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Mindfulness in Learning

Anna Malyukova

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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MINDFULNESS IN LEARNING

by

ANNA MALYUKOVA

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016
Mindfulness in Learning

by

Anna Malyukova

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Professor Konstantinos Alexakos

Date 

Thesis Adviser

Dr. Matthew K. Gold

Date 

Executive Officer
M.A. Program in Liberal Studies

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Abstract

MINDFULNESS IN LEARNING

by

Anna Malyukova

Adviser: Konstantinos Alexakos

In our everyday life, people feel busy, rushed, pressured to be productive and successful. There is little room for pausing, slowing down, having a moment of non-judgmental reflection on everyday activities, which include learning. One way to achieve balance and harmony in life is to become more mindful of oneself and one’s emotions. I argue that the speed and drive for productivity and achievement has disharmonized our lives, from the learning process inside and outside of the classroom to the way we interact with technology and attempt to find balance in life. Through my own personal journey of reflection on my own education, I look at the role of emotions in the classroom and what that means for me in regards to having a meaningful experience in learning. By applying techniques like mindful meditation I am working on changing my own habits of using digital devices like smart phones. As someone who is an adult who is working, going to graduate school and has a family, who lives in the times of digital devices dominating our life, I explore what it is like to try and find harmony within oneself, and argue that becoming mindful is the first necessary step.
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Acknowledgements

As my time in the M.A. program at the Graduate Center comes to its logical end, I can’t shake of the feeling that it went by very quickly. And yet, I have had a very rich and meaningful experience that could easily take up years of learning. Each class I took left a mark in my heart and mind. I feel humbled and grateful for guidance and influence of my professors and peers. This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my thesis adviser, Konstantinos Alexakos, who was patient, encouraging, and inspirational from the moment I met him. None of this would have been possible without Ken Tobin, who is our contemporary genius and also a very kind and nice man. Thanks to both Alexakos and Tobin, my life at the Graduate Center goes on in the Urban Education Ph.D. program and I will work relentlessly to prove my worthiness for years to come (hopefully not too many years). I also want to thank the student community at the Graduate Center, who were always eager to share their struggles and advice with me, especially those in the Urban Education department, who never made me feel like I didn't belong, even before I was accepted into the Ph.D. program. I am grateful to each of my professors, who have inspired me by their brilliance and kindness and who often provided opportunities to grow as an academic, especially Carol Korn-Bursztyn, Rachel Brownstein, Joel Spring, and Annalyn Swan. I want to express gratitude to Colyn Hunt for her advice, wisdom, and friendship. Thank you to my dear friend Elina Kats, who always believes in me and finds the best words to help me in the darkest moments, as I struggled through balancing work, family, graduate school, and never gives up on being my friend. Lastly, I want to say thank you to my family who has been patient with me being in school for many years and encouraged me along the way. And, despite the fact that they really want me to spend more time at home, they were the happiest when I got the news about getting into the Ph.D. program. Mom and dad, thank you
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Chapter I

Introduction

We can all name our favorite teacher in a heartbeat and remember in minute details the classes with that teacher, which sometimes took place many years ago. For me, it was my English teacher. I studied in a special language school in a small town in Russia, where we began learning a foreign language from the second year of our schooling in small groups (no more than ten people), for nine years, six days a week. She was not always a very good teacher but I eventually grew to love her. The first few years of learning English in her class were hard for me, because she was demanding, strict, and very serious. We were not allowed to speak the Russian language in our English classroom, and, no matter how difficult it was sometimes to communicate with one another, we had no choice but to give it our best effort. And even though it was really hard in the beginning, a few years later my group proved to be much better at speaking English than our peers taught by other teachers.

For me, she became the wonderful teacher that I remember and love now, in my fourth year of learning English, when she relaxed her tough grip on me and my classmates and began treating us as equals. This was when we began to genuinely have fun in our English classes. I do not know why this transformation took place. I can only try and come up with an explanation or a range of reasons why she changed as a teacher to us. Our society changed as a whole: the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, when I was in the fifth grade. By fifth grade we also learned enough basics from her, which served us as an important foundation for further learning and this could have been another explanation. And now, having learned the basics, we were able to engage in conversations which were interesting and meaningful for everyone in the classroom. It could have been personal reasons as well, but again, I can only hypothesize about them.
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Whatever the reasons were, I was happy that she became the teacher that I still remember and name as one of my favorites. Her style as a teacher was unique and appealed to us on an emotional level. We were engaged personally, emotionally and were interested and very present in her class. That is why some of the things learned in that classroom are still very vivid in my memory.

We read detective stories by Agatha Christie in their original language and paused and discussed the plot of each story and wondered about who the murderer was, together with looking at the language Christie used and how she used it. She got us a subscription to a youth magazine from England, which we were incredibly fascinated to read every time a new one would arrive, because we were genuinely interested in learning what it is like to be a teenager living in England. We read and re-read the articles, analyzing every detail. Meanwhile, English was used in every discussion and our vocabulary was growing with each new reading and every new conversation. We often talked about things that were relevant to us as a community and discussed school events as well as shared our worries and troubles, as we were growing up and becoming teenagers, and all in English language. All these daily activities helped us to develop a feel for the English language and we were very comfortable speaking English on a myriad of topics. Years later, I would remember a piece of information, which often had nothing to do with the subject of English language, like a geographical fact or a name of a writer or poet or even some scientific facts (for example I remember an article we read on hydraulics of the airplane), but I remembered it because it was something that we had discussed in my English class and not in any other class. I liked my English classes very much, because of the way the information was presented to us, because I was emotionally involved in the process of learning and because the teacher seemed to enjoy her work and was genuinely interested in everything she taught us.
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Now, as a graduate student who is interested in the process of learning and the role of emotions in the classroom, I often look back at my own personal experience as a way to find examples of learning that mattered, that stayed with me that were meaningful and engaged me in such a way that the knowledge was internalized forever. I was present in each of my English classes not just physically, but cognitively and emotionally. Today, I would call this presence mindfulness. Being mindful of my own learning was not intentional, it was rather accidental. I imagine my wonderful English teacher was so great not because she had theorized about what the process of education should look like and had decided that it would be best to engage us the way she did, but because it happened naturally, intuitively, as it often does. However, since I am now in a position to theorize about the process of learning, I feel it is very interesting to look at the role of emotions and how mindfulness plays a role in education and in everyday life.

Learning takes place every minute of the day, whether we are in the classroom, on a subway train, having a conversation with a friend or a child, etc. Learning, as I look at it, on a birth to death continuum, is an important part of our existence and if we are mindful about it, as individuals on both the giving and receiving end, we are in a much better position to benefit from the process of learning.

I was privileged to be with my English teacher for 9 years and we transformed through those years together and individually. She was very tough at first and I was sometimes scared to go into her class, because she had high expectations for us and did not handle well any slacking off on the part of the students. But as we all learned and grew, and the circumstances changed, the relationship changed as well. To have a teacher for such a long period of time turned out to be a great thing for my learning experience, and I strongly believe this was a privilege, but, I imagine, it can also turn into a disaster, if the relationship doesn’t reach that good place and you
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hate every class you take with the teacher for many years. Having gone through both good and bad experiences with the same teacher and learning in both instances, I wonder if what could be worse is the kind of experience that doesn't touch you on an emotional level, where the teacher is indifferent, uninvolved, and the students are disinterested.

More often than not, students find themselves bored in the classroom, waiting for the class to end, daydreaming while the teacher and classmates are talking. While physically sitting in the classroom, their mind is elsewhere, and unless the student can be engaged emotionally the mind will stay elsewhere the majority of the time and the knowledge will never enter the mind permanently and, possibly, not even temporarily. I remember too many classes like that. In fact my entire three years of college experience in a Russian University were an example of boredom and daydreaming. I vividly remember a spring day in 2001, I was sitting in the classroom of Properties of Materials and Technology of Design Materials and looking out of the window, while scribbling notes in my diary, instead of my notebook. I tried to focus on the material, but lost concentration, thinking about where my friends were who were missing the lecture, and I even wrote a short poem about love and spring. I still have that poem and I remember nothing of what was taught in that class and actually had to dig out my transcript to remember what the name of the class was. Now, it is very possible that I am personally responsible for not trying hard enough to stay present and concentrated on the material in the classroom, after all I was already 20 years old and, probably, should have known better.

However, I also remember other classes where even topics of no particular interest to me had my full attention and presence, like the article about hydraulics of the airplane in my English class.

Not every subject can be taught in such a way that the students feel the emotional charge, at least not all the time, and neither should it be emotionally charged all the time. Counting the
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number of bacterial colonies under a microscope, especially in large numbers, can hardly seem exciting, at least to an average student, but there is room for some emotional resolution when sharing the results or getting feedback from others. How the teacher handles those moments becomes very important, but even more important is to be able to recognize those moments as possibilities for learning. As humans in general, in our modern times, we feel rushed and pressured to do things fast, to achieve results, to be productive. Very rarely do we allow ourselves to slow down, pause, and reflect upon what goes on while we are learning.

In order for us to look at the role of emotions, we need to become more mindful of ourselves and others and the emotions we experience in learning. But what is mindfulness? Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994), a leading mindfulness scholar, defines mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmental. Mardi Horowitz (2002) looks at the difference of how both Eastern and Western religious–philosophical practices use the term mindfulness. In Buddhist tradition, mindfulness means awareness centered on the here and now without looking back in the past or fantasizing about the future (Horowitz, 2002). In Western social psychology and philosophy, according to Horowitz (2002), mindfulness means compassionate concern for and an understanding of others. The meanings according to Horowitz (2002) overlap. Malgorzata Powietrzynska, in her research on mindfulness and wellness techniques in a classroom setting, focused on seven facets of mindfulness: “observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, non-reactivity, de-centering, and curiosity” (2014, p. 28). Once we are able to apply this purposeful, non-judgemental, in-the-moment approach, together with other elements like curiosity and non-reactivity, as suggested by Powietrzynska, we will be able to recognize, understand, and interpret emotions better (2014). In
addition, we can look at what these emotions represent, how to navigate through difficult emotions, how to ameliorate strong emotions and promote wellness.

According to Sue Kraus and Sharon Sears, one metaphor for mindfulness is a bird, with one wing of awareness and the other wing compassion (2009). Unless awareness and compassion are in balance, the bird of mindfulness cannot fly. Being able to let the bird of knowledge take flight is becoming aware and compassionate of yourself and others. In a classroom setting, becoming aware could mean looking for opportunities for an emotional resolution, like sharing the number of bacterial colonies counted in a petri dish with the rest of the class and making a game or a competition out of it, for example. But if this opportunity is missed, then it becomes just a moment of counting the bacterial colonies and the emotional involvement will remain minimal.

Understanding emotions and untangling the knots of what each emotion represents has been a topic of interest for thousands of years. From Socrates and later Darwin, to the modern day neuroscientists like Davidson and Frazzetto, who look at the neural tapestry of each emotion or a mix of emotions, the goal has been to understand these emotions and make sense of them in a physiological, emotional and social sense (Frazzetto, 2014). Frazzetto argues that with joy and fear at the opposite ends of the spectrum of emotions, there is an emotional rainbow of positive and negative emotions (Frazzetto, 2014). In the learning setting, which I argue can be any setting, participants will inevitably experience this rainbow of emotions. What effect they will have on the learning process is not clear though. Frazzetto (2014) argues that even though we consider empathy, joy, laughter, curiosity, and hope to be positive emotions and, at the same time, anger, guilt, shame, regret, fear, and grief to be negative, it is also important to break the bifurcated system of negative and positive emotions.
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Both positive and negative emotions can be a great motivator in learning. That was the experience which I had with my English teacher, who for the first few years frustrated me and who frequently made me angry, but I kept going as if to prove to her, as much as to myself, that I am capable and smart. I remember how I liked to fantasize about one day receiving a prize of recognition or an award and how, when asked who are the people that I am grateful to, I would name her as someone who I am definitely not grateful to, because of how frustrated I was in her class and how I never seemed to be good enough in her eyes, as if to show her that I did it in spite of her disbelief. Upon reflection now, I see that this desire to show her that I can do it, was the biggest motivator for my learning and my progress.

In addition to that, there are instances when emotions will ride high on some topics of discussion, something that Alexakos describes as thorny issues (Alexakos et al., 2016). And when these thorny issues arise, the job of the teacher becomes to pay even more attention to the emotional climate (Turner, 2002) in the classroom and be even more aware of the learning process. Thorny issues are often topics on gender, sexuality, race, ethnic identities, etc. or could be even more individual to each person, and, therefore, even less obvious to others, among them issues like trust, loyalty, body image, accent, etc. Discussing thorny issues could potentially be very traumatic and even cause emotional violence to the students as well as the teachers, and sometimes without even those involved knowing that they are causing harm to others, something that Bourdieu (1977) describes as symbolic violence. Alexakos argues that the teacher needs to create a safe space, which will allow for a conversation on thorny issues to take place in the most constructive way (Alexakos et al., 2016). Being compassionate means becoming aware of other’s opinions, beliefs, reactions, etc. and doing our best to refrain from passing judgment.
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Mindfulness, in my opinion, is one of the approaches that will allow awareness and compassion to positively interact with many of the elements at play in a learning setting. I also argue that this approach could be used not just by the teacher, but by the students as well. Here is where the teacher can enlist the students in the process of learning, by educating them about the importance of mindfulness with both learning to be aware of yourselves and others and being compassionate to one another. When a teacher trusts his students, sets up high expectations, and shows respect for them, he/she illustrates institutional nurturing, which in turn shifts the responsibility to the student to take charge of their own learning. This is something I personally experienced in a classroom, and I felt empowered because I had some responsibility placed in my own hands. And since learning takes place not only in the classroom, in how I look at it, it would be beneficial to apply mindfulness to a way of living, where one can learn to be mindful while communicating with others, as well as interacting with technology.
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Chapter II

Mindfully Learning

Any educational process, in and out of the classroom, is contextualized by emotions. Emotions like happiness or anger, fear or frustration, are among the most recognizable, according to Turner (2002). And since I look at learning on a birth to death continuum and not restricting it to the classroom setting (but including it), it will involve emotions, which take place naturally in all fields of our life. But it gets much more complicated than that. Emotions, according to Turner, are often mixed with each other and the result is not always as straightforward as it may seem at first glance. Happiness mixed with sadness will produce emotions like nostalgia, and sadness mixed with fear will activate feelings of misery (Turner, 2002). Most importantly, it will be different for each individual and in each distinct setting.

Understanding what our knowledge system is, what is the nature of being in the world given to us, and where in that world our values are, or, in other words, becoming aware of our epistemology, ontology, and axiology, is the first step into illuminating the underlying reasons for different behaviors in a social setting. Tobin and Kincheloe argue all epistemologies are grounded upon a particular view of the world whether the researcher is conscious of it or not (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). Once we, as researchers and as learners, understand, or at least try to understand, our epistemology, axiology and ontology, it will be easier to explain emotions that take place in the process of learning. And once we try to recognize the emotions and use the information provided by them, we can understand what role they play in the process of learning. Thus, we can use that knowledge to make learning mindful and meaningful for everyone involved in the process.
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When conducting research in general, including research on learning, we are often told to strive towards objectivity in collecting the data (Kinzeloe & Tobin, 2009). Similarly, in the learning process, and particularly in the classroom setting, we are often encouraged to keep our emotions out of the process. In a crypto-positivistic world, objectivity is necessary, and emotions will, therefore, interfere with the process of research/learning, invalidating the data collected. This means emotions are the thing to get rid of in order to gain objectivity. First, it is improbable to reach the state of complete objectivity (Kinzeloe, 2012). Emotions are an unavoidable part of any social setting and saturate every field of our existence. Second, as researchers and teachers/learners we inevitably bring ourselves into the process and influence it, making it even less possible to reach objectivity (Tobin, 2014).

When we consider emotions as a strength and when those emotions are analyzed, we will be provided with an ample resource of information. Why are we experiencing certain emotions while we are learning? How to they affect the learning process? What are other emotions present in the learning setting in each individual and the group as a whole? How do emotions of the group affect the emotions of an individual? What is the role of the teacher/learner? Should we consider those roles (teacher/learner) as set or interchangeable? These and other questions are important when looking at the role of emotions in learning. And considering them will help us with understanding the underlying issues, like social and economic inequality, racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, individual and cultural differences, etc.

In a social setting it is important to be aware of the multiple voices (polyphonia) and multiple meaning systems (polysemy), according to Tobin (2014). Each emotion present in the learning process, in and out of the classroom, will represent the person experiencing the emotion, and his or her voice will be grounded by the meaning given by that person. When discussing any
challenging sociocultural issue, such as race for example, many emotions will be present in the
conversation: anger, frustration, sadness, empathy, indifference, etc. And each of these emotions
will be nuanced and contextualization by each individual present. One participant could be angry
because she feels she has been discriminated against due to race her whole life. For some, even
calling race an issue will make them angry, because it is not just an issue, it is their life, where
everything has to do with the color of their skin. To others, anger could represent something
entirely different -- being fed up with discussing race and believing that these issues are in the
past -- because they believe our society has already achieved equality and that racism is a myth.
So even the same emotion (like anger) can represent different things. Other emotions will be
present and they will mean different things for each individual as well. One thing is unavoidable
-- having these emotions. But what do these emotions mean and represent and why as humans do
we experience them?

Emotions and what they are

Emotions contextualize the setting. Different levels of emotions illuminate the issues
even further. These emotions are part of the reality, part of the real story. Neutrality is a myth,
which follows the crypto-positivistic ideas put forth earlier. Jonathan Turner looks at emotions,
the evolution of emotions, and their role in face to face interactions. Such interactions take place
everywhere in our everyday life, including the classroom. Among primary emotions are: anger,
fear, happiness, and sadness (Turner, 2002). Humans are emotional because this was the only
way for us as a species to become more social, according to Turner (2002). It is also the main
principal mechanism by which individuals are able to sustain the focus and flow of social
encounters, while they develop commitments to the culture and structures of highly complicated
institutional systems in a social setting (Turner 2002).
Many emotions have long been seen as negative, which can be seen in well-known sayings like “Don’t be so emotional.” But, as they are stigmatized in everyday life, they are especially condemned in a learning setting. Or even worse, in some cases, strong emotions are overlooked and ignored. Stress is all too often put on the result of education -- the knowledge collected; the mind growing by the accumulation of content. In a traditional classroom, something I have experienced myself, so much focus is placed on the outcome and so much effort is put into clearing our minds off of emotions, in order for us to focus on the subject at hand, on learning the material, on getting the results, passing a grade, getting a score, etc. Emotions that will naturally arise because of what happens in the classroom, or independent of it, are generally seen as a distraction. But, as Turner (2002) points out, these emotions are part of who we are and actually are important for our survival, collection of information, and interaction, which is a crucial part of our existence as a species and our ability to adapt.

Anger, fear, and sadness carry a negative value, and happiness carries a positive value according to Turner (2002). This is a big problem. “Fear is generated in a subcortical structure termed the amygdala” (Turner 2002, p. 68). Similarly, anger is generated by the amygdala, although on separate regions of this primal center of emotions (Turner, 2002). Satisfaction or happiness, according Turner, is a more elusive emotion because it is spread out in both cortical and subcortical areas of the brain. Happiness can be located in the cingulate gyrus in the mother-infant bonding moments, but it can also be located in the amygdala, where fear and anger is generated, Turner states (2002). This is very interesting, because we are so used to pre-judging these emotions, but physiologically speaking they are originating from the same area, which makes one wonder -- how different are they really?
Similar to happiness, sadness does not have a clear center as well, although the cingulate gyrus may be involved in generating this emotion, and this is where happiness is also generated (Turner, 2002). Sadness, according to Turner, is critical in mitigating fear and anger, and in that process it generates important emotions such as shame and fear, which in turn are essential to viable social structures. In fact, Turner argues that shame and guilt are two of the most powerful emotions that a human can experience, and these two emotions operate to promote social bonding (Turner, 2002). A person feeling guilty or ashamed will sanction himself/herself, even when others are not present. Each of us will feel shame and guilt for different reasons, due to our individual differences, but it also promotes commitments to others, norms, and morals (Turner, 2002).

How these emotions are combined and are manifested in a social setting vary. Several primary emotions can be activated at the same time and when that happens a different emotion will be experienced. For example, when fear is combined with happiness, emotions like awe and reverence are produced, or if anger is combined with happiness, according to Turner (2002), it generates emotions like condescension and rudeness. And this may work differently for each individual as well. In order to recognize these different emotions, respond to them properly and be able to communicate with each other accordingly, we must learn this emotional language.

Generally speaking, we learn to speak the emotional language without any conscious effort, and most of the time we are unaware of the specifics that take place in any given situation. But if we want learning to become mindful and make our social interactions meaningful, we need to bring that awareness back and recognize the patterns of the emotional language in order to assist us in learning.
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Giovanni Frazzetto, a neuroscientist who studies neural tapestry of emotions, looks at an important distinction between emotions and feelings. Feeling, according to him, is emotion which has been “rendered conscious” (Frazzetto 2014, p.33). He argues that even though emotions develop as biological processes, how they manifest themselves in each individual will differ (Frazzetto, 2014). The contrast then will be between the outer layer in what we can see as an expressed emotion, and the inner, intimate experience. Emotions can, according to Frazzetto, be (in most cases) measured and are a collection of biological responses like changes in behaviour and hormonal levels, as well as changes in facial expression (Frazzetto, 2014). The feelings are then the private awareness of that emotion (Frazzetto, 2014). Philosophers call the study of this subjective experience -- phenomenology -- which allows us to get a glimpse of what happens on the inside of each individual. Because, as observers, we have access only to the emotions, which cause changes on the outside, we can only assume, intuit, hypothesize about what that means to each individual on the inside.

Emotional knowledge is another concept that interests Frazzetto, which is very important in a learning setting. Acquired information from previous experiences becomes precious knowledge for when a similar situation arises again (2014). This can both be a bad thing, learned helplessness for example, or a good thing, when a high-achiever continues on the same path of success. Or, in the majority of cases it is something in between the two opposites. However, each of us gathers this emotional knowledge and it guides our present and future experiences.

When Frazzetto studies emotions like anxiety, anger, guilt, sadness, he introduces several ideas which align with my argument as well. First, he questions how we define these emotions. For example, in his chapter on anxiety, he looks at how we have created a stigma against anxiety. Anxiety resides in our constant desire to change our identities and the realization that it is hard to
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find guidance for that change to take place (Frazzetto, 2014). In our modern society we try to get rid of that emotion by medicating ourselves, speaking with a therapist, and even using nontraditional methods like meditation. Where some of these methods that deal with anxiety are more productive than others and in the end cause transformation that leads to healthier minds and bodies, we tend to miss the point where anxiety is a necessary emotion for reflection, planning, introspection, and change. Speaking with a therapist might bring the same result, as might meditation, but if we truly want to become mindful, we should begin by acknowledging our emotions and accepting them for what they are without any judgment.

Second, Frazzetto argues (and he is not alone in this argument, Davidson argues this too in *The Emotional Brain* (Davidson & Begley, 2012)) that our brain is plastic, and with practice we can change the habitual pathways of the brain and learn to become more in tune with our bodies and minds and more in control of both.

This brings me to the Polyvagal Theory developed by Dr. Stephen Porges. The theory looks at the tenth cranial nerve, which is called the vagus, and specifies two functionally distinct branches of how the vagus operates. According to Porges, the vagus nerve can elicit immobilization behaviour (as in more primitive mammals), or the more evolved function which is linked to social communication and behavior of self-soothing (Porges, 2011). The vagus nerve carries information between the brainstem and most of the internal organs. The Polyvagal Theory introduces an additional perspective of finding a connection between body and mind and how our body operates in a social context. Psychological and social stressors of different natures can induce different shifts of autonomic control on cardiac electrical activity, with either a sympathetic or a parasympathetic prevalence, according to a study conducted in 1997 on wild rats (Sgoifo, A. et al). Where we can measure the heart rate and heart rate variability as a result
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of different stressors, we can also look at how the vagus nerve operates in these situations. In particular, we can look at the vagal tone, which is the continuous, chronic, passive activity of the vagus nerve and represents the level of activity of the parasympathetic nervous system.

Porges’ theory suggests that the physiological state has an adaptive nature (2011). Different behaviors are emphasized by the physiological states: a vagal withdrawal, for example, which will mobilize the fight and flight response; or increased vagal influence on the heart, in contrast, which will increase social spontaneous behavior. In addition, Porges argues that the Polyvagal Theory emphasizes the functional and structural links between neural control of the striated muscles of the face and the smooth muscles of the viscera (2012). Furthermore, the Polyvagal Theory illustrates the defense strategies, where the process of neuroception will involve decoding biological movements and detecting the intentionality of social interaction (Porge, 2011).

Polyvagal Theory looks at how our bodies and minds operate in social setting, which is very important in my work on looking at emotions in learning, since learning happens (more often than not) in a social setting. It also offers a new perspective of becoming mindful and aware of how our bodies and minds operate and how, similar to Frazzetto discussed above, it can be in our hands to gain more control, if only by gaining more knowledge about the connection between our bodies and minds.

Another perspective of looking at emotions is to apply the model developed by Richard Davidson (2012) and in his work on neuroplasticity and the emotional styles. As Davidson discusses different emotional styles and where on the spectrum of each style a person is located, he also looks at ways to address the behavior associated with each style. Applying different types of meditation can, in his opinion, help to change the pathways in our brain and alleviate some of
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the negative effects of each emotional style. Neuroplasticity of our brain is possible, according to Davidson, by application of meditation. He suggests that mindful meditation can help us become more compassionate, more aware of ourselves and our surroundings, and more in tune with those surroundings, more resilient, and more positive (Davidson & Begley, 2012).

Davidson suggests that meditating can have a beneficial effect on all six emotional styles and, of course, it is not as simple; one has to meditate consistently and for a long period of time to see some changes in the brain pattern, but one has to start somewhere. For example, each class could begin with a few minutes of breathing meditation in order to prepare everyone for the class -- to clear the minds, to bring awareness to the present, etc. Kabat-Zinn (1994) notes that as we “begin befriending our breath, we see immediately that unawareness is everywhere” (p. 20). Or going even further, we can all learn to use meditation (or a quiet moment of reflection) before we engage in any activity, from the very first thing we do in the morning to taking a few moment to center ourselves before we start working, interacting with family members, and before going to sleep. By letting each of us become mindful and compassionate to ourselves and others, we may become better prepared for learning (or any other process) that will be mindful and meaningful. And since I look at the learning as the continuum, I argue that applying different techniques of bringing awareness back will be beneficial in many areas of our life.

Randall Collins, a sociologist who studies social conflict, talks about emotions in his work on interaction ritual theory, as well as the emotional energy and the transient emotions in human interactions. As he points out, emotions are the main ingredient and outcome of interaction rituals (Collins, 2004). Values, to the extent that they exist, are cognitions infused with emotions, he argues (2004). He points out that we must broaden our conception of emotion. In addition to dramatic emotions, which can be observed clearly, there are also emotions that are
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undramatic and long lasting, which permeate social life. An important element is the feeling of
solidarity, the feeling of membership, which are examples of long lasting, undramatic emotions.
Emotions of solidarity exist as undertones. The dramatic emotions, which are often transient, are
the ones which cannot be avoided, and which dictate the levels and intensity of emotional
energy. This is where emotions play a role as a transformer in power rituals.

Collins (2004) argues that the focus of power ritual is in the process of giving and taking
orders. Since a classroom setting, as one of the learning environments in the most traditional
sense, is the setting where the teacher is in charge and the students are obliged to follow orders,
this power ritual becomes very important. Those who give orders will ultimately be draining the
emotional energy from those who are taking orders. And those who are successful at giving
orders will continue to do so, because they are successful. The order takers will, therefore, be
inclined to rebel and revolt against those in power. This brings us back to the argument about the
power structure in the learning environment, and the roles of teacher/learner. If the power
structure is such that the teacher is always giving orders and the student always takes orders, then
the teacher will be exercising order-giving power and, by doing so, will increases his emotional
energy, which will also coincide with being in the center of attention in a situation of emotional
entrainment and rise to a palpable level of collective consciousness (Turner, 2002).

In the classroom setting Collins’ discussion of power rituals is very strong and relevant
because of how the power structure is set up, where (in the most traditional sense) teachers and
students follow the model of giving and taking orders. But since learning, as I look at it on the
birth to death continuum, happens in a variety of social settings over time, it also takes a variety
of forms and the power structure is not always set up the same way. However, he also looks at
the short term dramatic emotions, such as anger and fear, and the flow of these short term
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emotional experience into long-term emotional make-up, which he calls emotional energy. And the emotional climate is relevant to any learning setting. Here, we see that once a dramatic emotion, anger for example, is experienced by an individual or a group and it perpetually stays as an indicator of a group (or a person), thus becoming a long-term emotion, it is that much harder to change the pattern and the emotional climate of that group (or person), because such emotions carry over through interactional chains.

Language and its role

In the process of learning, there is a constant exchange of emotions, information, and knowledge. Language is used to communicate with each other in a social setting. Bakhtin argues that “All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language” (Bakhtin 1994, p. 81). And as diverse as are the areas of human activity, he states, as diverse is the nature and form of language (Bakhtin, 1994). Bakhtin suggests that language is defined by each individual utterance and will be, therefore, dependent on the content, the style, and the compositional structure of each such utterance. We also learn to speak in such utterances without realizing that they exist and learn to identify them and predict the whole utterance from the very beginning, having a sense of a speech as a whole. Different social settings will require different spheres of communication. Some people may seem awkward in one sphere, because they are not as familiar with the nature of utterances in that particular genre of speech. But the most important conclusion, in my opinion, which Bakhtin makes about the nature of utterances in the social setting, is the relationship of the speaker -- himself to the other -- participants. Bakhtin’s work (1994) focuses on dialogic interactions, polysemeia, and polyphony, which is imperative in a social context where ideas are constantly exchanged between participants by the use of language.
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Why language is important in a conversation on mindfulness in learning, one may ask? I believe, it is important, because we rely on language as our main source in exchange of information. In a learning setting, we use language in speech, reading, writing, etc. How we use it will vary. To rely only on language will be a mistake and, of course, there is always a crisis of representation when it comes to language. But to look at language in a learning environment is very important. For example, silence can be a big part of language: silence as an observation tool; silence as an opportunity to pause and reflect; silence as a symbol of respect, when refraining from saying something as a way to recognize that it is not your place to speak; silence as a lost opportunity to express an important idea; silence as an oppression mechanism, when not speaking up to injustice or violence, etc. It can be seen on micro level -- as something that is a choice of each individual--or a meso level -- when it is part of a culture-- or it can be seen at a macro level -- as an institutionalized silence about certain topics or even the way people are silenced in authoritative states or segregated societies.

Spoken language can be presented in many different ways and will mean different things, similar to silence. And the relationship between oneself and other, whether it is on micro, meso, or macro level, will guide the way knowledge and language are constructed and exchanged, which makes Bakhtin’s argument about the nature of utterances and the relationship between speaker and participants very important, in my opinion.

Bakhtin asserts that sentence, as a unit of language, is neutral and in itself has no expressive aspect (Bakhtin 1994, p. 85). “Each concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere,” writes Bakhtin, which suggests that language exchanged in the social setting are echoes and reverberations of utterances between self and others and is never monological (Bakhtin 1994, p. 85). The dialogic relationship of language between self and
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others will rely on active participation of others in the conversation. Entire utterance is expressed often in anticipation of the response. In a learning process a conversation between the participants is a natural occurrence. Whether it is a topic in a scientific or social sciences field, utterances will be made by either the teacher or the student that will anticipate a response. We often become energized when such conversations take place. In a classroom setting such opportunities are often overlooked or there is not enough time for them. But when such opportunities are used, emotions will be heavily involved in the exchange of utterances, whether it is a thorny issue or not. And once emotions are involved, each participant will be alert and present and invested in the conversation, regardless of them being silent or vocal.

Going even further, Bakhtin looks at the creation of ideas and suggests that “the idea lives not in one person’s isolated individual consciousness -- if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live-- that is to take shape, to develop, to find, and renews its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas,--only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others” (Bakhtin 1994, p. 98). This directly speaks to the experience in the learning process. If we follow the model of a teacher lecturing to the students, then there is no exchange of ideas, unless the teacher allows for a verbal expression of the students as well, in which case, the ideas will change, develop, take a different shape as the utterances are exchanged. In this process, which will be emergent and contingent, the role of the teacher (as a teacher in the most traditional term) will change, which brings us back to the shift of power in the classroom. A lot is dependent on the teacher, who will guide the conversation and shift the focus when necessary, or simply promote the exchange of ideas, but he/she will no longer be the holder of all the knowledge -- everyone in that process will contribute in one way or another to the knowledge creation. Once we as participants feel that we
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are invested in the process, we will be much more involved emotionally, intellectually, and physically.

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Mindfulness means being aware and compassionate, and in the learning setting being compassionate will take different forms, especially when discussing thorny issues. Thorny issues are generally identified as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, but can also be much more specific and individual to each person. To so many there are other issues that can be called thorny, like divorce, depression, diet, etc. And they are not always seen as such. Each of us has a different story and an idea of being in the world, a different ontology. And how we make sense of the world will be defined differently by each unique epistemology. Being mindful of others’ axiologies and where in those axiologies thorny issues are, can be quite a challenge. The awareness will be illustrated in opening yourself up to others’ experiences and points of view, and trying to understand their epistemologies. And compassion will be applied when refraining from judging and trying to empathize with one another.

The difficulty is to ameliorate emotionally charged situations and maintain the emotional climate, where there will be no place for any kind of violence (emotional, symbolic, or even physical). Critical ontology, in Kincheloe’s tradition, is grounded in respecting differences and learning from them (Kincheloe, 2011). And through learning from the difference and respecting it, compassion will be placed on the continuum. Ultimately, there will be instances where a teacher will need to be compassionate to both the abuser and the abused, especially when engaging in a conversation about thorny issues. Turner discusses different needs of humans in face to face interaction, among them is the need for group inclusion or a need to feel part of the ongoing interpersonal flow (Turner, 2002). When discussing thorny issues, participants will look
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for solidarity among other members of the group, and those that do agree will feel more willing
to contribute utterances and share ideas. The role of the teacher is to try and allow for the
different opinions to be expressed and shared, which will promote the exchange of ideas in the
most diverse manner.

It is also important to break the stereotypical structure of power -- teacher vs. student.
Because, if learning is mindful, everyone will be teaching and learning at the same time. A
teacher, who is open and perceptive to his students will rely on those emotional and language
cues and will learn a lot about each person, which in turn will allow for an interactive experience
in the group. And the student, who is encouraged to share, contribute, and engage in a dialogue,
will be that much more invested in the process, which will shift the power into his own hands
and make him just as significant in the knowledge-creation as the teacher. Of course, there will
be instances when strong emotions will emerge and they will disrupt the learning process.
However, the fact that these disruptions are seen as such -- is the problem. When strong emotions
are present in the classroom (or in a learning environment outside of classroom), more harm will
be done when they are not acknowledged and instead are ignored, or suppressed. These emotions
can arise spontaneously out of nowhere or can be predicted, especially when discussing difficult
issues, something that Alexakos et al. call thorny issues (2015).

According to Turner, when individuals feel included, they will feel satisfaction. “And
when the role identity presented in an encounter is a marker of core self, inclusion brings
moderate high degree of happiness” (Turner, 2002, p. 128) However, when individuals have
doubts about being included, they will experience pride, which may protect them from feeling
unsatisfied from not belonging to the group. The failure to feel included will generate negative
responses, Turner concludes. “Sometimes people experience hurt (a variant of sadness), at other
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times they are angry, and on still other occasions, they feel fearful” (Turner, 2002, p. 128). The way to attribute for these variations, according to Turner, is to apply critical force of attributions. When individuals blame their failure to feel included on themselves, they experience sadness; if they also have anger at themselves and fear about the consequences of being excluded, shame may emerge, argues Turner (2002). He also discusses the concept of salience, when it comes to each emotion and the core self of each individual. An emotion will be experienced in a more pronounced way, when it’s more salient to the core self (Turner, 2002).

These emotions, evoked by the need to belong to a group, are familiar to most of us and when analyzed in detail, as Turner did above, make it more understandable what they represent. Other elements in face-to-face interactions will be present as well; hence, one must refrain from making assumptions using only one dimension of looking at emotions. Turner himself looks at other needs that humans have in face to face interactions, like the need for trust, facticity, self-verification, and positive exchange payoff, which in turn elicit different emotions. When they are not realized, the interaction will not be smooth, and negative emotions (negative in the conventional terms) will be activate in ways that disrupt and breach interaction (Turner 2002, p. 136). Using these multiple angles of looking at emotions, in addition to other methodologies, will not be easy or straightforward. In fact it will be a difficult task. But one must always ask oneself, what am I not seeing? And when looking at emotions, many emotions will be seen easily (right there on the surface), but many will not be as visible and we need to find other resources of recognizing and understanding them.

Tobin and Roth (2010) look at aligned and misaligned prosody as a transactional resource in intra- and intercultural communication involving power differences. They look beyond facial expressions (to things like voice pitch, pitch intensity, gestures, etc.) as a resource for displaying
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emotions and find that prosody is a major pragmatic resource. Their study “augments the existing literature by contributing descriptions of prosody as a transactional resources that is displayed pragmatically (rather than deterministically and casually) and subject to the purposes at hand” (W. M. Roth & K. Tobin, 2010). Their findings disagree with previous research, which saw the power and status as a determinant of the pitch level. They looked at social alignment (represented, for example, by matching one’s pitch to the pitch of the previous speaker), which denotes high level of unity and accommodation and leads to synchrony among the participants. And in contrast, in cases of conflict, some participants may use a different level of pitch and speech intensity to “assist an angered, excited, or animated member to “cool” or calm down (W. M. Roth & K. Tobin, 2010). According to previous research, students’ pitch should be aligning with that of the teacher, following the power dynamic. However, the study conducted by Tobin and Roth concluded that it is not always so and is much more nuanced than that. Understanding what prosody alignment means in a classroom setting and how to make a shift in the existing alignment or misalignment in order for synchrony to emerge within a group, which will promote solidarity, identity changes, positive emotions and increased success on meeting collective goals, is another way of making learning mindful and meaningful.

Bellocchi et al. (2013) look at the emotional climate and the emotions of solidarity of a group in a classroom setting. Emotional climate, according to Bellocchi et al. (2013) are produced in social situations, after which participants develop solidarity, what they call group belongingness, which can be observed through rhythmic coordination of gesture and speech, mutual focus of attention, production of collective exuberance through group laughter and emotional attunement, and emotional energy. As a result, shared rituals heighten the emotional outcome of the group. Shared ideas become, Bellocchi et al. argue, symbols representing the
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group’s interactions. And the experiences of the group will flow to the emotional energy experienced by an individual. “Just as emotions can be characterized in terms of valence and intensity, so too can emotional climate” (Bellocchi et al., 2013). This brings us to the importance of the awareness of the emotions in the learning setting of all the participants individually, but also as a group.

“Successful rituals are exhilarating; failed rituals are energy draining” (Collins 2013, p.53). And one can easily imagine both scenarios in the learning setting: first when both the teacher and the student feel invigorated and inspired; and second, when they feel defeated and exhausted. Though the power relationship in the learning setting is unavoidable (be it a teacher/student, parent/child, or mentor/mentee), becoming aware of them will be beneficial to the process and could make interaction rituals more successful, which in turn will make learning more meaningful. Many of the differences and ways of knowing and thinking, Alexakos argues, may not be apparent to the teacher/researcher until he or she looks for them and learns from his or her students (Alexakos, 2015). In addition, Vygotskian theory (1981) argues that our learning is based on pereshevania -- cognitive and emotional experiences in past and present -- which will affect how we learn, what we learn, and where in that sociocultural world is the dialectical relationship between self and other, agency and passivity.

Powietrzynska et al. argue that addressing issues of wellness, sustainability, and literate citizenship are among highly desirable aims of education (2015). They consider mindfulness to be a promising practice in accomplishing such goals as it allows everyone involved in the learning process to pause, “zoom in on the micro situations and cancel out the cacophonous noise inside and around us and thus to develop a sense of equanimity” (Powietrzynska, M. et al., 2015). They argue that alleviating emotions may afford increased openness towards learning the
subject of science, which includes the ability to connect what is learned in the classroom with the larger context of life in the world (2015). They take a stance regarding the scientific literacy and argue that even though every participant, teacher/student, comes with their own epistemology and ontology, doing science in the classroom will involve the pursuit of different ontologies and epistemologies as a result of learning.

Heuristics is one of the tools which they suggested to use in a classroom setting in order to reveal the meanings associated with a particular social construct. A series of statements (characteristics) is created in such a heuristic, which describe the social construct and as one reads the statements and tries to place himself on a frequency scale, they engage in a mindfulness practice, by reflecting on the statement and his/her behavior associated with it. The goal is, of course, bigger than that, hoping that this reflection will be something that each individual will take away beyond the classroom and will find connections in the larger context of life in the world.

Alexakos calls heuristics a tool which can be used in sociocultural research, both as an instrument for investigation and intervention (Alexakos, 2015). It involves a process of reflection, which in turn will reveal information about us as much as others, or at least it is intended to do so. But the next step is what to do to with the information which will be revealed. Alexakos states that even when we are aware, we may not know how to change our emotions or expression, even if we want to change those (2015). He argues that heuristics can change these issues hermeneutically, as each participant makes their own meaning and takes away messages and acts on those that appeal the most to each individual (Alexakos, 2015). A heuristic can also be adapted to each group and changed by the participants of the group. In that process of changing/adapting the heuristics, as the group engages in a discussion about which
characteristics are important and salient, the reflection will happen more naturally. In addition, it will require more active participation of the participants: not simply sitting and receiving information about the importance of how to better listen to each speaker, but coming up with characteristics like “When I listen to others speak, I keep an eye contact,” and “when I speak, I notice when people look me in the eyes.” Often times, the characteristics of a heuristic will stay with the participant for a prolonged period of time and they may reflect on those characteristic weeks after they have taken such a survey, which also introduces a tool for meaningful reflection and a tool for a change in behavior in a desired manner.
As I discuss learning and mindfulness from theoretical perspective, I think about ways to find applications for such mindfulness practices in areas outside of the classroom and in our everyday lives. Mindfulness practice offers an alternative way of achieving wellness and in many ways we need all the help we can get in order to overcome unhealthy habits such as addiction, for example, and more specifically addiction to technology.

People eating dinner at a restaurant and instead of looking and talking to each other, staring at their smart phones; children playing games on devices at meals, in cars, subways, hospitals, airplanes, etc.; people walking on streets and staring at their phones; people on vacations snapping selfies and posting their pictures on social media; people turning to their smart phones first thing in the morning as they wake up to check their emails and updates on social media; feeling panicky when misplacing or losing a phone -- these images and ways of living are familiar to most of us. Digital devices have entered our lives quite recently, very quickly became ubiquitous, and now permeate every part of our lives. The significance of these phenomena is yet to be found for both older and younger generations, the latter of which grows up with no point of reference to lives without these everyday gadgets. Meanwhile, as we wait to find out the effects of using so much technology in our everyday lives on physical, emotional, social, and cognitive levels, we become more and more dependent and addicted to them. When I first became interested in mindfulness and wellness, I wanted to find a topic that would be relevant to me and others and see if by application of mindfulness practice there can be any changes in my behavior and the behavior of my family.
I am aware that I myself am also guilty of using digital devices in my life. I have a Smartphone, a tablet, my computer is turned on most of the day, and watching TV is my guilty pleasure, when I get a chance to do it. In addition to both my husband’s and my use of technology, when our children get home, one of the first things they do is turn to their devices as well. My son, who is sixteen, will turn his computer on and will check-in with his friends, minutes after he walks inside the house. He will soon be playing on the internet and talking with his friends on Skype, messaging them, his phone never too far away from him. And my daughter, who is six, arrives home from school and will want to watch TV and check the progress on her games on the same iPad that her father has been cradling in his hands since he got home. Obviously, as parents we try to limit and monitor the screen time for our children as well as for ourselves. But I found that it is becoming incredibly difficult to resist the temptation and control the screen time for the children, but even more so for ourselves. The desire to escape the reality of life, the endless list of responsibilities, and the stress of life, pushes one to turn to these devices and allow them do the job that they were designed to do – entertain and distract.

Mindfulness begins with bringing our attention to the issue at hand -- bringing our awareness to how much we use technology, the reasons why we turn to these devices instead of engaging in other types of activities, and what it does to us on an individual level and as a family as well. Awareness of these issues and with that awareness mindful meditation as a central element of trying to change the habits of the mind, which can also be identified as addiction, to modify the behavior for the betterment of each individual and family as a whole was at the heart of my project. In addition, I employed the use of Jin Shin Jyutsu (JSJ) as a different methodology in this wellness project. Jin Shin Jyutsu -- a term meaning Creator’s art through the person of compassion or way of the compassionate spirit -- was rediscovered, developed, and named by the
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Japanese philosopher and healer Jiro Murai in the early 20th century (Burmeister, 1997). The use of screen time, whether it is through smart phones, tablets, TV, or anything else, can take our attention away from our own bodies. JSJ works to bring this attention back to ourselves through practicing gentle holds which allow the “universal energy” to flow through our bodies without the blockage that is seen to cause discomfort, disharmony, pain, depression, etc.

I was hoping that by engaging my family in this process we could all learn from each other and make this process and this project more meaningful. However, I quickly realized that it would be difficult to accomplish, so I focused on adults only, leaving the children for another project. I thought it would make more sense to practice on my husband and I first and involve the children later. I also hoped that if we were able to become less dependent and addicted to technology by practicing meditation and JSJ, our children would observe us developing new habits and it would be easier to engage them in a similar project. And finally, I wanted to be aware of the challenges along the way of the project to see what could be expected and which mistakes could be avoided in the future.

I had been very excited and motivated to start this project, but quickly became aware that it had to be adjusted again. As the weeks went by of my practice with my husband, I learned something which I was not expecting. As enthusiastic as I was to achieve the results, I was blinded by the goal of achieving them and forgot halfway that this project was first and foremost designed to promote wellness. The more far and high I set out my expectations, the more prone to disappointment and failure I was. The desire to stop the practice and turn to the habitual behavior of using digital technology was far more difficult than I anticipated. And as difficult as it was to keep up with the practice of mindful meditation and JSJ for my husband, who I kept encouraging to work with me (or in his words nagged at him), it was even more difficult for
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myself. Changing the habits of the mind is a difficult and long process and requires a lot of stamina, determination and tenacity. Once I realized how difficult it is, my research became even smaller (or bigger, depending on how you look at it), because I decided that I need to focus mainly on myself and practice to mindful meditation and JSJ while still using digital technology to notice any changes in my behavior and the habits of my mind.

Davidson (2012), based on neurological studies, argues that each person has and emotional style which can be described through six dimensions: social intuition, sensitivity to context, self-awareness, resilience, outlook, and attention. Identifying yourself and others on his spectrum provides a different perspective of who we are as individuals and why we behave and react a certain way. Being aware of these six emotional styles helps to make a change as one can work to move towards the more positive end of each of the emotional styles. Davidson and argues that different types of meditation can assist us in changing the pathways in the brain, which in turn will change our habitual behavior (2012). If we want to become more attentive, for example, and be able to stay focused on a task without getting distracted by emotions, mindful meditation will assist in changing the habits of the brain to stay more focused and more attentive.

Among the six emotional styles discussed by Davidson are resilience and outlook (2012). Unlike me, my husband was skeptical of the project from the start, which in some way was a more realistic view. Something I only realized weeks later, he was aware of from the start. Upon our reflection I determined both mine and my husband’s emotional styles as described by Davidson, and also where on the scale of those emotional styles we are both located. This was confirmed when we both took the test in his book. My level of enthusiasm and ability to change my research project as time went by both pointed to a high level of resilience and a positive outlook. My husband’s outlook and resilience both were closer to the opposite end of the
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spectrum towards “slow to recover” and “negative outlook”. The difference was not big. For example he scored an “8” on the resilience scale (with a ‘10’ being ‘slow to recover’), where I scored a “7”, and he scored a “7” in the outlook scale, where I scored a “9” (with a ‘10’ being ‘positive’).

The Practice

We practiced meditation over several weeks. We practiced mindful, compassion, and attention meditation, which I will describe further. And we practiced JSJ in addition to the meditation and sometimes together with it. After the practice we talked about it. Out of these different types of meditation, we mostly focused on mindful meditation as described by Davidson (2012). While practicing it we turned our attention back to ourselves and our bodies and the world around us. I chose this type of meditation specifically because while using technology our attention is taken away from us and almost completely overtaken by the device that we are using. We took five minutes (several times a week) to sit down with our eyes closed and turned our awareness to things other than a phone, a game, TV, etc. Practicing mindful meditation, I was hoping to change the pattern of our brains. Before the practice began, I noticed that even in the first few minutes of waking up my hand was reaching for the phone to check my emails, go on one of the social networks, check the weather, or read the latest news. Practicing mindful meditation and fighting off the temptation to reach for that phone for as a little as five minutes in the morning, I was attempting to train the brain to change this habitual pattern.

Another type of meditation that we were focusing on was compassion meditation. Davidson asks themselves a question in his research, whether a person can train his brain to become more compassionate -- whether by practicing compassion meditation, one can change the way the brain activates different regions and that once practiced in this type of meditation
one can be more compassionate in a non-meditative state as well (2012). This kind of meditation was the one I personally enjoyed the most. Once sitting down comfortably, we focused on visualizing and contemplating different groups of people. We started by visualizing a loved one – specifically, a loved one at a time in her/his life when she/he was suffering. With the image clearly in our minds, we would concentrate on the wish that her/his suffering ends, silently repeating a phrase such as “may you be free from suffering; may you experience joy and ease” to help us focus on this task. Most importantly, we also tried to feel the compassion emotionally and not simply think it cognitively. After doing this for a loved one, we expanded our circle of compassion little by little, to ourselves, then to someone we recognize but do not really know (the mailman, bus driver, police officer), then perhaps a neighbor or a person who works in the same building with us but whose life we know little about, then to a difficult person, someone who pushes our buttons and makes us angry, and finally to all humankind (Davidson & Begley, 2012).

I almost always started my compassion meditation by visualizing my daughter. I could feel the warmth spreading through my chest and my forehead getting heated, when I pictured her face in my mind. Once I moved on to other people, I noticed that it was more difficult to accomplish the same level of compassion, which I noticed in how my body was reacting. For example, I didn’t feel warmth spreading in my chest thinking of a neighbor the same way as it did, when I thought about my daughter. The very first time we practiced compassion meditation I made sure to include my husband in the circle of compassion, since he was sitting right next to me, as well as me. He, however, admitted to me that he had forgot to include himself in that circle. I thought that detail was meaningful.
We talked about our experience during these meditations and compared our thoughts, sensations, and emotions. We even both sent good thoughts to the construction people downstairs during compassion meditation, who have been working on the apartment downstairs for over a month, causing all kinds of inconveniences for us. Once we talked about it after the meditation, it made us smile and feel a little more at ease about their work. Most importantly, as I have practiced compassion meditation more and more, I noticed that even in a non-meditative state, I often found myself turning to this kind of positive thinking, especially when someone was being difficult. I repeated to myself “may you be free from suffering; may you experience joy and ease”, as Davidson advised (2012), and if that didn’t work I sent the same positive thoughts to myself.

The third kind of meditation that we practiced was attention meditation. Davidson called it “one-pointed concentration” and he was trying to see if practicing this kind of meditation can change the plasticity of the brain and allow for someone, who on the emotional styles spectrum falls closer to the unfocused end, to develop a more focused attention. “In this practice, the meditator focused on a single object of attention, such as the breath or a picture” (Davidson & Begley, 2012). And that is exactly what we did. We tried to concentrate on our breath, on the sound coming from the window, on the cats lying next to us (they always joined us when we sat down to practice) or anything else. I found it difficult to accomplish this level of concentration especially when I was focusing on something internal. I could stare at the cat for a long time and my mind sort of went blank. I could also listen to the noises and allow them to fill my presence without a lot of other thoughts entering my mind. But once I tried to concentrate on my breath or just on clearing my head, the thoughts flooded me.
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I wondered if this “mind monkey” -- thoughts jumping around in the head -- is one of the reasons we turn towards digital devices. As we use technology more and more our ability to stay focused diminishes, at least in my experience. Technology provides multiple stimuli to our brain and even in the absence of the devices, absence of stimuli, our brain follows this “mind monkey” model, which becomes the more natural state. Or is it the most unnatural state? Is the most natural state of having your mind clear and calm, like the surface of the lake? Or is it, for us in our modern times, the most natural state of the brain when we are bombarded with information? Is this why it is difficult for me to quiet my mind by turning my attention on myself and yet a little easier to concentrate on a noise or an image, because this way I have something particular to focus on?

Addiction to Technology

After week three, my husband felt pressured to do meditation with me and I do not blame him for it. As I have mentioned before, I was blinded by achieving a goal for my project and strayed away from the wellness component at the core of the research. Besides, a few meaningful conversations about the meditation after the practice did not lead to any miraculous changes in our behavior, which was not a surprise of course, but was, nevertheless, discouraging. I failed to admit to myself that we have to address bigger issues, the addictive nature of gaming, for example, and my husband's tendency towards addictive behaviors. The emotional styles also came back to mind. Someone with an outlook closer to a negative end of the spectrum and a less resilient emotional style will have harder time taking on a project, because they both see how difficult and complex that project is and how improbable is the outcome.

As I understood that, I also became more aware of why it was hard for my husband to keep on going with this project. My emotional style of someone who is a much more resilient
and very optimistic person, makes me overly confident and less realistic in my endeavors. I also I learned that since I have continued with my project alone, my husband and my kids have become the quiet observers. And I believe that it was the first necessary step in achieving wellness for us as a whole family as well as for me individually. The hermeneutic nature of the research became such only when I surrendered my assumptions and judgments and allowed some room for reflexivity. The dialectic relationship of agency and passivity manifested itself when I let go of some parts of my research, like my husband’s participation, and engaged in the research alone. Besides I realized that it takes this dialectic relationship between agency and passivity to make such research happen and for it to become meaningful. When I was pushing my own agenda on my husband, I did not consider his agency/passivity, at least not in the way I should have it considered anyway.

Another important point to consider is the addictive nature of the digital devices. The most common and problematic addictive behaviors found among adolescents according to Hagedorn and Young (2011) include food, gambling, exercise, sex, spending, the Internet, and video/computer games. Similar to other addiction, addiction to digital devices has components of craving, mood alteration, withdrawal symptoms, problems with impulse control etc. (Hagedorn, Young 2011). Peter Waldman talks about the nature of addicts (2014). In his dialog with an Alcoholic Anonymous representative, Tony, he calls himself a “pill-popping pessimist” to which Tony, ignoring the sarcasm, replies “You didn’t tell me that you were a pessimist. Most addicts are.” (Waldman 2014). As I read Waldman’s work, I thought of the reasons why we all get addicted to things like food, drugs, games, phones, TV, etc. In essence, we all crave happiness and do our best to find a shortcut towards at least an illusion of happiness. Waldman asks, “What
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is the absence of craving?” The absence of craving is not craving. It is nothing. How does one describe nothing?” (Waldman, 2014).

Being happy has become an external form of measurement. It is about how successful you are, how much money you have, your marital status, how many friends you have on social networks, and how many “likes” you got on your last picture on that network. Mindfulness and meditation is all about finding happiness within yourself and in the moment, despite the external circumstances. And when to the outside world you seem like a person who cannot possibly be happy, you turn to the virtual world of the internet, games, TV, etc. to recreate the illusory world of happiness.

As I continued working on meditation and JSJ, which I will discuss shortly, I kept coming back to the reasons why my husband was so reluctant about working with me on this project. I knew, obviously, that his addictive nature is prone to creating illusory sources of happiness. This project began with me looking around in my own life to find a project that is worth undertaking. What I saw in my family manifested itself as an addictive behavior. But to break the dependency and find the happiness within yourself requires work. I know it myself because I also have to work hard on using digital technology mindfully.

When talking about addiction, abstinence is often the key term, but with technology, it is extremely difficult to draw the line separating the everyday use of digital devices and addiction to them, since we all use technology so much in our everyday lives for work, for communication, etc. Kimberly Young talks about the addictive nature of the internet,” The internet itself is a neutral device originally designed to facilitate research among academic and military agencies. However, how some people have come to use this communication medium has created a stir among the mental health community by great discussion of internet addiction”
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(Young 2006). When applying mindfulness I tried to see if can raise our awareness of why and how much we use digital devices and reevaluate those reasons. It was not as successful with my husband, but I myself continued working on changing my habits of how much I used digital devices and practicing JSJ was one of the elements that helped me.

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In my everyday practice I was applying gentle touch to my body in a specific sequence (flows) or simply placing a hold on different safety energy locks (SEL) on my body for a few minutes. “Grounded in philosophy, psychology, and physiology, JSJ is a hands-on energy medicine practice used to address health imbalances” (Burmeister, 1997). My self-help practice empowered me to participate in the healing and the restoration of energy within my own body. Basically, whenever I felt tired or angry or experienced pain in a part of the body, I relied on JSJ to harmonize body and mind and bring balance in my life. I practiced the Main Central Flow each morning to help me get centered and energized for the day and whenever possible would turn to JSJ through the day.

As I was practicing more and more, I became aware of my body and how it operates. As I felt the anger rise up in me, I was more aware of the emotion that I was experiencing, and therefore more capable of doing something about it. As I was placing my hands in different parts of my body, practicing JSJ, I noticed things about myself that I have never noticed before. For example, how my toes have different phalanges, the same as fingers, and how holding them one at a time relaxes me as well as feels really good. In addition, I never attempted to count my own ribs or even touch them, but since I started my JSJ practice, I have explored them as well. And most importantly I became more in tune with my own body and more in control of it. Whenever I felt the need or the desire to turn back to my unhealthy habits of interacting with technology, I
relied on JSJ to focus my attention elsewhere. I looked at the emotions I was experiencing in the moment and the reasons for them, to the best of my ability, and evaluated why I want to look at my phone again or turn the TV on. Just giving it a thought and taking a pause was already an improvement, whenever possible I applied JSJ holds to help me. If I was feeling scared, then I held my index finger with my other hand for a few minutes and felt the different pulses in two hands harmonize with each other. As I took a minute to do so, I felt less scared and more calm, as well as more happy that I was able to handle it on my own.

Where to now?

As I spend time reflecting on my work, holding my index finger, I keep thinking about the journey that I have taken. I learned that awareness and mindfulness is not a quick fix, but a shift in a mindset. If I do want to see positive change in my interaction with digital devices, then the meditation, the quiet reflection, the JSJ practice needs to continue. And although it may seem like work, something else became illuminated in the process as well, which made it that much more precious. Using mindfulness techniques, meditation and JSJ helps me not just with how I interact with digital devices, but how I interact with the whole world. And that is no small accomplishment. When I wake up in the morning I still try to reach for my phone, but I notice that need, pause, and resist the temptation and do a Main Central Flow (JSJ flow) instead and then I sit down on the floor with my eyes closed and try to send love to the world and to myself while I quietly meditate. Sometimes my daughter seeing me do that joins me in the practice and we sit together and wish for all the beings to be happy and free from suffering. And more often than not, it will be a long time before I remember again about my phone, sometimes until it rings to remind me.

Lessons Learned
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To complete the hermeneutic circle of research, where everyone involved in the project learns from each other and makes new meaning, constructing new knowledge by understanding each individual part and referencing it to the whole, I realized that I did not allow for my participants to take a more active role in the project. A year later since this project happened, one thing is still very present -- awareness, which more often than not results in feeling guilty when I turn to use digital devices. Although guilt is often seen as a negative emotion, I believe that it is much more complex than that and consider it to be a necessary emotion in order to get to the next level, whatever that may be.

Since then I have also created a heuristic on mindfully surfing the internet. Powietrzynska (2014) describes heuristics as a tool that may serve different purposes, of which one can be a low-grade intervention. And in this low-grade intervention reflexive inquiry, which means becoming aware of the unaware, is the the mechanism that accomplishes the mindful interaction with the topic (Powietrzynska, 2014). Like authentic inquiry, heuristics are organic, dialectical constructs (Alexakos, 2015). Heuristics, often described as shape shifters, can and should be adapted to particular contexts. Heuristics are providing an opportunity for transformation, but as they are designed to cause a transformation, they often change themselves, as they adapt to each individual setting. Alexakos argues (2015) that as new knowledge emerges, new characteristics can be added and prior ones revised or removed. The characteristics used should be contextually appropriate and participants should recognize them as relevant.

Here are some of the characteristics of that heuristic, which I chose by reflecting on my own habits of using digital devices:

I know exactly where my phone is at all times:

5=Very often or always, 4=Often, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, 1=Never or very rarely
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While working, I put my phone away in order to not get distracted:

5=Very often or always, 4=Often, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, 1=Never or very rarely

When I am bored, I browse on my phone:

5=Very often or always, 4=Often, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, 1=Never or very rarely

When eating dinner with my friends or family I put the phone away:

5=Very often or always, 4=Often, 3=Sometimes, 2=Rarely, 1=Never or very rarely

Tobin (2009) argues that one of the criteria of authentic research is catalytic authenticity criterion which is supposed to catalyze positive changes. And where some participants have a better opportunity for change, some will have more obstacles to overcome and it is the researcher's responsibility to provide additional structures for those individuals for whom the efforts to educate them and catalyze worthwhile changes were not enough (Tobin, 2006). In my research, catalyzing positive change for the participants was the primary goal, as I have indicated earlier. This goal, however, overshadowed other processes in the project as catalytic authenticity criterion is only one of the criterions which are necessary for an authentic research. I needed to come up with additional structures for my husband in order to catalyze positive changes. Clearly I still have a lot more to learn and consider, but I do believe that the topic of addiction to digital devices is an important one and I will continue to learn how to become more mindful while using smart gadgets and hopefully will be able to contribute to others as well.
When I got my Bachelors of Science degree, I was over the moon. I was so happy and proud of myself and was thrilled to get into the Master of Arts program at the Graduate Center. Naturally, it took time for me to get used to the new place, new people, and the new level of studies. With each new class I took, came new experience and my horizons widened in new directions. It was difficult sometimes, but I welcomed the challenge or struggled through it towards my goal. My goal was, of course, getting the Master’s degree and, hopefully, getting accepted into the Ph.D. program at the Graduate Center, CUNY. As the year 2016 began, my dreams started coming true. I was accepted into the Urban Education Ph.D. program at the Graduate Center, registered for my final classes, and began writing this thesis as a final chord of the Master’s Degree program. What came next was a surprise to me.

Writing this became a journey for me through my own learning and schooling. From my very first favorite teacher, to so many favorite teachers now, I look back and ahead with a sense of wonder. What will come in the future and what kind of a teacher will I become when my turn comes? As I read through my papers written for my classes in the Master of Arts program, I couldn't help but feel sad. I thought the writing was not very good, not smooth, not eloquent, and not logical. For a moment, I thought, maybe it is good that I am able to recognize this? Maybe the fact that I can tell what kind of writing is good is a sign of progress and my growing
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intellect? But then I also look back at how I felt when I got my Bachelor’s degree, when I felt that I knew it all, and I realize that I am only trying to comfort myself by thinking this way.

When I was 8 years old, my older brother told me that if I want to be smart I should read *Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne (1874/2008). It was a big book for me and I sat down to read it with one goal only -- becoming smart. The first hundred of pages were hard. I was basically making myself read through the pages, finding it hard to concentrate on the characters, descriptions, and events that took place in the book. Then I got swept away with the plot of the story, but I never forgot about my goal -- intelligence! When I read the very last page of the book, I closed it and sat there waiting for a miracle. I almost imagined that harps would start playing in my head any moment, declaring that I reached the mark of intelligence, which my brother had talked about. Needless to say, the harps didn't play, and miracle didn’t happen.

I obviously got what he meant by his statement (at some point), and, when years later I reread the *Mysterious Island* (Verne, 1874/2008), it felt like I was reading it for the first time. I was never able to let go of my goal and just be present in the moment with the book, when I read it for the first time, and for that reason I couldn't possibly enjoy it. In my learning, I am daily reminded of that episode from childhood, when I have to let go of my goal and simply enjoy the present and the process. And as I try to accomplish that, there are certain emotions that are present -- sadness, anxiety, and fear.

Several thoughts appear in my head, as I read and learn more in my academic life and as I interact with students and faculty members who are much smarter than me: “I know nothing!” and “so what do we do with all of this knowledge?” When I read things that I wrote earlier in my studies and recognize some progress, it makes me feel sad because at the moment I wrote them, I felt pretty confident of my abilities. As a faculty member who reads these words now, he/she will
be able to recognize something I am not yet capable seeing. But as I continue to learn and grow academically, I imagine I will be gaining new knowledge and new perspectives and, once I look back at my work, I will be able to recognize my limitations, weaknesses, mistakes, etc. The hermeneutic process of acquiring knowledge -- when one person learns from others, others learn from the one, and all learn from each other -- is a never-ending, spiral-like process (Heidegger, 2008). In this process everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher and we move along this spiral as we exchange ideas, perspectives, knowledge, etc. Seeing your own subjective process as one of the many participants in this process of knowledge creation can be a little disheartening. It is like staring at the open ocean on the shores of one continent and wondering if there is an end to this vast body of water. Only we, of course, know that there is an end to the ocean, where there is never an end to knowledge. The only end there can possibly be to anything is death, if that indeed is also an end. The learning then becomes this process of disillusionment, when one starts to feel powerless and small in the boundless, monumental sea of knowledge. Socrates famously said on his deathbed, or it is claimed that he said, “I now know that I know nothing.” And if that is how Socrates felt, how should I feel then?

With sadness, one starts to feel anxious and fearful. Fear is one of our basic emotions, which advantaged our biological success necessary for our survival as a species. It initiates the immediate response to imminent threat or danger and activates our senses and prepares our bodies in the face of sudden perils. Anxiety is different. Frazzetto (2014) argues that anxiety is usually a fear of the indefinite, something that we cannot always explain. It is also an anticipatory emotion. Just as staring at the ocean and not knowing how to get to the other side of it, not knowing what to expect on the journey across the wild and enormous beast, I feel anxious in my journey across the ocean of knowledge. But as I am anxious about the unknown, I am also
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fearful of my own place in this academic world and don’t yet know how to answer the question of what to do with any of the knowledge I will acquire.

One thing that I really don’t want to happen is to repeat my childhood mistake when I read *Mysterious Island* (Verne, 1874/2008). I want to be present and aware on my academic road. And, more than anything, I want it to matter and mean something, and not just to me, but to others as well. Here is where I ask myself, “So what do we do?” It is one thing to hypothesize about mindful learning and to discuss the role of emotions in that process and what that means, and another thing to actually find application of that theory in everyday life. In a way, my argument is quite simple. Of course emotions matter in learning. We all know it from our personal experience. We can look back on our education (as well as other instances of learning outside of formal schooling) and easily remember some moments. Most likely those moments are the ones when our emotions were activated, especially strong emotions. On the other hand, things we learned in the unemotional, non-relatable context have been long forgotten and the knowledge presented to us in those instances never stuck and there are no lasting memories of those instances. Activating those emotions then becomes a goal, in a way. But it is also much more difficult to navigate through these emotions and maintain a safe environment for learning when emotions are high. Alexakos (2015) argues that safe spaces are such when teaching and learning involves everyone in the classroom, where each is both a learner and a teacher, *all* learn from each other, and where all voices are heard, especially those that are the most vulnerable, oppressed, or marginalized by hegemonic structures in society. So it does become a lot more nuanced than just saying emotions matter.

Davidson’s (2012) research on emotional styles include social intuition dimension, which is embedded in how aware we are of nonverbal social cues of the people that surround us. There
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are some who are very in tune with those around them and those who don't pay attention to the bodily expressions of the people with whom they are speaking during interactions. This dimension is one of the most important skills needed to create an emotional climate which will create a safe environment and promote meaningful learning. In addition, it will also make us better human beings, who are not just focused on ourselves, but do pay attention to those around us and the world as a whole.

The goal is then to construct an alternative framework to learning and to living, since learning happens every day and in each field of our lives. We need to find a way to make it count and learn to enjoy it in the process. It will not always be possible, but we should never give up trying. Getting a degree may be a goal, but it is hardly a purpose in life. What most of us want is to be happy and for life to mean something to ourselves and others. Finding a balance in life, as we juggle many responsibilities, obligations, struggles, etc. and as we fight injustice, weaknesses, addictions, bad habits, disease, etc., we must never lose sight of ourselves and the fleeting moment of now. Ultimately, if we want to become mindful, we must learn to recognize, appreciate, and be happy in each moment – in the now. So let’s make it count!
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