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Using Mindfulness to Teach Beyond Triggers

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Abstract: The focus of this submission is on the intersection of mindfulness education and productive dialogue for understanding gender, race, ethnicity, ability, nationality, and religion as cultural constructs that often involve triggers. (31 words)

Keywords: mindfulness, triggers, education, race, gender

Introduction

Ideally education should be an agent of freedom; helping people *unlearn* the mindless, subservient learning styles most of us have become accustomed to and empowering people to learn critical thinking skills. This paper will speak to people whose teaching styles exhibit student-centered, transformative education using critical thinking, interracial dialogue, intersectionality, feminist pedagogy, and mindfulness.

I am an interdisciplinary scholar with experience teaching adult and community education, African and African American studies, communication, and women's and gender studies. In sixteen years of teaching, I have learned how triggering certain topics can be, and how being triggered often affects people's abilities to communicate effectively, especially in the classroom. Mindfulness is an important tool for creating inclusive learning environments. Moreover, mindfulness can help people learn beyond the triggers.

How can we use mindfulness to teach beyond the triggers? I propose we do it by developing a deeper understanding of teaching methods and exercises that help students learn about mindfulness, while they are also learning about the subject matter. The following discussion will be about triggers, mindfulness, and mindfulness in adult education.

Literature Review

The literature on triggers and mindfulness crosses through many genres and disciplinary perspectives. The focus of this submission is on the intersection of mindfulness and productive dialogue for understanding gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, nationality, and religion as cultural constructs. Discussing these constructs often involves difficult and important dialogue. These discussions can be a minefield for triggers.

Triggers

Triggers can evoke positive or negative memories and feelings. "A trigger is any stimulus that reshapes our thoughts and actions" (Goldsmith & Reiter, 2015, p. xv).

In every waking hour, we are being triggered by people, events, and circumstances that have the potential to change us. These triggers appear suddenly and unexpectedly. They can be major moments... or as minor as a paper cut. They can be pleasant, like a teacher's praise ... or they can be counterproductive... They can stir our competitive instincts... drain us... [and] can be as elemental as the sound of rain triggering a sweet memory. (Goldsmith & Reiter, 2015, p. xv)

Often triggers involve physiological responses to stress and painful memories. The body recognizes something that was painful and responds instinctively. Triggers can affect an individual in such a way that may bring back memories of trauma and abuse, or may make the person feel irritated, angry, and/or depressed. A triggering issue may include, but are not limited

to, experiences someone has had with violence in the form of physical abuse, sexual assault, and institutionalized oppression concerning racism, sexism, classism, ableism, nationalism, and religious oppression.

As a person who teaches about these issues, it is not uncommon for students to be triggered in my classroom. This outcome is not my intention, for I try to make the classroom a space where they can learn, be inspired, and feel empowerment. But, it happens; and it is unkind and irresponsible to teach about these subjects without considering ways to educate the students on how to manage or respond to triggers. A student who is experiencing a triggering moment in a classroom setting can feel incredibly vulnerable and scared. Mindfulness is the tool I have found to be the most helpful.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves noticing, becoming aware, and being present in the moment. “Mindfulness once was something discussed in Buddhist text, and Buddhist practice. Now, however, it is sweeping the country” (Sandman, 2014, p. 10). The research on mindfulness appears from spiritual and religious, psychology and healthcare, and secular academic sources. Meditation is a component of the spiritual and religious sources and some of the psychology and healthcare perspectives, but not all. I will share resources from each perspective and show how, in some cases, they overlap.

Mindfulness with meditation and spirituality. Thich Nhat Hanh, a 90-year old Buddhist Vietnamese monk, has dedicated his life to the enlightenment of others. He is often called Thay (teacher) and a bodhisattva (an enlightened one). In his book, *Peace is Every Breath: A Practice for Our Busy Lives*, Hanh explains, “Mindfulness is the energy that makes us fully present, fully alive in the here and now” (2011). Hanh has been practicing mindfulness meditation and promoting peace all his adult life. He is the author of over 100 books and has given countless talks about, but not limited to, mindfulness, meditation, breathing, peace, and interconnectedness. For instance, during a talk in 2012, he described *Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings* (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Openness	True Community & Communication
Non-Attachment to Views	Truthful and Loving Speech
Freedom of Thought	Protecting and Nourishing the Sangha – the practice of understanding and compassion
Awareness of Suffering	Right Livelihood
Compassionate, Healthy Living	Reverence for Life
Taking Care of Anger	Generosity
Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment	Right Conduct

For now, I want to focus on how educators can use the concepts of conscious breathing and interconnectedness in the classrooms. In his book, *Peace is Every Step*, Hanh (1991) describes the connection with conscious breathing and mindfulness.

Breathing in and out is very important, and it is enjoyable. Our breathing is the link between our body and our mind. Sometimes our mind is thinking of one thing and our body is doing another, the mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing... we bring body and mind back together, and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge. (p. 9)

Becoming aware of our breathing and our interconnectedness helps us to be more aware of the

present moment. In his book, *Peace is Every Step*, Hanh writes about interconnectedness using the term “interbeing” (1991, p. 95). “‘To be’ is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing” (1991, p. 96). Hanh illustrates this concept using an analogy about waves in his book, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*:

If the wave looks deeply within herself, she will realize that her being there depends on the presence of all the other waves. Her coming up, her going down, and her being big or small depend entirely on how the other waves are. Looking into yourself, you touch the whole, you touch everything—you are conditioned by what is there around you. (1999, pp. 3-4)

Secular mindfulness with meditation. Hanh’s talks, books, and activism have inspired people around the world. Jon Kabat-Zinn is one of the people Hanh inspired. As a result, Kabat-Zinn, became the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society.

Kabat-Zinn explains mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (1994, p. 4). You can think of it as mindful breathing, walking, observation, attention, and meditation. Mindfulness “wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).

He describes mindfulness meditation practice as a tool to help people cope with stress, pain, and chronic illness.

MBSR has proved to be enormously empowering for patients with chronic diseases and debilitating conditions, as well as for psychological problems such as anxiety and panic. These benefits could be seen not only in changes in the way people felt, thought, and behaved, but also in changes in the patterns of brain activity that we know underlie negative emotions. (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007, p. 5)

“More than three decades of scientific research around the world has demonstrated that mindfulness-based stress reduction can positively, effectively, and often profoundly, reduce psychological distress” (Solanki, 2014, p. 1).

Secular mindfulness without meditation. For over 40 years, Dr. Ellen Langer, a social psychologist, has dedicated her academic career to understanding mindlessness and using mindfulness in ways that have lead some to describe her as “the mother of mindfulness” (Tippett, 2015). She is the author of 11 books and over 200 articles on mindfulness (Feinberg, 2010, p. 2). She is an expert at identifying mindlessness and testing the benefits of mindfulness in study after study about mindfulness and learning, aging, creativity, workplace, and health.

Langer’s interest in mindless behavior began when she was in graduate school. Her grandmother was misdiagnosed with senility when she “complained to her doctors about a snake crawling around beneath her skull and giving her headaches” (1989, p. 20). Langer’s grandmother’s “descriptions were vivid and figurative, not literal. That was just the way she talked” (1989, p. 2). She was an older woman, from another culture, whose doctors assumed she had senility without any other test to check her brain. “When she grew more confused and unhappy, they recommended electroconvulsive therapy (‘shock treatment’) and convinced my mother to give her approval” (1989, p. 3). After her grandmother died, an autopsy was performed they found she had a brain tumor.

I shared my mother’s agony and guilt. But who were we to question the doctors? For years afterward I kept thinking about the doctors’ reactions to my grandmother’s complaints, and about our reactions to the doctors. They went through the motions of diagnosis, but were not open to

what they were hearing. Mindsets about senility interfered. We did not question the doctors; mindsets about experts interfered. Eventually, as I continued my work in social psychology, I saw some of the reasons for our errors and this led me further into the study of mindless behavior. (Langer, 1989, p. 3)

What is mindlessness? Langer describes three characteristics of the nature of mindlessness: (1) trapped by categories, (2) automatic behavior, and (3) acting from a single perspective.

“Mindlessness sets in when we rely too rigidly on categories and distinctions created in the past (masculine/feminine, old/young, success/failure). Once distinctions are created, they take on a life of their own” (Langer, 1989, p. 11). We construct rules, as we try to understand our realities and then we “tend to cling to these rules and the categories we construct from them, in a mindless manner” (Langer, 1989, p. 19).

Langer further explains three of the reasons we cling to rules and categories, including: (1) repetition, (2) practice, and (3) a more subtle and powerful effect that psychologists call premature cognitive commitment” (1989, p. 19). For the sake of this paper, I would like to focus on **premature cognitive commitments**.

[One] way we become mindless is by forming a mindset when we first encounter something and then clinging to it when we reencounter that same thing. Because such mindsets form before we do much reflection, we call them premature cognitive commitments. When we accept an impression or a piece of information at face value, with no reason to think critically about it, perhaps because it seems irrelevant, that impression settles unobtrusively into our minds until a similar signal from the outside world – such as a sight or smell or sound – calls it up again. At that next time it may no longer be irrelevant, but most of us don’t reconsider what we mindlessly accepted earlier. Such mindsets, especially those formed in childhood, are premature because we cannot know in advance the possible future uses a piece of information may serve. The mindless individual is *committed* to one predetermined use of the information, and other possible uses or applications are not explored. (Langer, 1989, p. 12)

Mindfulness involves critically examining some of our premature cognitive commitments. We don’t know when we are practicing mindlessness and the costs of mindlessness include: a narrow self-image, unintended cruelty, loss of control, learned helplessness, and stunted potential (Langer, 1989). Therefore, it is important for us to have ways to bring ourselves into mindfulness on purpose.

Langer offers three ways to establish more mindfulness. “The key qualities of a mindful state of being [include]: (1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more than one perspective” (Langer, 1989, p. 62). It is natural for children to engage in “[c]ategorizing and recategorizing, labeling and relabeling as one masters the world... They are an adaptive and inevitable part of surviving the world” (Langer, 1989, p. 63). As adults, “when we make new categories in a mindful way, we pay attention to the situation and the context” and we open ourselves to welcome new information and new points of view (Langer, 1989, p. 65).

Using Mindfulness in Adult Education Theory and Practice

Mindfulness research has strong implications for the development of adult education theory and practice. One could apply mindfulness to many of the frameworks for understanding adult learning including, but not limited to: andragogy, self-directed learning, emancipatory learning, engaged pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and transformative learning. In this section, I will discuss how mindfulness intersects with transformative learning.

In the spirit of Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, I propose that working through triggers using mindfulness, can enhance transformative learning experiences and affect adult learning. In his 1997 article, *Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice*, Mezirow explains:

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994, 1996) is the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world (p. 5). He describes frames of reference as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (1997, p. 5). He describes frames of references similarly to the way Langer (1989) describes premature cognitive commitments. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our “line of action.” Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioral) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) Ross-Gordon (2003) describes how triggers affect transformative learning experiences. “Perspective transformation often is described as being triggered by a significant life event, originally referred to by Mezirow as a disorienting dilemma” (p. 45). Mezirow's transformative learning experience happens when “learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (1997, p. 5). He explains, “We transform our frames of reference through *critical reflection on the assumptions* upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (1997, p. 7). This shift can also be described from Langer's (1989) mindlessness to mindfulness.

Ethnocentrism is a habit of mind Mezirow discusses. Let us imagine the classroom where ethnocentrism is being explained as, “the predisposition in regard to others outside one's own group as inferior” that results in complex “feelings, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes... regarding specific individuals or groups” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). These individuals or groups may include, but are not limited to, welfare recipients, members of the LGBTQIA community, women, people of color, people of different nationalities, and non-English speaking people. How might people be having transformative learning experiences related to ethnocentrism? Are they experiencing triggers? Are these triggers being managed with mindfulness or mindlessness? Does it make a difference?

I would argue that it makes an incredible difference whether or not the teacher and the students have already had mindfulness training before talking about ethnocentrism. With the use of conscious breathing, students can learn to focus on their breathing during difficult dialogue, and the sense of interconnectedness related to interbeing. Students, who have learned to pay attention to the present moment, without judgment, can listen better to the comments from classmates and communicate thoughts more effectively. And learning to be able to recognize mindlessness, will help students practice more mindful learning behaviors. They will be able to have a more thoughtful and engaged conversation about ethnocentrism, even if the material is particularly triggering to some of them.

Now imagine how mindfulness can enhance discussions about other topics that can also be triggering, such as race, gender, sexuality, violence, war, and peace. I argue that people who are mindful learners will be more aware of the nuances of their transformative learning experiences.

Conclusion

Mindfulness helps people understand one another and classroom material better because it enhances dialogue and leads to deeper collaboration and community building. Educators can use mindfulness to create classroom environments where people can learn beyond their triggers. Mindfulness enhances transformative learning experiences for adult learners.

Whether students use Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist perspective on mindfulness and meditation, Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction, or Ellen Langer's mindfulness in place of mindlessness, they will certainly be able to have a more thoughtful and engaged conversations, even if the material is particularly triggering to some of them.

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