

Episode 204—Dr. Annemarie Gockel: Practicing Presence: A Curriculum for Integrating Mindfulness Training Into Direct Practice Instruction

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. You've probably heard me talk many times about the unique neighborhoods that make up our diversity. If you're interested in hip and happening you should know about Hertel avenue. Based on its collection of Italian restaurants, bakeries and grocers, Hurdle has long been referred to as Buffalo's Little Italy. In recent years Hertel has also become home to businesses selling Kosher food, soul food and Middle Eastern food and goods. Add to that a series of well liked bars, boutiques, eateries, coffee houses and the incredible Northpark theater built in 1920 and restored to that era. It's no wonder that Hertel is such an appealing place to live and spend some time. I'm Peter Sobota. Openness, attention, presence and self-awareness. Tried and true foundational aspects of direct social work practice. In this episode our guest Annemarie Gockel, Ph.D. discusses her work, research and experience as a social work educator integrating mindfulness training as she instructs students in her social work courses. Instead of simply talking about mindfulness and self reflection, she creates time and activities and her courses for students to experience self reflection in the here and now and how this discipline brings to life the concepts being described. She offers recommendations and concrete examples of what mindfulness looks like in a classroom setting and how to introduce the whole idea of mindfulness in this context. True to form, Dr. Gockel guides the listener through a mindfulness exercise before concluding by describing the challenges to integrating this into courses and highlighting some new findings based on research in this area. Annemarie Gockel Ph.D. is associate professor and chair of the social work practice sequence at the Smith College School for Social Work. Our guest was interviewed by our own Elaine Hammond, adjunct instructor here at the UB School of Social Work. Their interview was recorded in April of 2016.

[00:02:47] So welcome Annemarie. I'm so delighted to be talking with you today about mindfulness and social work and training social workers and all that good stuff.

[00:02:57] Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be with you and be able to talk about this topic.

[00:03:03] You're welcome. So you came to our attention from an article that you recently wrote on using mindfulness training fairly specifically to teach social work students clinical practice skill.

[00:03:16] Yes exactly.

[00:03:17] So what made you decide to begin doing this in your training?

[00:03:21] Well really there are three primary reasons. One is at this point there's just so much research available that links mindfulness training to really key skills such as the ability to direct and sustain attention, to tolerate and regulate affect, to be flexible in your thinking, to be open and responsive and to enhance empathy and compassion for oneself and others. And so these skills are not only incredibly powerful for clients but they're also pretty foundational for clinical practice. If you can't sustain attention and really hear what your client is saying and if you don't have an openness to them it's pretty hard to do an effective assessment and begin to build a relationship. So one of the key reasons is really to try to enhance clinical teaching by using a vehicle for clinical training that builds on foundational skills.

[00:04:20] Yes, you are preaching to the choir here through my ears. How do you integrate mindfulness in your classroom?

[00:04:29] So many different ways. So in my clinical practice course in particular we usually use fairly brief periods with mindfulness and link them directly to the clinical skills that we're looking at for any particular day and have a sequenced flow in terms of the development of clinical skills and a sequenced flow in terms of the development of mindfulness skills. So one brief example would be just as we're thinking about and beginning to work with reflective listening and students are doing initial roleplay practice exercises. Usually they're quite anxious about them. I usually stop in the middle of a roleplay practice for example and just do a brief awareness of breath practice. Maybe five minutes, not even. And then have students continue the interview. And although that's a very accessible and very simple intervention in terms of teaching pedagogy it has quite a large impact. Students are always surprised about what they've noticed and usually they are noticing their anxiety or their self-consciousness or the things that are making the interview difficult and they often find that even after that brief pause the interview slows a little bit more smoothly and they're a little bit more present. So it's this great opportunity for learning experientially about working with things that students find get in the way of developing clinical skills.

[00:05:57] And then are you also encouraging your students to engage in these practices with the client?

[00:06:05] Yeah it depends. At the beginning I'm really actually focused on helping the students become aware of and start to use the practices for themselves. So I really start with the self and then gradually work into thinking about how this plays out with the client, just seeing what the dynamics are, how it changes the way that they relate to the client in terms of their presence in the room and then gradually as indicated perhaps using brief practices with the client.

[00:06:36] This really brushes up against student and practitioner self care issues, something that I am heavily involved in in my own work. Where do you see differences? Where do you see similarities? Is this something that you explicitly deal with?

[00:06:52] Right, thank you for also giving me a chance to come around. I had said there were three reasons and I think I've only got to two of them and so the third reason would really be around self care. I really see mindfulness training as a form of self care. Certainly in the sense that it heightens self-awareness. It kind of provides an experiential type of self-awareness. So, you know usually when we teach self-awareness in social work school is an important part of a clinical skill set, we think about getting people to examine their beliefs or their values, it's a little bit more conceptual. But using mindfulness training brings an experiential piece to it and people aren't just thinking about their thoughts. They're really actually looking at what's happening in the moment. They're seeing their thoughts unfold or they're seeing their process of engaging with the client unfold and that allows for more awareness of the triggers that come up or the anxiety that comes up or the things that they need to attend to to take care of themselves to be more present for their work but also for their life. So in that sense I really see mindfulness training as a way of fostering a foundation for short and longer term resilience.

[00:08:12] Now you very consistently use the term mindfulness. For myself I very often use the term contemplation. Some people would use meditation and they are three very different terms really. Can you talk a little bit about how you use the word mindfulness, how you introduce the concept of mindfulness to your students?

[00:08:37] Right. Well there's different definitions of mindfulness these days.

[00:08:41] Yeah.

[00:08:43] I usually try to keep it as simple as possible in terms of the capacity to attend to one's present moment experience with interest and curiosity and I really frame it in terms of capacity, a sense of awareness that invites a different relationship to one's experience and within the context of the clinical practice class I teach it really relate it to those foundational skills that help people be effective in the therapeutic relationship both in terms of all of the different skills I had earlier talked about having us develop and in terms of being able to relate to one's experience. And so let me give you a practical example. In one of my classes after a practice exercise we were working with awareness of thoughts and feelings. I had a student say "oh my gosh, like feelings, they happen to your body." You know I never really realized that it's actually this physical experience and that they affect your thought. And it's not like various forms of, or various models of social work practice don't also contain that information but it's conceptual and how much more direct and informative is having the experience yourself and being able to see this process in action and then by extension starting to see it in action when you're talking with your client how it's happening for the client and how you might begin to intervene with that for the client.

[00:10:10] Absolutely. And we are, at least for myself I know, I feel so fortunate to be living in a time where there is the neurological and the neurobiological research coming out that gives us language for the 21st century around experiences that are thousands of years old. It's a marvelous thing.

[00:10:33] It is, it's kind of a coming together in its most ideal form of really opposite ends of the spectrum that we've separated for so long in terms of the wisdom of religious traditions and wisdom traditions and indigenous knowledge and modern science.

[00:10:48] I like very much your phrase "interest and curiosity," because those two words for me seem as though they hold great potential for students to step away from judgment. I mean certainly in my experience with MSW students they are anxious to judge themselves. I did this perfectly. I did this wrong. It was bad. And instead it feels as though those two words lead the student into an assessment frame of mind. Maybe opening up response contrasted with reaction. Do you find that in your students?

[00:11:28] Yeah I think that, you know, sort of the feedback I've had in the classroom and from some of the interviews that we've done which is part of the research that we did on the curriculum really suggested that introducing the practice does change the nature of the learning process even with brief practices. So students said things like "wow, you know I'm just more into dialed in, I'm more connected and I'm also more connected to my classmates and when I'm sitting across from someone in a role play I'm actually really kind of seeing them, I'm not just caught up and thinking in my head about what I'm about to say next." And so it does engage this kind of ability to be more open to experience, to develop your interest and to plug into the interest channel as opposed to the self consciousness self-doubt fear channel.

[00:12:15] Certainly I find that with the social work students but I also spend some time with law students. I find them making that connection, that particular connection to their greater life and coming back with feedback around my daily meditation practice, the journaling around that practice is beginning to make me more patient in my life. I'm having good feedback from my family. That's something that I hear as well. What other kinds of response do you get from students?

[00:12:45] So it's really a range that I think increasingly students are a very receptive audience and more and more students are bringing in their own practice. They've been exposed to yoga. They've

been exposed to other forms of mindfulness practice or the broader umbrella of contemplative practice and they're interested in how it relates to what they might be learning. And they do also take it out and use it in their regular lives as well as just to get through school and then particularly in the clinical interaction in all three places. So students are enthusiastic even when they've had their own practice. They seem to feel that it's valuable to make a specific connection to their work as a budding clinician.

[00:13:29] Do you get pushback from students?

[00:13:32] You know what? Interesting. I haven't really and I've been really curious about what it is perhaps about my context. I do different forms of mindfulness teaching so using sort of brief very clinically focused pieces in the clinical practice class but I also do a voluntary adapted MBSR course that uses more extended practices and where mindfulness and self care is more the focus. And so I think that there's just a real interest and openness to body mind practices at least in the campus that I'm on that's made it very right for the context.

[00:14:07] So sounds like this would be a really good time in our conversation for you to talk more specifically about what this looks like in your classroom. What does a typical exercise really look like. I would even be open to a very brief experiential kind of thing between us here.

[00:14:26] OK. Well do we want to just take a few moments perhaps if you're sitting in a comfortable position?

[00:14:33] I am.

[00:14:34] And just taking a moment to feel your feet on the floor. And notice the seat that's supporting you. And perhaps just briefly become aware of the breath as it is entering and leaving your body and not needing to change it in any way but really just picking up on the breath coming in and out as it is something that's already going very well today. On its own. So it's just noticing if your mind has wandered. As minds tend to do. While in drawing the attention ever so gently back to the breath, allowing this to be an anchoring place for your attention. So that whatever I might invite you to explore. If it doesn't suit you in the moment there's always this capacity to come back to the breath. Then inviting, if it's OK for you in this moment to expand the awareness to the thoughts moving through your mind, perhaps first just to the stream of thought itself. Becoming aware of it flowing rapidly. Or slowly. Perhaps starting to see if you can become aware of individual thoughts. And noticing should you fall into following that stream following any particular thought. And just coming back to observing the flow of thoughts themselves. Perhaps being aware of any reactions or responses to the stream or to a particular thought. And not needing to fix or change, seeing if it's possible to simply notice. Simply notice what's taking place right in this moment. And releasing the focus on the stream of thoughts and returning the attention to the breath, perhaps noticing any shifts or changes in the breath. Is it labored or easy. Noticing right where you're feeling the breath enter and leave the body and becoming aware again of your feet on the floor. And the support of the chair. And as you are ready if you closed your eyes opening them just beginning to make contact with the environment. Taking a moment to look around. So that's an example of a typical practice that I might use to begin to help folks tune into the stream of thoughts moving through the mind and begin to work with thoughts. I usually would probably do that for a little bit longer and in a little bit more detail and I usually do that around classes around disorders related to thinking.

[00:19:27] And thank you. It is. It is not often in my life that, right now at least, that I have the privilege of being led. And I appreciate that very much. Thank you. When talking with colleagues about this, and not just in social work but in other disciplines as well, and practitioners, supervisors in clinical agencies who are looking to maybe introduce some of this in their clinical supervision or

their clinical training, what are some of the things that you find especially important for instructors to know? Are there any particular challenges that your work in research has brought up Do's, don'ts?

[00:20:14] I think that the really key thing for me has been to be grounded in my own mindfulness practice. I think it's a really impossible actually to try to introduce students or to work with clients without a basis in your own practice because then you're not connected experientially to the challenges that arise. And it's hard to work with those challenges and because Mindfulness isn't a concept, it's an experience and a way of relating to experience. And I think that it's limitless in my own experience how I understand mindfulness. What it is for me continues to deepen and grow and change. And I certainly noticed that in students even over brief periods. That's part of the mystery of it, that's part of the capacity for working with experience as it shows up, which is really what we're aiming towards. So being grounded in your own practice. And the other thing that's been really helpful for me is some specific training in actually teaching mindfulness or other contemplative practices if you use a range of contemplative practices.

[00:21:20] Yes I would absolutely agree that some form of personal practice is vital. The range of practice is huge.

[00:21:27] Yes.

[00:21:28] By personal practice as a compassion practice I integrate mindfulness throughout my day. But my, my sitting practice is a fairly lengthy, as such things go, compassion practice. But that's not an archetype for practice. It can come in many forms.

[00:21:46] Yeah. And I think anything else that students do, right? Students get drawn to different theories because it sort of makes sense to how they see and understand the world. I think it can be the same thing with contemplative practices, people are attracted to different doors to the same kind of experience because that's the door that they can go through most easily. That's the door that resonates for them and so I think it's great to offer options.

[00:22:10] And so your teaching focus really is in clinical interventions correct?

[00:22:17] That's my personal teaching focus yes.

[00:22:20] Okay. Do you see this as applicable as a pedagogy in other kinds of classes?

[00:22:27] Yes. Of course, with my biases it's particularly useful for clinical practice but I think it's been used well in many different areas. So for example in spirituality and social work classes to add an experiential dimension to those classes seems like it would be a really good fit. And also in classes, if we think about classes working with social oppression, socio cultural concepts, those classes often involve entertaining difficult conversations. And so there's been a lot of literature on how do you facilitate those difficult conversations among students and mindfulness kinds of practices that are contemplative practices I think can have a real contribution in terms of helping people see and work with their automatic knee jerk reactions and allowing those conversations to be deeper and richer and to get stalled less often by integrating that contemplative component. I think actually Renita Wong at York University writes a fair amount about using mindfulness practices to have critical conversations.

[00:23:36] And I would absolutely agree, especially in my diversity and oppression of course we use a lot of mindfulness activities around self care. And what I find is that as the students think about caring for themselves around these topics they're more willing to risk, more willing to go to a

place of assessment and response and step aside from a judgement and reaction.

[00:24:04] So you have a direct experience of it being really productive.

[00:24:08] As well in the last school that law students so often experience a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in their case study. It can really feel overwhelming to them and allows them Step aside just a little tiny bit.

[00:24:28] I think it can even be really productive in places that don't seem immediately obvious. I'm thinking even in social policy classes, it's not the practice itself, some of the insights from the practice. So I think about primary compassion practice or a loving kindness practice and for me really one of the fundamental insights that keeps coming up in the form of practice with those forms of practice really are about our essential interconnection with other folks. How there really isn't a division. And I think those insights are really helpful when you're thinking about how policy trickles down and what's the connection between micro mezzo and macro. To really get into the experience of how do decisions we make at a certain level of practice affect others.

[00:25:12] I would absolutely agree. I haven't actually met the course yet. This would not be appropriate for it. So what's next for you? Where is your research leading you? Where is the course development leading you?

[00:25:24] Well, so initial research, we found that students who received this training reported more counseling self-advocacy than students who didn't, and also sort of talked about how useful it was to them not only in the class but we found that they did continue to practice when they went out to the field and used it both in terms of their own presence with clients, their work with clients and for their own self care. And so the next step really is following students up from classroom to field to see if we can see and measure does it have an effect directly on the skills that they use with clients. So that's one potential avenue forward that I'm working on and another one is really just some more writing about mindfulness along with other related themes such as thematic practices in the contemporary practice world.

[00:26:17] I will look forward to all of those. Do you have any final words of wisdom?

[00:26:22] Final words of wisdom. Personally I'm really excited about the potential of mindfulness and social work training. I think we've just only begun to tap the potential that's there and I think students are hungry for it. I think it's utility is immediately apparent once you start to engage with it. So I really think that this has great potential for kind of complementing existing models of training and really increasing our ability to do some of the things that we've been trying to do in terms that help students embody the resilience and the attentiveness and the effectiveness really that we'd ideally like to see in a clinician and that we'd like to ideally be experiencing as a clinician and able to offer ourselves.

[00:27:10] Thank you, Annemarie. This has just been a pleasure talking with you.

[00:27:13] Thank you. Likewise.

[00:27:16] You are most welcome.

[00:27:19] You've been listening to Dr Annemarie Gockel describe her work integrating mindfulness training in the instruction of direct social work practice on inSocialWork.

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