

“Could radically change our concept of learning.”

– Jerome Bruner

The Power of *Mindful Learning*

With a New Preface
by the Author

Ellen J. Langer

author of *Mindfulness*

Praise for *The Power of Mindful Learning*

“*The Power of Mindful Learning* argues that traditional methods of learning can produce mindless behavior because they tend to get people to ‘overlearn’ a fact or a task and suggest that there is only one way to do it. She argues that it is important to teach skills and facts conditionally, setting the stage for doubt and an awareness that different situations may call for different approaches or answers. . . . Landmark studies make the point scientifically.”

—*The New York Times*

“I’m a firm believer in the power of mindful learning. This book should be required reading for teachers at every level, both in academia and the business world.”

—Howard Stevenson, Harvard Business School

“Like Freud, Piaget, Werner, and Vygotsky, Langer is well on her way to constructing a grand theory of human functioning with important implications for such diverse areas as education and learning, development and aging, group relations, and psycho- and neuro-pathology. . . . Never before has social psychology provided more subtle insights into neuropsychology and related fields than in Langer’s provocative work. . . . Her seemingly simple experimental manipulations point out profound truths about the human condition and how we as people can develop.”

—*Contemporary Psychology*

Praise for Ellen Langer

“Ellen Langer’s insights span every field of human endeavor, including not least my own.”

—Atul Gawande, MD, Harvard Medical School, author of *Complications*,

“All of us who write books about psychology for a popular audience are aware that we stand on the shoulders of giants, and Ellen Langer is one of those giants.”

—Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink*

“No one in the history of psychology has done more than Ellen Langer in showing the power mindfulness can give us over our health and happiness.”

—Philip Zimbardo, Stanford University, author of *Shyness*

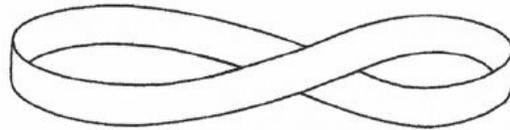
“Dr. Ellen Langer has always been a source of great inspiration to me. With elegant simplicity, she can completely change your life and transform your experience of reality.”

—Deepak Chopra, MD

The Power of Mindful Learning

The Power *of* Mindful Learning

Second Edition



Ellen J. Langer

With a new preface by the author



A MERLOYD LAWRENCE BOOK
LIFELONG BOOKS • DA CAPO PRESS
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

Copyright © 1997, 2016 by Ellen J. Langer, PhD

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Da Capo Press, 44 Farnsworth Street, Third Floor, Boston, MA 02210.

Set in 10-Point Caslon by the Perseus Books Group

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Langer, Ellen J., 1947–

Title: The power of mindful learning / Ellen J. Langer; with a new introduction by the author.

Description: Boston, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2016. | Series: A Merloyd Lawrence book | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015044939 | ISBN 9780738219097 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Learning. | Attention. | Thought and thinking. | Cognition. | BISAC: PSYCHOLOGY / Creative Ability. | PSYCHOLOGY / Personality. | PSYCHOLOGY / Cognitive Psychology.

Classification: LCC LB1060 .L35 2016 | DDC 370.15/23--dc23 LC record available at

<http://lcn.loc.gov/2015044939>

Published as a Merloyd Lawrence Book by Da Capo Press

A Member of the Perseus Books Group

www.dacapopress.com

Da Capo Press books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the U.S. by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 2300 Chestnut Street, Suite 200, Philadelphia, PA 19103, or call (800) 810-4145, ext. 5000, or e-mail special.markets@perseusbooks.com.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Permissions

Excerpt from *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, copyright © 1943 and renewed 1971 by Harcourt Brace and Company is reprinted with the kind permission of Harcourt Brace and Company.

Excerpt adapted from Series 7 exam is reprinted with the kind permission of Todd Rosenfeld.

Excerpt from “Primer Class” in Elizabeth Bishop, *The Collected Prose* copyright © 1984 by Alice Methfessel is reprinted with the kind permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

Lines from Robert Frost, “Two Tramps in Mud Time” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem, copyright © 1936 by Robert Frost, © 1964 by Leslie Ballantine Frost, and © 1969 by Henry Holt and Company are reprinted with the kind permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Lines from “Psalms” by Luis Lloréns Torres quoted in *The Whole World Book of Quotations* copyright © by Ross Petras and Kathryn Petras are reprinted with the kind permission of Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Excerpts from “The Three Languages,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Four Artful Brothers,” and “The Old Man and His Grandson” in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, translated by Jack Zipes and copyright © 1987 by Jack Zipes, are reprinted with the kind permission of Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

Excerpts from “The Lost Horse” and “The King’s Favorite” in *Chinese Fairy Tales and Fantasies*, translated by Moss Roberts, and copyright © 1979 by Moss Roberts are reprinted with the kind permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House.

Contents

Acknowledgments

Preface to the Second Edition

INTRODUCTION

1 WHEN PRACTICE MAKES IMPERFECT

Overlearned Skills

Whose Basics?

The Value of Doubt

Sideways Learning

Can a Text Teach Mindfully?

2 CREATIVE DISTRACTION

The Puzzle of Attention

Enhancing Novelty

Soft Vigilance

Rethinking Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

3 THE MYTH OF DELAYED GRATIFICATION

All Work and No Play

Turning Play into Work

Turning Work into Play

4 1066 WHAT? OR THE HAZARDS OF ROTE MEMORY

Locking Up Information

Keeping Information Available

Drawing Distinctions

5 A NEW LOOK AT FORGETTING

Staying in the Present

The Dangers of Mindless Memory
Absentminded versus Other Minded
Does Memory Decline?
Alternative Views of Memory and Aging

6 MINDFULNESS AND INTELLIGENCE

Nineteenth-Century Theories of Intelligence
The Notion of Optimum Fit
An Alternative Ability
Linear versus Mindful Problem Solving

7 THE ILLUSION OF RIGHT ANSWERS

Hobbled by Outcomes
Actor/Observer and Other Perspectives
Uncertainty and Creative Thought
When Right Becomes Wrong
Mindfulness and Self-Definition
Learning as Re-imagining the World

Notes

Index

About the Author

Acknowledgments

Each chapter of this book relies in part on the mindfulness of various students with whom I've had the pleasure of working. Their contributions are noted throughout where our experiments are described. Even more extensive collaboration and thus special thanks are extended to Douglas DeMay and Paul Whitmore re chapter 1; to Mathew Lieberman re chapter 4; Becca Levy re chapter 5; and Justin Brown re our work on intelligence.

Taken as a whole, this book has benefited greatly from the comments and questions given to me by Roger Brown and Lenore Weitzman. Katherine Jaeger, Trina Soske, John Myers, Albert Carnasale, Marie Tatar, Phyllis Katz, and Nancy Hemenway also provided useful insights. I extend my gratitude to each for their advice and my appreciation of their friendship.

I also want to thank Sophia Snow and Brian Ericcson for their mindful technical help.

Last, but foremost, I am indebted to my editor and friend, Merloyd Lawrence, whose skill, patience, and wisdom helped me with each draft.

The Power of Mindful Learning

Preface to the Second Edition

When I first wrote *The Power of Mindful Learning*, I strongly suspected what lay at the source of all kinds of mindlessness—personal, interpersonal, and societal—but hesitated to state it boldly. Now after more than forty years of research on the mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action, I’m finally persuaded enough to state its cause in print.

Our schools are the problem. They unintentionally teach us to be mindless.

Schools do this in at least two ways. They teach us to evaluate each other and ourselves, and they teach us to seek or accept information as if it were absolute and independent of human creation. Both of these ideas were implicit in *Mindfulness* but not fully explained.

EVALUATION

Shakespeare warned us against being judgmental when he wrote “Things are neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so.” I would add that behavior makes sense from the actor’s perspective or else s/he wouldn’t have done it. When we evaluate someone negatively—he’s lazy, stubborn, gullible—we’re evaluating the person from our observer’s perspective. It doesn’t even occur to us that the person may instead be insufficiently motivated, steadfast, or trusting.

The great novels that we are given to read in school show us how behavior makes sense from the actor’s perspective. *Gulliver’s Travels* shows us that perspective changes as Gulliver enters kingdoms of tiny folk and giants and even horses. Adults reading *Lolita* from Humboldt’s perspective may even come to understand his attraction to the young woman.

True artists scorn nothing; they are obliged to understand rather than to judge.

ALBERT CAMUS

But these insights do not carry over when teachers evaluate students. Teachers are some of the most caring people among us. They are recruited,

however, into a system that, in part, is mindless. Tests, grades, and labels are part of the judgmental culture of schools. A child is seen as distracted, for example, rather than as otherwise attracted. From this observer's point of view, the problem is always seen to lie in the child.

Schools promote this mindless view when we are graded. Our culture has taught that virtually all traits/characteristics/talents follow what is called a "normal distribution." That means a small number of us lie at each end of a continuum and have either a lot or a little of something good (for example, smarts or artistic talent) or something bad (aggressive tendencies or learning disabilities). Schools unwittingly confirm these societal expectations by awarding As to those whom they have identified as especially gifted and Ds and Fs to those they have put at the bottom.

Schools generally pay little attention to how, when, and by whom the criteria for grading were chosen. If the criteria were questioned and varied, students' position on the continuum might change. But they are rarely varied. To make matters worse, once we are placed on the tail end of the distribution, social forces work to keep us there, setting us up for a lifetime of success or failure. Our fate as winners, losers, or just average is sealed. In Robert Rosenthal's *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, teachers were told which children were late bloomers from whom they could expect great things. Unbeknownst to the teachers, the children were actually chosen at random, but the labels became self-fulfilling. In grading an A student, teachers look for the sense their answers make. With the rest, it is easy to find evidence of incompetence. Without these labels, a teacher might ask a child to explain "wrong" answers. "One wad of chewing gum plus one wad of chewing gum equals one" might show a clever mind. But we don't do that because we mindlessly believe things can be known with certainty and that we teachers and the books we teach from know the answers. It's the very unusual teacher who is strong enough to buck a trend and see greatness where others failed to do so. In the words of Oliver Sacks, "People will make a life in their own terms, whether they are deaf or colorblind or autistic or whatever. And their world will be just as rich and interesting and full as our world."

Once a child has been "evaluated," a cascade of consequences follows. Telling the parents sets up another opportunity to build negative expectations. No matter how caring a teacher or parent may be, their assumptions leak out and influence other students, relatives, and neighbors. While we are in school, these views become part of our own self-concepts and we too tend to confirm them.

The consequences of all this grading and labeling are clear all around us. For a child judged harshly, the only way to get any attention or notoriety may seem to be through bullying or major misdeeds. All of us at one time or another seek to be noticed and admired (at least by a few peers). The behavior makes sense. For someone too timid to misbehave, depression could be the result.

Why does the bully bully? Can we see things from his perspective? Successfully pushing someone around can make us feel strong. Thus it seems mindless to me to try to put a stop to the abuse by telling bullies any version of “It’s not nice to pick on the weak” since doing so makes them feel big. A mindful alternative is to teach children that only weak people bully. If they knew they’d be seen as weak, there would be little reason to bully. Changing people’s behavior works better when we look at their actions from their perspective.

What about the winners? For them, life should be a smooth ride. But it’s not. Having been taught always to compare ourselves with others, even a winner will occasionally come up short. Why didn’t I win that award, get tenure, get the promotion? Am I now a failure? At Harvard, the home of some of the best and the brightest, it’s easy to see that being among the winners is not stress free. Depression, anxiety, and even suicide are not unknown here. All these may begin with the evaluations made in school. Many have written about the problems with tests. My claim is a bit stronger. I’m suggesting that all evaluation is mindless and problematic for the winners as well as the losers when the subjective nature of the criteria is not clearly stated.

Who set the criteria? After 9/11, I was listening to a radio show discussing whether women should be allowed to be firefighters. Eventually they came to the conclusion that if a woman can pass the test, she should be allowed to have the job. For me, the important question is: who created the test? In many situations firemen may have to be very strong, thus eliminating most women from the competition. But consider the situation after the fall of the Twin Towers in New York. No matter how strong, the men were not able to move the steel girders that were trapping some of the people in the flaming ruins. Equipment had to be brought in to do the job. Had there been some small and very thin women on the force, perhaps they might have been able to squeeze between the girders to provide some aid to those trapped.

The same is true for any set of criteria—someone chose them. We accept them as if handed down from the heavens, without acknowledging that had they been set differently, the outcome might change . . . I might win more tennis matches, for example, if instead of two serves, the rules allowed three. I’d hit the

first serve hard and learn from it for the second serve and still have the backup third serve, which I could hit gently and make sure it went in.

When we fail, psychologists often suggest that it is better to ascribe the failure to insufficient effort than to a lack of skill. I agree if we are asking ourselves to explain our failures. I think, however, that there is a more mindful solution than stopping to evaluate our performance. When people are playing games (for example, computer games, cards, or tennis), how often do they stop to seriously evaluate their performance? I would suggest, not very often. We make a move, it works or it doesn't. We make a face or curse and move on. When it doesn't, we try something new. Except in extreme cases, we don't take time out of the activity to grade ourselves and study the causes of each move. When professional teams are coached, except for perhaps a pre-game motivational speech, the advice is very immediate and behavior specific—do more of this or less of that—rather than changing one's attribution. Instead of rating our performance, I think it would serve us better to train mindful attention to the particulars of the game.

ATTENTION TO VARIABILITY

By labeling people according to skills we assume are fixed, we forget that no one is the same in all situations. Our evaluations of people, including ourselves, keep us from noticing this variability in behavior. Paying attention to variability gives us more control.

Consider learning disabilities in this context. People who are dyslexic may make more mistakes than the non-dyslexic, but they are still reading a lot correctly. Does it make sense to apply a pejorative label when most of what is read is correct? Because of the way we're taught to mindlessly accept diagnoses, we overlook all the instances when we're doing just fine. In fact, those who believe they are learning disabled would probably opt out of all sorts of reading activities, making the problem even worse. If instead they did notice how often they were correct, several things would probably follow. First, they'd feel better about themselves. Second, knowing that they get just a small percentage of what we read wrong, they'd be more inclined to look at the specific words they got wrong to see why these words were a problem and not others, and this might lead to solutions. Members of my lab and I are currently testing this. By showing dyslexic students how much they are getting right rather than wrong when reading passages, we expect self-esteem to increase. By having them mindfully