

Given that participation in “shared reading” groups appears to increase mindfulness and improve quality of life in undergraduate students, what experiences most impact participants?



A qualitative interview study

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Abstract

Purpose: This is a report on the qualitative data from a mixed methods study that investigated whether Shared Reading (SR), a specific literature-based intervention benefits undergraduate students and how adding Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) helps the shared reading experience. Quantitative data suggested that SR bears further investigation as a contemplative intervention for stress reduction and wellness within a selection of programs offered for undergraduate students while classes are in session.

Method: Grounded Theory was applied to qualitative data from post-intervention interviews. Qualitative data accessed via virtual zoom interviews exploring participants' experiences: 1) with the shared reading process, 2) particular story or character or moment in a story that had a significant impact on the participant's thinking or emotions, and 3) the participants' relational experience within the group.

Results: Qualitative analysis indicated that SR and Mindful Based Interventions (MBIs) can be effective in lowering stress, sharpening focus, and improving quality of life. The findings must be interpreted in view of several limitations, primarily, this included constraints on the research process including the small sample size. Quantitative data from this mixed-methods study indicated that SR has the capacity to promote well-being, and enhance a sense of achievement, self-worth, and social engagement.

Conclusion: Mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative, build on previous research findings, the results revealed in this report and in the 10-years research around Shared Reading groups emanating from the United Kingdom suggest that SR appears to improve quality of mindfulness in undergraduate students. Furthermore, SR may be of value in reducing loneliness to new students who may seek meaningful conversations in a group setting. Given the current challenges of COVID-19 limitations, specific research on remote delivery of the intervention could be of value. The results from the study indicated that there was a significant difference in the outcomes of the group that practiced mindfulness with SR. This suggests that Mindfulness-based interventions incorporated with SR can be effective in targeting and lowering stress, increase mindfulness, and improve quality of life in undergraduate students.

Introduction



- Shared Reading (SR) (Davis, 2009), is an intervention developed over the past decade in the UK and imported by the author, in which a group of participants read aloud and pause to discuss great literature, both longer narratives and poems.

Introduction

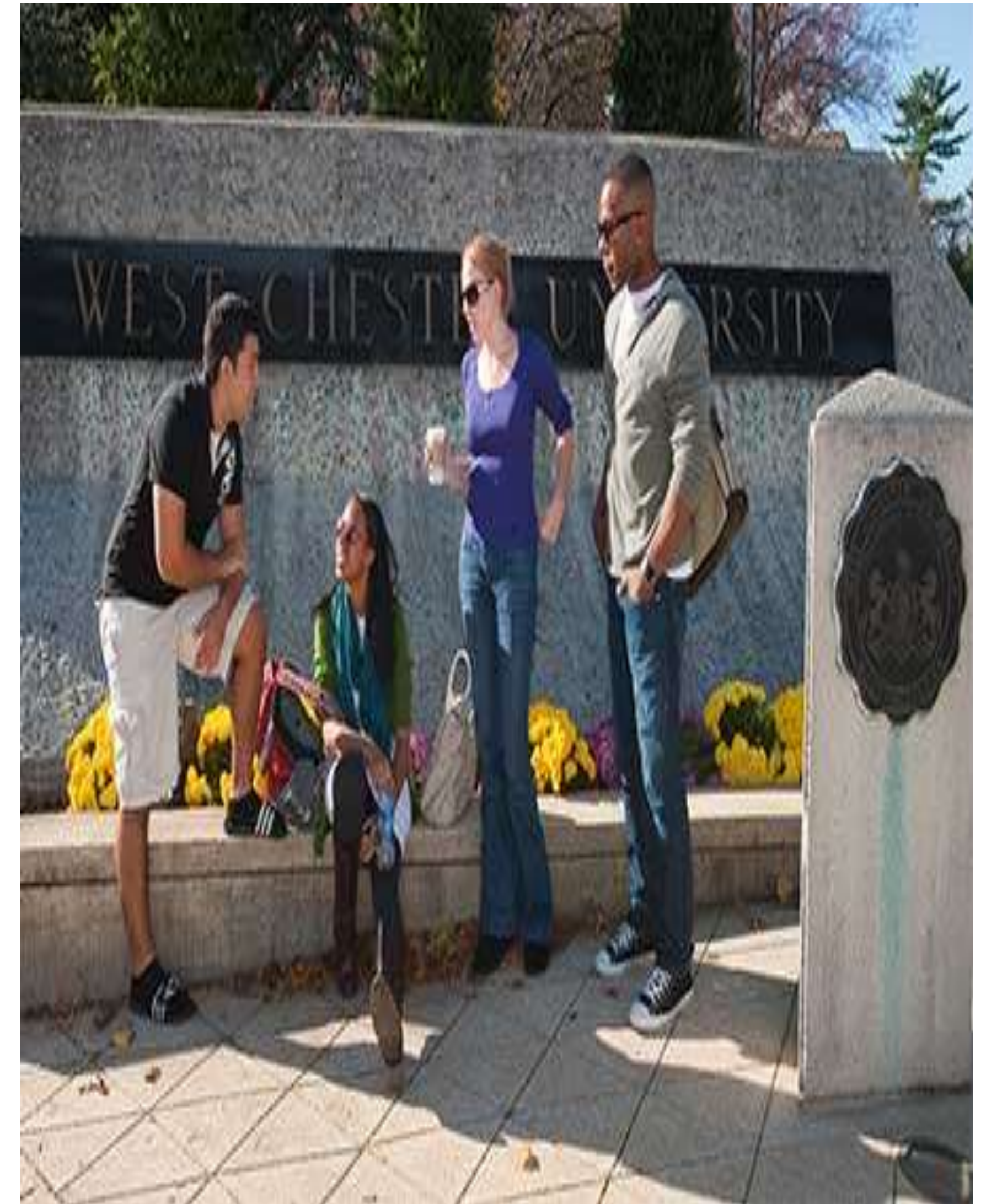
- A review of the extant research studies (Longden, et al., 2015) cited broad benefits to SR, including enhanced relaxation, calmness, concentration, and quality of life.
- SR compares to mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) through its parallel group atmosphere as well as equivalent outcomes—particularly with such measures as quality of life and mechanisms such as turning towards experiences of strong emotion (McCown & Billington, 2017).
- MBI groups turn towards the in-the-moment experiences of participants, encouraging exploration without avoidance or judgment. SR offers this process by proxy, turning participants towards a text of an experience with strong emotional resonance and offering shared dialogue, space and time for reflection, and, potentially, resolution or acceptance.
- While the process of mindfulness might be said to titrate personal experience in a way of personal practice that generates less avoidance or resistance, SR might be said to titrate experience through the mediation of the thought and feeling of the texts of accomplished authors.

Program Goals and Objectives

- To investigate whether Shared Reading (SR), a specific literature - based intervention, benefits undergraduate students, and how adding Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) helps the shared reading experience.
- To evaluate and better understand the capacity of the target group to read and dialogue about serious literature—short stories and poems.
- To identify the benefits possible with incorporation of Mindfulness-Based interventions (MBIs), in SR sessions and the opportunities for continuous growth and development.

Methodology

- **Grounded Theory (GT):** A systematic methodology that examines in-depth reports using inductive reasoning of first-person, subjective experience to explain the studied report's phenomena in detail.
- **Target Population:** Undergraduate Students (n = 6). All of whom completed the eight weeks MBSR study at the Center for Contemplative Studies at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Gender, educational level and location were the only participants demographic data obtained for this study. There was no formal exclusion criteria to recruiting participants.



Methodology

- **Interviews:** Qualitative data was accessed through audio-recorded interviews conducted where three open-ended questions inquired into what the participants experienced or learned during their MBSR study. All interviews were meticulously transcribed to allow precise coding. **Questions included:**
 - a. How was the experience of shared reading for you?*
 - b. Is there a particular story or character or moment in a story that had a significant impact on your thinking or emotions? Please describe it.*
 - c. What was it like to be with these other people in the group?*
- **Open Coding:** The interviews were coded for themes found in the qualitative data. In open coding the research initially segments the data, breaking the mass into manageable units, to stay close to the data. These manageable units are called discursive turns (DTs).
- **Focused Coding:** These codes were then analyzed thematically to capture how the most useful initial codes from study participants describe “Shared Reading” in the study and in their lives.

Shared Reading Material

The works and their authors were:

- Week 1: “Breakfast” by John Steinbeck & “Eternity” by William Blake
 - Poem: “ This is Just To Say” by William Carlos William
- Week 2: “The Thief” by Ruskin Bond
 - Poem; “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” by William Shakespeare
- Week 3: “Gravity” by David Leavitt
 - Poem: “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden
- Week 4: “Black Elvis” by Geoffrey Becker
 - Poem: “Sonnets to Orpheus II,29” by Rainer Maria Rilke
- Week 5: “ The Revenge of the Lawn” by Richard Brautigan
 - Poem: “On Turning Ten” by Billy Collins
- Week 6: Online session The Illustrated Man (Prologue) by Ray Bradbury
 - Poem: “Musee Des Beaux Arts” W. H. Auden.
- Week 7: Online session “The Sun Between their Feet” by Doris Lessing
 - Poem: “Rich” by R. S. Thomas
- Week 8: Online session “ The Invisible Child” by Tove Jansson
 - Poem: “ The Smile” by William Blake



Analysis

- Six recruited participants completed the study; given the small sample, statistical analyses were performed from the quantitative and qualitative data from the individual interviews with the participants pre and post SR intervention.
- Interviews revealed that participants found the intervention itself to have been “intimidating at first”, “a very different experience”, however, “calming and enjoyable”. One participant suggested that offering more groups at different times would be useful for student engagement, while another suggested having more participants in a group to increase more dialogue.
- Interviews further demonstrated that the stories and poems were well-selected, reinforced participation, and were appropriate for the group. One participant noted that, one of the stories was very inspirational to him.
- All participants in the group noted that it was a pleasant atmosphere to be in, and that each week they emerged from the session feeling more relaxed and in a better mood, and it was a great experience.
- It is perhaps worth noting that one of the participants enjoyed the program so much that they want to participate in future SR and MBIs programs, furthermore, they would recommend the contemplative practices to other students.

Verbatim Quotes From Participants

Question: How was the experience of shared reading for you?

- Answer 1). It was actually pretty good. When I first came in, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I like how they had [inaudible] [Max?] pizza - not [Max?]; it was actually [inaudible] - and then you got to go around and introduce ourselves, and then that helped start the week, so that way it would be easier to have conversations with others. I think it was really nice.
- Answer 2). It was a nice experience and the time was perfect in-between my classes. So that gave me time to be calm by coming to the reading.
- Answer 3). It was really good. I was nervous going into it because I'm not huge on meeting new people, but they were all super friendly, and King and Don really made it easy to do.
- Yeah. That's awesome. And is there a particular story or a character or a moment in a story that had a significant impact on either your thinking or emotions? And then if you could please describe that.
- I don't really think any specific thing had an impact. I think the overall just the calmness of the stories even though some of them were definitely filled with some action. I think just the overall story reading.

Discussion

- This study presents the qualitative findings of Shared Reading (SR), combined with Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and how the experience impacts the participants.
- The study indicates that SR can be adaptive as a contemplative intervention to improve wellness and quality of life within undergraduate students while classes are in session.
- The interview format, with open-ended questions and follow up allowed participants to share their experiences from being nervous at first and intimidated at times, to accepting the moment, relaxing, and feeling enhanced self-esteem after a SR session.
- When evaluating how the participants engaged with the literature, poetry, and the group, qualitative analysis provisionally indicated some intrinsic psychological elements of the SR experience such as; stress reduction, calmness, attentiveness, social engagement and caring for others.
- The impact of Shared Reading was described by the participants as “**very calming**”, and, overall, “**a great experience.**”

Discussion

While the qualitative analysis indicated that SR and Mindful Based Interventions (MBIs) can be effective in:

- Lowering stress,
- Sharpening focus
- Improving quality of life

The findings must be interpreted in view of several limitations. Primarily, this included constraints on the research process imposed by the small sample size.

Quantitative data from this mixed-methods study indicated that SR has the capacity to:

- Promote well-being, and enhance a sense of achievement, self-worth, and social engagement.

In addition to being an intrinsically enjoyable activity in itself, the qualitative analysis demonstrated that some participants found SR as:

- A little odd, participants were nervous at first, and had trouble concentrating.

However, as they gained experience, they found SR to be an overall:

- Calming and enjoyable experience.

Conclusion

- For continuous growth and development of Shared Reading as an intervention for undergraduate students, further investigation is required.
- Given the current challenges of COVID-19 limitations, specific research on remote delivery of the intervention could be of value.

The
Smile



William Blake

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