

Mindfulness

Ellen Langer, a psychologist from Harvard University, developed the theory of “mindfulness” based on research on human behaviors. Mindful behavior is alert behavior, but it is much more than that. It is a way of experiencing life fully. Unlike Costa and Tishman and Perkins who attempt to identify a set of specific attitudes that contribute to effective thinking, Langer uses the term “mindfulness,” to describe several behaviors that lead people to intelligent decisions.

Mindful behavior consists of five different ways of interacting with the world:

- Making new categories and remaking old ones
- Adjusting automatic behavior
- Taking new perspectives
- Emphasizing process over outcome
- Tolerating uncertainty

Rethinking Categories

Mindless thinkers rely on familiar, untested categories. Creating new categories and relabeling old ones are indications of mindful behavior. Rethinking the categories in which we put people and tools gives us more options for creating good work.

Analyzing Automatic Behavior

It is often very difficult to remember the specifics of behaviors that have become automatic. In some cases, the mindless execution of tasks can inhibit growth and improvement. Taking a new look at automatic patterns of behavior in order to modify and refine them can lead to more desired outcomes. Teachers who help students notice automatic patterns that hold them back and keep them from adjusting to new situations can help them learn to be more mindful.

Welcoming New Information

People often form opinions based on first impressions and cling to those opinions even when contradictory evidence becomes available. Langer calls these “*premature cognitive commitments*” (p. 22). Mindful people use all the tools available to them to improve their understanding. New information can come from a variety of sources, and mindful thinkers do not limit themselves to just one perspective or one way of solving problems.

In school, mindless thinkers isolate subject areas. It never occurs to them that mathematics can help them understand history or that art can play a role in science. Students who are mindful, however, notice the similarities in apparently very different objects and ideas and create new categories with this information.

Emphasizing Process over Outcome

Society and school often force people to think of their lives in terms of their accomplishments. A process orientation, “‘How do I do it?’ instead of ‘Can I do it?’, directs attention toward defining the steps that are necessary on the way” (p. 34). Taking each stage as it comes also allows for making changes and modifications that bring about better results.

This kind of focus helps students attack big projects in small pieces by thinking of what step to do next rather than thinking of everything at once. Teachers can help students concentrate on process by pointing out that all outcomes are preceded by processes and that some processes are more effective than others. Providing students with tools to plan and implement processes can help convince them of the value of paying attention to how things are accomplished and spending less time thinking of what the project should look like in the end.

Embracing Uncertainty

Many people rely on predictability. They like knowing that B follows A and that it always will. They like to be able to plan for things that will happen exactly the way they always have. Mindful people, however, know that the world is a confusing place, unpredictable and often chaotic.

Students who are comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity have a big advantage when it comes to clear thinking. They are less likely to jump to conclusions just so things will be settled, and they are not seduced by simple answers to complex problems.

A willingness to embrace uncertainty may stem partly from personality, but it can be nurtured in everyone. Many children are uncomfortable when they don't receive specific directions, and it is often difficult for teachers to refrain from telling students exactly what to do instead of letting them struggle while making their own decisions. The purpose of allowing students to work through ambiguous problems is to help them become expert problem solvers. The best way to support them in their learning is to provide them general strategies, such as thinking strategies that they can then apply to the specific problem they are working on and to other similar problems in the future.

Teachers must keep in mind, however, that there is a difference between allowing students to struggle to find their own answers to problems and asking them to guess at an answer without giving them the information they need. If you know exactly what you want students to learn or experience, then asking them to struggle at figuring it out through a lack of directions has the opposite effect of genuine, authentic uncertainty. It makes them suspect that a teacher's motive for not giving them specific instructions is to trick them into failing.

The concept of mindfulness can be useful in classrooms. While other frameworks such as Costa's Habits of Mind and Tishman and Perkins' Thinking Dispositions break attitudes about thinking down into specific topics that can be more easily taught and assessed, a general term like mindfulness can be an effective way to focus students' attention on paying attention to how they are responding to tasks. "Remember to be mindful while you're planning your experiment" or "Don't forget to be mindful while you're discussing the project" can be a simple reminder to use those Habits of Mind that contribute to effective thinking.

Reference

Langer, E. J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. New York: Merloyd Lawrence.