

# Promoting Ethical Behaviours by Instant Mindfulness Meditation in Ethics Education

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**Abstract.** There is a growing need to identify what really can converge classroom learning to the real-life practising of ethical principles. We examine if the effectiveness of ethics education can be improved through meditation-based mindfulness intervention. Our baseline experiment is a procedurally modified version of the anagram exercise (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010) for measuring unethical behaviour. We introduce a brief meditation intervention to induce instant mindfulness. Our findings indicate substantive evidence confirming the positive effect of the state of mindfulness on ethical behaviour. Subjects in the meditation group engage in more low-level cheating compared to the control group who cheated more severely. Gender and academic grade do not influence ethical behaviour. Mindfulness fosters composure, mental poise, and a conducive environment for upholding ethical values, as indicated by a lower incidence of cheating in our study. We propose to promote a learning environment with mindfulness intervention in educational programmes.

**Keywords:** instant mindfulness, ethics education, unscrambled anagram experiment, meditation, ethical behaviour.

## 1. Introduction

Systemic corporate scandals and rampant financial frauds reignited the attention of academic bodies, state, and international organisations to re-assess ethical principles that guide businesses. With the growing concern towards developing ethical behaviour in decision-making, global associations of business schools have promoted to institute ethics education in graduate and postgraduate courses in higher learning institutions (Medeiros *et al.* 2017). The genesis behind this is that the education system (Gautschi and Jones 1998) and academic input (Eynon

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*et al.* 1997) play a significant role in building the core value system and ethical orientation. But the question arises... is introducing an ethics course in the curriculum enough to instil ethical behaviour? Though many higher education institutes across the globe have included foundational ethics courses in their curricula to inculcate ethical behaviour among students (McCabe and Trevino 1995; Lewellyn and Rodriguez 2015; Toolami *et al.* 2019), there has not been much reduction in the magnitude and frequency of fraud and cheating behaviour in the professional world. Indeed, one can observe a general decline in ethical conduct in growing incidents of cheating and lying both at personal and professional levels (Bosco *et al.* 2010). Additionally, higher incidents of cheating and academic dishonesty among university students cause grave concern for higher educational institutions (Yang *et al.* 2013; Tabsh *et al.* 2017). To put things into perspective, offering business ethics courses at the higher education level has not given the desired results. This calls for a need to review the existing teaching pedagogy and identify plausible instruction modes to ensure that ethical values are internalised. There is a growing need to identify what really can converge classroom learning to the real-life practising of ethical principles.

The extant literature examines multiple dimensions, methods and pedagogies that can plausibly improve the effectiveness of ethics education. In an interesting study, Ruedy and Schweitzer (2010) analyse how mindfulness, a person's self-awareness of the moment, impacts an individual's ethical decision-making. They use the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS, Brown and Ryan 2003) to assess mindfulness and the carbonless anagram method, a novel behavioural measure to assess unethical behaviour. We recreate their study using brief meditation to induce mindfulness and study the impact of this intervention on ethical behaviour. We study the influence of meditation-based mindfulness intervention on the ethical behaviour of commerce students who have completed ethics education. The genesis of this exercise is that connection-with-self achieved through a short meditation protocol induces instant mindfulness among subjects (Heppner and Shrink 2018). There is only brief literature that elucidates the benefits of brief, low-intensity medication on cognition and performance (Hommel and Colzato 2017). Providing mindful time-to-think before self-evaluation can lead to more ethical decision-making (Kern and Chugh 2009). The role of instant mindfulness on actual behaviour is examined through an unscrambled anagram exercise that is structured to allow the subjects to overstate their responses. The experimental design clearly demarcates unethical acts of commission that cannot be erroneously ascribed as acts of omission. True or actual reporting of responses is considered ethical behaviour or a higher sense of moral conscience, while dishonest reporting of responses demonstrates unethical behaviour or a lower sense of moral conscience. The present study examines if the influence of instant mindfulness, that is, inducing a state of awareness and attention through meditation exercise, can lead to lesser instances of cheating behaviour.

## 2. Ethics Education and Ethical Behaviour

Instructors apply diverse teaching pedagogies to improve teaching effectiveness and meet curriculum objectives. Specifically, in ethics education, case-based tutoring uses incidents of financial fraud, tax avoidance, misreporting, mis-selling, financial statement falsification and alike as acts of unethical behaviour. Research criticises case-based tutoring on the grounds of low generalisation, bias towards verification and low external validity (Flyvbjerg 2006). With specific reference to delivering ethics education, such illustrations highlight destructive and negative associations. Instead, corporate measures with positive implications on ethical conduct are more helpful for value-added understanding (Persons 2012). Further, ethics centres at higher education institutions encourage awareness, ethical thinking, and application by organising talks, seminars, workshops, interaction sessions with industry professionals, screening films and documentaries, and conferring awards, and certificates (Safatly *et al.* 2017). Other engagements at higher education institutions that instil social and moral learnings and transform the character traits of the students (Sabat *et al.* 2015) include community-based service (Zweekhorst and Essink, 2019), and advocacy assignments (Kretz 2014). Simola (2014) applies relationship sculpting for increased emotional awareness and empathy for stakeholders, and process recording for enhanced literacy (Simola 2019) at the undergraduate level of learning. Evidence confirms that college major plays a vital role in the decision-making process of students (Smyth *et al.* 2009). Interestingly, delivering ethics as an “embedded” course seems to deliver improved relative efficacy compared to a “stand-alone” ethics course (Coldwell *et al.* 2020).

While academic input is also identified as an important determinant of ethical behaviour (Balotsky and Steingard 2006; Vrdoljak and Matic 2016; Kum-Lung and Chai 2010), some studies find that only teaching ethics does not transform into ethical behaviour (Low *et al.* 2008; Weber 1990). Even in the meta-analysis on business ethics instruction, Waples *et al.* (2009) identify that business ethics instructional programmes have negligible impact on internalising ethics though instructional content and methods provide an indicator to improve effectiveness. When the pedagogical focus shifts to “preaching by practising” using relevant tools and methods, it makes students moralistic in conduct (Persons 2012; Aguirre *et al.* 2017). Training-based-ethical learning has a positive influence on students’ ethical conduct (Persons 2012), with students who studied a higher number of ethics courses displaying a stringent viewpoint to cheating than those who had studied one or none (Catacutan 2019). Using innovative exercises as a pedagogical tool improves the internalization of ethical values as compared to focusing on theoretical principles in the ethics education curriculum (Misra and Goel 2021). Tailoring pedagogical techniques of the ethics course as per the specialisation of the student should improve learning outcomes (Aguirre *et al.* 2017).

### **3. Mindfulness, Meditation and Ethical Behaviour**

Researchers have established that the internalisation of ethics is an outcome of personal moral value system, moral beliefs, (Jones *et al.* 2003), upbringing and cultural underpinnings (Li and Persons 2011), religion/religiosity (Christie *et al.* 2003; Parboteeah *et al.* 2008, Goel *et al.* 2020), philosophy of life (Fernando and Jackson 2006; Tracey 2012), mindfulness (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010) and regularly engaging in worship, meditational practices, yoga, and spiritual learning (Srinivasan, 2011).

A mindful individual will be more aware and focused on the current situation to take ethical decisions (Small and Lew 2021). Mindfulness is a mental state of mind which can be achieved by being continuously aware of the present surroundings and accepting judgements and feelings arising from such sensitive awareness (Brown and Ryan 2003; Chan and Wang 2019). Mindfulness echoes the moral intent of the person over and above the cognitive judgement (Orazi *et al.* 2019). Mindfulness provides a sense of moral conscience that creates a self-regulated behaviour differentiating between right and wrong. This leads to the ‘right actions’ such as eliminating greed, aversion and delusion, and the manifestation of virtues like generosity, kindness, compassion, and wisdom for the adoption of ethics (Rooney *et al.* 2021).

Mindful meditation and other spiritual acts create awareness about moral reasoning (McNaughton 2003) and allow greater cognitive flexibility in judging between right and wrong and supporting ethical thinking (Lampe and Lampe 2012). Evidence appears to support the wide-ranging influence of meditation amongst decision-makers. Meditation improves compassion (Engel *et al.* 2020), personal awareness (Lampe and Lampe, 2012), moral reasoning ability, mindful attention, cognitive emotional regulation, and well-being (Shapiro *et al.* 2012), and reduces anxiety, stress, fear, and anger which helps the cultivation of positive emotions to improve ethical decision making (Leppma 2012; Kligyte *et al.* 2013). As part of the external intervention, instant meditation is observed to have a positive impact on the creation of mindfulness in students (Garrison *et al.* 2014). Using meditation as a teaching pedagogy may create an “ethical vision” amongst students who become more aware of ethical issues to apply ethical decision-making models in real life.

### **4. Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

Final-year commerce and management students of an undergraduate programme are recruited as the subjects for the study. All the students have credited courses on business ethics, corporate governance, and business environment and they are well-aware of the imperatives of ethical business conduct. Necessary approval was duly obtained from the institute’s ethical committee to conduct the