

Using mindfulness techniques to improve focus and concentration for university students- a group based approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of mindfulness techniques as a tool for improving focus and concentration and general well-being of university students. Research has indicated a high prevalence of psychological distress and mental health problems among university students compared to the general population, which can result in a reduced capacity to work and study (Stallman 2008). This has resulted in a high demand on services and support for the University of South Australia (UniSA) counselling service. International students are a particularly vulnerable group as they experience more problems than the rest of the student population (Pedersen 1991) however, they are less likely to seek support from a counselling service (Bradley et al. 1995) due to the associated stigma (Eisenberg et al. 2009). As a pro-active approach for managing this high demand and providing other avenues for international students to seek support, the UniSA counselling service developed the "Improving Focus and Concentration" group program.

A mindfulness based approach was chosen due to its effectiveness for reducing stress (Shapiro et al. 1998) improving psychological wellbeing (Van Gordon et al. 2013) and working memory (Mrazek et al. 2013) in various groups of university students. This three week program focuses specifically on skills that help to improve academic performance, manage study and exam stress and improve overall well-being. So far, the program has attracted 346 students including a significant number of international students. Evaluations from students indicate that it was beneficial for their study and overall wellbeing. Students reported improvements in sleep, concentration and an increased ability to manage study related stress, demonstrating an effective and innovative way to support student learning and wellbeing as well as providing a non-threatening way to engage with the counselling service. This paper reports on the content of the three week program, the recruitment strategy, student profile, feedback obtained from student evaluations as well as our future plans.

Keywords

Mindfulness, well-being, focus and concentration, university students, group program, study stress

Introduction

Research has indicated a high prevalence of psychological distress and mental health problems among Australian university students compared to the general population, with approximately 84% of students reporting elevated distress levels (Stallman 2010). Very high levels of psychological distress among students are also reportedly much higher than age matched peers in the general population (Stallman 2008).

Increased levels of psychological distress have been associated with increased disability resulting in a reduced capacity for students to meet their educational demands (Stallman 2008) with these students achieving poorer educational outcomes as evidenced by lower grades (Stallman 2010). Students experiencing very high levels of distress experience impaired capacity to work and study up to 60 % of time, which may then place them under more pressure and psychological distress as they try to catch up with their workload (Stallman 2008). Only about 36% of students experiencing high levels of distress access professional assistance (Stallman 2008) with international students

being even less likely to seek support from a counselling service (Bradley et al. 1995), even though they are a particularly vulnerable group, experiencing more problems than the rest of the student population (Pedersen 1991).

While the language barrier presents the most significant difficulty for most international students, further difficulties with linguistics, academic requirements, finances, intrapersonal issues (Mori 2000) and social isolation (Stallman 2008), constitute unique sources of stress for these students. This is somewhat concerning given that international students are less likely to engage in help seeking, often due to elevated levels of personal stigma attached to psychological distress (Eisenberg et al. 2009).

Although research indicates there are low levels of help seeking among university students, the high prevalence of distress has resulted in a high demand for one on one services and support for the UniSA counselling service. The levels of distress among students and the impact this has on their overall wellbeing and capacity to study raised concerns for the counselling service. As a pro-active approach for managing the demand and providing skills for managing stress, improving study capacity and overall wellbeing, the “Improving Focus and Concentration” group program was developed. This method of establishing connections with students, especially international students, is supported by research that suggests that outreach programs exposing counsellors to students and the learning of relaxation skills are well received by students (Bradley et al. 1995).

A mindfulness based approach was chosen due to evidence of its effectiveness for improving various cognitive skills required for academic performance (Zeidan et al. 2010; Mrazek et al. 2013) as well as reducing stress (Shapiro et al. 1998) and increasing psychological (Van Gordon et al. 2013) and physiological wellbeing (Hassed et al. 2009). Mindfulness practice has also been shown to facilitate increases in adaptive coping style (Palmer et al. 2009) as well as assist in the reduction of negative mood (Lynch et al. 2011), mood disturbance (Rosenzweig et al. 2003) and emotional regulation (Van Gordon et al. 2013).

Mindfulness has been defined as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 4). It involves consciously bringing awareness to the present moment, with curiosity, openness and acceptance of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Mindfulness practice is based on focusing on the sensation of the breath or body, while being aware of any distractions. When the mind wanders due to internal or external distractions, the practitioner’s task is to gently bring the attention back to the breath or body and maintain a state of relaxed alertness.

A number of studies among university students (Shapiro et al. 1998) including senior medical students (Wernicke et al. 2011) and student nurses (Kang et al. 2009), have shown that the practice of mindfulness contributes to a reduction in stress and anxiety. Further research has indicated that mindfulness practice is effective at reducing fatigue (Zeidan et al. 2010) and symptoms of psychological stress (Shapiro et al. 1998). A number of cognitive factors essential for study have also been enhanced using various mindfulness techniques, leading to better academic performance. Students practicing mindfulness were better able to maintain focus and sustain attention, showed greater efficiency in higher order processing and long term memory retrieval (Zeidan et al. 2010). One study indicated that university students with two weeks of mindfulness practice increased levels of reading comprehension and working memory capacity while reducing the occurrence of distracting thoughts and mind wandering (Mrazek et al. 2013). These students practiced maintaining their focus on a single aspect of experience, e.g., their breath, and were then able to redirect this same focus and concentration to a challenging task. This assisted with reduced levels of mind wandering despite frequent internal or external interruptions and confirmed that mindfulness practices can deliver immediate short term benefits for students (Zeidan et al. 2010).

There are a variety of mindfulness-based interventions mostly founded on the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) program (Segal et al. 2002) and the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (Kabat-Zinn 2005). These programs were originally developed to prevent relapse into major depression (MBCT) and to assist patients to better cope with pain and distress (MBSR). Although these programs have been effective in a range of settings, including universities (Collard et al. 2008; Shapiro et al. 1998) and have provided evidence based interventions for increasing wellbeing and reducing psychological distress, anxiety and worry (Ruths et al. 2012), they require extensive time commitments. The UniSA counselling service’s experience of running group programs on campus inform us that time constraints and life pressures experienced by university students result in high drop-out rates from workshops. In order to reach a broader, more diverse audience and increase retention we needed a shorter program than the standard 8 week MBCT and MBSR courses.

There is evidence that supports brief mindfulness training as an effective intervention for improving wellbeing and cognition. For example, Ziedan et al. (2010) found that a four day (20min/day) meditation training program increased the ability to sustain attention, improved cognition and mood, reduced fatigue, anxiety and increased mindfulness. Moreover, brief mindfulness training significantly improved visuo-spatial processing, working memory, and executive functioning (Zeidan et al. 2010). Tang et al. (2007) reported that five days of Integrative Body Mind

Training improved mood and cognitive processes. In another study Ziedan et al. (2009) found that three days of meditation training was more effective at reducing anxiety in participants compared to other cognitive interventions.

The aims of the current study were to determine if a three week mindfulness program helps students to improve their ability to focus and concentrate, manage study related stress and help to improve overall well-being.

Method

Participants and recruitment

Since commencing in 2012, the program has attracted 346 students including under and post graduates, school leavers and mature aged as well as a significant number of international students. The program was advertised via an email sent out by program directors and course coordinators, a message in the student portal, posters and flyers on campus and by word of mouth through staff members of the Learning and Teaching Unit who had previously worked with the students. A link to the mindfulness webpage was included in all the promotional material to provide students with the opportunity to obtain further information before committing to the workshop.

The mindfulness webpage provides further information about mindfulness including a video of past participants describing the program and self-reported benefits as well as MP3 recordings of a sample of the mindfulness exercises used in the workshop¹.

The program was advertised as a three week “Improve your Focus and Concentration workshop”. A copy of the promotional material is included as Appendix 1.

Development of program

An initial four week experiential focus and concentration workshop program was constructed in 2012 by the authors. The program consisted of a one hour workshop, once a week for four weeks with each week focusing on a different theme; being present, being aware, being present with your thoughts and feelings and taking mindful action. Due to a significant reduction of participants in the final week of the program, the workshop was restructured into a three week program in 2013 where attendance remained high.

Week one of the three week program introduced the concept of mindfulness by using the experiential exercises of “mindfulness of eating” and “mindfulness of the body”. Time was allocated after each exercise for debriefing. Discussion focused on barriers to being mindful and home practice was set encouraging students to choose a regular activity to do mindfully each day. Week two and three incorporated elements of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to bring awareness to the relationship between thoughts, feeling and actions. Week two focused on “being aware” and introduced the “hands as thoughts” exercise to aid in defusion or distance from thoughts, various study visualisation exercises and the “leaves on a steam” exercise to assist in letting go of thoughts. A handout was given consisting of a list of metaphors to assist in facilitating cognitive defusion. Week three focused on “being present with your thoughts”, accepting thoughts and feelings, strategies for defusing from thoughts and introduced a longer “mindfulness of breath” exercise. There was discussion on how to use these skills in daily life, to reduce study stress and increase overall wellbeing. Students were given a number of handouts to assist with ongoing home practice.

Group facilitator preparation

The Improving Focus and Concentration workshops were delivered by members of the UniSA counselling service who had received training in mindfulness including MBCT (Mindfulness based Cognitive Therapy) and ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy). In addition, they were trained by the authors in the delivery of the three week program. Facilitators had the opportunity to participate in or observe the workshop before delivering and were initially paired with a more experienced facilitator. Mindfulness practice activities were also incorporated into the fortnightly team meetings where staff took turns to deliver a brief mindfulness exercise at the beginning of each team

¹ Link to UniSA Mindfulness webpage <http://w3.unisa.edu.au/student-experience/mywellbeing/mindfulness.asp>

meeting followed by feedback. This provided opportunities for all the facilitators to have ongoing experience in being a participant as well as a trainer. These elements of training and preparation were introduced with the aim of bringing a more genuine approach to the facilitation of the workshops as each facilitator had personal experience with the practice of mindfulness on a regular basis.

Measures

The MSES-R (Mindfulness-Based Self Efficacy Scale–Revised, Cayoun 2011) was administered before the first session and after the last session. Students were advised that this was voluntary and they could request their results after the final session. This scale will not be analysed in the current paper.

A simple evaluation (see Appendix 2) was created for the three week program with the primary purpose of capturing information to assist in program development. This evaluation comprised of open ended questions including self-reported benefits of learning mindfulness skills. This information will be presented in the results section of this paper.

Procedure

The program consisted of a one hour workshop, rolled out across all four metropolitan campuses, once a week for three weeks. Each workshop started with a “five minutes of mindfulness” exercise to assist each member of the group to focus on the workshop and enter the present moment. Each week a differing theme was introduced; (1) introduction to mindfulness, (2) being aware and (3) being present with your thoughts.

In week one, after the initial mindfulness exercise, students filled in the MSES-R. This was filled in again at the end of week three. Home practice and handouts were given each week and there was some discussion time allocated for this at the beginning of each session. A brief evaluation was administered at the end of week three which forms the basis of this paper.

Results

The registration data and evaluations reported on are from workshops run in 2013 and 2014 across the four metropolitan campuses. 245 students registered for these workshops and 34 completed evaluation forms were collected. Thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes in the qualitative data.

Registration Data

Workshop registration data was split by local and international student registrations, gender and degree level. The data was also compared against UniSA enrolment data to see if the workshops attracted a cross section of students.

Table 1: Registrations by campus, local and international students

Campus	City West		City East		Mawson Lakes		Magill		Total
	Local	Int	Local	Int	Local	Int	Local	Int	
2013	40	14	24	9	38	12	25	5	167
2014	36	7	30	5	*	*	*	*	78
Total	76	21	54	14	38	12	25	5	245

*Data for Mawson Lakes and Magill campuses was not available at the time this paper was written as these workshops were scheduled to run in the second part of the year.

Local students represented 78% while international students represented 21% of the total registrations. The data is representative of the overall UniSA enrolment data which indicates that international student enrolments fluctuated between 19% and 22% for 2013 and 2014.

Table 2: Registrations by gender

Male	97 (39%)
Female	149 (61%)

In table 2 the data was split by gender. Registrations for the workshops are slightly higher for females when compared to the overall enrolments which indicate that around 57% of enrolled students are female at UniSA.

Table 3: Registration by degree level

Undergraduate	211
Postgraduate	35

Table 3 shows the data split by undergraduate and postgraduate registrations. The majority of registrants were undergraduate students. This is what the authors expected since most postgraduate students have had previous experience of study at tertiary level and time to develop successful strategies for improving their ability to focus and concentrate. The majority of postgraduate students who registered for the workshops were studying a master’s degree by coursework. These students are more likely to be attracted to this type of workshop as many of them would have had a significant break before returning to study.

Overall, the data shows that registrations for the workshops match enrolment data indicating that the workshops attract a cross section of the university population.

Student Evaluations

The data obtained from the student evaluations has been plotted on the graphs below.

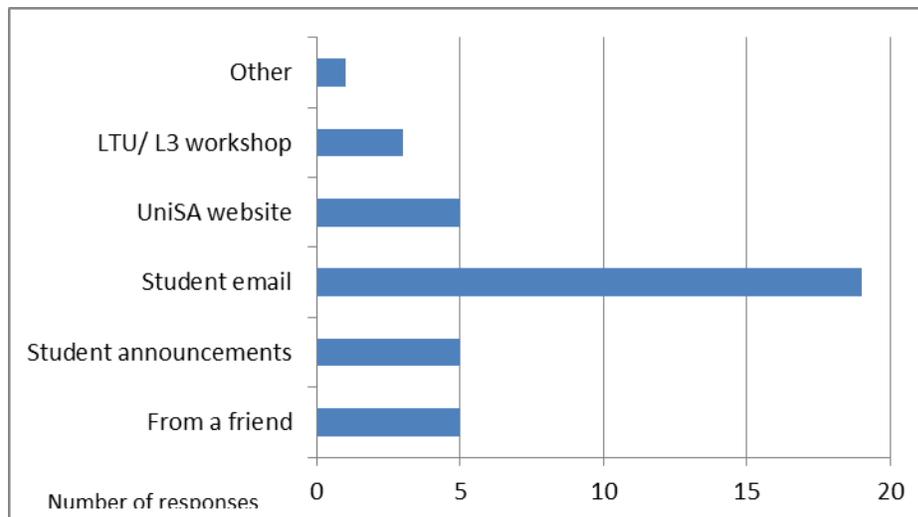


Figure 1: Question 1. How did you hear about the workshop?

These results indicate that emails sent to students by their course coordinator or program director are the most effective way of advertising the workshop, although having the information disseminated by multiple methods is essential to ensure that it reaches a broad audience.

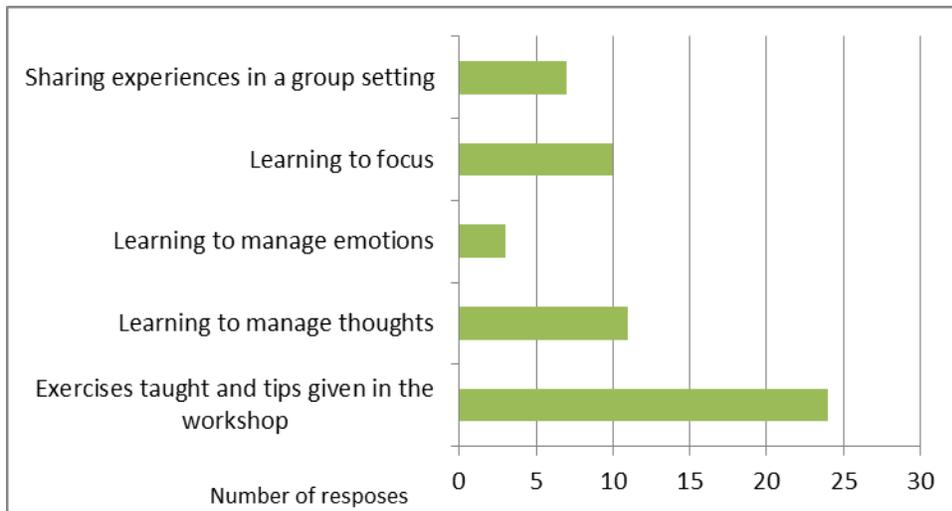


Figure 2: Question 2. What was most useful from the 3 week workshop?

In addition to the main themes identified in figure 2, students reported that the group program taught them new skills which assisted them to normalise thoughts, feelings and ways of coping with the pressures of study by giving them the opportunity to share their experiences and support each other. Here is a sample of the comments:

- *Learning very practical & easy techniques for diffusing anxiety, and being able to practice as part of a group.*
- *Hearing other people's experiences was really helpful to make me feel not alone.*
- *Learning about the different distractions experienced by students and what techniques work for them.*
- *Having a period of time where I can focus and let worried slip to the back of my mind.*

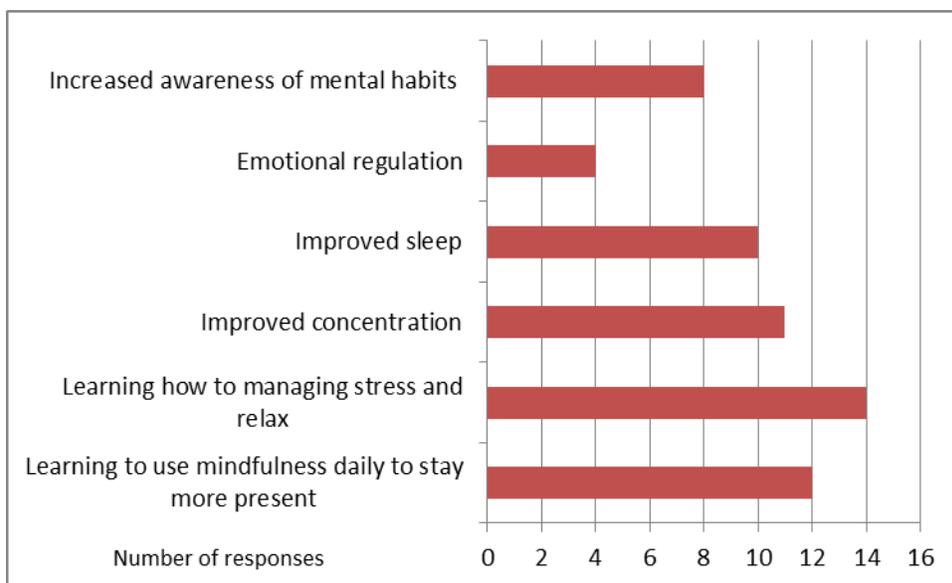


Figure 3: Question 3. How has it helped you?

Feedback from participants highlighted that after 3 one hour sessions they were able to apply the new skills to their daily life and use these to help them stay more present and focused on the activity they are participating in. They were also more aware of and able to manage distractions. Some comments include:

- *I am able to catch myself when I overthink and worry.*
- *I realise when my mind is drifting, when I really need to be focused and I can bring it back now.*
- *Being able to accept how I am thinking and feeling and just getting on with what I have to do.*
- *It's given me skills to deal with the pressure of full time study and it's a reminder to take time for myself.*

Most participants reported that the mindfulness techniques learnt helped them improve across a number of categories listed in figure 3, indicating overall improvement in focus and concentration, coping skills and wellbeing.

Question 4 of the evaluation asked students if they would recommend the workshop to other students. All students stated that they would recommend the workshop to others. They identified the skills and techniques learnt as useful and beneficial to all university students and helpful in managing study stress and improving overall wellbeing.

Question 5 asked for any additional comments. Participants used this question as an opportunity to make a number of recommendations to improve the workshops which included having a summary of the techniques introduced and practiced at the end of each session, recordings of the exercises and starting a mindfulness club on campus. The authors intend to use these suggestions to improve the workshops in the future.

Many participants also used this question as an opportunity to thank the facilitators and highlight the impact that this workshop had on them overall. For example:

- *This was a really valuable experience & has helped me feel more on top of my study.*
- *Without these tips I probably would have quit, but with these new skills I feel I can deal with the pressure.*

Discussion

This paper examines the effectiveness of a three week mindfulness program in assisting students to improve their ability to focus and concentrate, manage study related stress and help to improve overall wellbeing. Evaluations from students demonstrate that it was not only beneficial for increasing focus and concentration, managing study stress and increasing overall wellbeing but assisted in a number of other areas picked up by thematic analysis. Students reported improvements in sleep, emotional regulation, increased relaxation, awareness of mental habits and the ability to be more present in daily activities.

Feedback from participants highlighted that after 3 one hour sessions they were able to apply these new skills to daily life. By noticing their thoughts and managing distractions, they were able to refocus and remain more present on the activity they were engaged in. These self-reported improvements are consistent with previous research findings reporting that brief mindfulness practice assists in being able to sustain attention and remain focused (Zeidan et al. 2010).

The data indicates that the workshop attracts a cross section of the student population, which is consistent with enrolments. The workshops attracted a significant number of male and international students, who are often underrepresented in counselling contacts. The data indicates that international students were just as likely to register for this workshop even though they are less likely to access one to one counselling, indicating that the workshop is a successful proactive approach for assisting international students to access support.

Learning mindfulness techniques in a group setting also has some broader benefits. Student evaluations revealed that they enjoyed sharing their experiences and learning new skills within a group setting. These results support previous research indicating that international students enjoy learning new skills, such as relaxation, and engage better with group programs exposing them to counsellors, rather than engaging in one on one counselling (Bradley et al. 1995). Evaluations also indicated that participation in this program assisted students in feeling less isolated, which has been previously been identified as a barrier in help seeking by international students (Stallman 2008).

One of the challenges of running group programs within the university setting is recruitment. As students need to manage their time between work, study and other life commitments they often have little time left to commit to anything outside of class. This study has shown that emails sent to students by their course coordinators or program

directors are the most effective way of advertising this type of workshop. Students value recommendations from their course coordinators and program directors, so good relationships between teaching staff and the workshop facilitators was very important for the success of this program. However, advertising the workshop by multiple methods was essential to ensure that the information reached a broad audience, including those students who may not regularly check emails or engage with their teaching staff.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the three week mindfulness program is an effective and innovative way to support student learning and wellbeing as well as providing a non-threatening way to engage with the counselling service with all students reporting that they would recommend the workshop to others.

Research Limitations

To date, the authors have been unable to investigate appropriate measures of mindfulness for such a program. Initially, the MSES-R was administered, however further research needs to be done on its suitability for this type of program.

Now that sufficient positive feedback has been obtained to make an appropriate program for the university setting, further evaluations will measure self-reported changes in the ability to focus, manage distractions, increase productivity and reduce overall stress levels. The authors have already developed an evaluation for another mindfulness program which ran for the entire teaching period in 2014 which they intend to adapt for future use in these workshops. In future workshops facilitators will be more vigilant in collecting the evaluations from students to ensure we have a broader cross section of data to work with.

Future program/research

The Improving Focus and Concentration workshops will continue to be run across all 4 campuses of UniSA. The authors intend to use student feedback to improve print and online promotional materials and resources to promote the program and provide student friendly resources. At the time of writing this paper the authors were in the process of meeting with two Design Studio students who were interested in researching and developing posters promoting mindfulness practice and its benefits as well as information kits for home practice as part of their final year major research project. In addition, the counselling team was in the process of updating MP3 recordings of the mindfulness exercises used in the workshops.

A complete workshop manual was also prepared in 2014 including all information and exercises to assist facilitators in the smooth delivery of the program. This will be evaluated at the end of 2014 with the intention of publishing and making the program available to other universities.

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Appendix 1

Promotional Material for the Workshop

Improve your focus and concentration workshop

Would you also like to learn how to:

- Deal more effectively with study stress and the pressures of daily life,
- Make the most of your potential,
- Increase your energy, wellbeing and feel happier

This 3 week workshop covers the principles and practice of mindfulness; a skill for restoring a sense of calm and clarity to your mind. It will focus specifically on skills that will help you to improve your academic performance, cope with the current pressures of final assignments and exams and make study life more enjoyable. In all the sessions, you will be guided through a range of simple exercises and techniques that you can put into practice immediately.

When and Where: (Dates and Times)

You need to attend all 3 sessions as skills and practices will be built on each week.

For further information go to <http://w3.unisa.edu.au/student-experience/mywellbeing/mindfulness.asp>

To register go to ([link to online registration here](#))

Appendix 2

Focus and Concentration Workshop Evaluation

How did you find out about the workshop?

- What was most useful from the 3 week workshop?
- How has it helped you?
- Would you recommend the workshop to other students?
- Any other comments?

Thank you

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