

Stanford University Mindfulness Classroom by Stephen Murphy - Shigematsu

Prologue

Stanford University Mindfulness Classroom by Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu. Tokyo: Kodansha. (2016)

Fresh out of college, without a job, and needing some money to pay the rent I became a substitute teacher in the Cambridge, Massachusetts public schools. Substitute teaching in inner-city public schools in the United States is a horrible job. \$25 for a day in hell. Teach? Just surviving to the end of the day was the goal. The tough, city kids were too much for me, or maybe any substitute teacher—they ate me up from the ring of the opening bell and spit me out when the bell mercifully rang after last period, signaling that the punishment was over. I was desperate for anything that would help me to do more than just make it through the day, and one morning while walking to a new school, I got a brilliant idea.

I strode into the fourth grade classroom with as much confidence as I could muster, though only a few kids seemed to notice or care. I faced them and told them to sit down and be quiet – in Japanese. They started to turn their heads and stare at me. I repeated my directions. Their incredulous looks turned to smiles. They peppered me with questions:

“What did you say?”

“You okay mister?”

“What language you speaking?”

I looked at them as if in disbelief,

“I’m speaking Japanese, don’t you understand?” They shouted back, “No man, teach us Japanese!”

And so I did and the day flew by. I taught them how to say "hello" and how to write their names. I had their interest and attention. They were curious and eager learners. And they were fresh, all beginners with many possibilities.

One child in particular, Jamal, was enthusiastic and continually asked me questions all day, “How do you say ‘hello’?” “How do you write ‘Maria’?” “how do you say, ‘Mother’?”

I got a steady job shortly after that and forgot about that glorious day but a few years later as I was walking through that same part of the city I heard someone call out,

“Hey mister!”

I turned and faced a smiling young teenager, who exclaimed:

“You’re the guy who taught us Japanese!”

Prologue 1

I was overwhelmed with joy when I realized that it was a now adolescent Jamal, the kid who had been most excited and enthused about learning Japanese from me on that day years ago. And I recalled the note the regular teacher had left for me warning that Jamal was one of the kids who would be “oppositional” and “hostile” to learning. But with me he had had a fresh start and a level playing field—a beginner’s mind. This was an indelible and unforgettable experience for me in understanding how we learn and how we teach. It lay dormant until the day many years later that it reemerged at a moment when I needed it.

Stanford University

During a sabbatical from Tokyo University, when I was visiting professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, I was asked to lecture about culture and medicine. As I pondered how to instill the most important lessons of cross-cultural medicine in a short time I recalled that amazing experience as a substitute teacher from many years before. It had worked then with fourth graders and faced with the challenge of teaching Stanford medical students decided to try it once again.

When I walked into the room I could sense that all eyes were on me. I was self-conscious but fully expecting this attention. After all, they had never seen me before, I had been introduced as the guest speaker and I was wearing a kimono. I smiled at their anticipating faces and began speaking in Japanese, noticing their energy, facial expressions, bodily movements. I could feel that the students were with me; as a veteran teacher, I sensed that they were curious, confused, involved, questioning, reflecting—just what we want to see in students and what gives us the exhilarating feeling that we are engaging in a learning experience together.

After a few minutes I finally spoke in English, “Is everyone okay so far?” Several students laughed or smiled, and I asked, “How are you feeling? Please share your thoughts.”

“I’m feeling a little frustrated, because I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Confused at first, wondering what’s going on. Then just going with it, seeing what’s going to happen; anticipating good things.”

“Listening . . . even though I don’t understand the words but feeling that I understand what you are talking about from the tone and your nonverbal cues.”

“Curious . . . content in the moment . . . wanting to know what will happen next.”

I thanked them for sharing and explained that my hope was to arouse all of these thoughts and feelings—shake things up a bit by disrupting their normal expectations of what happens in a university classroom. I was presenting them with a “disorienting dilemma,” an experience that does not fit their expectations or make sense to them and they cannot resolve the situation without some changes in their views of the world.

Since I would be asking them to be mindful, I wanted to do what I could right from the start to induce that state. I wanted to assure them that I would be mindful and that I hoped that they too would be as fully present in the moment as they could, as a way of reminding themselves to be mindful in their work as a health professional, attentive, truly listening, trying to see the uniqueness in each patient.

This brief performance has become a useful way of inducing mindfulness, drawing students into the moment and experiencing rather than being told. By bringing myself in a performative, playful way students are invited to bring themselves into the classroom, with their full presence, their attention to what is happening in the moment, with awareness, acceptance, and appreciation. And the attention they have given to me will then be extended to themselves and to their classmates.

I also want students to experience vulnerability because I believe that it is a key to education as a lifelong commitment to self-reflection rather than a detached mastery of a finite body of knowledge. Vulnerability means appreciating mystery as much as mastery, and being comfortable with not-knowing, ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity, cultivating awe and wonder that deepen our knowledge. This is what in Zen is the lightness of “beginner’s mind,” rather than the heaviness of needing to be competent.

Creating a situation of uncertainty and ambiguity is a way of arousing the kinds of feelings students will confront in their work. Their feelings of vulnerability may be unsettling, but are a way to understand how important it is to balance a sense of competence with humility. They are challenged to remain open to complexity despite their desire for simplicity.

Speaking to them in a language that most do not understand is a way of inducing vulnerability. Confronting them with a disorienting situation, can create openness to learning, disrupting their assumptions of what is supposed to happen and initiating recognition of a disconnect between our meaning structure and our environment. Questioning their worldview creates the possibility of new worldviews as the foundation of learning.

And the kimono? It’s a way of drawing attention as something outside of the norms of academics, a presentation of self, modeling vulnerability through unconventional behavior that risks the possibility of ridicule. The striking sight of a professor in kimono also brings awareness to our reliance on visual cues and the related assumptions, attributions, and stereotypes that lead to biases of judgment and disparities in how we treat others. The spectacle brings attention to the self, and asks students to bring attention to themselves, for understanding oneself is a pathway to understanding others. Attention to the body also leads the way to our focus on embodied learning.

For me personally, the kimono is a symbol of authenticity, a way of showing them that I will bring a whole self to the classroom and invite them to do the same. This is not commonly done and professors tell me, “We leave ourselves at the door,” as if the self could somehow be separated the moment the threshold is crossed, leaving in place only

an objective mind, free of biases and experiences. The kimono demonstrates how I will engage with them in embodied, experiential learning, creative expression and playful involvement with self and others, bringing us out of our heads, and our usual distanced, removed, intellectualizing, rationalizing, analyzing selves.

Heartfulness

It has become my habit to begin encounters in a way that induces mindfulness. The way in which it is done depends on the context, my role—psychotherapist, group facilitator, instructor, lecturer—and the others present. In some cases, I simply begin by asking myself, “Why am I here?” reflecting on that question, and then articulating it to the participants. In this way, I ground myself in the moment and heighten awareness. I then ask others, “Why are you here?” to bring them into the moment. Each person responds the best they can, and my effort models a possible way of responding and encourages them to reflect deeply on why they are there. I also ask them to reflect for a moment on this question: “Why are we here?” to bring their attention to others and the group as a community with the possibility of connecting, learning from each other, and collaborating.

I practice this habit because I believe that mindfulness is a source of power to living with meaning and compassion. Being mindful is a way of understanding and accepting self and others, feeling gratitude and connections, and becoming whole. It’s good for learning, enhancing clarity, focus, and judgment; enabling more effective communication and interpersonal relationships and fostering well being and greater quality of life.

Mindfulness is intricately tied to other ways of being:

Attention as respect and deep listening

Vulnerability as humility and courage

Authenticity as genuineness

Acceptance of things we cannot change

Gratitude for what we receive

Connectedness to ourselves, others, and the world

Responsibility for ourselves and others

This is an educational approach that in my experience can be used not only in college classrooms but in high schools, middle schools, with parents, and in organizations. The content may change but the process is similar and the ways of being that are involved are the same. In this book I am sharing what I know, no more, and no less from my teaching and learning, with the belief that it may have value for your own endeavors and struggles with living meaningfully.

I use the word heartfulness, as it resonates with my understanding of mindfulness. Minds and hearts are often clearly distinguished in a Western sense that differs from an Eastern sensibility. The pictograph of Chinese origin that best expresses mindfulness is this:

It consists of two parts, the top part meaning now; the bottom part meaning heart. In Japanese [the bottom part of the pictograph] is the word Kokoro, which includes feeling, emotion, mind, and spirit—the whole person. The word heartfulness may be closer to this meaning than the word mindfulness, which for some people may evoke images of the

brain as detached from the heart. Though they mean different things for some people, to me they are similar, and I will use both words in this book. Biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, perhaps the person most associated with the term mindfulness says, "There is nothing cold, analytical, or unfeeling about it. The overall tenor of mindfulness practice is gentle, appreciative, and nurturing. Another way to think of it would be 'heartfulness.'"

A major part of this educational approach is bringing myself as a human being into the classroom. It may help the reader to know that I was born in Japan with a Japanese mother and Irish-American father, raised in America, educated and taught at Harvard as a clinical psychologist, and was professor at The University of Tokyo and then at Stanford. My career in Japan and the U.S. has been an expression of my life journey bringing worlds and worldviews together, integrating, balancing, and synergizing my Eastern and Western heritages. I did this in a clinical context in Japan after studying East Asian medicine, indigenous Japanese therapies, and Western psychotherapy. I am now engaged in this integrative work in educational contexts in the U.S. and Japan, in my classes at Stanford, as well as with high school students and adult learners.

As a psychologist I use narrative because I believe that we make sense of and find meaning in life through stories. My narrative approach is expressed in writing through books on narrative in Japanese and English, articles in academic journals, and blogs. Public presentations are usually storytelling, and in classes and workshops we create a vulnerable and safe space to share stories as a way of connecting with each other.

My life is nourished and guided by traditional Japanese values, and classes are based in values of interdependence, collaboration, collectivism, humility, listening, and respect. I use Japanese words to teach and tell my students to call me Sensei, explaining that it simply means one who lives before you. This is a way of teaching them that there are people who are their elders who have wisdom and in most cultures deserve respect. To function in diverse cultural contexts they need to balance their Facebook culture where youth reign and are considered smarter, with respect for the wisdom of elders.

In my courses we begin with mindfulness, vulnerability, and authenticity as a way of developing the theme of connectedness. The values we practice are different from those to which students are accustomed in education: appreciative inquiry over critical analysis, emotional intelligence more than cognitive intelligence, connected knowing over separate knowing, listening over speaking, collaboration over competition, interdependence over independence, inclusion over exclusion. Rather than a scarcity paradigm of knowledge in which the teacher possesses it and distributes it selectively to students, we emphasize a synergistic paradigm in which knowledge is unlimited, expandable, and is possessed and is to be shared by all.

I ask students to slow down, telling them: "Don't just do something, sit there," a striking

reversal of the message they usually receive: "Don't just sit there, do something!" We respect silence in the Japanese sense of *Ma*, as containing meaning rather than simply emptiness for them to rush and fill. I hope to still the voices of the more extraverted and raise the voices of the more introverted.

Students are accustomed to academic learning that emphasizes following a line of reason and looking for flaws in logic and errors of omission in order to create more defensible knowledge. Critical analysis is often aimed at others'; work to find a weakness, something to criticize and to have an argument against those ideas or theories. This is a

fundamental scholarly skill taught in universities.

We are complementing this skill with knowledge from contemplative inquiry, that provides a more holistic approach to developing and testing ideas, one that suspends judgment and is an expression of what physicist Arthur Zajonc calls, an “epistemology of love.” It includes respect, gentleness, intimacy, vulnerability, participation, transformation, and imaginative insight. This form of knowing is experienced as a kind of seeing, beholding, or direct apprehension, rather than as an intellectual reasoning to a logical conclusion. We are attempting to bring ideas and experience together. What Johann Wolfgang von Goethe calls “gentle empiricism,” is a painstaking, disciplined attention that requires the scientist to patiently allow the phenomena to speak, and silences the scientist’s urge to rush into premature explanatory hypotheses.

Our study is appreciative, as a collective exploration of the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be, and to act purposively to transform the potential to outcomes. We cultivate what Tojo Thatchenkery calls “appreciative intelligence”—the ability to perceive the positive potential in a given situation. We develop the ability to see the positive even in apparently opposing worldviews, trying to understand and empathize, and the capacity to see with a sense of gratitude.

In classes and workshops we learn through nurturing and caring, through relationships with others. When we disagree with another person, we try to understand how that person could imagine such a thing, using empathy, imagination, and storytelling as tools for entering into another’s frame of mind, trying to see the world through their eyes. We create a level playing field and make space for everyone to have voice by encouraging listening and embracing personal experiences, feelings, and narrative. We try to enter into another’s perspective, adopting their frame of mind, looking for strengths, not weaknesses, in another’s argument.

By sharing voices in the classroom through both the narrative and multicultural content and pedagogy, students consistently speak up and feel heard, unlike in other school settings where they are frequently silent or silenced. This is particularly significant for the many ethnic or sexual minority students in my classes who historically have been silenced, marginalized, and excluded. We create spaces for their strengths and struggles to be expressed, appreciated, and recognized. Everyone has experience, therefore a story to contribute, and each is equally valued. In our classroom, students do not feel the need to compete because the concept of a privileged voice of authority is deconstructed by our collective appreciative practice.

This form of education is a way of meet a pressing need for students to integrate what they are learning in different disciplines and inside and outside the classroom. This kind of holistic education provides for students’ needs in finding identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. Through their participation in a compassionate community we are providing transformational education of the whole student, integrating the inner and outer life, and actualizing individual and global responsibility.

By making connections between what students are learning and their lives, we bring together parts that are often apparently disparate so that the whole of the learning and teaching enterprise becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Students are invited to collaborate, including many who have been historically excluded. This helps initiate a network of learning environments, in which there are an expanding number of learners and teachers on a collaborative learning journey, where what is good for one becomes

good for all.

I believe that the purpose of life is to learn who we are, what we can do, and to act on that knowledge which comes from all places of our lives. This kind of learning requires highlighting and transforming ways of learning that too often are kept separated, and sometimes ignored. To learn we must respect the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual, which belong together and make us whole.

Feminist scholar bell hooks, calls for an “engaged pedagogy,” which emphasizes well-being and calls for “radical openness,” “discernment,” and “care of the soul”. This well-being involves a knowledge of oneself and an accountability for one’s actions, as well as deep self-care, for both students and professors. Engaged pedagogy is an education for how to live in the world, educating on the level of mind, body, and spirit.

We purposefully cross disciplinary and institutional lines, seeking connections across boundaries that isolate subject matter or separate people. We move comfortably and productively across borders of race, culture, gender, and class to facilitate collaborative learning. As a teacher, I consciously strive to create community in the classroom, based in part on the mutual understanding and respect that result from sharing voices and crossing boundaries together. This is especially important for students who are struggling to develop a cohesive sense of identity and connections on campus.

We engage in talking circles, pushing back the tables and sitting in a circle. Talking circles demonstrate the transformation of consciousness that often occurs during simple, everyday exchanges, when all are treated with respect. We are engaged in academics but we are also touching our spirit and enhancing consciousness. This need not be radical or intense; often it is a subtle shift in perspective.

We practice what Richard Katz calls “education as transformation,” in which we experience going beyond oneself, so that one can see/feel/experience the reality, even the texture and rhythms of other worldviews and worlds, especially those that appear in

conflict with one’s own comfortable, comforting world. This involves letting in “new” data, seeing things one ordinarily cannot or wishes not to see/experience. At a practical level, education as transformation allows one to hear, and understand more deeply, the stories of others. The experience of vulnerability is a key ingredient in encouraging and supporting that transformation, that going beyond oneself. The development of awareness is not a purely intellectual or cognitive process but part of a person’s total way of living her life. Academics emphasize cognitive skills but it is qualities of the heart—courage, commitment, belief, and intuitive understanding—that open us to learning.

This way of teaching uses contemplative education practices that promote self reflection, compassion, and the ability to become more aware of one’s perceptions and actions. Students can focus on inner dimensions of being and strive for integration of inner and outer. We are also guided by transformative education practices of developing the skills and ethics necessary for participation in societies that are just and fair to all its citizens. Rather than seek the answers, we try to live the questions now.

Our work bridges different communities, uniting contemplation and action, mindfulness and social justice. This brings mindfulness to social activists and brings students interested in mindfulness into the world of social justice. Healing and transformation intersect with justice and equality and knowing involves caring for the world beyond the

individual self and exclusive community. Mindfulness leads to compassion and a sense of responsibility to eliminate suffering in self and others and to the world. Through this kind of education I believe that we are best serving our students by preparing them to be compassionate persons and responsible citizens.