Using the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC) in Supervision

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Abstract

The Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC) is a useful framework for supporting teacher development in the context of mindfulness-based supervision (MBS). It offers a framework that enhances clarity, develops reflexive practice, gives a structure for feedback, and supports learning. MBS is a key component of Mindfulness-Based Program (MBP) teacher training and ongoing good practice. Integrating the MBI:TAC within the MBS process adds value in a number of ways including: offering a shared language around MBP teaching skills and processes; framing the core pedagogical features of MBP teaching; enabling assessment of developmental stage; and empowering supervisees to be proactive in their own development. The paper lays out principles for integrating the MBI:TAC framework into MBS. The supervisor needs awareness of the ways in which the tool can add value, and the ways it can inadvertently interrupt learning. The tool enables skills clarification, but the learning process needs to remain open to spontaneous experiential discovery; it can enable structured feedback but space is also needed for open reflective feedback; and it can enable conceptual engagement with the teaching process but space is needed for the supervisee to experientially sense the teaching process. The tool needs to be introduced in a carefully staged way to create optimal conditions for learning at the various stages of the MBP teacher-training journey. Practical guidance is presented to consolidate and develop current practice. The principles and processes discussed can be generalized to other forms of reflective dialogue such as mentoring, tutoring and peer reflection groups.

Mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) are being implemented worldwide to improve health, well-being, and to support people to flourish. As the evidence base and demand grows and MBPs are delivered into different sectors of society across the globe, it is vital to ensure that the quality and integrity of the approach is sustained. At the heart of ensuring rigour and high standards is the quality of training for MBP teachers. MBP teacher training has become increasingly systematised, with supervision (or mentoring as it is known in some regions) as an integral part of the process.[1–4] Supervision is one key element of how teachers learn to deliver MBPs in ways that adhere to the current evidence base; are steeped in the underpinning theories from scientific, psychological and contemplative frameworks; are based on experiential engagement in mindfulness practice; and are culturally sensitive and inclusive.

Mindfulness-based supervision (MBS) is an essential part of maintaining standards and upholding the integrity of how mindfulness is taught, both during and beyond training. There are not any formal accrediting professional bodies for MBP teachers yet, but national and international associations are being formed to set guidelines and codes of conduct. BAMBA, the body that represent MBP teachers in the UK, require MBS to be a key element of training and ongoing good practice for MBP teachers. The guidelines recommend that

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MBP teachers engage in regular supervision with an experienced mindfulness-based teacher to reflect, inquire and receive feedback.[1] This is because MBS provides a checking process where good teaching practice is developed and nourished. The potential importance of supervision was recognised in a recent study looking at the scalability of training teachers to deliver a mindfulness program in schools. One of the recommended future directions was that teachers might benefit from supervision as they begin to teach to ensure competency of teaching.[5]

The articulation of the distinctive features of MBS and the current evidence base is relatively recent. A framework has been set out, based on expert opinion, for describing and understanding the distinctive features and processes of MBS.[6] This framework and its adapted form have been used as a basis for training experienced MBP teachers to offer MBS.[7] A qualitative research study gathered reports from mindfulness supervisors and supervisees of their experience of MBS and how it impacts on MBP teaching.[8] MBS was found to be both an essential part of learning to be an MBP teacher and ongoing professional development, which in turn contributes to the delivery of high-quality MBPs and integrity of the field. The MBS relationship is rooted in mindfulness practice and theory, and is dedicated to supporting supervisee learning and growth, with a particular focus on developing teaching skills, underpinning knowledge, and the embodied qualities that enable them to work with the unfolding process of teaching MBPs.

The research on MBS revealed a consensus from participants of seeing the potential of using the Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC)[9] within MBS, whilst also acknowledging some cautions.[8] In one supervisee's words when asked if it was being used: "*No, but why not?' is my short answer.*"[8(p115)] One of the recommendations from this research was for supervisors and supervisees to explore further the use of the MBI:TAC in MBS. A subsequent survey of MBP trainers and supervisors internationally shows that this is already happening, 95% of respondents ($N = 79$) reported that they use the MBI:TAC as a reflective tool with their trainees and supervisees in a range of ways.[10] Thus although the tool was initially developed for assessment, its roll out into practice is being accelerated by its value as a formative tool. Given that this is the case, it is important to examine best practice in how to use the tool in these more informal ways.

This paper develops understandings and examines the use of the tool within MBS to support reflective dialogue, teacher development and teaching integrity. It lays out principles for integrating the MBI:TAC frameworks into the supervisory relationship. To date, explorations about the use of the MBI:TAC in supervision are

happening from the ground up and are organically and creatively evolving. We gather current practice and understanding together to offer guidance on using the tool in individual supervision. Many of these ideas could also be explored in other learning and supportive relationships such as peer reflection groups (PRGs), mentoring and tutoring. We offer a short case study on PRGs to demonstrate this application. The paper is one of four linked papers addressing the contribution of the MBI:TAC to integrity in practical ways. The other papers focus on the integration of the tool into teacher training[11]; presentation of research on training practitioners to use the tool[12]; and laying out good practice considerations for using the tool to assess skills in MBP teacher training contexts.[13]

The MBI:TAC as a Support to Developmental Learning in Supervision

The MBI:TAC was originally designed to assess the skills of MBP teachers but is now used also as a framework for promoting skill development. MBS supports teachers to develop the skills and orientations required for mindfulness-based teaching.[8] Both aim to highlight where a teacher is in their development and help provide clarity about strengths and learning needs. Bringing the MBI:TAC into the MBS process supports developmental learning in a number of potential ways.

First, the MBI:TAC gives a shared language about the skills and processes within the teaching of MBPs. For example, the implicit process of embodiment of mindfulness (domain 3 of the MBI:TAC) is often difficult for new teachers to grasp – the MBI:TAC descriptors may help them to enter this territory. The tool offers a language for giving challenging feedback. This removes some of the personal, and brings to focus to observable, tangible aspects of the teaching process. Being able to receive honest feedback can be an aid in moving through blocks in development as an MBP teacher.[11] The combination of the supportive MBS relationship with the use an objective framework such as the MBI:TAC enables the supervisor to combine kindness with rigour.

Second, the MBI:TAC frames the core pedagogical features of mindfulness-based teaching, giving an overall picture of the teaching process (the six domains), and unpacking the specifics within these (the key features within each domain). This mapping of the territory of skills enables the supervisor and supervisee to anchor conversations within a shared framework of understanding.

Third, the use of the MBI:TAC in supervision can be staged to offer the appropriate conditions for the various stages in the mindfulness-based teacher training journey.

For example, in the early stage of learning, using a skeletal version of the tool (that includes the domains of teaching but leaves out the competence levels). This version offers a broad map of the territory of the domains without the imposition of content about levels which can trigger anxiety.[14] As supervisees develop in their teaching, space can be given to exploring the specifics of each domain and their key features in turn, and identifying strengths and areas of learning. At later stages supervisees may record themselves teaching and ask the supervisor to offer feedback using the framework of the MBI: TAC. The framework of the MBI:TAC offers a structure to bringing curiosity to the phases of the developmental process.

Fourth, the MBI:TAC provides the ability for the supervisor and supervisee to be able to see where they are developmentally. The tool is structured with developmental processes in mind and presents a clear and detailed picture of how MBP teaching looks at different competence levels.

Fifth, the MBI:TAC can empower supervisees to be proactive in their own development. The tool can demystify the MBP teaching process. If assessment of teaching skills is part of their teacher training, this is not a 'secret' assessment done to them, but a transparent participatory engagement.

Principles in Using the MBI:TAC as a Formative Reflective Tool—Potentials and Pitfalls

There are some key differences in using the MBI:TAC as a basis for reflective dialogue, as opposed to using it as an assessment tool. In MBS, the MBI:TAC is regarded as a tacit map for exploration rather than using it to focus on fixed assessment points. Used in this way, the MBI:TAC has the potential to catalyse an attitude of curiosity, and a willingness to grow within a context that feels safe and open.

Parker-Palmer speaks of the importance of holding creative tensions, polarities and paradox in learning processes without moving to resolution.[15] Instead, we honour the truths that are held within each dimension of a polarity. The important point is to be aware of the risk of over-identifying with or ignoring one dimension of a truth. This awareness of creative tensions helps to frame understanding about the potential benefits and possible pitfalls of using the MBI:TAC in reflective dialogue. Every potential benefit that the MBI:TAC brings to the MBP teacher learning process, is matched by a potential pitfall if the process is not held with sensitivity and care. It is important that supervisors use the tool with awareness of these dimensions, and in turn help their supervisees to open awareness to subtlety and

nuance. We name some of these tensions to be aware of when using the MBI:TAC in MBS below:

Skills Clarification Versus Remaining Open to Experiential Discovery

Using the MBI:TAC to reflect upon the supervisee's practice (via the use of video material) can help clarify and nurture the particular skills being developed. In this way, the tool may safeguard integrity by giving the trainee clear feedback on competence level. However, beginner teachers may be prone to grasp for concepts from an external source of expertise, seeing the MBI:TAC as a set of prescriptive guidelines, which may move them into striving towards an ideal of what they want to be rather than allowing themselves to be where they are at.

Structured Feedback Versus Open Reflective Feedback

The MBI:TAC is an invaluable tool to support reflective feedback within the MBS dialogue, enabling depth and honesty about teaching strengths and learning needs. The tool offers a way of organising feedback across all the domains in a strengths-based way that nurtures growth (see feedback resource).[16] It enables the supervisor to give feedback in a way that feels less personal, and therefore may be more readily digested and received by the supervisee. Conversely, there is a risk that this structure interrupts the process of reflexive learning and practice. If held too rigidly, it could have a reductive effect, narrowing the richness and breadth of conversation within the supervision process.

Thinking About Versus Sensing Into The Teaching Process

The MBI:TAC is a comprehensive and detailed articulation of MBP teaching. However, it can be overwhelming and daunting, especially to a new teacher. Navigating the detail can trigger a movement into a conceptual, disembodied and effortful process. Although the MBI:TAC describes the various nuances and process nature of MBP teaching skills, there is a risk that it may stimulate supervisees to be too fixed and think that there is a 'right' way of doing things. The MBI:TAC is best seen as an opener for conversation in supervision, rather than having the 'last word' on the teaching process.

Practical Ways of Using the MBI:TAC in Supervision

Within current MBS practice, supervisors are exploring creative ways of using the MBI:TAC. The supervisor may hold the tool implicitly within their process, as a frame of reference around which to orient to the material

that the supervisee brings. This can include recognising what the supervisee is not bringing to supervision and getting a feel for the supervisee's strengths and learning needs. Supervisors/ees are also bringing the MBI:TAC more explicitly into MBS in a variety of ways as shown in Table 1.

How the MBI:TLC Supports Reflective Conversation in Supervision

The forthcoming Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching and Learning Companion (MBI:TLC) has been developed from the MBI:TAC as a response to the need of the mindfulness field to have a specific, simpler tool that is tailored to enable reflection rather than assessment.[17] It gives a brief description of each key feature as described in the MBI:TAC and asks trainees to choose the descriptor of skill level which most closely matches their felt experience. Alongside this, trainees are encouraged to write down identified strengths and areas of learning as an aid to self-reflection.

These aspects of the MBI:TLC offer new ways for opening up reflective dialogue in supervision. It has been piloted in UK and US universities and initial feedback is positive, and the tool will be published in 2021. Its distinctive contribution is to:

- *Help a staging process:* The MBI:TLC is introduced first to support developmental learning and familiarisation with key features of MBP teaching; and the MBI:TAC can thus be introduced at a later stage,

Table 1. Practical Ways That Supervisors Could Use the MBI: TAC in MBS.

Explore the domains of the teaching process without linking this to competence levels (using the summary version of the MBI: TAC)[14]

Be creative about which elements of the MBI:TAC to use in supervision depending on supervisees' needs and preferred style of exploration e.g. the full whole tool, the strengths and learning needs table, just the words, self-created pictures, diagrams, mind maps etc

Encouraging supervisees to reflect upon one domain at a time, perhaps exploring one theme per supervision session: reading about it, practising with it, thinking about its meaning and how it applies to their teaching, and to their strengths and learning needs

Noting which domains are not often spoken about to enable further exploration

Using the key features within the domains for feedback after live teaching/recorded clips, with an emphasis on narrative feedback of strengths and needs[16]

The supervisee sharing any MBI:TAC assessment outcomes from their training with the supervisor, with a view to shaping future direction within supervision

when trainees are seeking more depth and detail about teaching methods, and when they are preparing for assessment of their teaching competence.

- *Take away the pressure of assessment:* No matter how skilfully introduced, it is still clear that the MBI:TAC is an assessment tool.
- *Encourage a specific focus on non-judgemental but honest self-reflection*: It encourages journal writing and is written in such a way that 'incompetent' is replaced with the friendlier: 'I just didn't know about this key feature'. The reflective questions may open up conversation and new understandings within MBS. These questions may be used, or others created by the supervisor/ee.
- *Empower supervisees to be part of their learning process and the direction of supervision:* It encourages supervisees to be active learners, bringing their reflections and learning needs into MBS.

The ethos of the MBI:TLC as a self-reflective aid fits well with supervision. The supervisee is empowered to take ownership over their learning and development and present this to the supervisor for discussion. The supervisor is not 'doing' an assessment, they sit more alongside the supervisee and guide discovery. The potential power imbalance of being assessed by the supervisor is reduced.

The MBI-TAC in Peer Reflection Groups

Whilst, this article has focussed on supervision, we include a case study example of another way that the MBI:TAC is being used informally, to support MBP teachers and trainees to meet good practice guidelines.[1] Peer Reflection Groups (PRGs) are group-based meetings, co-ordinated and facilitated co-operatively (e.g. PRG to reflect on development as an MBI:TAC assessor).[18] Meetings include mindfulness practice and peer reflection and possibly a space in which teachers can practice delivery of curriculum segments and receive feedback from peers. The group context in PRGs mirrors the structure of the traditional teaching context for mindfulness-based approaches and the 'peer-led' format means that members are often facilitated by, and in relationship with, a range of levels of competence. The relationship between these processes and the MBI-TAC are multi-layered and operate through three primary modes:

1. Co-ordinating, facilitating and participating in group activities, provides learning and development that enhances competency across all domains of the MBI-TAC.
2. Peer reflection can be themed by a key feature or a domain of the MBI-TAC. Teachers and trainees can describe a pertinent or recent teaching, the group can

then sense into which domains and key features were at play, and which feel primary at the time of reflecting back. This process allows space for teachers to 'step back' from their teaching experience in a non-judgemental, mutually supportive environment and explore the way in which a domain has shown up in their own personal experience.

3. The use of the MBI:TAC, as both a peer reflection tool and as a structure for PRGs, sits within a recognisable framework for MBP teacher development. This framework allows PRGs to be informed by learning and development arising from teacher training and the supervisory process and in turn can inform focus and direction for a teachers' development going forwards.

Conclusion

We have presented the emerging practice of integrating the MBI:TAC within MBS. In summary, the tool offers a clear framework of the skills and qualities of being an MBP teacher, develops reflexive practice, gives a structure for feedback and supports developmental learning. Working with the MBI:TAC in the ways described in this paper, requires supervisees and supervisors to become familiar with the structure and content of the tool. We hope that the principles laid out in this paper stimulate the use of the MBI:TAC framework in ways that are meaningful and relevant. The integration needs to be tailored and sensitive to supervisees' needs and learning styles, their current context. Our experience is that the process is most fruitful when it comes out of a creative collaborative engagement between supervisee and supervisor, which informs when to incorporate the tool explicitly into supervision, and when to let it rest implicitly in the background. In order to use the tool, supervisors are encouraged to read these linked papers,[11,12] and move through the Levels 1 (introduction to the tool) & 2 (deepening for trainers and supervisors) of the MBI:TAC training pathway.[19] We hope that this paper encourages further dialogue and creativity in the potential of both the MBI:TAC and MBI:TLC within MBS, to support the growing confidence and quality of MBP teachers, and the integrity of courses that they teach. Ultimately, all this is in support of the learning and wellbeing of MBP participants.

Author Contributions

AE wrote and edited the manuscript. GMG and RSC contributed and edited. SAS contributed with reference to peer groups and edited. All authors approved the final version.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

AE is the executive director and supervision lead within a charity that offers mindfulness-based supervision. SS and GG are MBP program training leads. RC directs a mindfulness training centre which includes delivery of training to use the MBI:TAC and receives royalties for books on mindfulness.

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