**Mindful Learning: The Role of Imprints, Storytelling and Action Inquiry to**

**Improve Its Practice**

The past several decades have seen a strong emergence of mindful learning as a mainstay to facilitate greater learning agility. Originating from Ellen Langer’s work in Western social psychology, mindful learning has been differentiated from other mindfulness traditions, particularly those from Eastern Buddhist practices, by focusing on how attention can be cued and made “conditional” without meditation. Yet, a key limitation is how imprints (i.e., previous learned experiences in what we value) can affect its enactment. We provide three alternative teaching methods (e.g., storytelling and action inquiry) that can surface these tensions along with their implications on management education.

*Keywords: Mindful learning, imprints, and action inquiry*

**Introduction**

Mindful learning starts from this premise: To what extent can individuals be cognitively trained to become more or less agile in their thinking?

Originating from Ellen Langer’s (1989; 1997; 2000) work that builds from the illusion of control in Western social psychology, mindful learning has been studied in terms of its effectiveness across industry and organizational settings, ranging from education to health care management. Its power originates from the assumption that when individuals are primed appropriately, they can become more agile in their thinking through its defining principles: 1) “being in the present”, 2) “moving beyond categories”, 3) “drawing distinctions”, 4) “developing greater sensitivities to context”, and 5) “paying attention to novelty” (Langer, 1997; 2000). Its importance has been related not just toward improvements in learning agility, but also organizational performance. For example, a large body of work in particular to the collective mindfulness tradition from Weick and colleagues (e.g., Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) on high reliability organizations builds initially from Langer’s work.

At the same time, mindful learning is not just about how to build awareness that maintains this openness to new information. Mindful learning also rests upon the willingness to accept and act upon differences in information, which can be affected by previous imprints (i.e., socialization effects, the role of familiarity, and emotionality in information); A simple exemplification of this problem is when individuals reject or refuse to act upon newer pieces of information - not because they lack awareness, but because see that information as threatening or disempowering to what they already know; this area remains a relatively under-conceptualized area mindful learning practices to-date both at individual and organizational levels of analysis.

To address this gap, our session provides critique and commentary on three teaching exercises that surface these tensions through forms of inquiry, and storytelling exercises, showing how imprinting can either facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of mindful learning along with its implications on management, and where there has been less attention on this issue in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

We focus on the role of imprints, storytelling, and action inquiry to guide discussion of these tensions in mindful learning for the following reasons.

First, imprints affect the underlying assumptions found in the mindful learning literature. For example, current research on mindful learning implicitly rests on the assumption that cognition can always be shifted. In this sense, mindful learning shares conceptual similarity with Eastern Buddhist mindfulness practices, in that cueing attention to the present can facilitate cognitive movement beyond existing expectations and categories. Yet, a long line of research describes how this may not always be the case; forms of resistance (or fluidity) derive from strength of imprinted experiences (See Lorenz, 1935:1937; Harlow 1958; Harlow & Harlow 1962; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) that create levels of attachment to information, which may make it more difficult to loosen and to fully realize the proposed fluidity found in mindful learning to-date.

Second, and interrelated, while mindful learning practices have been outlined through its key principles (i.e., “being in the present”, 2) “moving beyond categories”, 3) “drawing distinctions”, 4) “developing greater sensitivities to contexts”, and 5) “paying attention to novelty”), it isn’t clear how they can be tested for this awareness and acceptance of information in day-to-day dynamics beyond research and psychological laboratory settings. At the same time, a long line of research on action inquiry and listening dynamics shows how imprints are reflected and defined by memory as well as speech and discourse patterns (e.g., Wooffitt, 2005); they can both frame attention and open awareness to information differently, such as in storytelling (e.g., Desjardins, 2012). Yet, there hasn’t been explicit means to connect these areas together to critique and extend the principles of mindful learning.

Third, and interrelated, a litany of research on individual and organizational learning highlights the connection between emotions and memory that implicitly undergird these effects (e.g., Levine & Burgess, 1997; Cameron, 2011). Much of the resistance that we find in organizations and individual learning creates different challenges when building mindful individuals and organizations that can be surfaced when highlighting these imprints in day-to-day dynamics. While the role of emotions is less of a focal point, imprints can expose where higher or lower identification with information can affect information absorption and learning agility. This point is particularly important to emphasize given the increased complexity facing organizations today, and why individuals may resist change personally, and in organizational contexts.

**Learning Objectives**

Our session therefore aims to expose both these assumptions and failures with mindful learning to-date with the following objectives in mind. Specifically, we target educators in business classrooms and with the following objectives in mind.

1. To provide a review of mindful learning and why it is important to individuals and organizations today and specifically from the Langerian perspective
2. To introduce three exercises highlighting its current strengths and limitations around the role imprinting, storytelling, and action inquiry, and how they can expose opportunities as well as limitations in mindful learning
3. From discussion of these points, understanding what alternative strategies might be built to realize the principles of mindful learning in management education and beyond

As preparation points, we advocate that educators read in advance the following two articles from Ellen Langer.

* <https://hbr.org/2014/03/mindfulness-in-the-age-of-complexity>
* http://blogs.ubc.ca/mindfulnessintheclassroom/files/2015/03/mindful-learning.pdf

**Session Description and Plan**

To achieve our learning objectives, our session is thus planned as follows:

* Format – Three activities with general discussion
* Target Audience – Undergraduate and/or graduate students
* Materials Needed – Four flipcharts, computer, and projector
* Time Requested – 90 minutes

We will divide the requested 90 minute of general discussion and inquiry exercise into three parts (i.e., Parts A, B, and C):

**Exercise/Activity Overview**

* **Part A: A Review of Mindful Learning and Its Assumptions (15 minutes)**
  + This discussion will entail a brief PowerPoint review of what mindful learning is, how it is different from other mindfulness traditions, along with its key tenets/principles. Please see the note readings above.
  + The focal point of Part A is to provide an overview of the key tenets of mindful learning (i.e., “being in the present”, 2) “moving beyond categories”, 3) “drawing distinctions”, 4) “developing sensitivities to contexts”, and 5) “paying attention to novelty), that will be the segue-way into the activities and subsequent areas of critique and extension. As part of our introduction, we also provide an overview as to how Langerian mindfulness and mindful learning has been critical to organization studies, but also why it is critical to re-evaluate its effectiveness.
* **Part B:** **Exposing Limitations and Extensions on Mindful Learning in three exercises. (60 minutes)**
  + From, Part A, we then introduce three exercises in succession, that expose how imprints may limit, but also how they might extend mindful learning. We focus on specifically on how educators can use these exercises to show how the role of memory and history alters our perception on what is meaningful, but also how it can influence our actions and forms of resistance in learning.
  + **Exercise.1: Surfacing Imprints Part I: Revisiting Past Histories and What Makes Learning Memorable** (20 Minutes)- This first exercise will have participants individually construct a story from a collection of newspaper and magazines stories about what has been most memorable and formative experiences in the development of their learning. As part of this activity, participants will pick at least three to four adjectives that best describe them and how they have affected their learning behavior in organizations, groups, and with other individuals. Participants will briefly share out their findings in pairs, identifying what is both similar and different in what they value. The focus of this lesson is to add an experiential element to feature the importance of early imprinting.
  + **Exercise 2: Surfacing Imprints Part II: Narrowing What Triggers Identification and Resistance in Mindful Learning** (20 Minutes) – This second exercise will build from the first, highlighting how imprints are defined by specific triggering moments or events. We contextualize this activity to management settings. This activity is done in pairs - beginning with the following set of instructions in accordance to the template below.

Think of a time that you jumped to a conclusion and said or did something you regretted in a management situation. Knowing the truth helps us make better choices. In the space below describe the…

*Trigger Event (what happened):*

*Reference (how you incorrectly evaluated the situation):*

*Unhealthy Response (what you did or said that you now regret):*

*Truth (what was really going on):*

*Healthy Response 1 (what you can do or say better the next time):*

*Healthy Response 2 (what you are your non-negotiables):*

At the end of this activity, participants will revisit the results from the first activity, and will add what other insights they learned about the role of imprints in their learning behavior. The focus of the debrief will discuss - how did their early learning imprints influence their current decision making and how they might manage differently. As part of this discussion, we will also probe participants to highlight what might be some the benefits (not necessarily the drawbacks) of holding on to these imprints in management situations.

**Exercise.3: Linking Exercises 1 and 2 to Ways to Improve Mindful Learning** (20 Minutes) – In this final exercise, participants will then be split into three larger groups. As part of this final exercise, participants will review the key tenets of mindful learning and how they might be improved from the imprinting exercises. For example, these exercises might expose that even when “being in the present”, “paying attention to novelty”, and “drawing distinctions” – that “movement beyond categories” (i.e., imprints) may not always be beneficial or feasible; these dynamics may influence how individuals, in turn, develop sensitization and identification strategies differently in information use and retrieval. As part of this discussion, participants will revisit the learning points from exercises one and two, and will then identify 4-5 points that can extend mindful learning, and another 4-5 points that expose its current limitations. This is done as a flipchart activity with two columns titled as follows: “Mindfulness is powerful when……” – “Mindfulness is potentially less useful or harmful when …” The focus of this culminating lesson is to add a critical thinking element to unpack how we think and how our thinking processes are influenced by early learning, but may have broader impact not just to self, but also in contexts of management.

* **Part C: Debrief and Wrap-Up** (15 -20 Minutes) – The remaining time will be spent identifying what other strategies might be considered to improve mindful in both individual and organizational contexts that educators believe are pertinent to impart to management students. As part of this debrief session, educators will be asked to discuss when and how individuals may reject or refuse to act upon newer pieces of information – especially when they find newer pieces of information as threatening or disempowering to what they know

**Application to Conference Theme and Unique Contribution to MOBTS**

Mindful learning emphasizes that individuals can be primed toward becoming more agile in their thinking. While the majority of the extensions and criticisms with mindfulness have centered on Eastern Buddhism and its adoption into meditative practice, Langerian mindfulness, as a learning paradigm, has been largely overlooked in terms of its limitations, and also where it might be extended; this is despite considerable uptake in the utilization of mindful learning as means to facilitate learning agility (i.e. improved decision-making and creativity) and also to lines of work on high reliability organizations (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006), and their extensions (e.g., Veil, 2010).

However, it fundamentally overlooks how imprints can both moderate and mediate the relationship between mindful learning and learning agility in individuals and organizations. We argue that these considerations are important to highlight and that mindful learning might be better tested and taught in terms of its benefits and limitations in this regard. Our contribution to this year’s conference theme of reflective re-invention is to acknowledge the critical role that imprints and identification effects play. Especially, as one aspect of mindful learning entails “matching” encoded experiences to context appropriate situations and routines (see Levinthal and Rerup, 2006), it is important to surface its assumptions that may affect individual and organizational agency in learning.

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This is the first time this proposal has been presented to MOBTC and at a conference.

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