

Book review of *The Power of Mindful Learning* by Ellen J. Langer. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997. ISBN 0-201-33991-9 (paperback)

Slanger's objective summary. Teach conditionally, i.e., do not say, "This is the way to do it." Say, "Here are some things to consider as you figure out how **you** can best do it." Also, place instructees in the context of the material first; discuss concepts and principles later. Examples of universal identification are 1) being pushed out onto a dance floor and 2) being at a party of a certain context for the first time. Dr. Langer is as Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and presents data to backup her basic contention that more learning takes place by softening the approach by simply saying here are some things to consider when answering the questions or solving the problems rather than saying **here are the things you have to know** to answer the questions or solve the problems; the same amount of rote type learning takes place with the two approaches, it is just that more "learning to be creative with the knowledge" takes place with the softer approach. Gender differences are also described and discussed.

### Chapter 1, When Practice Makes Imperfect

Summary: Do not start with the basics. Memorization is unmindfully learning, i.e., we only learn when we are thinking. Some gender differences discussed. "..., the concept of mindfulness revolves around certain psychological states that are really different versions of the same thing: (1) openness to novelty; (2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (5) orientation in the present." (p. 23) She has demonstrated that her contention plays out even if the instructees learn only from a text. She and others re-slanted a textbook to present the information conditionally; people who studied the re-slanted textbook did better at questions that called for synthesis than people who studied the original, "dictatorial" textbook.

### Chapter 2, Creative Distraction

Summary: "Successful concentration occurs naturally when the target of our attention varies." "Varying the target of our attention, whether a visual object or an idea, apparently improves our memory of it." "Another approach is not to vary the stimulus, but to vary our perspective in relation to the stimulus." "In contrast to hypervigilance, which locks in an object of attention, this soft vigilance remains open to novelty. With vigilance, the target of attention is static; with soft vigilance the mind, without detailed prescription, is open to take in more information." "...mindfully varying perspective helps us pay attention." "...instructions on how to seek out novelty, and thus pay mindful attention, appear to enhance performance." This chapter also discusses Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in the context of her theories.

### Chapter 3, The Myth of Delayed Gratification

Summary: Taking a positive attitude can make learning fun, and the more the fun the more the learning.

### Chapter 4, 1066 What? Or the Hazards of Rote Memory

Summary: Reviews literature that says memorization is not particularly useful. Facts are remembered when they can be accompanied with an emotional aspect personal to the person wanting to learn the facts. She presents some of her own experiments that reinforce the ideas of

these just two previous sentences. She gives some ideas on how to infuse the emotional aspect. She makes the point of the book and reinforces our learner-centered agenda item with “The second approach [to making facts or ideas seem personally important] is to change student’s attitudes toward the material, that is, to teach students to make the material meaningful to themselves.”

#### Chapter 5, A New Look at Forgetting

Summary: It is a natural tendency to think we have knowledge just from knowing some facts-not true of course.

#### Chapter 6, Mindfulness and Intelligence

Summary: The chapter promotes the recent concept of multiple intelligences and links this concept to mindfulness. The following is the chapter’s first paragraph:

“The very notion of intelligence may be clouded by a myth: the belief that being intelligent means knowing what is out there. Many theories of intelligence assume that there is an absolute reality out there, and the more intelligent the person, the greater his or her awareness of this reality. Greater intelligence, in this view, implies an optimal fit between individual and environment. An alternative view, which is at the base of mindfulness research, is that individuals may always define their relation to their environment in several ways, essentially creating the reality that is out there. What is out there is shaped by how we view it.”

Dr. Langer obviously subscribes to the alternative view. A sentence of this chapter that reinforces our learner-centered agenda is “When we are mindful, we implicitly (1) view a situation from several perspectives, (2) see information presented in the situation as novel, (3) attend to the context in which we are perceiving the information, and eventually (4) create new categories through which this information may be understood.”

#### Chapter 7. The Illusion of Right Answers

Summary: “The capacity to achieve an outcome is different from the ability to explore the world and understand experience.” Dr. Langer is affirming the later ability. This is the subtlest of the chapters; it dives into making a distinction between mindfulness and intelligence [a certain, prevalent viewpoint of intelligence]. I think the crux of her argument is that “The theory of mindfulness insists that uncertainty and the experience of personal control are inseparable.” (p. 130) I think she is saying that learner-centeredness will only take place in an environment of uncertainty (you have to think about it). I think she is saying that even a touch of certainty in the environment, at least during the first stages of contact with new material, is a psychological “killer” to achieving the goal of the instructees taking personal ownership, i.e., control of the information. -- Oh, and this chapter has the reminder that “Much research in psychology has shown that people often ignore population-based information in favor of anecdotal, idiosyncratic information.”

Slanger’s subjective summary: The book is about 70 8 inch by 5 inch pages of double-spaced, about 12 point text, i.e., probably a quick read for those teach a lot. Dr. Langer is obviously

erudite. Often her examples stuck me as superficial. Some of her experiments felt small and lacking of scope. The book seemed hastily written. Her book *Mindfulness* (1989) may be more seminal, however, I got the feeling that most of her idea-supporting experiments are post-1989. Maybe the most quickly useful review is what Theodore Marchese, Vice President of the American Association of Higher Education, said of *The Power of Mindful Learning* in his article titled New Conversations About Learning – Insights From Neuroscience and Anthropology, Cognitive Science and Work-Place Studies in *Assessing Impact*. The four paragraphs preceding Ted Marchese’s paragraph on Langer and the paragraph itself follow:

“In a latest twist, Entwistle last year published findings showing that anxiety, fear of failure, and low self-esteem are associated with surface approaches to learning. Further, students are more likely to engage in active forms of learning when they believe that their own effort, rather than external factors beyond their control, determines success. He urges university faculty to build up students’ sense of control over their work and get them to exercise responsibility for their own learning.

“Let me add that the ‘deep and surface’ line of inquiry posits not two, polar-opposite traits but a continuum of behaviors. Nor should it be taken as denigration of ‘mere facts.’ When facts become the be-all and end-all of education, of course, we’re all in trouble. But a sound base of available knowledge, indeed of socially shared knowledge, is an indispensable platform of shared work and democratic living. In light of this, Entwistle now talks of ‘knowledge seekers’ and ‘understanding seekers,’ with good parts of the former (knowing what and how) necessary to the latter (knowing why).

“As you sense, I find this whole line of inquiry provocative. I think the language of deep and surface learning is highly useful...preferable even, to U.S. locutions such as ‘active vs. passive learning.’ ‘Active learning’ has the ring of a slogan; ‘passive learning’ is an oxymoron. In contrast, the deep vs. surface formulation is evocative; it captures something important; the words say what they mean. We’d be on as right track if we set as our aim deep experience of learning for every student in every course.

“If ‘deep vs. surface’ as a concept has yet to take hold among researchers here, the phenomenon of superficial approach to task, and of what to do about it, has indeed attracted the attention of American psychologists. Let me mention two recent books on the theme, then a transnational study.

“The first is a book that appeared this April, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer. Like Marton and Saljo, she notices that even the best student may produce right answers but fail utterly to get the point or meaning; like Ramsden, she’s keen to the dangers of rote learning, canned assignments, and hurried coverage. The mindless learner, in effect, is on autopilot. Though Langer’s book isn’t directed at teachers, it is so masterful in adducing insight from a series of small, telling experiments than any teacher will find lots to chew on. Mindfulness, in her view, is promoted by the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. I was reminded by her book, too, of the importance of student choice, of control over task, to ownership of academic assignments and thoughtful engagement of subject.”