

The case for mindfulness in teaching and learning

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Abstract

In this article the nature of mindfulness is explored in conjunction with its mental neighbour, mindlessness. At first glance, mindfulness conjures images of alert consciousness and willing responsibility whereas mindlessness reflects a far more negative perception of attitude and behaviour; a state of mind seemingly detrimental to effective learning.

In Eastern philosophy, however, emptying the mind, a positive mindlessness if you will, is a recommended state of consciousness where learners intuitively act from a state of grace with seeming ease and prowess. This mindful mindlessness is a worthy educational pursuit which belies the simplicity of polarised opposites.

The mindful mindless equation impacts our lives as teachers and learners as potential partners in education and thus carries potentially positive and negative societal and educational consequences.

INTRODUCTION

‘Whatever we call it – mind, character, soul – we like to think we possess something that is greater than the sum of our neurons and that “animates” us’ (Kaysan 1993,137). We also like to believe that we are mindful beings, that a ‘cognitive, intentional process’ (King and Sawyer 1998, 326) drives our communicative selections and acts and that we are mostly aware of the relational and interpersonal consequences of what we say or do. Well, ideally. Langer (1989) contends that far too often we behave unconsciously, automatically and helplessly, sometimes intentionally, often not. Whether intentional or not, the harm that we can inflict on others (and ourselves) is often incalculable. The results of mindless thinking and behaviour, even when coerced or driven by fear, carry long-term penalties, both individually and collectively.

Like many philosophers, writers and researchers before her, from the ancients such as Socrates and Aristotle to modern-day commentators described in Mason (1994, 1996 and 2000), Langer also argues that being cognitively aware and acting mindfully are not a given. She further contends that mindful, empathetic behaviour can be learned and that our role as teachers and practitioners (especially in communication) should be to critically explore the concept of mindfulness as a

worthy educational mission and to champion its cause. How the mindful – mindless equation impacts our lives as teachers and learners underscores the theme of this article.

MINDLESS ‘IGNORE-ANCE’

A state of mind, individually or collectively, reflects many shades of meaning along a continuum from mindlessness to mindfulness. As we’ll see, these are not polarised opposites nor mutually exclusive. This ‘mindmap’ – to use the term differently – constitutes a variety of roles both negative and positive that influence educators and learners, institutions of learning and the societies in which they exist and operate.

Bertrand Russell believed that education should ‘aim at expanding the mind, not at narrowing it’ (1960, 154). He held that any type of orthodoxy whether religious, political or economic was an educational constraint and dialectically opposed to free thinking. He further held that even our largest and most powerful democracies were so afraid of dissenting, enquiring, emancipatory voices that any school or teacher that did not uphold unquestioningly the right of the state to total obedience to its paradigms and life curricula, would find themselves in serious legal and criminal hot water. An American law held that any teacher who did ‘not approve of the present social system . . . must surrender his office’ (1960,156) – a distinctly masculine voice. This law, originally framed in 1922, was only modified in the 50’s. In certain states, including the State of New York, the sentiment was much the same: do not use the classroom for unpatriotic political ‘incitement’. Since ‘9/11’ and the Iraqi invasion, many commentators feel that this ‘you are either for us or against us’ sentiment still holds sway. This, not from Paulo Freire’s dictatorial Brazil but the world’s so-called greatest democracy (1970).

Mindless, unthinking acceptance of the educational, political and economic status quo was actively and coherently inculcated into the minds of the American youth as indeed it was here. We had a name for it: National Christian Education. The brainchild of Dr Hendrik Verwoerd’s administration (first as Minister for Native Affairs, 1951–1958, and then as Prime Minister, 1958–1966), National Christian Education reinforced two separate educational paradigms. The one for whites comprised educational dominance, job reservation and ‘baaskap’, a type of master race mentality. The other for ‘non-whites’ was grounded in education for ‘service’ and ‘labour’.

It was dangerous to be mindful. It was safer to look away and pretend that, if you were white, although perhaps ‘rooinek’ English, ‘freedom’ was possible. Turn a blind eye and ignore, folk were warned, sometimes ominously.

The term ‘ignore-ance’ is purposefully spelt differently to ignorance. I borrow it from Melissa Steyn who used it in her 1996 dissertation on Whiteness and later in her book (2001) to label a mindset which speaks volumes in its relationship of user to the ‘other’, a mindset that had (has?) tragic consequences. Throughout history,

people in Nazi Germany, South America, South Africa could say: 'I did not know what was going on. I was ignorant of . . .'. It was far easier to loudly blame the Government and of course, unconsciously, the victims.

Plain ignorance is one thing. It has a more acceptable, innocent face. It has surer links to (pardonable) incompetence than to (unpardonable) negligence. Even so, we say: 'Ignorance is no excuse'. But one can live with it and move on. It is not shameful. But ignore-ance is quite another matter. It pushes the perpetrator into a relationship with those on the receiving end. The act (or non-act) by an employer to an employee, teacher to learner, parent to child or Government to citizen (although the 'ignored' were seldom regarded as citizens) is an act of repudiation, of consciously or unconsciously rendering someone, a whole community or nation of people, invisible.

This can happen at both a conscious and unconscious level. Educationally, politically, socially and economically, what happened during the South African Apartheid years was painstakingly conscious but so institutionally orchestrated that it seeped into every crevice of one's life. Like Polyfilla, a DIY (do-it-yourself) instant cement for a quick and easy (temporary?) filling, it provided the solace of a so-called seamless façade to a privileged minority. Disgracefully, uneasily, most white South Africans grew used to it and then participated in perpetuating its norms thoughtlessly, mindlessly. It was and continues to be an act of culpability. Tacit acceptance of a state of dehumanising people, which is what ignore-ance leads to, turns all who participate into accessories.

One should mind. Having a mind of one's own leads to autonomy, adulthood and, beyond independence, into relational and dialogical inter-dependence. It is the minding that leads to better thinking, open-minded thinking that accepts shared responsibility and eventually peace of mind. Equality and empathy can only emerge in relationships that are mindful. Old power relationships and dictatorial leadership styles were characterised by mindlessness because the 'other' was not worth considering, their opinion did not count. They were non-people (non-European, non-white; always classified by their opposite to the 'norm': white.) Government and church officials, businessmen, (very much the masculine), farmers and educationalists exerted such control that equality was impossible.

Yet this control was not 'attention' in the sense of attending to what the other was saying or wanting to say. Not being seen *and* not being heard were preferable. Pass laws, curfews, regulatory bells and whistles and of course separate townships, even homelands all conspired in maintaining a thoughtless society and aided and abetted the notion of invisibility. How easy was ignore-ance then. Out of sight, out of mind.

The need to wake up must continue. A change in Government does not automatically bestow mindfulness. We cannot rest on their laurels (for they are surely not ours). The eloquence of former President Mandela's words reinforces the message that the short-term comfort of blinkered lives is just that: short-term.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred: he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. Some say that freedom has been achieved. But I know that is not the case. The truth is . . . we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter . . . I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me . . . but I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended (1994, 751).

Whether we poignantly speak of breaking down 'bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness' or, as Langer would have it, 'disabling stereotypes', 'rigid mindsets' and 'premature cognitive commitments', we know that open-minded minding and reminding, is 'effortful' (1989, 201) and holistically so. Consciousness raising and 'wide-awakeness' in the Hannah Arendt (1958) and Maxine Greene (1986) traditions are states of being which involve heart and mind. True mindfulness goes beyond cognition; it must include the affective, the intuitive, the behavioural and manifest itself in more than just our thinking. It must inform and permeate our worldview authentically, not cosmetically (Rogers 1980; Cissna and Anderson 1998).

WESTERN AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVES

But is all mindlessness inappropriate? Negative? Sometimes less mind, more instinct or gut feel is appropriate. How we define, contextualise, problematise and, finally, integrate the mindful-mindless relationship is crucial to clarity of understanding and interpersonal communicative success. If we place mindlessness and mindfulness along our contextual continuum, we allow more and judge less. Connotation is the harshest judge. The actual term mindfulness sounds positive and caring, while mindlessness sounds negative, a state of mind with no redeeming features.

In certain Eastern religions, for example, a mindful state may be reached only by emptying one's mind so that 'the mind becomes quieter and active thought is discouraged' (Langer 1989, 79). Serene meditational states require a type of mindlessness, which at first glance, may seem diametrically opposed to Western perspectives in general and my initial arguments specifically. Techniques (and semantics) may differ, however. In Eastern philosophy, both mindful- and mindlessness occur in tandem to ensure seamless skill and harmony of brain and

brawn (Smith 1958). From a different standpoint, King and Sawyer also support ‘the view that mindful and mindless behavior coexist and operate in complementary fashion during information processing’ (1998, 327).

The point about mindfulness is that it wakes us up to choice and that there are various, creative and flexible ways of reaching a mindful state of being (routes) which may arise from and be informed by culturally embedded diversity (roots). Semantics aside, if you tease out the comparison a little, you are finally struck by one thing: the end result – whether East or West – shares more common sense (as in commonality) than sense-less opposition. The ethical concerns are mutual:

- that mindful people are not single- or closed-minded nor do they instantly jump to conclusions (preferably only one: the ‘right’ one).
- that mindful people are not trapped by stereotypes or rigid distinctions. Being ‘wide-awake’ to alternative ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, acting may or may not result from meditation but it always requires our intervention: we must engage with it.

Mindfulness, although cognitively linked (especially in the West) does not only comprise thought. The dualism between mind and body has long had the potential to harm (Langer 1989; Mason 1994, 1996) in that instead of seeing ‘self’ and ‘being’ honestly (Rogers 1961, 75), we tend to categorise:

thoughts = logic = male;
feelings = emotion = female.

But all of us require cognition in order to experience emotion. ‘For a stimulus to be emotionally provocative it first has to be thought of in some form. To fear a lion is to think of a lion fearingly’ (Langer 1989, 175). Our well-being will affect all our faculties not least of all our mental capacities. A truly mindful person will not discriminate between thoughts, feelings and behaviour from the point of view of importance or connection but will discriminate between them in order to give each its due. They are all necessary and necessarily interwoven. In conjunction, they fulfill a mindful being and being mindful reinforces all three.

In research on *The Discipline of Noticing*, Caleb Gattegno’s name comes up often. His assertion that only awareness is educable (1987) has generated two more assertions which echo and reflect this trilogy:

Only awareness is educable
Only emotion is harnessable
Only behaviour is trainable

The force of the word only creates ‘disturbance followed by questioning and even investigation of sense and validity for these assertions’ (Mason 1994, 9). The

mindful questioning of the relationship between the different energies required in training, harnessing and educating is also a moot pedagogical point. But this deliberation does encourage ‘fresh noticing’ (Mason 1994, 9).

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

So often during teaching I hear myself saying to students: ‘becoming aware is half the battle won’. If we can do just that, good. Perhaps even that is wishful thinking, either from the teacher dialogically reinforcing it or from the learner reciprocally willing it. We speak of consciousness-raising as if consciousness lies submerged and dormant somewhere like a seed underground; only the sweat of our oft-cynical brow will coax it to germination – at worst, our own flowering awareness, at best (better?), our pupils or students. A clichéd metaphor but one that does bring ‘growth’, ‘development’, ‘blossoming’ to mind. John Fowles linked our way of seeing things, our thoughts, to a forest: dense and lush, natural and ‘quintessentially “wild”’ (1992, 41). He hoped, indeed yearned, that it would not be filled with straggly, choking weeds but strong, separate trees that collectively grow tall and find the light above the canopy. On their own, but a tree (thought), collectively, a great epistemological forest. Our outlook would determine what we see: ‘A green chaos. Or a wood’ (Fowles 1992, 57).

Edward de Bono (1970) used other metaphors to show how mindful people think, act, feel. They could, for example, wear different hats. Each hat, different in design, hue, mood could sanction its wearer to:

- deliberately slow down decision-making proceedings;
- flexibly, creatively tolerate ambiguity;
- focus on the process, not only the outcome;
- transform categories and do so, playfully; and then only
- carefully select alternatives without jumping the gun and ‘plumbing’ for a solution (any old one will do).

Obviously the more practised one becomes, the more skilled. Our greater sensitivity, knowledge and expertise may lead to faster, more automatic processing, to a point even where one can react and engage without thinking such as a good martial arts expert or gymnast individually or as a team (synchronised swimming). Mindlessly? Yes and no, depending on one’s definition. Perhaps one should remember how mindful top sportspeople, for example, would have been initially before reaching a state of grace where the most difficult action could be made to look easy, that is mind-less.

Over and above criticism of some of Langer’s results and methodologies detailed in King and Sawyer (1998), some criticised her call for mindful engagement per se. What about informational overload, her detractors groaned? Why would/should we deliberate and attend to everything? Images of constantly alert and mindful people with smoke coming out of their ears were conjured. King

and Sawyer (1998) contend that much of this criticism was unfounded and that true mindfulness allows one to decide what to be mindful about and what can drop from consciousness as we select and react automatically under certain circumstances.

Langer, when she argued for mindful behaviour was doing so from an ethical point of view. This is of crucial importance to teachers and our responsibility towards our students in these ‘changing times’ (Hargreaves in Gordon and Campione 1994). She encouraged mindfulness as an antidote to prejudice and intractable mindsets, those usually brought about by learned and automated responses. She agitated for heightened awareness with the best of intentions. Often we don’t hear for so many reasons and don’t question for hundreds more. Active listening and perception are important ingredients of a mindful and empathetic state (Rogers 1961, 1980).

She was not arguing for active thought at every turn but a type of ‘metacognition’ where we ‘monitor’ (McCallum, Hargreaves and Gipps 2000, 276) our choices and either just follow the script or consciously decide on perhaps a newer, better way of doing something even if (especially if) ‘we’ve always done it this way’ (Langer 1989, 149). So much mindless activity comes from relying on rubberstamp thinking, tradition, ‘groupthink’, peer or societal pressure. Sometimes we need to take stock and really put our minds to it. The same old categories and solutions, having worked in the past, may not be valid anymore, especially in our multi-cultural, post-modern, global environments.

NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS CO-EDUCATORS

‘We adopt sets of categories which serve as ways of managing phenomena’ (Trungpa in Langer 1989, 11). We cling to the past and the world as we know it. This comforts us. This helps us come to terms with the growing complexity and confusion of postmodern living. Old-style authoritarian, teacher-centred educational practice (much like old-style government and management) is still the default. Teachers (and students) – even those who acknowledge they know better – fall back on traditional teacher-student roles, saying it’s ‘the devil we know’. Others confess that they regard learner-centred, experiential education as generally more ‘educational’ but only ‘indulge’ in it occasionally. These quotations come from academic staff at the University of Cape Town who participated in an informal survey I conducted during 2002 about their preferred and actual teaching practices. They felt that an experiential, learner-centred approach takes a great deal of commitment, time and effort. They felt that ‘good teaching’ per se is not institutionally supported (especially at a research-dominated institution), a finding confirmed by Katula and Threnhauser’s study (July 1999).

The more ‘scientific, empirical, rationalistic orientation’ of the ‘dominant pedagogy’ (Brunson and Vogt 1996, 75) often promises the easier path to both teachers and learners. By taking over in the classroom, with learning only occurring

‘at the teacher’s initiative’ (Becker, in Conquergood 1993, 340) teachers avoid having to cope with the increasingly diverse and critical voices of their multicultural learners (Freire 1970; Giroux 1991; McCallum et al. 2000).

Given our staid institutional norms, allowing students to see that knowledge is more negotiable (McCallum et al. 2000, 275) is a teacher initiative. When learners feel that their autonomy and opinions are being respected and ‘they experience learning as a dynamic, engaging and empowering activity’ (McCallum et al. 2000, 174), then we will have moved away from Freire’s ‘banking’ concept of education ‘in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits’ (1970, 58).

Learner-centred, collaborative experiential learning takes high levels of energy, ingenuity and, as so many of these writers such as Rogers, Greene, De Bono and Arnett have said, ‘tolerance for ambiguity’. It is a dual challenge: we must be willing to relax the legitimate power we have in a system that often encourages us to treat our students as learners incapable of mindful, critical thought. As we know, this degree of flexibility is not the institutional norm. With the best will in the world, it will not always be easy to relinquish power nor the traditional task of mere information redistribution in favour of a more constructive role, one that facilitates the creation of learning (Grant 1999).

Greene encourages us to take our students by the hand and question, learn and observe what is generally taken for granted. ‘The teacher as stranger probes ideas with the insight and vision of a thoughtful and enquiring new person in a community. Such a teacher walks with open eyes, helping students see and discover what may be missed in casual everyday looking’ (1973, 66). This resonates with Langer’s quest for mindfulness and Mason’s later research into the Discipline of Noticing. Allowing students to notice, to speak is often easier said than done, however.

Learners may be so used to being ‘lesser in status’ (Brunson and Vogt 1996, 78) in the teacher-student dialogical partnership that being ‘invited’ to engage in a ‘conversational exchange’ (Arnett 1992, 7) or offered mutual responsibility for their own learning and development (Dewey 1954, 1964) may fill them with dread and suspicion (Greene 1973; Arnett 1992). Freire (1970) called it ‘the fear of freedom’. ‘Students seem to gain a great deal of comfort from having someone else lay the foundation, chart out the path, give them the tools, take them by the hand and navigate them through the course’. (Brunson and Vogt 1996, 78).

Sometimes inexperienced, ignorant (mindless?) teachers may fail (albeit unintentionally) to provide the ‘intellectual scaffolding’ (Smagorinsky and Fly 1993, 169) so necessary with inexperienced or apprehensive groups. Over and above content- or knowledge-based support, teachers in a multicultural environment also need to provide patient and caring emotional scaffolding and sensitivity within a climate conducive to the building of confidence and trust. As a group

(teacher-student and student-student) we need to engage positively not only with the content (task or product) but also the process of learning and the dynamic of the group (Dobos 1996).

If group members do not collectively identify with the membership, its goals or feel psychologically safe, on the one hand, or understand or feel able to complete the task/solve the problem, on the other, collaborative experiential learning can turn into a very negative experience (Fogler and Le Blanc 1995).

‘With intimacy comes responsibility’ (Arnett 1992, 19). He argues that people’s ideas need respect, especially those we do not regard ‘the norm’. Diverse groups will have diverse voices. Those ‘previously silenced’ must now be given the ‘opportunity of being heard’ (Hargreaves in Gordon and Campione 1994, 344). Contradictory information and worldviews need to be given space, dissonance accepted (even embraced), borders crossed (Giroux 1991).

No one, least of all those so often ignored, will be keen to participate dialogically if their ideas and ‘personhood’ (Rogers in Arnett 1992, 15) are ‘pummeled’, ‘abused’ (Arnett 1992, 19) or even politely discounted. This does not mean that group members cannot be critical or disagree but that they should feel affirmed and be willing to participate collaboratively in the mutual give and take of healthy group functioning. They must be empowered to ‘call out the best’ in themselves and become ‘more than they may have originally thought possible’ (Arnett 1992, 125). Collective minding and heedfulness takes work but the rewards invariably outweigh the effort (Cooran 2004).

Numerous writers such as Arendt (1958), Freire (1970), Greene (1973, 1986), Boud (1993), Brunson and Vogt (1996) and Katula and Threnhauser (1999) have urged teachers and educational institutions to move towards a liberal democratic approach to learning so that it becomes entrenched, respected and practised by trained teachers and facilitators. We must grasp the nettle and move beyond comfort zones to embrace risk, to risk vulnerability, to mindfully shift the locus of control onto those we seek to educate. Only then is it possible to deepen democratic principles, to produce, as Dewey encouraged, an ‘articulate public’ (1954, 184) and a form of ‘organizational intelligence’ (Cooran 2004, 518). What we are aiming for are interactive, connected citizens who want to be involved, committed and to grapple collaboratively towards societal well-being.

TOWARDS AN OPEN MIND

Without fixed categories the world might seem to escape us. But with them, can we ever escape our worlds?

I would like to finish with a quotation from Andy Hargreaves (in Gordon and Campione 1994) who issued the following challenge, a challenge to stir the imagination:

A question for this millennium: How do we as teachers build people’s theoretical and

practical capacity to deal constructively and engage critically with the complex social and educational changes of the postmodern age in ways that increase achievement and engagement for all students, and equalize opportunities and outcomes among them regardless of colour, class, gender and disability?

This may seem a formidable challenge in our often polarised and ethically-strapped society but keeping an open mind should allow us to mutually deal with ambivalence and change with an ‘ecological’ fluency that allows, indeed encourages, exploration of many paths.

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