
Key feature 1: Authenticity and potency – relating in a way that seems genuine, honest and confident	The teacher is honest and open in their relationships with participants. They relate in a way that is naturally aligned with how they are as a person. Facial expressions are congruent with the felt emotions and verbal expression in the room. Instead of being caught into habitual, automatic reactions, the teacher's words are conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what is internally perceived and sensed, so conveying authenticity and congruence to participants. There is a sense of ease, naturalness and presence (i.e., how the teacher presents within the teaching feels like the person they are). There is a sense of honesty about who they are, so there is not much to 'figure out' about them as a person. N.B. This overlaps with embodying. This key feature pertains to how authenticity is expressed in the moments of relating to participants.	Authenticity: You teach in a way that is aligned with who you are, congruent and open in your relationships with participants. Responses to individuals or the group arise from a responsiveness to the moment, rather than a cognitive focus on what 'should' be happening	Do I relate to participants in an authentic way?
Key feature 2: Connection and acceptance – actively attending to, attuning to and connecting with participants and their present moment experience, and conveying back an accurate and empathic understanding of this	This feature refers to the ability of the teacher to 'tune' into or empathise with what the participant is conveying. This skill relates to how well the teacher can step into the participant's world, see and experience life the way the participant does, and convey this understanding back to the participant. Active listening skills are essential to empathic listening and responding and will include the appropriate use of open questions. Empathy is conveyed by the teacher's ability to make the participant aware that their difficulties are recognised and understood. The teacher accurately paraphrases both the content of what participants express and the emotional tone. The teacher demonstrates genuine interest in the participant's 'internal reality' and communicates (through appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses) enough understanding to help the participant feel understood. The teacher is completely willing to 'meet' each individual where they are in this moment, to respond in an attuned way to this and to explore and honour their experience just as it is. There is a clear movement from connecting with the individual, to attending to a participant's experience, and being responsive to it. During conversations with participants in the class, the teacher will check in with them to gauge the accuracy of their understanding (e.g., 'So let me check that I am hearing you correctly…'; and 'So you noticed…') The teacher will demonstrate attentive body language (e.g., eye contact, encouraging gestures, positive facial expressions and nodding, etc.). The respect inherent within this feature includes working sensitively with the possibility of trauma, cultural diversity and respecting difference	Connection and Acceptance: You 'tune into' what a participant is saying, both in terms of content and emotional tone, with the ability to reflect this back, meeting the participant where they are in the moment, fostering a sense of acceptance of yourself and the participant	Can I 'tune into' the participant's world, and convey an accurate and empathic understanding of this?

Table 1. (continued)

MBI:TAC Domain 2: Relational Skills	MBI:TAC descriptor: Domain 2	The TLC descriptor: Domain 2[5]	The TLC reflective question[5]
Key feature 3: Compassion and warmth – conveying a deep awareness, sensitivity, appreciation and openness to participants' experience	The teacher displays an authentically warm and friendly affect, listens with full attention, thanks participants for their contributions and is encouraging and supportive. Whereas, empathy is the sense of 'feeling with' another being, compassion is the movement of mind that seeks to 'feel with' suffering. In the moment of relational contact, there is a sense that this individual who is here with me really matters. For compassion to be authentic, it must recognise and appreciate individual sovereignty. Unlike sympathy or pity, it boosts the other's self-esteem and cultivates human dignity. There is, consequently, the recognition of the human-ness of experience, of knowing that in another moment it could be my turn to be 'in the fire' of painful experience. Compassion is thus accompanied by humility and recognition of interconnectedness (i.e., my ability to be compassionate and giving does not make me better than the recipient). Compassion strengthens our ability to remain human and be open to the experiences of others. Compassion particularly finds expression when painful experience is present. Warmth is an aspect of compassion, a warm person conveys to others a sense of feeling appreciated, respected and accepted.	Compassion and Warmth: You convey authentic warmth and compassion towards participants. This manifests through relating with attentiveness, encouragement, and compassion in difficult moments, and being a 'fellow-human' who is interconnected with the experiences of the participants.	Do I give participants my full attention when they speak, and relate in a warm and compassionate manner?
Key feature 4: Curiosity and respect – conveying genuine interest in each participant and their experience, while respecting each participant's vulnerabilities, boundaries and need for privacy.	The relational style of the teacher engages participants in an active exploration of their own experience rather than relying on the expertise of the teacher. In addition, the teacher brings a gentle but alive curiosity to the explorations that unfold in the session. The teacher has a strong degree of responsibility not only to create the particular conditions for this learning to take place, but also to ensure that participants take responsibility for their own learning process. The intention is to empower participants to come to know that they are their own experts and that they already have a 'fund of relevant experience and skills' (Segal et al., 2013). This is conveyed in a range of ways including a strong invitation to take care of themselves within the learning process, and only to follow the guidance and participate as much as feels appropriate and right to them. There is an absence of agenda in the sense that the teacher is not endeavouring to create change, but is rather offering a space within which participants can engage in exploration in this moment. The teacher will invite participants to explore their experience, to move towards painful experience and to bring curiosity to all this. This will be done with deep sensitivity to and respect of participants' boundaries and vulnerabilities as they are in this moment. In practice, the teacher will ask permission of participants while engaged in exploration together (e.g., 'Is that enough or shall we go on a little further?' or 'would you mind if we explore this together for a bit?'). The teacher demonstrates awareness of and respect for participants' individual vulnerabilities and need for privacy (e.g., the teacher will move on if participant chooses not to share), and the particular boundaries and requirements of the participant population being taught.	4) Curiosity and Respect: You encourage participants to actively explore their own experience rather than relying on your expertise as the teacher, with a consistent message of encouraging them to participate in their own way, and with deep respect for participant's vulnerabilities and boundaries. You convey genuine curiosity about participants' experiences as they unfold.	Am I able to be genuinely curious about participants' experiences, and respect individual vulnerabilities and processes?

Table 1. (continued)

MBI:TAC Domain 2: Relational Skills	MBI:TAC descriptor: Domain 2	The TLC descriptor: Domain 2[5]	The TLC reflective question[5]
Key feature 5: Mutuality – engaging with the participants in a mutual collaborative working relationship.	A key characteristic of the relational style between participants and teacher is the sense of mutuality and shared exploration. The processes of mind that are under investigation fall into a continuum of experience that everyone can relate to. It is impossible for teachers to separate themselves from the process of investigation. In the spirit of adventure that is core to this learning style, the process of exploration within the sessions becomes a collaborative venture between all those engaged in it – there is a feeling of 'cojourneying' and of a highly participatory learning process involving participants and teacher alike. Appropriate use of humour can help to promote engagement, a willingness and openness to engage in learning and exploration, and to establish and maintain an effective collaborative relationship.	Mutuality: You communicate a sense of shared exploration, of cojourneying with participants, emphasising the human vulnerabilities we all share.	Do I foster a sense of shared exploration among participants, of which I am a part?

across the globe relies on supporting MBP teachers to develop their skills effectively. This freely available tool is a low-cost method which has the potential to be an enabling ingredient within the MBP teacher development journey.

Declaration of Conflicting interests

Funding

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