



Redux: Mindfulness and Learning with Ellen Langer

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 336

Ellen Langer: [00:00:00] Mindfulness as we study it is a simple process of noticing new things and as you notice new things that puts you in the present, that makes you sensitive to context and perspective. And it's the process of engagement. So it feels good. And as you're noticing new things, you come to see, gee, you didn't know it as well as you thought you did. And so then your attention naturally goes to it. So it's very easy and it's the essence of what we're doing when we're having fun.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:32] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:33] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:42] Welcome to episode 336, which features a conversation with the esteemed Dr. Ellen Langer. This is an encore airing of an interview from our archives. Dr. Ellen Langer is a social psychologist and a Harvard professor. In fact, she was the first female professor to gain tenure in the Psychology Department at Harvard. She's a Guggenheim Fellow and the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her work on mindfulness that spans more than 40 years. She's written 11 books and more than 200 research articles for general and academic readers on mindfulness. Her bestselling books include *Mindfulness*, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity*, and *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:34] In recent years, mindfulness has become a popular topic, but Ellen began researching and writing about mindfulness long before it became trendy. Sometimes called the "mother of mindfulness," Ellen is a true pioneer in a Western view of mindfulness. Mindfulness, for her, is not about meditation or mantras. Rather, she defines mindfulness as the "simple process of actively noticing new things," and she contrasts this with the state of mindlessness that we tend to exist in most of the time. There is a strong connection between mindfulness and learning—and a strong connection between mindlessness and not learning.

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Those connections and their implications are areas Jeff and Ellen explore in this conversation. Jeff and Ellen spoke in July 2017, and this episode originally aired in 2017.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:38] I'm looking forward to discussing mindfulness as it relates to learning and possibly even touching on creativity and health because I know those are topics that you've also explored relative to mindfulness. But, to start off with, obviously you've become known by many as the "mother of mindfulness" because of all the valuable work that you've done on that topic. But clearly that's not where you started out. In fact, I'll often tell people that you were basically doing mindfulness before mindfulness was cool—or at least that's how I see it—back when at least nobody in the West was really paying a lot of attention to it.

Ellen Langer: [00:03:12] Right.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:13] How did that happen? How did you come to be so focused on mindfulness as an area of study?

Ellen Langer: [00:03:19] Okay. Well, it was back in the early '70s, and what happened was I would walk into a mannequin, and I'd say, "I'm sorry." I would watch people do the strangest of things. And so initially I was studying mindlessness, which seemed to be pervasive. And 40 years of research since the original work has shown that virtually all of us are mindless almost all of the time. And the problem is, when you're mindless, you're not there to know you're not there. So everybody thinks they're mindful, and then we have this silly instruction that people give to us, and they say, "Well, be in the moment." But the problem is, again, when you're not there, you're not there to know you're not there. So you need to do more than that. And it's probably a good time to for your listeners to understand what we mean by mindfulness, which, again, we've been studying all this time. This is not meditation. Meditation is fine, but meditation is simply a tool to lead you to post-meditative mindfulness. Mindfulness, as we study it, is a simple process of noticing new things, and, as you notice new things, that puts you in the present, that makes you sensitive to context and perspective, and it's a process of engagement. So it feels good. And, as you're noticing new things, you come to see, gee, you didn't know it as well as you thought you did, and so then your attention naturally goes to it. So it's very easy, and it's the essence of what we're doing when we're having fun.

Ellen Langer: [00:04:50] You mentioned in the introduction that people have this mistaken notion of no pain, no gain. And my view is, if there's pain, of course there should be gain, but one can gain without pain and does so in the process of being mindful. If you were listening to a comedy and or simply a joke, what makes a joke funny is that you're led one way, and all of a

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sudden you say, “Oh, it had this other meaning.” And so if you realize that laughing at jokes, for example, is a result of our being mindful, then the question that often comes to mind about “Isn’t it difficult to do?” goes away. Wouldn’t it be nice just to be laughing and happy all day long? And then you also mentioned creativity. Now, when I first started studying mindfulness, I could have called it creativity. The reason I didn’t was because we have a mindless notion of creativity, where what’s important is the final product. And mindfulness is a process. And, when you’re mindful, what happens is the product is usually better. And so, when you’re mindful, you’re noticing new things, the neurons are firing, and it’s literally and figuratively life-supporting and encouraging. People live longer, and they feel better.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:18] And so you’ve just said that it’s really just the simple process of actively noticing new things. That’s really what mindfulness comes down to. I’ve also heard you say that to be mindful is to be confident and uncertain simultaneously, I guess.

Ellen Langer: [00:06:33] Yeah, what happens is that, when you notice new things about the things you thought you knew, you come to see, “Gee, I didn’t know it as well as I thought I did.” And the fact of the matter is that everything is always changing. Everything looks different from different perspectives. And, when we think we know, we’re essentially being mindless. We’re letting the past determine the present rather than be in the present. So what happens is you go to school, your parents, or you’re young, and they give you all these facts. And each of these facts are situated in a context, but you’re not told that. So you come to think you know, and, if you know, then there’s no need to pay any attention. But you can’t know because everything is changing. So, when I lecture on this, I might say to people, “How much is one and one?” Here’s a fact that everybody thinks they know. And so people dutifully say, “Two,” but it turns out one plus one isn’t always two. If you are adding one pile of sand to one pile of sand, one plus one is one. One pile of laundry to one pile of laundry, one plus one is one. In fact, if you think deeply about it or even casually, you come up with the realization that one plus one doesn’t equal two in the real world probably as often as it does. So, if the simple thing that we think we knew—one plus one—imagine, with our understanding of people, of their needs, of their likes, dislikes, personalities, and you call somebody by a particular name, describing their behavior, and you say, “Gosh, this person is just so gullible,” and you’re being mindless for several reasons.

Ellen Langer: [00:08:15] One, and the more important one, is that behavior makes sense from the actor’s perspective, or else the actor wouldn’t do it. So nobody gets up in the morning and says, “You know, today I’m going to be gullible.” So what is that person intending? And it turns out people who are gullible are being trusting. People who we might see as impulsive are being

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spontaneous. People who we see as—oh, I don't know—as inconsistent are being flexible. Turns out that every description we have can be understood in an equally powerful but oppositely balanced way. And that leads us to be less judgmental, and that leads us then to be less concerned about other people judging us. And life is just easier. So after 40 years of research on this, we find the simple act of noticing—we did some of the early studies with older people—they lived longer. It's good for one's health. It's the experience of engagement. So you feel good. People, when you're mindful, see you as more attractive and more charismatic, and the products you produce are better. So it's a win-win-win-win. And the fact that it's easy is that last win.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:33] Well, now it makes me wonder as I'm listening to you, what you're saying could be interpreted as all knowledge is contextual, all knowledge is relative to a certain extent, that potentially you can't be certain about anything. So I guess the argument against mindfulness—not that I would really embrace this myself—but is it sounds scary in a way to be mindful, to be that open.

Ellen Langer: [00:10:01] That's smart of you, Jeff. But, in fact, what happens right now is that people pretend because they know they don't know. They think you might know, and they hope that they can get away with not knowing by pretending. So they're making what I call a personal attribution for uncertainty: "I don't know, but it's knowable." What people need to do is make a universal attribution for uncertainty: "I don't know. You don't know. Nobody knows." And then you can stand tall. And the best, I think, posture essentially is to be confident but uncertain. So there's nothing scary about not knowing.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:43] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:17] Well, now, it makes me think, though, a little bit of our current context, at least in the U.S. And perhaps in other places. And this is far from a political podcast, and I don't want to really go down the political rabbit hole, but it seems to me that there is perhaps a bit of a mindfulness problem out there right now, just the general openness to learning, to mindful learning, that there seems to be a lot of resistance to that. Do you feel that way? Is anything different now from how it's been before?

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Ellen Langer: [00:11:44] Not since Trump is elected—that’s what you’re quietly implying. I started this 40 years ago and—over 40 years ago—and, at that time, as you rightly said, nobody had heard of it. And today it’s hard to open up a magazine or listen to newscasters—not talking about Trump—where they don’t use the word “mindful.” Now, very often they’re using incorrectly, and they only have a meditation-kind of understanding of mindfulness. But now I think the world is more and more open to all of this. But obviously we’re going through a rough time right now. I was doing one of these interviews right after Trump was elected, and the interview had nothing to do with politics, but it was a call-in show, and those are the only questions I got. I’m not going to speak to it.

Ellen Langer: [00:12:40] I think that certainly mindlessness is prevalent in many quarters because people think they know. So, when they know, they’re closed. They’re not open to what’s happening. And, when you become mindful, what happens is you can take advantage of opportunities that you otherwise wouldn’t notice, and you also avert the danger not yet arisen. But you can’t know everything. And that’s why people understand about unintended consequences. So you go forward thinking it’s going to be good and, oops, there’s this downside. Or you think it’s going to be a downside, and, oops, there’s this upside that you hadn’t considered. Because we don’t know.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:21] So if an individual wants to become a more mindful learner—this is something she’s just seeking to do. On the one hand, it’s just simply noticing new things. But we have the habits of a lifetime that can be hard to suddenly switch into doing. Are there practices that you would have people undertake?

Ellen Langer: [00:13:38] Yeah, there are things people can do. They’re not practices. Practice is something people don’t want to do. And, if you’re going to meditate, they call that a practice, where you have to learn how to sit still for 20 minutes twice a day and say your mantra and what have you. This is very different. This is being out in the world. And, if you could do nothing else but establish a mindset for uncertainty, you’d do just fine. Other than that, when life is working, it doesn’t matter. When life isn’t working for us, that’s the time that people naturally seek solutions without being trained. They just say, “Oh my goodness.” And so stress, for instance, is a major problem for people all over the world. I get this question about how can people not be stressed when there’s so much to know? And the fact of the matter is there’s not much more to know than there was in the past. The difference is that people think that the more they know, the better they’ll do. And there’s no evidence for that. When you’re stressed, stress is mindless. It relies on two things. First, the belief that something is going to happen, and,

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second, that, when it happens, it's going to be awful. Well, it's easy to combat both of those. The first thing we need to do is ask ourselves, give yourself three, five—there's no magic number—but let's say three reasons why it might not happen. Well, as soon as you do that, you immediately become less stressed because you went from it's definitely going to happen to it might not happen.

Ellen Langer: [00:15:16] Now, let's assume that it does happen. Evaluations are in our heads. They're not in the things we're evaluating. So, if we say it's going to happen, how might that actually be a good thing? So now you have this thing that you thought was going to be devastating and definitely going to happen to, so it may happen, it may not. And, if it happens, there'll be good parts of it, bad parts of it. It all depends on how I choose to view it. And then stress dissipates. Exercises that people can do. First, every time you hear yourself say something like "It's obvious"—because nothing is obvious since everything looks different from different perspectives—every time you see yourself as judgmental, and you call somebody something, you see them in some pejorative way, you're being mindless. You turn around and say, "Well, how might that very behavior have made sense from that person's perspective?" Aside from all of that, you walk out your door and notice three things that you didn't see before. You come back in the door. If you're living with somebody, notice three or five things about that person. And just keep doing this. If you're having an interview, ask three different questions from the questions you've written down for yourself. So the idea is just keep taking the thing and turning it inside out and around. And what happens is, over time, you come to say, "Gee, I didn't know." And, again, then once you're in that position, where you're standing tall, because again nobody knows. So it's okay not to know. Then what happens is you're naturally mindful. You don't have to work at it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:05] To change the frame just a little bit, we were discussing before we started recording that most of the people who are listening to Leading Learning are in some way or another involved in what we characterize as the business of lifelong learning. So they're offering conferences, seminars, doing online learning, professional education, continuing education, those sorts of things. What would you say to those people to help them deliver or facilitate—I don't know what the right word is—learning experiences that are going to be more conducive to mindful learning? Can you help to architect a more mindful learning experience?

Ellen Langer: [00:17:43] I think so—I think in the choice of speakers who attend these conferences. Obviously, if people are going to be lecturing on mindfulness, people learning about mindfulness, but if you had a conference on X, and you got some leading authority on Y to give it, that would be interesting because people would say, "Well, how is this related?" And,

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since everything is related, they would be more mindful. I think that people have a mistaken notion that, we said before, no pain, no gain, and that one should be gaining all the time. Well, we also have that idea with respect to learning. Learning is fun. And so what should happen is that all of these conferences, everything that's being done, should be fun doing it. And, if it's not, then you need to do it differently. And, when you're having fun at it, then you're going to be mindful. And, when you're setting up an event for other people, rather than focus solely on the transmission of information from one person to a group of people, make it fun for everybody. That's a definite win because, at the end of the conference, people will have had a good time, and they will probably have learned something anyway, so you'll only get points for that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:02] Related to that, many of these same groups that I'm referencing that are putting on different types of learning experiences, delivering different types of educational opportunities, it's become a trend now, a focus for many organizations to have a recognized body of knowledge, a set of competencies, basically a uniform set of knowledge that people have to master, and then they're going to get certified for that. And that certification is supposedly going to indicate that they have learned what they need to learn to do what they're supposed to do. How does mindfulness jibe with that certification and that whole approach to competency and bodies of knowledge?

Ellen Langer: [00:19:38] Yeah, well, it's interesting. Let me give you an answer that's far afield. So people may say that watching television is bad. But television is neither good nor bad. It's the way you watch it. And so, too, with a certification process. You can have a rigid set of rules and teach that people had better follow each of these rules just as they're laid out, and that sounds very mindless. If you found a way to make each of the rules a little more tentative, if somebody who might not have the competencies that are in that list but have many other competencies, that you wouldn't want to just reject the person. At a place like Harvard, where I teach, we have rules, and then, if somebody wants to petition for something quite different, then we listen, and most of the time they're granted permission. So the way to appreciate anything being mindful or mindless is, when it's mindless, it tends to be rigid, and you follow things regardless of whether they make sense in the particular context or not. That mindlessness is where the past is dictating the present. And mindfulness is a looser, more conditional structure. If you're teaching material, for instance, the material itself to be taught mindfully, would seem that it could be one way of looking at it rather than is. One plus one is often two. In certain theories, one plus one is two. But in the real world, not always. As they say, you teach the deviation. The lifelong learning, anything that's true for lifelong learning should really be lifelong, meaning it should start earlier on. All learning should be fun. All learning should be

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conditional. And I think that the lifelong learners themselves probably would benefit from some of the research that people like myself do. We have a lot of research with older folk where we make them mindful. They live longer, they're happier, and they're healthier. A dramatic study—do you know my counterclockwise study?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:55] I am familiar with it, yes.

Ellen Langer: [00:21:56] Okay. So let me just briefly, for any listener who doesn't know it. What we did was to take older adults, and these were men in their 80s, and that was back in '79 when 80 was 80, not the new 60, and so they were really old by all of our stereotype notions of what it means to be old. And we were going to have them live in a retreat for a week that had been retrofitted to 20 years earlier, and they were going to be living there and speaking in the present tense about the past. So what we were trying to do was to take their minds and have them be who they were 20 years earlier. And we had control groups and so on. And what we found, in a period of time as short as a week, those men in this group who were their younger selves, so to speak, their vision improved, their hearing improved, their memory improved, their strength improved, and they looked noticeably younger by the end of the study. So the reason for teaching things like this to lifelong learners is to make them aware that there're much greater possibilities than most people assume.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:09] Yeah, it's a fascinating study. I really love that. And I think it brings home—we were talking earlier about context—and it really brings home how important context really is. It also makes you think that so much about health, about aging, about things like creativity and innovation, that to the extent that our negative views of those or our negative ways of being around those are really learned to behaviors to a certain extent. We can't all live for—

Ellen Langer: [00:23:34] Exactly. Yeah, well, first of all, I have four different studies. These are controlled experiments where people are living longer. But I think that what people should focus on, rather than adding more years to their life, is to add more life to their years.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:51] Definitely. Well, I know, in terms of you living life fully, you do so many things besides your focus on mindfulness. You yourself are an artist I know. And I've looked at some of your work online, which is great to see. And one of the questions we like to ask everybody who comes on to the show is about their own lifelong learning habits and practices, whether that's around art or anything else that you're doing, might be professionally as well. I'm going to make the assumption that you are a mindful, lifelong learner. But are there

particular methods, practices, habits, and anything you do to help cultivate and promote your own lifelong learning?

Ellen Langer: [00:24:30] Other than follow the advice that I've just given all your listeners, probably that life gets easier as you get older. You become aware that all you know. You're two years old, and you fall down, and you scrape your leg and it's "Oh, my God, the world's going to end." And when you're eight years old, and Johnny or Janie doesn't invite you, send you a valentine in elementary school, "Oh, my God, the world is going to end." This goes on. At some point you get to the point where you say it's not going to be so terrible. In one of my books, which is called *The Art of Noticing*, where I pair one-liners that have been culled from research over 40 years with paintings of mine, one that I like in particular is "Ask yourself is it a tragedy or an inconvenience?" And most of the time, when we're younger, we're reacting to things as if they're tragedies when in fact they're only inconveniences. So simply asking yourself that, and I've done this for so many years that at this point I'm pretty calm. I'm just one of these happy people. What can I say?

Celisa Steele: [00:25:45] Dr. Ellen Langer is a leading expert and pioneer in the field of mindfulness. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode336, you'll find links to Web sites where you can learn more about her important and insightful work.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:01] And we know it can be easy to tune out our final comments, but stay mindful for a moment more. At leadinglearning.com/episode336, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:20] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Jeff and I personally would appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:40] Lastly, please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode336, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:51] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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