The Elements and Benefits of Mindfulness: Deepening Learning on Co-op and Beyond

Michael Sweet // **Northeastern University**

Dori Mazor // **Northeastern University**

Sarah Klionsky // **Northeastern University**

Jonathan Andrew // **Northeastern University**

Michelle Zaff // **Northeastern University**

Abstract

Cooperative education provides an opportunity to integrate academic and workplace learning and to immerse oneself in a chosen discipline, industry, and organization. Through observation and participation in the workplace, students develop new skills and knowledge, as well as greater awareness of their professional and personal values and goals. While not everything about a co-op experience will be in a student's control, those who have the most satisfying experiences often set the explicit goal of maximizing their own learning. Success on co-op (and beyond) is often rooted in mindfulness, a specific set of practices we can adopt in order to maximize our learning and respond effectively to change. Throughout, we refer to socio-cognitive mindfulness in the context of self-directed learning (rather than meditation). This article reviews some of the research on socio-cognitive mindfulness, identifies its three component features, and links them directly to real-life co-op situations in which mindfulness theory and practice come together. The examples provide practical advice on mindful learning, which can foster students' engagement and professional accomplishment.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative education provides an opportunity to integrate academic and workplace learning and to immerse oneself in a chosen discipline, industry, and organization. Through observation and participation in the workplace, students develop new skills and knowledge, as well as greater awareness of their professional and personal values and goals. While not everything about a co-op experience will be in a student's control, the authors' years of experience with co-op make clear that those who have the most satisfying experiences set the explicit goal of maximizing their own learning. Their approach is *mindful*: they strive to observe and analyze

connections, distinctions, patterns, and routines; identify and pursue new opportunities; extract learning from all interactions and tasks (even those that seem mundane); and discover ways to enjoy their work even in the face of difficulty or disappointment. These students tend to thrive on co-op regardless of whether their actual job lives up to expectations. If the co-op is a great fit, they push themselves to take full advantage of the experience. In the face of real adversity, for example, an ineffective supervisor, organizational strife, or an insufficiently challenging workload, they find ways not just to cope, but to grow personally and professionally.

Success on co-op (and beyond) is often rooted in socio-cognitive mindfulness, a specific set of practices we can adopt in order to maximize our learning and respond effectively to change. While the term *mindfulness* commonly refers to meditation and Eastern philosophies, socio-cognitive mindfulness is very different: it "pursues a learning agenda, can be very goal-oriented, and involves the use of mindfulness in enhancing problem solving and other cognitive exercises" (Pirson, Langer & Zilcha, 2018). Students at Northeastern University are introduced to the theory and practice of socio-cognitive mindfulness in a preparation class before their first co-op experience. Co-op Faculty include readings (including this article), discussions, and activities that that aim to prepare students to approach their co-op experiences mindfully and in a way that emphasizes learning.

This article reviews some of the research on mindfulness, identifies its three component features, and links them directly to real-life co-op situations in which mindfulness theory and practice come together. The examples provide practical advice on mindful learning, which can

foster students' engagement and professional accomplishment. (Note: the co-op stories are true, but student names have been changed for privacy.)

PART ONE: ELEMENTS OF MINDFUL LEARNING

As change in the world keeps accelerating, every day brings its own learning curve. Scholars have identified a way to navigate our day-to-day experiences to not only stay flexible and productive, but also enjoy ourselves more. This perspective is called "socio-cognitive mindfulness" and it consists of a specific set of practices we can learn.

The word "mindfulness" is often used in reference to various forms of meditation. While meditative mindfulness and socio-cognitive mindfulness have similarities, they are different concepts with different goals and different lines of research. This article is about socio-cognitive mindfulness, which we will refer to simply as "mindfulness" in this paper. It is the habit of constantly taking note of new and different features, experiences, and interactions in one's environment in the present moment (adapted from Langer, 2014). "Mindful learning" capitalizes on the information gained from being mindful and provides connections and insights that would otherwise be missed.

We have all had the experience of behaving mindlessly. We might eat a take-out dinner while watching TV, for example, barely noticing the taste or texture of the food. Moving through an experience on auto-pilot and acting out of routine is the *opposite* of mindfulness. A mindful headspace, in contrast, enables us to understand more about our environment and respond rather than react: to act out of choice, inten-

tionally and strategically, instead of out of habit. Eating mindfully, then, might involve consulting a new cookbook, preparing an unfamiliar entrée, and then savoring every bite.

At Northeastern University, we use the work of Dr. Ellen Langer as a basis for our thinking about the role of mindfulness in experiential learning. Langer has been researching aspects of mindfulness for decades and in her view, mindfulness incorporates three main elements:

1. a focus on the present;

2. recognition of context and perspective; and

3. critical consideration of pre-conceived notions, rules, and routines.

Let us consider each of these in terms of learning.

1. ***Mindfulness is about making novel distinctions in the present moment.*** The present-moment focus of mindfulness contrasts directly with the mindlessness with which we too often move through our days. The more fully we can engage in learning in our current situation—no matter how mundane the situation or task may appear—the richer our learning can be. The concept translates easily to the workplace. For almost anyone, it can be as simple as making time each morning to declutter and prioritize projects. In a nonprofit organization, it could mean stopping periodically to rethink one's role in an organization and consider how current tasks contribute to the broader mission. At a law firm, it could mean understanding and appreciating how specific language and the ways it is used can have significant impact on clients' lives.

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Alex attended weekly staff meetings at his engineering co-op. At one point, he found the subject matter uninteresting to him, but he challenged himself to notice the body language of the presenters and reflect on the responses of the other meeting attendees. He paid careful attention to *who* was speaking, *how* they were communicating, and *why* certain behaviors were more effective than others. By making these observations, Alex was more easily able to focus on the content of the presentation. When asked to deliver a presentation the following week, he combined his observations with information he had learned in one of his communications classes. He recalled the ways in which body language and phrasing can convey subtle messages, leading him to experiment with different gestures and language to draw more people into his presentation and the following discussion.

2. ***Mindfulness is about being sensitive to context and perspective***. Judgments about what is "good," "bad," "correct," or even "true" depend upon one's perspective within a given context. Learning things with a too-narrow sense for their meaning or use can lead us astray. For instance, students often learn words strictly in terms of their definitions, without understanding the variations in how the words can be used. The importance of context is clearly revealed when students who learn vocabulary through rote memorization use those words incorrectly in a sentence, for example: "I was meticulous about falling off the cliff" (Miller & Gildea, 1987). "Meticulous" usually means to do something carefully—whereas falling off a cliff is something you

are careful <u>not</u> to do, making the use of the word in this context absurd. In many ways, learning is a process of enculturation into *using knowledge in certain contexts and in specific ways*, not just the acquisition of context-free intellectual tools (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1985). At a more practical level, a mindful job candidate will understand that the "best" part of an applicant's resume will likely vary from employer to employer. Similarly, a mindful sales analyst will grasp that a price increase will be perceived very differently by customers of different income levels. Mindfulness, in these cases, means analyzing each situation (the hiring process, the pricing strategy) from a variety of viewpoints.

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Nisha worked for a start-up that was unable to secure the expected amount of funding from investors. As full-time staff members were laid off, she was given more and more responsibility and was included in higher-level decision-making. Instead of fixating on the stress of working for a company that was experiencing financial challenges, Nisha assumed a perspective that helped her realize she was gaining more experience than if she had been working at a thriving company with more permanent staff. She also had the opportunity to consider how different stakeholders—investors, managers, and staff who remained at the company— perceived the situation. Not only was she learning how to do higher-level work, she was also exposed to the realities of a challenge at an organizational level and the lessons it had to offer.

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Jane worked at a job where three units had trouble communicating. Her position was located in one of the three units, so its approach to communication resonated the most with her. However, instead of accepting the notion that only her unit's view could be "right," she saw this as a growth opportunity and strove to understand the language used by all three units to describe the organization's work. As a result, she expanded her knowledge about the industry, developed the ability to translate the different languages that were used by each unit, and even became valued as a mediator among them during collaborative work.

3. *Mindfulness involves critical consideration of pre-conceived notions, rules, and routines.* Experience is important, but we must not let our past too narrowly determine what is possible in the present. Certainly, we have to develop mental categories and generalizations to make it through our day, but when we rely too heavily on these labels and generalizations, they can actually blind us to possibilities that exist right in front of us. When we keep alive a virtuous and healthy doubt about our pre-conceived notions, we keep ourselves flexible and creative. In a professional setting, this can be likened to viewing oneself as participant observer of the workplace. A mindful staff member might reframe her role to one of an outside consultant, critically examining the inner workings of the organizational culture. In doing so, she is able to enrich her learning experience and gain useful insight on the features of functional work environments.

PART TWO: APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF MINDFULNESS ON CO-OP

Mindfulness keeps us in the present moment, is sensitive to context and perspective, and is guided, but not governed, by rules and routines. But what does mindful behavior and mindful learning look like? What do we actually do when we are being mindful, how can it benefit us, and how can we cultivate these habits?

Langer and her colleagues (2012) have identified three specific mindfulness behaviors: (a) engagement, (b) novelty seeking, (c) novelty producing.

(A) *Engagement* – Engagement is a habit of tracking new developments within our environment—noticing changes and updating our moment-to-moment knowledge of ongoing events. According to Langer, this involves all kinds of changes, including what other people are doing and even how ideas can develop in thought-provoking conversation.

Real-world benefits of engagement – Engaging with the environment reveals new possibilities as they arise. As circumstances, events, and people continually rearrange themselves in our fast-paced world, it is crucial to track how those changes unfold. We do this not just to operate with maximum effectiveness, but also to reconize new opportunities as they present themselves.

How can we build this habit? – The way we classify tasks can make a big difference in how deeply they engage us and how much we enjoy them. Langer (1997) describes how a sorting exercise was introduced to research participants as either "work" or "a game." Those who were introduced to the task as work enjoyed the activity much less and reported that their minds

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Jamal understood that his future success would be greatly enhanced by having a global mindset. To make this possible, he decided to engage in as many global experiences as possible. He approached his co-op at a global investment management firm with a spirit of play because he liked to imagine what it would be like to live and work in the various countries where the company had offices. This exercise led him to the revelation that the company did not include Scandinavia in their portfolio, but that some of the biggest sovereign wealth funds were located there. On his own, he developed a proposal for assessing the Scandinavian market and was fast-tracked into the company's most prestigious professional development program.

wandered twice as often. The same phenomenon applies to many professional situations. For example, if we equate a reduction in workload with boredom, we are likely to squander the extra hours. If we reframe down time as *free* time, however, we are more likely to take advantage of it, perhaps for networking, or for initiating new projects.

(B) *Novelty seeking* – Novelty seeking is a method of processing our observations and deepening our understanding of them. It is about figuring out how things work, challenging ourselves intellectually, and experimenting with new ways of accomplishing tasks. Novelty seeking describes not just being receptive to changes in the environment, but also being inclined to embrace and learn as much as possible about them.

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Charlotte worked for a software analytics company. During a time when work was not as intense as usual, she challenged herself to be creative. Charlotte re-imagined the company's customer-facing process, and, in consultation with her manager, prepared herself to undertake a new approach that would potentially be more engaging. She found online tutorials to learn the necessary programming language, and she used her new-found knowledge to write original code. After she tested and implemented the new process, her company adopted it, saving $17,000 in the first year.

Real-world benefits of novelty seeking habits – Today's world is one of increasing change and diversity, and a habit of novelty seeking positions us to view our experiences from a flexible perspective. Change and diversity can generate new opportunities for the novelty seeker and provide fuel for creative acts. Further, continually striving to explore new perspectives—rather than letting them threaten or overwhelm us—provides us with a larger and more informed picture of the world in which we operate.

How can we build this habit? – Novelty-seeking is a desire to have new experiences and can be as simple as challenging ourselves on a daily basis to notice a certain number of new things that can be seen, heard, felt, touched, or even smelled or tasted—a practice called "grounding," which has a documented history of increasing mental well-being (Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013). Further, creativity expert Julia Cameron (2003) recommends dedicating one hour a week to investigating new places or activities for the sole purpose of breaking out of our routines and the habits of our comfort zones. In the con-

text of the workplace, this can mean working beyond the limits of a job description or rethinking established procedures.

(C) *Novelty producing* – Novelty producing is the ongoing habit of doing familiar things in new ways, or undertaking new ventures, as opposed to simply noticing and seeking out new information. Producing novelty can consist of creating innovative materials or processes, coming up with new ideas, or even making creative contributions in a conversation.

Real-world benefits of novelty producing habits – Today's world demands innovation, and a novelty-producing habit makes innovation a familiar act, even in tiny ways. All forms of innovation can be useful.

Novelty producing can take the more common form of engaging in familiar acts in subtly new ways, or involve more significant departures from the status quo, such as digitizing a paper-based filing system or making toys out of surplus office supplies.

CO-OP EXAMPLE: Mei co-oped at a small fashion design company with an on-site boutique. Shortly after starting, she noticed a pile of unused T-shirts on the sales floor. Her manager confirmed that the shirts weren't selling. Mei approached the situation in a mindful way, seeking out a creative opportunity. With her manager's permission, she used scissors to cut out patterns and customize the shirts. The redesigned garments quickly sold out, and Mei created new batches throughout the course of her co-op.

How can we build this habit? – Novelty producing is about creativity, but it doesn't have to be dramatic to make an impact. One way to build a habit of creativity is to integrate small creative adjustments into daily life. Even subtle creative acts make a noticeable difference and can keep creative juices flowing. For example, in one experiment, Langer, Russell, and Eisenkraft (2009) asked symphony musicians to perform the same piece in two different ways. For the first performance, they asked the musicians to adhere exactly to the score. For the second, they were encouraged to add creative personal nuances, in a manner that was "so subtle that only they would notice." The result? Both audience members and the musicians themselves preferred the performance that incorporated tiny creative adjustments - the one in which the music was played mindfully. Students can also find small ways to incorporate creativity in a co-op. For example, a graphic design student might be on co-op at a large company with very strict brand guidelines. While the student will have to adhere to specific typefaces and colors, she can challenge herself to incorporate her personal aesthetic into her designs, ultimately increasing her satisfaction and improving her performance.

CONCLUSION

Mindful students—like those featured in the Co-op Examples in this article—seek out new ways to understand their environment and to make contributions. They often return to campus excited about their accomplishments, with stories about how they capitalized on learning opportunities and sometimes overcame challenges in creative ways.

Prompts and activities that are integrated into reflective practices can help students focus on remaining mindful while on co-op and when they return to campus. Students at Northeastern create and refine learning outcomes throughout their co-op experience, and mindful students are able to reflect on the differences in their initial learning goals and their final learning outcomes and use this understanding to frame future aspirations. In conversations, in interviews, and on resumes, they find ways to highlight what went well and learn from what did not. They share their learning with others, and they approach the next step in their careers—whether it is another co-op, a full-time job, or further schooling—with a combination of motivation, curiosity, and creativity.

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