

THE BIG IDEAS

Myths of Learning
Seven pervasive ones.

Reframing
Is huge. Time to practice!

Ever-Present Gratification
Why not?!

Mindful Presentations
And preparation.

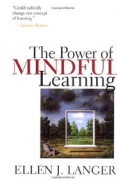
Creating Options
Is a good idea.

Active Self-Definition
Is better than mindless conforming.

Celebrate Confusion
Starting today!

"When faced with something that hasn't been done before, people frequently express the belief that it can't be done. All progress, of course, depends on questioning that belief."

~ Ellen Langer



The Power of Mindful Learning

BY ELLEN J. LANGER · DA CAPO © 1997 · 167 PAGES

"The term *mindful learning* is used here in a very specific way, drawn from the concept of mindfulness that I defined in an earlier book by that name. 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. Mindlessness, in contrast, is characterized by an entrapment in old categories; by automatic behavior that precludes attending to new signals; and by action that operates from a single perspective. Being mindless, colloquially speaking, is like being on autopilot. In *Mindfulness*, I described the benefits of a mindful approach for our psychological and physical well-being. For instance, elderly adults given mindfulness treatments were shown to live longer than their peers who were not given such treatments. In this book I use the concept of mindfulness as a lens through which to explore its importance in the world I know best, teaching and learning."

~ Ellen Langer from *The Power of Mindful Learning*

This is the third Note we've done on [Ellen Langer's](#) wisdom.

As I mentioned in the Notes on [Mindfulness](#) and [Counterclockwise](#), Langer is one of the world's leading research scientists, the first tenured female professor in Harvard's Department of Psychology and creator of what she calls the "psychology of possibility."

This book is all about applying her research on mindfulness to the world she knows best: teaching and learning. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

THE SEVEN PERVASIVE MYTHS

"Certain myths and fairy tales help advance a culture by passing on a profound and complex wisdom to succeeding 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."

The seven pervasive myths that undermine mindful learning.

Langer dedicates a chapter to exploring each.

Let's take a quick look at a few of my favorite Big Ideas we can apply to our lives today!

REFRAMING

"Virtually any task can be made pleasurable if we approach it with a different attitude. If we have long held a mindset that a particular activity is arduous, changing to a mindful attitude may be difficult, but the difficulty stems from the mindset not the activity."

~ Ellen Langer

"Sometimes we are stressed and want distraction. When thoughts about an impending divorce, an operation, or a move to a new city prove anxiety provoking, we often seek relief by trying to occupy our minds with other things. We may find temporary relief, but if the issue in question is important to us our minds find a way back. Rather than trying to think about something else, a more effective strategy may be to think about the problem differently. In research Irving Janis, John Wolfer, and I conducted we taught people about to undergo major surgery to reframe the hospital experience. We asked the group to view the experience from a more adaptive perspective, to attempt to notice the advantages of being in the hospital. Having time to take stock of goals or to get in touch with family and friends who had been taken for granted or even a forced weight loss can be seen as an advantage. The potential advantages varied from person to person. Patients in this group felt less stress, took fewer pain relievers and sedatives, and left the hospital sooner than did patients who were not given this preparation. The desire to be distracted was the desire to be otherwise attracted."

Imagine that.

Two groups are preparing for a major surgery. One group is taught to reframe the experience in a positive light—noticing the advantages of being in the hospital rather than focusing on the negatives. The other group was not.

The group trained in viewing the experience from a more adaptive perspective *"felt less stress, took fewer pain relievers and sedatives, and left the hospital sooner than did patients who were not given this preparation."*

Wow.

Makes you wonder why *every* person about to undergo major surgery isn't taught how to reframe, eh?

And, of course, the benefits of training ourselves to reframe our experiences in an adaptive way extend beyond hospital stays.

We ALWAYS have that choice.

The key is to be mindful of that fact.

Are *you* facing any challenges in your life?

Rather than distract yourself with entertainment or email or alcohol or whatever, can you step back and practice reframing by noticing the advantages of the challenge?!

Some questions you may want to journal: Can anything good come out of this experience? Does it present any opportunities for me? What lessons can I learn from this that I can apply to the future? What's the silver lining here?

This takes hard work to master. And it's worth it.

Here's how [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) puts it: *"Essentially, all optimism strategies involve the exercise of construing the world with a more positive and charitable perspective, and many entail considering the silver lining in the cloud, identifying the door that opens as a result of one that has closed. It takes hard work and a great deal of practice to accomplish effectively, but if you can persist at these strategies until they become habitual, the benefits could be immense. Some optimists may be born that way, but scores of optimists are made with practice."*

This is the essence of turning poison into medicine and seeing the obstacle as the way.

As we cultivate our ability to cognitively restructure our perception of reality, our reality changes.

EVER-PRESENT GRATIFICATION

“If we don’t open the presents until Christmas, or if we plan a trip for after the new year, aren’t we delaying gratification? We are not, if the anticipation itself is positive. Compare leaving on a trip the same day you decide to go with planning to leave in three weeks. You might spend the three weeks actively planning the trip, gathering information, imagining all the fun you will have. The trip might even turn out to benefit from such thoughts. This is hardly delaying gratification; it is merely being gratified by anticipation as well as by the actual trip.”

This is from a chapter busting the myth of delayed gratification.

Langer challenges the idea that work cannot be play and tells us that, with the right (mindful!) mindset, we can experience what she calls “ever-present gratification.”

Ever-present gratification.

I like it.

In our Note on [Mindfulness](#), we looked at Langer’s research on the fact that simply describing an activity as “play” rather than “work” resulted in a higher level of enjoyment. (Amazing.)

How do you define what you do throughout your day?

How can you reframe that a bit more to make it all one big game?

[Tal Ben-Shahar](#) talks about another aspect of immediate gratification in his book [Choose the Life You Want](#) (see Notes).

He likes to engage in what he calls “happiness boosters” and says this: *“In the past, I often reached a point where I felt depleted, when I had little enthusiasm for work (and sometimes even for life in general). The best cure, I found, was to inject a few happiness boosters into my daily routine. Today, rather than waiting for my energy levels to drop dangerously low before I take a break, I incorporate instant gratification into my life on a regular basis. These infusions of moments of joy do not merely make me feel better in the moment, they often create a current of enthusiasm and energy that helps me become more productive, more creative, happier.”*

The challenge, as it often is, is to find the right balance between delaying gratification, and grabbing it. I leave that to you...”

What happiness boosters can you bake into your daily routine for a little extra hit of immediate gratification?!

Here’s to taking baby steps in the direction of ever-present gratification! :)

MINDFUL PRESENTATIONS

“My notes before a lecture are sparse to nonexistent. I fear that if I write out all that I plan to say, it will be hard not to rely on past thoughts when I give the lecture again. Without a script, I’m forced to reinvent the lecture instead of delivering a canned one. I remember the general points, but the particulars have to be discovered. Preparing in this manner makes it much more likely that I will deliver a lecture that reflects my current thinking and the present situation; I’m not tied to a rigid outline or to reading notes. Moreover, I find that I feel excited by the possibility of coming to a new insight.”

“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.”

~ Ellen Langer

I love this.

You ever give presentations?

We all have different ways to prepare (and a key part of mindfulness is to mindfully create our style rather than conform to another's perspective!), but I just love Langer's description here and it's a nice validation of the style I'm developing.

The perfectionist part of me has always felt that I needed to have nearly every word of a talk prepped and ready in advance. The other part of me has always preferred to have a basic framework/mindmap in place and then just let it rip.

One is much more mindful (and fun!!!) than the other.

The reality is, if we write out every.single.word to make sure we've got it juuuuuust right we might have just killed the talk!

This also provides the context to share some of the best advice I've ever received on how to give presentations. As I was preparing for the original Optimal Living 101 video class years ago, my coach, [Steve Chandler](#), told me to focus on "connection over perfection"—pointing out that people won't be moved by the "perfection" of the presentation as much as the energy with which I gave the presentation.

If we mindlessly try to recall every detail of a presentation we've created, we may deliver it "perfectly" and, in the process, lose the very energy that would have made it compelling.

I'll always remember Steve's example of John Madden—the former football coach and broadcaster. Madden got so fired up talking about football he practically spit all over himself. Hah! He was less interested in "perfecting" his presentation skills according to someone else's standards and simply let it rip. As a result, you FELT his passion and ignored the supposed "flaws" in his style.

Here's to mindfully preparing and letting the moment dictate where we go as we share our enthusiasm and focus on connection over perfection!

CREATING OPTIONS

"Many of us, as students and teachers, are still in search of the one right answer. This belief in a single right answer rests on a view of intelligence that emphasizes outcome and expert authority."

~ Ellen Langer

"In contrast, when we are mindful, we are implicitly aware that in any particular situation there is no absolute optimum standard for action. From a mindful perspective, one's response to a particular situation is not an attempt to make the best choice from among available options but to create options. Rather than look for an external standard of optimum fit or the right answer, one discovers that, in the words of William James, 'the standard perpetually grows up endogenously inside the web of experience.'"

Mindfulness is all about being open to new information and experiences and being flexible in how we dynamically respond to a given situation.

Mindlessness, on the other hand, is all about being on autopilot and trying to rigidly apply a certain set of rules to whatever situation we're in—largely ignoring our experience as we conform to what we think we *should* do.

As Langer explains, when we are mindful, we're not trying to apply an absolute optimum standard. We're focused on creating options within a given context.

Mindless: "I should do this right now."

Mindful: "What are my potential responses to this situation?"

Here's to creating options!

"The rigid mindsets we hold about ourselves affect our performance."

~ Ellen Langer

ACTIVE SELF-DEFINITION

"To my mind, there are advantages to following one's own perspective even when one loses. Mindful decision making, as opposed to decision making passively based on data assembled by outside observers, is a process of active self-definition."

Another choice:

We can mindlessly accept advice from experts (or well-meaning friends and loved ones) who cite relevant data. Or, we can mindfully follow our own perspective even if it goes against the conventional, expert perspective.

As Langer points out, when we follow our own perspective—even if we're wrong!—we still win because we're actively engaged in defining our experience rather than passively doing what we think we should do.

That builds an important muscle.

Reminds me of [Vernon Howard](#) who shares this gem in his great book [The Power of Your Supermind](#) (see Notes): "No one can tell you what is right for you except for yourself. So start telling yourself what to do. If you blunder for ten years while thinking for yourself, that is rich treasure when compared with living these ten years under the mental domination of another. The only true, honest and enriching authority is the internal authority of your own Supermind."

Howard also adds: "Don't look for someone in whom to believe. Believe in yourself. The only authentic authority is your own original nature."

[Samuel Smiles](#) puts it this way in his classic book [Self-Help](#) (see Notes): "Human character is moulded by a thousand subtle influences; by example and precept; by life and literature; by friends and neighbours; by the world we live in as well as by the spirits of our forefathers, whose legacy of good words and deeds we inherit. But great, unquestionably, though these influences are acknowledged to be, it is nevertheless equally clear that men must necessarily be the active agents of their own well-being and well-doing; and that, however much the wise and the good may owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers."

Here's to trusting ourselves!

CELEBRATING CONFUSION

"People who dwell on this perceived instability are likely to experience greater uncertainty than those who dwell on fixed categories. For some, such uncertainty represents an absence of personal control. From a mindful perspective, however, uncertainty creates the freedom to discover meaning. If there are meaningful choices, there is uncertainty. If there is no choice, there is no uncertainty and no opportunity for control. The theory of mindfulness insists that uncertainty and the experience of personal control are inseparable."

The first key tenet of mindfulness is to be open to new categorizations of experience; whereas, when we're mindless, we lock everything into fixed categories.

Now, when we mindfully open up to new experiences and have a willingness to shift our perspectives, we introduce instability. That, by definition, feels a little wobbly. It's less comfortable in the moment than holding on to a rigid vantage point.

We need to recognize the fact that all growth requires us to step into the unknown.

I'm reminded of a little exercise Tony Robbins did at an event I attended years ago. Often people would stand up to ask a question and start by saying, "I'm confused..."

"How do we know if we do not ask? Why should we ask if we are certain we know? All answers come out of the question. If we pay attention to our questions, we increase the power of mindful learning."

~ Ellen Langer

Tony trained the audience to stand up and give a rousing standing ovation every time someone said that. I laugh as I type this as it was so awesome.

Why did he do that?

Because he wanted us to create a new association to our confusion. Most of us (mindlessly) resist the instability/confusion that comes with being willing to look at the world and our behaviors + thoughts with a new perspective.

We need to train ourselves to lean into our confusion, to get EXCITED (!) about the opportunity to make new distinctions rather than crawl back into our comfort zones.

Reminds me of [Rollo May](#)'s wonderful wisdom in [The Courage to Create](#) (see Notes) where he tells us: "What is courage? This courage will not be the opposite of despair. We shall often be faced with despair, as indeed every sensitive person has been during the last several decades in this country. Hence Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Camus and Sartre have proclaimed that courage is not the absence of despair; it is, rather, the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair."

Here's to having the courage to take the next authentic, mindful steps on our paths of optimization and actualization, my friend!!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

[Mindfulness](#)

[Counterclockwise](#)

[Choose the Life You Want](#)

[How to Think Like
Leonardo da Vinci](#)

About the Author of "The Power of Mindful Learning"

ELLEN LANGER



Ellen J. Langer is the author of eleven books, including the international bestseller *Mindfulness*, which has been translated into fifteen languages, and more than two hundred research articles. Langer's trailblazing experiments in social psychology have earned her inclusion in *The New York Times Magazine*'s "Year in Ideas" issue and will soon be the subject of a major motion picture. A member of the psychology department at Harvard University and a painter, she lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.