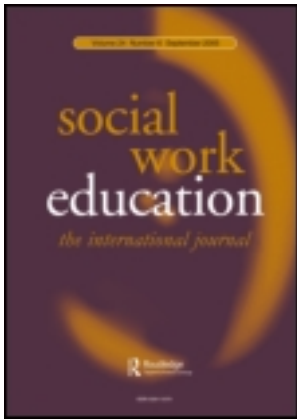


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Integrating Mindfulness and Reflection in the Teaching and Learning of Listening Skills for Undergraduate Social Work Students in Singapore

Esther C. L. Goh

This paper illustrates how mindfulness and reflection exercises can be integrated into the teaching and learning of active listening skills, an integral component of relationship skills training. This pedagogy was first trialled on a small cohort of 15 students and the improved version was applied with a second cohort of 53 students. Through the mindfulness and reflection exercises which were built in throughout the module, students identified the three most prominent 'bad habits' that hindered active listening as 'mind wandering', 'multi-tasking' while listening and 'thinking ahead'. The mindfulness and reflection exercises appeared to bring the usually-unnoticed 'bad habits' into awareness so that a conscious effort could be channelled into preventing them from interfering with relationship building. This expanded awareness facilitated the strengthening of ability to observe oneself in interactions. This paper proposes a combination of exercises that expand students' awareness of their own habitual listening styles, together with skills training through conventional methods of role play, video-taping and skills drilling, in order to strengthen motivation to change and bring about deeper learning.

Keywords: Pedagogies; Reflection; Skills Teaching; Expanded Awareness; Mindfulness

Introduction

Social work celebrated its 50th anniversary as a profession in Singapore in 2008 (NCSS, 2008). In this city state, the social work profession faces the challenge of a chronic shortage of trained personnel to fill the expanding scope of social service delivery. Every year there is a shortfall of 60 social workers in the various social service sectors

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(Sim, 2010). One of the chief goals in training social work students at the bachelor degree level is to meet the manpower needs of the human services. Hence, practice modules designed to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills in working with clients at the individual, family and group levels are foundational.

This paper discusses the core module 'Relationship Skills and Social Work' taught in the Social Work Department of the National University of Singapore. This practice module is a prerequisite for all social work major students before they can register for their first field placement. Two thirds of this module is devoted to training students on core interpersonal skills, namely 'active listening', 'non-verbal communication', 'empathy', 'paraphrasing' and 'probing'. Essentially students learn skills in engaging clients. The remaining one third covers 'awareness of diversity'. The focus of this paper centres only on the component of teaching and learning of active listening. The methods in which mindfulness and reflection exercises are woven into the pedagogical design will be discussed. How these exercises interfaced between classroom learning and daily life will be explicated. An outline will be given of the rationale behind the methods, students' responses and learning gained, and identification through these exercises of the most common obstacles hindering active listening.

Active Listening, Mindfulness and Reflection

Active Listening

Listening is not merely a skill, it is a foundation not only for professional helping relationships but for all relationships. Full listening means listening actively, listening accurately and listening for meaning (Egan, 2010). Carl Rogers (1980, cited in Egan, 2010) passionately called it empathic listening, i.e. being with and understanding clients and their world. To listen actively and empathically one has to put aside one's own concerns in order to be fully with the client. Empathic listening leads to empathic understanding which leads to empathic responding (Egan, 2010, p. 138). In this sense, active listening is hard work. Most beginning social work students are, however, unaware of their tendencies to succumb to passive and distorted listening. Egan (2010) attributes the causes of distorted listening to: filtered listening; evaluative listening; stereotype-based listening (i.e. helpers' tendency to box clients into diagnostic categories which causes distorted listening); fact-finding listening; and sympathetic listening. The culture and values we are socialized into form filters, and hence distortions are ingrained in us and operate almost automatically when we interact with people. In training social work students to listen actively and empathically, it is not possible to eradicate all these obstacles to active listening. Instead, bringing these unhelpful habits to the conscious level is the first step. Awareness is the basis of choice. Without awareness, it will be impossible for us to consider how our habitual reactions hinder us from being with our clients, let alone understanding them.

One way of achieving active listening is through the ability to observe oneself; not only observation of behaviour but also of inner dialogue while interacting with

another. Egan (2010) likens this to having a 'second channel' of listening to oneself. Not only should we listen to our clients but also to the dialogue within ourselves, to identify what might be facilitating or standing in the way of being with and listening to the client. This is a positive form of self consciousness.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way to cultivate such self consciousness. There is an emerging literature about the use of mindfulness in social work pedagogy (Lynn, 2010). Thus far it is being used within the classroom. Mishna and Bogo (2007) proposed that mindfulness can enhance the educator's ability to attend to tensions and emotions arising in the classroom, enabling the educator to respond more effectively to a moment of tension and dissent. Wong (2004) used mindfulness to create a safe classroom environment in teaching critical and anti-oppressive social work, which often invokes a sense of discomfort within the students and between students and teacher. She encouraged both teacher and students to 'relax into' and befriend the discomfort through mindfulness exercises. Through engaging and working with their discomfort, students and teacher develop a 'listening silence' where

we commit ourselves to paying attention to an open way, without being trapped in our likes and dislikes, good and bad, opinions and prejudices, projections and expectations, we have a chance to free ourselves from the constraints of the conceptual mind and predominant discourses. We see new possibilities. Our relation to each other and to the world also opens up. (Wong, 2004, p. 6)

Using gentle relaxation, mindfulness meditation and guided meditation in structured group sessions over eight weeks, Birnbaum (2008) helped social work students to cope, enhance self-awareness and increase emotional support in handling field and academic stressors while experiencing different states of consciousness. Experiment with mindfulness in social work education has only just begun (Lynn, 2010).

This paper demonstrates how mindfulness used in a secular form enhances students' self-awareness of their internal dialogue when they are listening. It is a technique which involves noticing those thoughts and feelings which are dominated by the habits of categorizing and judging, which often lead to mechanical reactions (or distorted listening). The practice of mindfulness enables us to be a witness to our judging mind. The stand of a witness makes it more possible for us to break away from our habitual mental activities of labelling and judging (Wong, 2004). Through this awareness, students can respond in choice rather than in a habitual and mindless manner (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Mishna and Bogo, 2007). Taking it one step forward, this paper shows the benefits of implementing sustained mindfulness practices in students' daily lives. Individual reflection is interfaced with group reflections in the classroom to facilitate the practice of active listening.

Reflection

Literature shows the increasing enthusiasm of educators for incorporating reflection—a psychological concept—into the teaching of social work, medicine,

nursing etc., because of its value in transforming practice (Dimova and Loughran, 2009). In social work, reflection is recognized as an essential element in practice, research and education. The heart of reflection is a concern with enhancing the awareness of one's assumptions, values and intentions embedded in practice and of the various social, cultural and psychological forces shaping these assumptions and values (Tsang, 2007). Notwithstanding the lack of consensus in the definition of reflection in extant literature (Ixer, 1999; D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007), this paper adopts Tsang's (2007) conceptualization of reflection as dialogue. I will demonstrate how mindfulness, together with reflection as dialogue, was designed and implemented at two levels: 'internal dialogue' and 'external dialogue' (Bakhtin cited in Tsang, 2007) in the teaching and learning of active listening skills.

Internal dialogue

Ho and associates (Ho *et al.*, 2001) consider that internal dialogue happens subconsciously: 'we fall into internal dialogical states, without conscious effort, as readily as we walk. In social interactions, we engage in internal dialogue to serve as a social compass with which to guide our actions'. Basically there is a continuous stream of internal dialogues which evaluate what we hear from the speaker. Based on this evaluation we respond accordingly. For the purpose of helping students to notice the assumptions and values that govern their evaluative processes, students are coached to be mindful to their internal dialogues so as to capture segments of it for reflection and examination. With the captured segments, students are able to 'dialogue with the dialogue'. This is to disrupt the subconscious flow of internal dialogues, take note of one's dominant and unexamined internal 'voice' and then challenge this voice if it prevents one from listening actively. This effort is similar to Nienkamp's (cited in Tsang, 2007, p. 688) suggestion to 'cultivate internal rhetoric' as a conscious and intentional process that would allow different voices to be heard and understood with a willingness to be persuaded and to change. It is through these insights that we can begin to modify the once unnoticed yet unhelpful dialogues that block our ability to listen actively to each other. Reflection at the individual level is an imperative action for learning about practice (Dimova and Loughran, 2009).

External dialogue

As much as it is useful to examine internal dialogue to identify obstacles that prevent us from listening actively, reflecting at the individual level by itself has its limitations. Personal reflection demands mindfulness and detachment on the part of the self to look at another part of the self, and in this there is a danger of self-deception. Dialogue that takes place with others brings learning beyond an individualistic process (Habermas, 1974 cited in Brockband and McGill, 2007). To create a safe learning context for students to engage in external dialogues, the teacher-guide has the responsibility to develop an atmosphere of trust. Cope (2001 cited in Johns, 2009) identified five attributes that contribute to trust, namely: truthful—the extent to which integrity, honesty and truthfulness are developed and maintained; responsive—openness, mental accessibility or willingness to share ideas and information freely;

uniform—consistency, reliability and predictability contained within the relationship; safe—willingness to protect, support and encourage each other; and trained—competence in technical knowledge and capability of parties involved. Guided group reflection is contracted in much the same way as clinical supervision, ensuring that every person takes responsibility for the self and the group as a whole (Johns, 2009). Let us now turn to examining the methods of integrating mindfulness and reflection at individual and group levels in the implementation of this pedagogy.

Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

Trial Run Pedagogy

This pedagogy design was first experimented with using a small group of social work students ($n = 15$) during the first semester of the academic year 2009/2010. In order to understand the learning experience of these students, I invited them to have an ‘informal chat’ with me after the completion of the module and after the release of results. This timing was to avoid any placating behaviour and to remove the power difference; students would not have to fear that giving negative feedback would have implications on their scores. These ‘chats’ were voice recorded with consent and analyzed. Ten students volunteered and the interviews were conducted individually, with the exception of two students who came together. Each interview lasted for an average of 45 minutes. The comments by these 10 students, particularly on the mindfulness and reflection exercises, were adopted and incorporated into the teaching of a larger class ($n = 53$) in the subsequent semester. One important recommendation was to increase the frequency of the weekly mindfulness and reflection exercises and to stagger them over the module rather than running them for two continuous weeks as in the original design. This paper reports the design, implementation and findings of the second run of this pedagogy in Semester 2 of the academic year 2009/2010.

Mindfulness and Individual Reflections (Internal Dialogue)

To aid students in identifying their habitual mental activities of labelling and judging, a structured checklist entitled ‘Bad Habit Tracking Exercise’ (hereafter known as BHTE, refer to Appendix 1) was given to students. This was modified from a web-based resource (<http://www.leadershipletters.com/2003/10/17/barriers-to-listening-1/>), and consisted of five categories of ‘bad habits’ namely: filters (comprising 12 items, for example: prejudices, expectations, past experience etc.); habits (comprising eight items, for example: jump to conclusion too fast, mind wandering, multi-tasking when listening, judging the speaker etc.); external distractions (comprising five items, for example noisy environment and time pressure); use of trigger words (either by the speaker or the listener); and finally, insufficient attention to non-verbal cues. In total there were 28 items in the BHTE. These items were collated into a six-day-week checklist. Students were asked to be mindful and observe themselves in their daily interactions, with particular attention to listening to others, and check against the list at the end of the day

to see what ‘bad habits’ they had committed that day while listening to friends or family. On the reverse side of the checklist were six spaces for short daily reflection (about five lines each day). Students worked on this BHTE on alternate weeks (third, fifth and seventh week of the semester). The design of working on the exercise in alternate weeks rather than every week was based on research findings that spaced practice generally promotes longer retention than massed practice (Demster, 1990).

Group Reflection (External Dialogue)

The class of 53 students was divided into three tutorial groups of 16–18 each. The big class attended a weekly two-hour lecture, and a smaller tutorial group met fortnightly for two hours. Smaller group size in tutorial classes facilitated students to engage in external dialogues with each other with regards to their BHTE. The small groups created a less formal and safer atmosphere. I usually addressed each student by name. Participation level of students was generally high. The first hour of the tutorial on the third, fifth and seventh weeks was devoted to group reflection exercises. Each person would take turns to share the top three ‘bad habits’ that he/she had committed during the past week. They discussed the reasons for these commissions and strategies to overcome them. It was not uncommon for teacher and students to challenge each other during the group reflection process, but this was done with respect and care. Sharing of successful experience of overcoming ‘bad habits’ was also part of the group reflection. Confidentiality was observed and students knew sharing should stay within the group. Each tutorial class constructed their group chart for the BHTE so that they could track the progress of the whole group visually. The pedagogical methods are summed up in Figure 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research data included the three BHTEs over five weeks and the teacher’s logs kept during group reflections in tutorials. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. Of the 53 students, 45 sets of BHTEs were collected for analysis purposes. The checklist of frequencies of occurrence of ‘bad habits’ completed by students

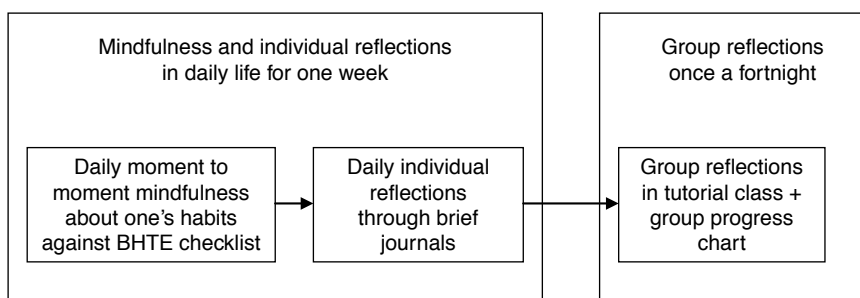


Figure 1 Fortnightly BHTE Integrating Daily Life Mindfulness, Individual Reflections with Group Reflections

(45 students \times 3 weeks = 135) over five weeks were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Qualitative analysis of the short individual written reflections was performed by careful readings and coding of all journal entries (135 individual reflections \times 6 entries per week = 810). Teacher's logs were also analyzed qualitatively and served to triangulate with the findings from students' reflections. The main themes that surfaced from the qualitative analysis were students' experience of the mindfulness and reflection exercises, reasons attributed for 'bad habits', strategies devised for counteracting bad habits, and their learning experience.

Limitations

It is worth mentioning that the findings presented in this paper have only been trialled with a small class ($n = 15$) and implemented with a larger cohort ($n = 53$). Undoubtedly, replications of these initial findings with more cohorts of social work students, not only in Singapore but also in social work education programmes in other countries, will serve to test the usefulness of this training pedagogy cross culturally.

Findings

This section first presents the quantitative findings followed by insights from qualitative analysis. There was minimum fall in the 'bad habits' between the first and second exercise. An obvious drop from the second to third exercise was observed. Qualitative data shedding light on students' reflections on the reasons behind salient obstacles to listening and how these 'bad habits' are interconnected will be presented. Strategies devised by students to prevent unhelpful habits from occurring, and learning gained, will be discussed.

Frequencies of Occurrence of 'Bad Habits'

The 28 'bad habit' items on the checklist are divided into five categories. Three items with extremely high accumulated frequencies over the three exercises, which all fall within the category of 'habits', are 'mind wandering' ($f = 330$), 'multi-tasking' ($f = 283$) and 'thinking ahead' ($f = 248$). The category with the second highest mean score is 'external distractions'. The top three items are 'noisy environment' ($f = 168$), 'interruptions' ($f = 153$) and 'time pressure' ($f = 140$). With regard to the category of 'filters' the three items that occur most frequently are 'assumptions' ($f = 166$), 'interest' ($f = 144$) and 'expectations' ($f = 100$). The fact that the three extremely high items of 'mind wandering', 'multi-tasking' and 'thinking ahead' all fall within the category of 'habits' explains the overall high mean score of this category (174.8) as compared to 'external distractions' (132.0), 'filters' (98.0), 'insufficient attention to non-verbal cues' (67) and 'trigger words' (50.2) (see Figure 2).

Reduction of 'Bad Habits' Over Five Weeks

Figure 3 shows the changes of the three BHTEs implemented over five weeks. It can be seen that between the first and second exercise, the only category with clear reduction

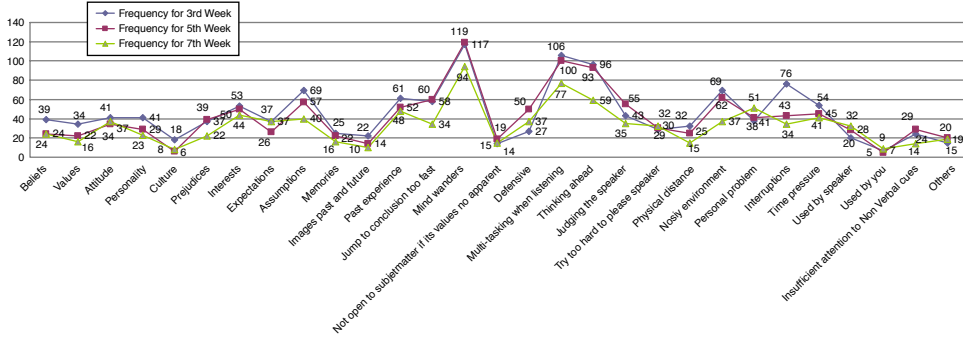


Figure 2 Scores of Three BHTE Exercises.

in frequency was ‘filters’ ($f = -102$) followed by ‘external distractions’ ($f = -53$). Instead of a reduction, the other three categories all showed a moderate increase, with ‘habits’ having the greatest rise ($f = +36$). This finding is within our expectation. Noticing unhelpful habits, undoing them and replacing them with new habits requires time. Hence, the increase in score could be partly attributed to the heightened sensitivity to one’s ‘bad habits’.

There was a clear drop in all categories between the second and third exercise. Drastic drop can be seen in the ‘habit’ category ($f = -143$) followed by ‘filters’ ($f = -50$). The overall scores of all ‘bad habit’ items showed a two-fold drop between the second and third exercise ($f = -239$) as compared to between the first and second exercise ($f = -103$).

Overall the three BHTEs spaced across five weeks appear to be useful in reducing the occurrence of unhelpful habits in the students who participated ($f = -330$) (see Table 1).

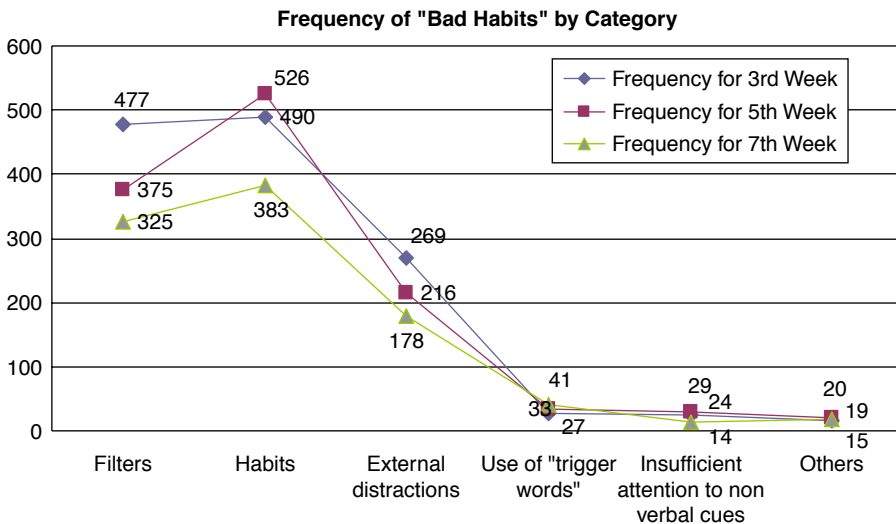


Figure 3 Frequencies of ‘Bad Habits’ by Categories.

Table 1 Reduction of 'Bad Habits' Over Three BHTE Exercises

	Filters	Habits	External distractions	Use of 'trigger words'	Insufficient attention to non-verbal cues	Others	Total
Frequency for Wk 3 (A)	477	490	269	27	24	15	1,302
Frequency for Wk 5 (B)	375	526	216	33	29	20	1,199
Wk 3–Wk 5 diff (B)–(A)	–102	+36	–53	+6	+5	+5	–103
Frequency for Wk 7 (C)	325	383	178	41	14	19	960
Wk 7–Wk 5 diff (C)–(B)	–50	–143	–38	+8	–15	–1	–239
Wk 7–Wk 3 diff (C)–(A)	–152	–107	–91	+14	–10	+4	–322

However, one should not examine the effectiveness of this pedagogy merely from the reduction of frequency, because the chief aim of the BHTE was to increase students' awareness of their existing habits which prevent active listening. Hence the frequencies of occurrence reported earlier and the reduction in occurrence should be read as two sides of the same coin. We will now turn to examine the qualitative findings.

Reasons for High Occurrence of 'Bad Habits'

Figure 2 shows that 'mind wandering', 'multi-tasking' and 'thinking ahead' peaked on the graph. It is worth close investigation into why students committed these bad habits so frequently. They acknowledged that these obstacles hindered them from fully listening to their friends and family members in their daily lives.

Mind wandering

According to the individual (journals) and group reflections (teacher's logs), students revealed that they noticed their mind wandering when they lost interest in what the speaker was saying. In a bid to be polite, instead of terminating the conversation they allowed their minds to wander and stop listening. The speaker talking too slowly or being too 'long-winded' (repetitive) was another reason cited. 'Slowness', 'repetition' or 'boredom' caused their minds to wander because, according to them, their minds work at a faster speed than the speaker is talking, hence, the 'free space' in their minds wandered. Another commonly cited reason for mind wandering was time pressure in meeting different academic deadlines and preoccupation with school work:

Because of the various upcoming tight deadline for projects, [I am] always thinking about these issues [and it] has prevented me from listening actively. It is only when I'm reflecting [now] that I realized how [worrying about] personal issues can have such a huge impact [on the way I listened]. Not only was my mind wandering off, I was also very reactive to words like "school work" and "projects". I could not focus on what she had to say and couldn't stop thinking about my own plight. (Student 9, 3 March 2010)

Multi-tasking

Many students reported difficulties in being fully attentive to the speakers because they were doing several things while listening. The most common distraction was sending text messages via mobile phone or chatting online with one person while talking face-to-face to another person. According to the students the tendency to multi-task can be partly attributed to the 'fast pace of living in Singapore' (Student 15) and the tremendous academic pressure undergraduate students face in the university.

Due to my packed schedule, I actually had to discuss matter online [with a laptop computer] while participating in a face-to-face meeting. The other people in the face-to-face meeting didn't mind but I knew it was quite distracting for them and for me. I realized I could not totally concentrate trying to be in two places at one time. (Student 53, 10 March 2010)

Another student wrote that fear of silence was her reason for multi-tasking:

I am aware that I fear silences which can be awkward. I would use the action of checking my mobile phone for messages or just simply pressing buttons to make myself [look] busy when I cannot find a topic to talk about. (Student 10, 3 February 2010)

Mind wandering and multi-tasking were often closely related. Students shared that when they multi-tasked, their minds could not focus on the speaker and started to wander. Hence, these two 'bad habits' tended to reinforce each other as stated below:

I was multi-tasking when I was listening to her. I had a message in my mobile concerning the details of the upcoming meeting for my projects. As a result, my mind was preoccupied with project and so I could not lend a good listening ear. (Student 13, 2 March 2010)

Multi-tasking while listening seemed to be part of the lifestyle of many of the social work students. The BHTE appeared to achieve its goal in raising students' awareness of the unhelpfulness of this communication style:

It has never occurred to me before that multi-tasking would hinder my listening as I've always considered myself a good "multi-tasker" and a good listener. This exercise made me realize that if I want to listen well, I have to do less, listen more. (Student 14, 23 February 2010)

Thinking ahead

Thinking ahead refers to the unhelpful habit of formulating responses or arguments in one's mind while listening, instead of paying full attention to the speaker. Some common reasons for thinking ahead were defensiveness, eagerness to give advice and discomfort with silence. When students felt challenged by the speaker they became defensive and needed to think ahead in order to retort. To withhold judgment or advice while listening to a friend's problem is not easy for most people. One student wrote 'I have experienced how powerful it felt to be giving advice to people and also discovered how it prevented me from listening actively' (Student 9). The discomfort with silence caused students to 'think ahead' so they had something in mind to fill the silent gaps.

I do not like silence, especially with people I am not close to. I tend to formulate my response in my mind, making sure that there are no grammatical errors or to ensure

that I do not sound stupid or ignorant. I do not want them to think that I am not interested when I failed to give a response. Therefore, [it] affected me in listening to the key content of the message. (Student 53, 4 May 2010)

Filters that Prevented Active Listening

The accumulated frequencies of identified 'bad habits' within the 'filters' category were much lower than the 'habits' category. It is, however, worth taking a closer look at the two highest items, namely, 'assumption' and 'interest'. Our listening is naturally filtered when we have preconceived assumptions of the speaker.

My friend was sharing with me her religious belief. I made some assumptions about what she was going to tell me as I had some knowledge of that particular religion. Thus throughout the conversation I kept thinking of what to say and did not totally absorb whatever she said. (Student 18, 6 April 2010)

Another form of assumption was based on past experience: 'I acknowledge that I tend to jump to certain conclusions based simply on my prior experience of talking to her [mother] about the same issues. Due to these assumptions, I tend to not listen actively' (Student 32, 2 March 2010). Lack of interest in what the speaker is saying is another reason for students to filter or even block out what they hear, as one student's journal says: 'I realized that when my friends were talking about stuff that I have no interest in, I allowed my mind to wander' (Student 34, 9 February 2010). There seem to be some links between 'filters' and 'habits'. 'Assumptions' were often coupled with 'thinking ahead' while 'lacking in interest' and 'mind wandering' often occurred together.

External Distractions that Hindered Listening

It is common sense that being in noisy places does not help one to listen. However the lifestyle of students in Singapore is such that meeting friends for lunch in the university canteen is probably the only available socialization time. Another noisy environment the students often mentioned was having conversations in public transport systems. They often had to raise their voices in order to hear each other. The next most frequently mentioned external distraction was 'time pressure'. The heavy and demanding workload in the university means the students were constantly under time pressure. They had to maximize use of time by merging time spent with friends with eating or travelling together. Both happened in noisy environments which were not conducive to listening.

Strategies for Overcoming 'Bad Habits'

An analysis of the individual journal entries over five weeks and the group reflections from the teaching logs shows many strategies that the students devised in their efforts to enhance moment-to-moment awareness of their 'bad habits' and thus prevent them from hindering listening.

Mindfulness

Some of the strategies for helping themselves to be mindful included: *making conscious effort* to be more aware of movement of thoughts [without being preoccupied]; *catch myself in time* [when my mind strays]; make a habit to *constantly watch* my behaviours; send myself *mental reminders/mental notes* to stay focused and keep my mind off other things and to give full attention to the speaker as the person deserves it. All these attempts hinted at new mental habits that students were beginning to cultivate. One person (Student 36) devised a visual strategy to help himself to be mindful:

I wear a yellow band on my wrist and it serves as a reminder to me whenever I am listening. If I forgot to have the yellow band on, I would write the word “listen” on my thumb. This method has gradually helped me to improve my ability to listen actively and reduced mind wandering.

Make the speaker the focal point

In addition to the mindfulness strategies to aid in preventing mind wandering, students found tactics to change their behavioural habits by making the speaker the focal point of attention. They believed consciously practising micro relationship skills learned in the module, which included keeping good eye contact, listening to the verbal content, observing non-verbal cues displayed by the speaker, and paraphrasing what the speaker said, would keep their minds fully occupied with no ‘free space’ to wander. As beginners, some students experienced exhaustion from such focused listening, as one student remarked:

I suddenly felt very fatigued and dizzy as though my brain is shutting down. This happens quite often when I’m listening actively focused. And is quite bad because the other party will start to end the conversation sensing my mind is not there. (Student 26)

Soliciting for feedback

A number of students believed there were limitations to their own efforts in preventing ‘bad habits’ by ‘catching themselves’. Hence, they actively solicited feedback from their significant others.

Another method is accountability, asking friends and family to help keep a look out for certain [bad] habits that I display when listening. This is a better method than just trying to catch myself in the act because they can see my blind spots easier. (Student 19, 4 May 2010)

This strategy shows that students made conscious efforts in interfacing their classroom learning into their personal daily lives and vice versa.

Students’ Reflections on Learning from the BHTE

The overall fall in the occurrence of ‘bad habits’ between the third and seventh week of the BHTE revealed in the quantitative findings (frequency = -322, refer to Table 1) is corroborated by qualitative analysis. The positive effects of the BHTE appeared in many students’ journal entries. This section discusses students’ reflections on their learning and the challenges they faced in doing the exercises.

Constant looking in the mirror

Being mindful of one's habits and style of listening did not come easy for many students. Their initial experience of starting a 'second channel' in their consciousness brought about some discomfort.

This exercise is actually quite frustrating for me because I've to be constantly aware of what is going through my mind while listening to a person and also be very conscious of my bad habits. I find myself resisting to change some of my bad habits especially when a pattern of communication has already been established with that person, it is even harder to take steps towards changing despite knowing it is going to be for the better. (Student 20, 9 March 2010)

It is definitely hard to be aware of one's own actions, both verbal and non-verbal and also to note those habits. It is like looking at the mirror all the time. But it certainly is a good thing. (Student 15, 23 February 2010)

Some students also found the need to constantly take note of their own 'bad habits' a distraction in itself. However, many of these uncomfortable experiences appeared in the journal entries only in the third week. Such 'complaints' disappeared by the fifth and seventh week of the BHTE. Time was clearly needed for students to get used to being mindful and observing themselves in action.

Heightened awareness

During group reflections in tutorials, many students verbalized their unpleasant discoveries that they were not as good listeners as they thought they were before embarking on the BHTE. One student even said that she felt depressed with this new awareness:

It was a tough and painful experience having to scrutinize myself and realize my weaknesses and failures in paying close attention to others [when they speak to me]. However, it is a necessary and helpful learning experience. I believe reflection plays a big part in helping me gain self-awareness as I took time to review my own thoughts and emotions in relating to people throughout the day. (Student 17, 4 May 2010)

Another student reflected specifically how she was surprised at the feedback her friend gave her about her 'shifting eyes'. Prior to the BHTE this student thought she did not have any difficulties in looking the speaker in the eye. She later realized the content of the conversation had provoked a sense of conflicting emotions in her that might have caused her to look away during the conversation (Student 49). The new awareness gained was at two levels: firstly an increased cognitive awareness of one's 'filters', which included values and judgmental attitudes as well as the moment-by-moment awareness of one's verbal and non-verbal messages and their impact on the interacting partners. The second level of awareness was succinctly expressed by a student:

The exercises helped me identify my major problem areas [in listening] and think about what made me act or think in a certain way at that time [of interaction] which led to better understanding of myself and of how I can improve in active listening. Without such awareness I would have continued to think of myself as a competent listener and do not acknowledge or be motivated to overcome the hindrances to listening. (Student 19)

Improvement in listening

Students' heightened awareness of their ingrained bad habits seemed to occur in the fifth week of journal entries and teaching logs. Some of them were frustrated because they felt 'old habits die hard'. On the seventh week, however, it appeared that some students began to notice some improvement. These findings corresponded with the quantitative data where occurrence of 'bad habits' reduced markedly in the third exercise.

I felt this whole week, I committed less bad habits and was able to engage in active listening more effectively as compared to before this exercise had been done. I think it is mainly because I make an effort to keep in mind to listen actively and felt that it is important because it shows respect to the person whom I am talking to. (Student 11, 6 April 2010)

Generally I feel I have fewer problems this week and I was more conscious of the need to practice active listening. I guess it comes naturally by now. (Student 10, 6 April 2010)

Sustained practice on mindfulness and reflections over five weeks seemed to have some positive effects on the students. It increased their intentionality when listening and helped them to gain some success in refraining from old habits. These tastes of success fuelled their interest in wanting to further improve on their listening skills, as one student stated:

Formulating an empathic response on the spot was quite a challenge because I wasn't used to it but when I realized that my sister was more willing to share her troubles when I responded empathically, it made me feel slightly more confident about my skills. Although I was still guilty of [the bad habit of] thinking about past experiences I had with her while she talked, I reminded myself to quickly focus on what she was saying. This experience has made me feel more motivated to practice skills I've learnt in classes. (Student 20, 9 March 2010)

Discussion

The palpable reduction in self-assessed occurrence of 'bad habits' shown in the quantitative data, corroborated with qualitative findings on learning gained by students from participating in the daily mindfulness exercises and individual and group reflections, led me to propose a complementary pedagogy for the teaching and learning of active listening in social work education. The conventional training in active listening technique through role play, video recording and skills drilling in classrooms is necessary. Learning can be deepened, nevertheless, if complemented concurrently with sustained exercises that aim to increase students' consciousness of their habits and relationship styles.

Expanded Awareness

It appears that students found the spaced exercises of mindfulness and reflection aided their discovery of unhelpful habitual relational styles of which they were previously unaware. **The mindfulness exercise did not only allow them to observe their behaviours when listening, but were also useful in detecting thoughts and feelings that emerged.** This allowed them to observe the contents of their consciousness (through internal and external dialogues) rather than simply being absorbed by them (Hart, 2004). According

to Hart (2004), the arms-length distance created through mindfulness allows us to reorganize and potentially interrupt usual patterns of thinking and impulsivity, freeing the mind to notice unexpected insights (p. 33). For instance, many students experienced discomfort when they noticed many 'bad habits' that emerged when they were listening, and some felt depressed when they learned that they were not as good listeners as they had thought. This unpleasant awareness gained from self-observation could be the beginning of potential personal transformation through their willingness to make subtle shifts (pp. 33–34). This can be seen in the creative strategies students devised to help themselves not to fall back into bad habits. These strategies were not cognitive knowledge they learnt from classes, but rather arose from within their own sense of dissatisfaction with their current state and their desire to make shifts.

My hunch is that retention of such learning may be longer-term, although this is not supported by empirical evidence since this study did not track the students beyond one semester (12 weeks). The students have not merely learnt a set of skills and techniques cognitively in the classroom, but have a motivation to change which comes from within their own expanded awareness. It will be useful for future research to track students on a longer time-frame to assess retention of skills training with a structured component of mindfulness and reflections.

Challenges of Pedagogy

The discussion of the potential benefits and challenges of this proposed pedagogy needs to be understood within the context of undergraduate student education in Singapore.

Students' commitment

Whether this pedagogy yields positive learning largely depends on students' level of commitment. Students had to be motivated to faithfully carry out the daily mindfulness exercise and reflections on alternate weeks. The BHTE was designed as part of the continuous assessment, with small marks assigned to all the exercises. Students' motivation in doing the exercises can come from two sources. One is the desire to score well in the subject. Singaporean students generally have high academic aspirations for themselves and want to score well in their results. The other, and perhaps more important reason, is the interest in self-improvement. All the students reading this module have decided to major in social work. Many of them are passionate about their potential social work careers and have a strong desire to equip themselves to be effective helpers. Also, most of our graduates will enter into direct practice, hence listening and relationship skills are key to their future work.

Risk taking

Being honest in the individual reflections and sharing their struggles with 'bad habits' with their peers in the tutorial class required risk taking. The risk was fortunately kept at bay by positive energies. First was a supportive peer culture that evolved over the semester. Students were able to laugh at their own bad habits and willingly took comments and feedback from their friends in class. They created a safe atmosphere for

each other and cheered each other on the journey of self-discovery. In a sense the group reflections produced positive group synergy for honest discussions.

Conclusion

Similar to most metropolitan cities, the pace of life in Singapore is very fast. People are always pressed for time and attentive listening is not the culture in this city. It does not help when the ability to multi-task is often lauded as an asset, because people are busy with many activities and responsibilities. For university undergraduates, their lives are packed with deadlines, examinations and social activities. Being mindful and reflective is counter-cultural both on and off campus. Learning to listen well in this cultural context is especially crucial in social work training, as it does not come naturally to most people. For this reason, this paper proposes a pedagogy that appears to bring about deeper learning by helping students first to be aware of and unlearn their bad habits before learning new and helpful techniques in active listening.

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Appendix 1. Bad Habits that Prevent Face-to-Face Active Listening

Bad habits	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Filters						
– beliefs						
– values						
– attitude						
– personality						
– culture						
– prejudices						
– interests						
– expectations						
– assumptions						
– memories						
– images past and future						
– past experience						
Habits						
– jump to conclusion too fast						
– mind wanders						
– not open to subject matter if its values not apparent						
– defensive						
– multi-tasking when listening						
– thinking ahead						
– judging the speaker						
– try too hard to please speaker						
External distractions						
– physical distance						
– noisy environment						
– personal problem						
– interruptions						
– time pressure						
Use of 'trigger words'						
– used by speaker						
– used by you						
Insufficient attention to non-verbal cues						
Others:						

Source: Modified from www.leadershipletter.com.

Reflections

Mon (Date:)
Tues (Date:)
Wed (Date:)
Thurs (Date:)
Fri (Date:)
Sat (Date:)

Name of Student:

Date of submission: