

## **Mindfulness and Experiential Learning**

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Over the last forty years researchers from many different theoretical perspectives have discovered that individuals develop consistent, routinized approaches to learning called learning styles (Sims and Sims 2006). Learners use these learning “habits” to make sense of the world and adapt to it. But what happens when learners over-routinize their learning styles? Are they missing opportunities to reach their potential as learners? Mindfulness is an age old practice used to overcome the tendency to “sleep walk” repetitively through our lives. In recent times it has been accepted into mainstream psychology, social psychology, and medicine. Empirical studies are now finding statistical support for what many have known for two millennia: that practicing mindfulness enhances mental and physical health, creativity, and contextual learning. In a world of flux and rapidity, living mindlessly can result in a host of problems including but not limited to: tunnel vision, increased stress, reduced physical health, reduced creativity, and difficulty navigating complex systems. In this article we explore discuss mindfulness as a tool to assist learners in unlocking their full learning potential.

## **Mindfulness**

So what exactly is mindfulness? Any construct that has existed for thousands of years has many definitions. We would like to offer two of the most widely accepted descriptions of mindfulness. In our research with Darren Good at Case Western Reserve University, we found two predominant streams of mindfulness research and practice, meditative mindfulness and socio-cognitive mindfulness (Good & Yeganeh, 2006; Yeganeh, 2008).

**Meditative Mindfulness.** Although it is widely used as part of a secular mindfulness practice, mindfulness is the core of Buddhist meditation (Kabat Zinn, 1994). Thich Nhat Hanh, Gunaratana, Kabat-Zinn and other authors advocate developing mindfulness through meditation techniques to help people heal themselves and live intentionally. A distinction of meditative mindfulness is that it requires a discipline of anchoring the mind in the present moment. This is often accompanied with a practice of awareness and acceptance through breathing. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p.4). Non-judgment, in mindfulness theory, is accepting the current state as part of a constant flow of changing experiences. This paradigm suggests that letting go of judgment strengthens the mind, and it challenges the illusion that over-thinking something gives one control over it. Authors who discuss mindfulness within these parameters also talk about the antithesis of mindfulness which is mindlessness, or a state of auto-pilot and lack of intention. Are you aware of your breathing right now? Try some deep calm breaths from the diaphragm prior to reading on. Try practicing acceptance of whatever you are experiencing in the moment by letting go of evaluation and judgment.

**Socio-cognitive mindfulness.** Developed by social psychologists, this understanding of mindfulness emphasizes cognitive categorization, context and situational awareness (Langer, 2000; Langer 1997). Harvard social psychologist Ellen Langer, often relates mindfulness to learning:

“When we are mindful, we implicitly or explicitly (1) view a situation from several perspectives, (2) see information presented in the situation as novel, (3) attend to the context in which we perceive the information, and eventually (4) create new categories through which this information may be understood.” (Langer,1997, p.111)

Langer (1997) argues that our school systems largely encourage mindless learning through the accumulation of “objective” truths, rather than mindful learning which places a value on context, uncertainty, and doubt. As with meditative mindfulness, socio-cognitive mindfulness authors contrast mindfulness with mindlessness, which is described as automatic behavior. When mindless, “we act like automatons who have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present.” (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p.2). Mindfulness from the socio-cognitive perspective requires broadening ones repertoire of cognitive categories. The idea of creating new categories was influenced by Langer’s earlier studies in bias and prejudice. Explaining the practical benefits she illustrates that “If we describe someone we dislike intensely, a single statement usually does it. But if, instead, we are forced to describe the person in great detail, eventually there will be some quality we appreciate” (Langer, 1989, p.66). One of the reasons Langer’s work is so compelling is that it thoroughly supports the notion that simple labels (e.g. good and evil) do not accurately reflect the complexity of the world. Instead they allow for mindless rationalizations that justify a broad range of dysfunctional behaviors, from ineffective to criminal. Are you aware of how you are sorting and labeling what you are reading right now? Are you aware of the images, memories, and thoughts that your mind is recalling as you are reading? Try exploring one or two categories you have been using while digesting this article thus far.

Figure 1 compares the definitions of meditative and socio-cognitive mindfulness.

**Figure 1. Meditative and Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness/Mindlessness Comparison**  
(Yeganeh, 2008: revised from Good & Yeganeh, 2006)

<p><b>Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sensitivity to context</li> <li>2. Openness to new information</li> <li>3. Novel distinction/New Categories</li> <li>4. Multiple Perspectives</li> </ol>	<p><b>Similarities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Awareness</li> <li>2. Novelty</li> <li>3. Engagement</li> </ol>	<p><b>Meditative Mindfulness</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present-centered</li> <li>2. Nonjudgmental</li> <li>3. Purposeful</li> </ol>
<p><b>Socio-Cognitive Mindlessness</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Autopilot</li> <li>2. Following predetermined rules</li> <li>3. Engaged in routinized behaviors</li> <li>4. Rigid perspectives</li> <li>5. Lacking capacity for variation</li> </ol>	<p><b>Similarities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Autopilot</li> <li>2. Rigid Biases</li> <li>3. Predetermined Rules</li> </ol>	<p><b>Meditative Mindlessness</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Habitual Reactions</li> <li>2. Living in past/future</li> <li>3. Judgment/Evaluation</li> <li>4. Autopilot</li> </ol>

One way to distinguish the two schools of thought is that meditative mindfulness, with its focus on present centered awareness, describes an internal process required to maintain a mindful state, where socio-cognitive mindfulness definitions seem to focus on cognitive applications of mindfulness (e.g. how we sort out experiences and make sense of the world based on our available mental categories/models). Furthermore, meditative mindfulness authors offer a technique in practicing mindfulness through breathing, acceptance and present centered awareness. Socio-cognitive mindfulness deemphasizes meditation, suggesting supplemental practices such as placing a value on doubt, looking for disconfirming data, and producing new ways of thinking and acting. Each of these approaches offer research streams in which a person's degree of mindfulness is measured through statistically validated self-report assessments. Meditate mindfulness is often measured by Brown & Ryan's Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and socio-cognitive mindfulness is measured by the Langer Mindfulness Scale (LMS) (Bodner, 2000). A factor analyses (Yeganeh, 2008) of these two scales completed by 314 participants supports the following definition of mindfulness:

*Mindfulness is a state in which an individual:*

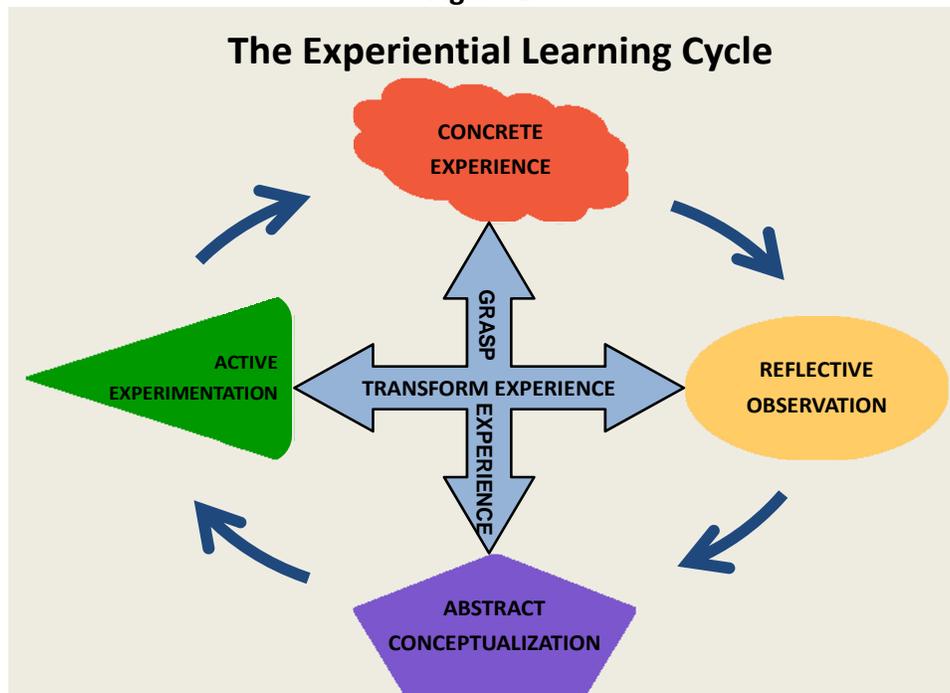
- 1) focuses on present and direct experience
- 2) is intentionally aware and attentive
- 3) accepts life as an emergent process of change

## Mindfulness and Experiential Learning

Building on this research, we began to explore the notion that mindfulness might increase the effectiveness of learning from experience. Specifically we designed a study to explore the learning style of mindful individuals using the two mindfulness scales just described and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb 2007) based on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.41). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of *grasping* experience—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) -- and two dialectically related modes of *transforming* experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner “touches all the bases”—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate concrete experiences (experiencing) are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts (thinking) from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences (See Figure 2)

Figure 2.



Learning style describes the unique ways that individuals spiral through the learning cycle based on their preference for the four different learning modes—CE, RO, AC, & AE. Because of our

genetic makeup, our particular life experiences, and the demands of our present environment, we develop a preferred way of choosing among these four learning modes. We resolve the conflict between being concrete or abstract and between being active or reflective in patterned, characteristic ways. ELT posits that learning is the major determinant of human development and how individuals learn shapes the course of their personal development. Previous research (Kolb 1984) has shown that learning styles are influenced by personality type, culture, educational specialization, career choice, and current job role and tasks.

Our hypotheses about the relationship between mindfulness and learning style were influenced by William James, the originator of the theory of experience on which ELT is based. James (1890) stated, “no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before” (p.155). The mind often neglects the rich context available for observation. Instead it automatically labels stimuli based on limited exposure and moves on to the next stimulus to under-observe. James writes:

The realities, concrete and abstract, physical and ideal, whose permanent existence we believe in, seem to be constantly coming up again before our thought, and lead us, in our carelessness, to suppose that our “ideas” of them are the same ideas. [Later], we shall see how inveterate is our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective facts, but simply using them as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal. The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real sensational effect. We take no heed, as a rule, of the different way in which the same things look and sound and smell at different distances and under different circumstances.” (p. 156)

To extend this further, our labels of experiences such as fun, boring, sad, happy, urgent, relaxed, and so on are also often based in automatically categorizing experience, rather than being fully present in the unique context of every moment. For James, everything begins and ends in the continuous flux and flow of experience. This emphasis on immediate direct sensual experience is exactly the focus on here and now experience that characterizes mindfulness.

James also emphasized the importance of attention. He defines a spiral of interest-attention-selection similar to the experiential learning cycle that creates a continuous ongoing flow of experience summarized in the pithy statement—“My experience is what I agree to attend to.” (1890, p. 403). This also is a central element of mindfulness.

Supporting these links between learning from experience and mindfulness, our research found that individuals who scored high on Langer’s mindfulness scale emphasized direct concrete experience in their learning style (Yeganeh, 2006). We also found that mindful individual’s did not score high on reflective observation, suggesting that they were not “lost in thought” or rumination but were attentive to their experiences. The results suggest that the practice of mindfulness could help individuals learn from experience in two ways:

1. Encouraging a focus on here-and-now experience uncluttered by preconceptions and bias

## 2. Intentionally guiding their learning process by paying attention to how they are going through the phases of the learning cycle

Mindfulness becomes important when we consider *how* we choose to process and learn from the events in our lives. Learning style determines the way we process the possibilities of each new emerging experience, which in turn determines the range of choices and decisions we see. The choices and decisions we make to some extent determine the events we live through, and these events influence our future choices. Thus, people create themselves and their learning styles through the choices of the actual occasions they live through. For many, this learning style choice is relatively unconscious, an auto-pilot program for learning. Mindfulness can put the control of our learning and our life back in our hands.

### **Practicing Mindful Experiential Learning**

As it relates to mindfulness, ELT provides a grounded explanation of the learning processes of the mind when making sense of the environment (Zull 2002). The mind makes sense of complex environments by generalizing. In doing so, we abstract rules and guidelines from our experiences and act and/or reflect on them. Indeed this is what has enabled early civilization to take shelter when weather worsens, use fire to ward off nocturnal scavengers, seek medicine when ill, teach right from wrong, and so on and so forth. It is clear that this propensity to generalize can be a gift, enabling us to thrive. However, the process of generalizing from experience also enables rumination, bigotry, fortunetelling, stress, and the like. The ability to generalize is neutral; it is how we go about doing so that determines whether the outcome is generative or degenerative. Within the process of generalizing concepts from experience, we tend to do two things: reflect to ourselves, and actively experiment with behaviors. So how can we leverage the best of these learning processes? We believe mindfulness can help facilitate a choice regarding how and when we generalize, how we subsequently act, and it can increase our flexibility when seeking out information. Practical examples are limitless. For example we can increase our awareness of how we work with others in specific situations, and who is best for specific kinds of work on a team. Mindfulness can be used as a tool to be intentional and aware of how and when we take in concrete experience, abstractly conceptualize new information, reflect, and act.

Mindfulness can free the mind to intentionally think and create in new ways. Those with rigorous mindfulness practices routinely practice present centered awareness. Meditation is a powerful way to discipline the mind into practicing mindfulness. However, research suggests there are also ways to practice mindfulness for those who are not dedicated to a meditation program. However, if one is interested in developing mindful experiential learning it is important to begin a mindfulness routine, whether through meditation or not. For those interested in practicing mindfulness without meditation, it is important to find a way to regularly attend to one's state in order to be intentional in subsequent thoughts and behaviors. Self-monitoring when coupled with practicing acceptance creates new opportunities to think and act. This requires a routine of "checking-in" with the self, which can be done through

regular journaling, questioning, and/or taking several deep breaths from the diaphragm and focusing on accepting reality the moment. Some mistakenly confuse acceptance with apathy, which it is not. It is important to note that mindful acceptance disallows the mind and body to suffer from things beyond one's control. To further clarify, one can have goals when practicing mindfulness. However a strong outcome orientation in which the results of whether or not those goals are attained, determines one's state of being, is a symptom of mindlessness.

## **Tools for Mindful Learning**

Those who use the Kolb Learning Style Inventory to assess their learning style often decide that they wish to develop their capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle—experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC) and acting (AE). In some cases this is based on a desire to develop a weak mode in their learning style. In others it may be to increase capability in a mode that is particularly important for their learning tasks. Because of the dialectic relationships among the learning modes, inhibiting dominating modes can be as effective in developing strengths as actively developing inhibited modes. Overall learning effectiveness is improved when individuals are highly skilled in engaging all four modes of the learning cycle.

From our work on mindfulness and experiential learning we have created a practical model (Figure 3) that answers the following question: What are various mindfulness practices that can be used to develop the capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle? The next section provides some useful tools to improve specific phases of experiential learning through mindfulness. Keep in mind that the key to being mindful when learning is intentionality, as opposed to being on auto-pilot in any of the phases.

*Developing the capacity for experiencing.* This requires fully opening oneself to direct experience. Direct experience exists only in the here-and-now, a present moment of endless depth and extension that can never be fully comprehended. In fact, being heavily biased in the thinking mode (being too much “in your head”) can inhibit the ability to directly sense and feel the immediate moment. Engagement in concrete experience can be enhanced by being present in the moment and attending to direct sensations and feelings. This presence and attention are particularly important for relationships. Interpersonal skills of leadership, relationship and giving and receiving, can improve by developing the experiencing mode of learning. Those who tend to be heavy in thinking and light on experiencing may wish to write out lists of everything floating around in their minds. This can include “to do’s”, ideas, concerns, and anything else cluttering the mind. The mind often replays these thoughts to maintain control over them. Once thoughts are written out, it is easier to practice engaging in the present moment, knowing that the list is only a glance away if something seems forgotten at a later date. Clearing the mind is a central tool for shifting from abstract thought into engaging present moment experience. Additionally, any time words are being used to think or speak, abstract thinking is happening. Words are symbols, representing only a fraction of full experience. To develop the capacity for experiencing, one can practice observing the environment while consciously shifting the mind away from words that arise, and back to the momentary observation. Taking

deep breaths while doing this, anchors the mind in momentary awareness of perception: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, and away from abstract thought. If thoughts appear in the mind, one can gently but firmly re-focus on the breath and away from thinking in order to be more fully present. Deep breathing is a powerful intervention for strengthening the ability to experience. Most of us breathe shallowly, especially when engaged in tasks that pull us away from momentary awareness. Anchor points for creating a mindful learning routine can be as simple as routinely taking deep breaths from the diaphragm. In order to remember breathing, one can practice routine self check-ins, asking “how deeply am I breathing right now?” Creating reminder cues such as a pen dot on the hand, and/or a symbol at the desk can help as well. Because the practices suggested to engage in experience include adaptations of meditation, they often come with a host of benefits such as reduced stress, increased clarity, improved health, calmness, and creativity.

*Developing the capacity for reflecting.* Reflection requires space and time. It can be inhibited by impulsive desires and/or pressures to take action. It can be enhanced by the practices of deliberately viewing things from different perspective and empathy. Stillness and quieting the mind foster deep reflection. Information skills of sense-making, information gathering and information analysis can aid in the development and expression of the reflecting mode of learning. To practice this phase of mindful experiential learning, one can actively discover critical times of impulsive action and plan to suspend action during these times through mindfulness. Focus on the physiological cues that signal when impulsivity is about to occur. When these cues arise, practicing redirecting the mind towards reflection can be a powerful tool. Those who feel quick to judge and act can routinely ask themselves “what actions have I been rushing into that I can sit with a bit longer to make sure I am being intentional?” This can be done numerous ways. One suggestion we offer clients is to program their computer calendars to announce this question on their screens every hour or few hours. Another useful practice is to hone in on one issue that requires reflection, and spend 10-15 minutes to generate new questions to answer about the issue. Create a question for yourself that you normally would not ponder, and place a value on doubt, rather than rushing into being correct. Finally, practice acceptance of the moment by identifying which actions are generative and which ones are just a way of trying to take control of an uncontrollable aspect of the environment.

*Developing the capacity for thinking.* Thinking requires the ability to cognitively represent and manipulate ideas. It can be distracted by intense direct emotion and sensations as well as pressure to act quickly. Engagement in thinking can be enhanced by practicing theoretical model building and the creation of scenarios for action. Analytical skills of theory building, data analysis and technology management can aid in the development and expression of the thinking mode of learning. From a mindfulness perspective, questioning assumptions can help to focus the mind in order to make “theories-in-use” intentional rather than automatic. Taking time to view assumptions from multiple perspectives can enrich thought. A way to do this is to experiment with how one would make sense of a situation if a current belief were untrue. Another tool is to consider the role that context plays in current mental models, and how these might differ if the context changed. Creating contextual knowledge rather than

pursuing dichotomous thinking can strengthen the capacity for abstract thought. Mindlessly moving from abstract thought to concrete experience can interfere with learning in some scenarios. Practicing a focused routine of abstract questioning and seeking shades of gray can develop the mind's ability to fully think in learning situations.

*Developing the capacity for action.* Acting requires commitment and involvement in the practical world of real consequences. In a sense it is the “bottom line” of the learning cycle, the place where internal experiencing, reflecting and thinking are tested in reality. Acting can be inhibited by too much internal processing in any of these three modes. Acting can be enhanced by courageous initiative-taking and the creation of cycles of goal-setting and feedback to monitor performance. Action skills of initiative, goal-setting and action-taking can aid in the development and expression of the acting mode of learning. Mindfulness can help with this phase by helping learners be intentional about actions, especially when reflective observation is a more comfortable state for the learner. Asking people novel and thoughtful questions can be a safe and mindful way to begin practicing action. Another tool is having the learner envision all the ideal behaviors that he/she would like to practice. The learner then can decide which behaviors would be generative to practice in specific learning situations and begin practicing them mindfully. Learners who would like to move to action more often or more strongly will benefit from being aware of any automatic self-judgments, self-schemas, feelings and thoughts that support inaction. These can be released through acceptance and breathing practices. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that acting isn't just about filling space with behavior. Intentionally suspending behavior is a mindful act as well.

### **Figure 3. Mindful Experiential Learning Practice Guide**

## Desired ELT Phase

Concrete  
Experience  
(CE)

Reflective  
Observation  
(RO)

Abstract  
Conceptualization  
(AC)

Active  
Experimentation  
(AE)

## Mindfulness Practices

- Diaphragm breathing – relaxing the physiological state
- Focus on a new touch, sound, sight, smell so your mind re-sets and switches off autopilot
- Become aware of critical times that you are impulsive
- Suspend impulsive thoughts and actions through deep breathing and acceptance
- Practice sitting with thoughts and feelings rather than acting on them
- Practice acceptance rather than judgment
- Question assumptions you are making in this moment
- Consider other peoples’ perspectives
- Doubt your personal “truth”
- Seek shades of gray rather than dichotomous thinking
- Practice novel questioning – shift the conversation by asking questions that generate possibilities
- Think of thoughts and behaviors that you admire in another during a given situation and practice them
- Experiment by responding to people and events in ways that you normally do not

## Conclusion

Everybody has learning style preferences. Cultivating mindfulness can help learners be intentional about how they think and behave in a given learning environment. In order to be more aware of learning processes, learners must find unique ways to engage in routines of momentary awareness. Regular practices of deep breathing can help create anchor points for learners to check in on thoughts and behaviors. It is helpful for learners to identify people who they can routinely check-in with on the degree to which they are being intentional in learning situations. These conversational anchors provide environmental cues to stay focused on a mindfulness practice and emotional support to remain optimistic. Using coaches who are well trained in mindfulness is also a powerful tool. Finally, we encourage learners not to be discouraged when facing difficulty in starting a mindful experiential learning practice. It may be best to try 1 or 2 specific mindful learning practices, and go from there. Anything more can be overwhelming and may actually inhibit progress. As techniques are mastered, additional methods can be added.

Mindfulness is an age old tool to enhance life. We believe it is worth identifying more ways to use mindfulness in organizations, and that there are ways to use mindfulness in organizational life that include meditative exercises, but that are not limited to a meditation practice. Experiential learning theory helps us understand the mental architecture of learning. Mindfulness helps us understand processes by which the mind is aware, intentional, and accepting. Using the two together unlocks a powerful tool for empowered adult learning.

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