

Two Book Reviews

By Dave Lehman NSRF National Facilitator in Madison, WI

The Power of Mindful Learning

By Ellen Langer

Paperback 1997

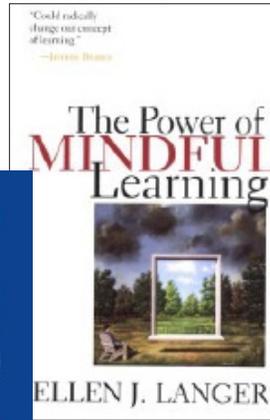
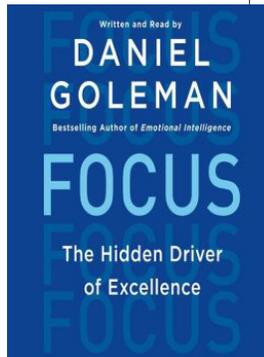
Lifelong Books, Da Capo Press

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

By Daniel Goleman

Hardback 2013

Harper Collins Publishers, New York



The Power of Mindful Learning

Recently my wife, Judy, heard Ellen Langer interviewed on NPR, and we immediately went out and found three of her eleven books – her first book, *Mindfulness*, her most recent book, *Counter Clockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*, and the one I’ll review here; *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Ellen Langer is a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, and winner of numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Award for Distinguished Contributions of Basic Science to the Application of Psychology from the American Association of Applied and Preventive Psychology.

Throughout *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Langer effectively uses stories and fairy tales at the beginning of each chapter, such as her retelling of the familiar excerpt from Little Red Riding Hood (see sidebar).

Langer then goes on to begin her Introduction with these references to seven “educational myths” which form the structure of the book. Although the book was published in 1997, these myths unfortunately still seem all too familiar today:

Certain myths and fairy tales help advance a culture by passing on a profound and complex wisdom to suc-

ceeding generations. Others, however, deserve to be questioned. This book is about seven pervasive myths, or mindsets, that undermine the process of learning and how we can avoid their debilitating effects in a wide variety of settings.

1. *The basics must be learned so well that they become second nature.*
2. *Paying attention means staying focused on one thing at a time.*
3. *Delaying gratification is important.*
4. *Rote memorization is necessary in education.*
5. *Forgetting is a problem.*
6. *Intelligence is knowing ‘what’s out there.’*
7. *There are right and wrong answers.*

Langer feels these debilitating myths point to yet another educational myth – “only a massive overhaul can give us a more effective educational system.”

Those of us within the National School Reform Faculty (note - “Reform”) certainly do not subscribe to that last myth. We have seen many teachers and administrators change their practice at the grassroots level to make a real difference for kids. Still,

“Once upon a time there was a mindless little girl named Little Red Riding Hood. One day, when she went to visit her ailing grandmother, she was greeted by a wolf dressed in her grandmother’s nightclothes. ‘What Big eyes you have, Grandma,’ she exclaimed, clueless as ever, although she had seen her grandmother’s eyes countless times before. ‘What big ears you have, Grandma,’ she said, although it was unlikely that they would have changed since her last visit. ‘What a deep voice you have, Grandma,’ she said, still oblivious to the shaggy imposter beneath the familiar lacy nightcap. ‘What big teeth you have,’ she said, too late, alas, to begin paying attention.”

we do not disagree that changing school curricula, changing standards for testing students and evaluating teachers, increasing parent/care-giver and community involvement in education, and increasing school budgets would also help.

The term “mindful” is used in a very specific way in this book: “A mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective.” Likewise, the word “mindlessness” is characterized by these characteristics: “an entrapment in old categories by automatic behavior that precludes attending to new signals, and by action that operates from a single perspective.” What follows is seven chapters, each devoted to one of the seven myths listed above with wonderful examples and alternatives.

I encourage you to read this book so I won’t review the content of every chapter, but let’s look at how Langer responds to the first of the seven myths, “*The basics must be learned so well that they become second nature.*” She begins by drawing examples from her experiences as an educator and in other aspects of her life. She follows with examples from extensive research into the myth, much of it research she herself conducted with colleagues and/or graduate students. This quote provides an overview:

One of the most cherished myths in education or any kind of training is that in order to learn a skill one must practice it to the point of doing it without thinking. Whether I ask colleagues concerned with higher education, parents of young children, or students themselves, everyone seems to agree on this approach to what are called ‘the basics.’ Whether it is learning how to play baseball, drive,

or teach, the advice is the same: practice the basics until they become second nature. I think this is the wrong way to start.

Langer relays an example: learning to hold a baseball bat a certain way as a child in a summer camp, then re-learning a different way to hold it as an adult. [As a college baseball player who was an All Star third basemen for Ohio Wesleyan University, I can attest to how players change holding the bat. As a boy in Little League I was taught to hold the bat straight up at shoulder height. In college I held my bat straight back at virtually eye level. Next time you watch a professional baseball game, notice the varieties of ways the bat is held and the variation in stance, in the placement of feet.]

Langer also describes having to change her “second nature,” driving a car in the U.S. on the right, and then switching to the left when she went to England. Clearly, developing a “second nature” about driving is unhelpful when driving in certain foreign countries, likely to get you into an accident if you’re not exceedingly mindful at intersections.

Then on a trip to Singapore, she asked her taxi driver the size of the Chinese population in Singapore. The answer was “76%” to which Langer wryly responded, “Are you sure it isn’t 77%?” Happily, the driver laughed, realizing his long-ingrained response to that question isn’t necessarily still accurate: population percentages change all the time with births, deaths, emigration, and immigration.

Additional examples draw on Langer’s research, such as one impact study on changing an approach in teaching high school physics. Here they found that teaching the material conditionally allowed students to manipulate the information creatively in

a different context, rather than being taught that there was only one way to explain particular physics concepts.

Based on these and other examples, Langer summarizes her response to this myth, using the term “side-ways learning:”

Sideways learning aims at maintaining a mindful state. As we saw, the concept of mindfulness revolves around certain psychological states that are really different versions of the same thing: (1) openness to novelty; (2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (5) orientation in the present. Each leads to the others and back to itself. Learning a subject or skill with an openness to novelty and actively noticing differences, contexts, and perspectives - sideways learning - makes us receptive to changes in an ongoing situation. In such a state of mind, basic skills and information guide our behavior in the present rather than run it like a computer program.

Another myth, “*Rote memorization is necessary in education,*” is addressed in chapter four, “1066 What? Or The Hazards of Rote Memory.” Langer provides this response:

Closed packages of information are taken as facts. Facts are taken as absolute truths to be learned as is, to be memorized, leaving little reason to think about them. Without any reason to open up the package, there is little chance that the information will lead to any conceptual insights or even be rethought in a new context. We can think of such encapsulated information as overlearned...

Some teachers try to provide opportunities for the development of knowledge through flexible understanding of course material. In math, teaching for understanding in-

Regarding *The Power of Mindful Learning*

“Most of us are often mindless in our learning. How this happens and what can be done about it - these are Ellen Langer’s important questions. Her lively answers could radically change our concept of learning.” – Jerome Bruner, The New School for Social Research

Regarding *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*

“Attention is so important that ordinary people take it for granted, while scientists subject it to microanalysis. Steering deftly between these extremes, Dan Goleman synthesizes what is known and what we need to know” – Howard Gardner, Professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education



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Ithaca, NY. This public middle-high school was named for him and his wife by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. Dave was a member of the very first “Principals Seminar” leadership group at the beginning of the NSRF, under the umbrella of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Soon thereafter he was trained as a CFG coach and then an NSRF National Facilitator.

volves teaching students to think about what a problem means and to look for multiple solutions. Studies have confirmed that science is better taught through hands-on research and discovery than through memorization alone. In English, teaching for understanding means emphasizing the process of writing and exploring literature rather than memorizing grammar rules and doing drills. Understanding is encouraged in history by turning students into junior historians. These methods, all more effective than having students memorize material, are usually used sparingly and primarily with high-level students even though virtually all students seem to be able to learn without memorizing. Too many students still suffer the hidden costs of learning in the more familiar manner.”

Each of these statements is backed-up with footnotes to extensive research supporting each of them.

Last, as a reviewer “of a certain age,” I want to briefly share Langer’s response to her myth number five, “*Forgetting is a problem.*” Here, Langer presents “alternative views” of memory and aging. Evidence from cross-cultural studies with hearing impaired and the elderly in China that indicates the gradual loss of memory as one ages is not necessarily true.

For that discussion, and the other myths she dispels, I strongly encourage you to read, *The Power of Mindful Learning*. You may also want to visit her website at www.ellenlanger.com as well as her blog and her other books.

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

Daniel Goleman’s latest book is *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*. Goleman is a former science

journalist for the New York Times, author of 13 books, and cofounder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning at the Yale University Child Studies Center (now at the University of Chicago).

I pair this book with Ellen Langer’s largely because of Langer’s myth #2: “*Paying attention means staying focused on one thing at a time.*” Goleman, who is familiar with and cites Langer’s work on mindfulness, describes three kinds of focus:

Inner focus [self-awareness] attunes us to our intuitions, guiding values, and better decisions. Other focus [empathy] smooths our connections to the people in our lives. And outer focus [systems thinking] lets us navigate in the larger world. A leader tuned out of his [her] internal world will be rudderless; one blind to the world of others will be clueless; those indifferent to the larger systems within which they operate will be blindsided.

Goleman notes that the “science of attention” has grown well beyond the early years of vigilance research in World Wars I and II, showing us that focus, paying attention, is essential to how well we perform any task. Our very “nimbleness in life” depends on our ability to focus, rippling through virtually everything we want to accomplish. This “supple tool” is embedded in countless mental operations including comprehension, memory, learning, sensing how we feel and why, reading emotions in other people, and interacting smoothly with others.

Goleman is concerned about the decline not only in young people’s ability to focus, but adults as well, as the age of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with ever faster cell phones, laptops, and iPads continuing to dominate our lives around the world. This is a world

in which young people are tuned-in more to machines than to people, and that's troubling. Goleman states -

...[T]he social and emotional circuitry of a child's brain learns from contact and conversation with everyone it [s/he] encounters over the course of a day. These interactions mold brain circuitry; the fewer hours spent with people – and the more spent staring at a digitized screen – portends deficits.

Digital engagement comes at a cost in face time with real people - the medium where we learn to 'read' nonverbal [cues]."

Analyzing the anatomy and functioning of the human brain, Goleman notes that there are two main varieties of distractions – sensory and emotional:

The sensory detractors are easy: as you read these words you're tuning out the blank margins surrounding this text. Or, notice for a moment the feeling of your tongue against your upper palate - just one of an endless wave of incoming stimuli your brain weeds out from the continuous wash of background sounds, shapes and colors, tastes, smells, sensations, and on and on.

In contrast, the emotional turmoil in our lives is particularly challenging as it keeps intruding in our thinking, demanding a response. Only when we figure it out (or at least learn to notice and set aside the intrusive thoughts), can we cease obsessing over that topic that has caused such turmoil in our thoughts. The more our focus is disrupted, the worse we do in all kinds of life's activities, as athletes can attest. This *...means that those who focus best are relatively immune to emotional turbulence, more able to stay unflappable in a crisis, and to keep on an even keel despite life's emotional waves.*"

And "we learn best with focused attention."

Here I think its important to note some distinctions that Ellen Langer makes about focusing and attention as they may seem to disagree with Daniel Goleman. Langer notes that when we are distracted, it really means we are "otherwise attracted," and that it's important to note what it is that is attracting us. She goes on to say, "The most effective way to increase our ability to pay attention is to look for the novelty within the stimulus situation, whether it is a story, a map, or a painting. This is the most useful lesson to teach our children, because it enables them to be relatively independent of other people and of their physical environment." I believe Goleman would agree, but would want to note the importance of our "emotional resilience" – How long does our focus stray, and how quickly do we recover from upsets? Goleman points out that we can develop and strengthen our ability to focus.

Goleman's *Focus* is divided into seven sections, three of which are devoted to the three kinds of focus described above: "Self-Awareness," "Reading Others," and "The Bigger Context." Each of these sections contains three chapters in which Goleman cites examples from his own experience, from all kinds of different human endeavors, and from extensive research. Another section, "Smart Practice," looks at the "myth of 10,000 hours" of practice required to master anything. The last two sections of the book delve into ways to develop well-focused leaders who can make a difference. Looking particularly at the qualities needed in focused leaders, Goleman cites examples of leadership in Whole Foods, Zappos, Unilever, and Ben and Jerry's, noting what I believe applies to educational leaders as well:

If a leader is to articulate such shared values effectively, he or she must first look within to find a genuinely heartfelt guiding vision. The alternative can be seen in the hollow mission statements espoused by executives but belied by their company's (or their own) actions.

Then, from these values, good decisions will flow that allow for "present needs as well as those of a wider web of people, including future generations. Such leaders inspire: they articulate a larger common purpose that gives meaning and coherence to everyone's work, and engages people emotionally through values that make people feel good about their work, that motivate, and that keep people on course. Focusing on social needs can itself foster innovation, if combined with an expanded field of attention to what people need."

Goleman, who has worked with the Dalai Lama, ends his book with the following plea to leaders:

The largest lens for our focus encompasses global systems; considers the needs of everyone, including the powerless and poor, and peers far ahead in time. No matter what we are doing or what decision we are making, the Dalai Lama suggests these self-queries for checking our motivation:

Is it just for me, or for others?

For the benefit of the few, or the many?

For now, or for the future? 

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