

Communication concepts can be viewed as internal and external influences on our behavior that typically impact us unconsciously. Mindfulness meditation can help us become more aware of these influences as they occur moment to moment, allowing us to observe our emotional reactions to them and enabling us to break free of habitual patterns of behavior, thus broadening our communicative options in each moment of our lives.

**Waking Up To Ourselves:
The Use of Mindfulness Meditation and Emotional Intelligence
in the Teaching of Communications**

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Contemplative practices can transform curricula, classrooms, and students. As community college teachers, we are accustomed to greeting rooms full of students each semester who are there simply because someone told them they have to be. Yes, the decision to attend college in general may have been theirs, but the particular courses they take are largely prescribed for them, and they sometimes find themselves signed up for courses they don't think they need. Communications is perhaps one of the best examples of such a course; other than improving at public speaking, which scares most of them to death (and which, if studies are correct, many of them fear even more than that ultimate fate), they see no need to improve in their ability to communicate. After all, haven't they been communicating most of their lives? They already know how to do that, don't they? "Studying communications?" they think. "How boring and useless can you get?"

Unfortunately, the thick, theory-laden textbooks frequently used to teach introductory communications courses often don't do much to dispel students' original perception. The texts often seem dry to students and full of common sense. Like many of my colleagues, I discovered these phenomena

early in my teaching career. Fortunately, I also stumbled upon mindfulness meditation as a fledgling community college teacher, and it not only changed my life but had a profound influence on my curriculum as well. Bringing mindfulness meditation into the teaching of communications transforms the course from what is often considered dry information into a journey of self-exploration and insight. By the end of the term, many of my students find the course has changed their lives, helping them to improve relationships with family, friends, and co-workers; helping them discover and modify unproductive patterns of behavior and self-fulfilling prophecies; and helping them to become better students and happier human beings.

The benefits of using mindfulness meditation in teaching are clear; however, how to do that successfully requires careful study, personal application, and a shift in the classroom culture. The emphasis on gentle acceptance of oneself that is at the heart of these practices – which allow for honest, nonjudgmental, accurate observations to take place – combined with a basic belief in each student's ability to make good choices for herself, can run counter to what many students (and teachers) at community colleges have experienced in the past. Certainly, students who enter my introductory communications class are not expecting to be invited to close their eyes and meditate, but it wakes them up – in more ways than one.

Combining mindfulness meditation with communication theory helps students realize the extent to which human beings operate on autopilot, relying on habitual patterns of behavior when interacting with others, misinterpreting what other people say and do, and imposing their predictions, assumptions, and expectations on themselves and those around them. Waking up to this reality can be a revealing experience that helps students gain self-understanding, participate in life more fully, and let go of confining storylines and habits that often limit their communication, causing them

needless disappointment, frustration, or suffering. Part of this process involves becoming more aware of the emotions they experience in their day-to-day interactions, learning how to accept those emotions and communicate honestly, accurately, and productively as a result. For this reason, emotional intelligence plays a key role in my curriculum as well.

In the following chapter, I will explain the basic logic of this approach to teaching communications and provide readers with some guidance for beginning to implement these teaching methods.

How Does Mindfulness Relate to Communication?

Mindfulness is multifaceted and hard to pin down in one precise definition. It is fundamentally about being aware and fully "present." It involves approaching each moment of our lives as if it has never happened before (which is clearly the case) and nurturing a clean-slate perspective that researchers Kirk Brown and Richard Ryan (2003) describe as "pre-reflexive" (p. 823). From such a perspective, we observe the events of our life unfold with more clarity and more awareness of the internal and external influences we experience from moment to moment. Studying basic communication theory can provide us with a vocabulary that describes some of these internal and external influences, thus helping us become more aware of them, allowing them to penetrate our consciousness. Those factors include how people conduct conversations and whether or not they listen effectively, as well as people's use of nonverbal behavior and their own inner monologue and self-esteem.

Typically these factors influence us on an unconscious level and we react to them impulsively and habitually (Motley, 1986a, 1986b, and 1990; Wenk-Sormaz, 2005). For instance, someone who has been speaking for a while during a conversation may unconsciously misinterpret her partner's continuous

nodding and lack of eye contact as an indication that he is bored with the conversation. Consequently, she may suddenly become very quiet, puzzling her conversation partner who was, as it turns out, extremely interested in what she had been saying before she abruptly shut down.

Although the communication concepts, skills, and problems we cover in the course might initially seem like common sense, actually observing them in the moments of our lives can be a surprisingly revealing experience. In the example above, for instance, if the conversationalist who began to feel as if she were boring her partner recognized that it was her *interpretation* of his nonverbal behavior that led her to question his degree of interest, she might also realize that her interpretation could be wrong. As a result, she could choose not to shut down and take other measures instead to gauge his interest or behave in ways that would not bring the conversation to an abrupt halt.

Mindfulness meditation helps us observe communication concepts as they occur in our daily lives (such as the nonverbal behavior in the above example), notice our interpretation of them, and choose a deliberate response to them, rather than automatically falling back on impulsive, habitual patterns of behavior as we are prone to do. It is quite possible, for instance, that it is typical for the woman in the above example to assume people are not interested in what she is saying and to shut down whenever that kind of self-talk kicks in. That belief could be something she has told herself for years, perhaps due to her self-image, another concept that is typically covered in introductory communications classes.

Basic Logic of Mindful Communication

1. See the world as a clean slate: Mindfulness helps us see each moment of our lives as completely new, making us more alert and more aware of internal and external influences.

2. Notice communication concepts: The communication concepts themselves are internal and external influences, which mindfulness can help us become aware of, that impact how we communicate.
3. Use that awareness to communicate effectively: The application of the awareness mentioned above can take on an infinite number of forms including listening well, expressing oneself honestly and productively, or behaving assertively. The list, however, is as infinite as there are people and the situations they encounter.

Individual Perception Prisms

Human beings have a natural tendency to filter the world through their own unique perspectives and experiences and assume that what they are seeing is "reality." How we interpret the events of our lives is dependent on all of the experiences we have ever had – where we grew up, who our parents are, how our friends have treated us, what books we have read – yet there's a tendency to assume that our interpretation of the events in our lives is not an interpretation at all; we assume it's just accurate perception, but that assumption can get us into trouble.

Furthermore, human beings are equipped with an ability to form generalizations, often referred to as schemas, about their experiences. On one hand, this ability can be immensely useful. It allows us, for instance, to instantly recognize a staircase when we see one. We don't have to stop and figure out what it is before we make use of it. However, this type of generalization, or "mental guideline" as Trenholm (2005) describes it, also represents a dulled, limited version of what it is we are actually experiencing. We don't, for instance, see all the details of a particular staircase – the peeling rust on the rail, the worn foot mats, the color of the stairs themselves. Although that's not necessarily a problem if your only goal is to get from Point A to Point B, the tendency to generalize about our experiences just for the sake of getting through them to the next moment of our lives can become habitual in itself, our *modus operandi*, and we can

find ourselves living an entire life made up of hasty, unconscious generalizations about our experiences, the people with whom we interact, and about ourselves as well. Noticing what you say to yourself (your "self-talk") as you go through daily activities is a good way to observe how often you impose your predictions and interpretations on the events of your life. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (formerly the Stress Reduction Clinic) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, explains that "While our thinking colors all our experience, more often than not our thoughts tend to be less than completely accurate. Usually they are merely uninformed private opinions, reactions and prejudices based on limited knowledge and influenced primarily by our past conditioning" (1994, p. 56).

What we say to ourselves is strongly influenced by our individual perspective and the schemas we have formed during our lives; these all influence the emotions we feel during our day-to-day experiences, and our emotions affect the way we communicate. Whether we are quick to snap at someone, grow embarrassed to express how we feel, or are overcome with excitement, our emotions influence what we say, how we say it, or whether we say anything at all.

Emotions and the Refractory Period

Recent research in emotions and neuroscience also shed some light on how quick we are to interpret the events of our lives on an unconscious level in a way that re-enforces our often distorted perception. Paul Ekman (2008) explains that it is not the events of our lives that trigger emotions within us, but the way we appraise those events. For instance, if someone speaks to us in a loud volume we might interpret his tone as meaning he is upset with us and we may consequently become angry. That interpretation happens almost

instantaneously. "When an emotion is triggered," Ekman writes, "a set of impulses arise that are translated into thoughts, actions, words, and bodily movement" (p. 68). Consequently, we often enter into what he calls a refractory period, during which time "we cannot perceive anything in the external world that is inconsistent with the emotion we are feeling" (p. 68). For a period of time, we are locked into seeing things only from our perspective – blind, as it were, to any evidence that we may have misinterpreted something, determined to play out the emotions that have been triggered by our interpretations. Ekman's description makes clear the role emotions can play in the way we communicate, as well as the extent to which it is possible to communicate based on a misunderstanding of the events we are experiencing.

You can see, then, how useful it would be if we were to develop the ability to observe the instant we interpret the events of our lives. Unfortunately, such a skill may only be available to the most advanced of yogis – even the Dalai Lama himself, with his extensive meditation experience, doubts he has the ability to observe "those few milliseconds during which automatic appraisal occurs ... long enough ... to make a conscious choice to modify or cancel the appraising process" (Ekman, 2003, p. 74). However, it is possible to observe the "impulses to action and words" that are stirred immediately after an appraisal is made, but before the refractory period has begun. Furthermore, as Ekman (2008) points out, meditation can be helpful in developing this ability to observe the "spark" (the impulse to react) before being engulfed in the "flame" of reactive emotional behavior.

A recent study suggests that the anterior insula may be the essential part of the brain involved in observing our initial impulse to act once we have interpreted events in our lives (Craig, 2009). Studies have shown that meditation appears to activate this part of the brain and may even make it

thicker (increase its gray matter density), just as athletes alter the muscles that are specific to their sport (Hölzel and others, 2008; Lazar and others, 2005). Although most of us cannot observe our initial interpretation of stimuli while it is going on because it simply happens too quickly, it is possible to think back on what just occurred and how we interpreted the situation once we have observed our initial impulse and successfully avoided entering the refractory period. A 2007 study on reappraisal conducted by Sarah Banks and others suggests that the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and the anterior cingulate cortex are active when people deliberately alter their original interpretation of events. Although mindfulness is not about imposing one's preferred appraisal of events onto one's experiences, various studies suggest the same parts of the brain are activated during meditation as were during the Banks study (Brefczynski-Lewis and others, 2007; Hölzel and others, 2007; Lutz and others, 2008), and Eric Garland's recent research suggests that there is a correlation between mindfulness and positive reappraisal (personal communication, December 17, 2009). It is possible, therefore, that these parts of the brain are also involved in the process of mindfully "opening" one's awareness after noticing the impulse to react (but before giving way to the refractory period) to reveal the interpretation that lead to that impulse. In so doing, we effectively open our mind (or at least avoid becoming "narrow minded") to other information that is available to us. We may even notice that the initial impulse we feel is very familiar to us and, if we follow its chain reaction, it would lead to a habitual pattern of behavior. With this increased awareness of our reactivity, we are now free to choose *not* to engage in impulsive, habitual behavior and can instead choose a conscious, informed response to the events we are experiencing.

Many of the communication concepts students study in an introductory communications course (conversation skills, listening skills, nonverbal behavior) operate as stimuli that we unconsciously appraise and to which we habitually react during our daily lives. As we have seen, becoming mindful of these stimuli and the way we are interpreting them allows us to choose how to behave in any given situation. This conscious decision making can be seen as a form of self-regulation, which some researchers describe as an aspect of emotional intelligence (Pearman, 2002; Goleman, 2002). I believe this type of self-regulation involves increased self-awareness and contributes to increased flexibility, resilience, and empathy – all of which are also considered to be forms of emotional intelligence.

The Nuts and Bolts of Teaching Mindful Communication

The basic structure of my class consists of weekly in-class exercises and assignments that (1) introduce students to communication concepts, (2) introduce students to a variety of meditations, and (3) invite students to use the mindfulness they are nurturing through meditation to observe the communication concepts in their lives by completing one “Application Journal” per week. The journal assignments build on one another in a very deliberate, natural progression, as do the meditations students practice in and out of class. The following explanations refer to various forms of meditation, all of which I have learned as a result of studying the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn as well as Pema Chödrön, Chögyam Trungpa, S. N. Goenka, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Joseph Goldstein. It is important to realize that what follows is an overly simplified explanation that is meant simply to give readers an idea of how one might structure meditation exercises in conjunction with the content of a communications course. I use the following terms to describe particular types of mediation:

Focused Attention Meditation, which “involves sustaining selective attention moment by moment on a chosen object, such as a subset of localized sensations caused by respiration” (Lutz and others, 2008, p. 164).

Open Presence Meditation, which is “a clear, open, vast, and alert state of mind, free from mental constructs. It is not actively focused on anything, yet it is not distracted. The mind simply remains at ease, perfectly present in a state of pure awareness” (Ricard, 2006, p. 190).

Loving Kindness Meditation, in which “meditators try to generate an all-pervading sense of benevolence, a state in which love and compassion permeate the entire mind” (Ricard, 2006, p. 190).

Meditation 1. This introductory meditation is a simple focused-attention meditation that has students focus on their breath as it enters, circulates through, and leaves their bodies. After a minute or two, students are instructed to shift the focus of their attention to sounds. Approximately two minutes later, their first meditation practice is over. Students often find this brief meditation incredibly relaxing; it is important to point out, however, that relaxation is not the goal of this type of meditation. The goal is simply to be present. Many students also notice that their self-talk constantly distracts them from focusing on breath or sound, and I take this opportunity to point out to them that self-talk is one of the communication concepts we will be studying and that mindfulness meditation is already helping them to observe communication concepts “in action.” The Application Journal associated with this meditation primarily asks students to reflect on how they are feeling about the inclusion of mindfulness meditation in the course, to reflect on their communication habits and the ways they experience emotions.

Meditations 2 and 3. These meditations begin with a focused-attention meditation on breath and sound. They tend to be a bit longer than the first meditation and include instructions that invite students to observe thoughts and emotions that might come into their field of awareness. Initially, it is helpful to suggest that students allow these thoughts and emotions to be “in the background” of their awareness, not pushing them away but not fixating on them either. The importance of not pushing thoughts and emotions away cannot be overemphasized. Eventually, I invite students to treat their thoughts and emotions the same way they do their breath and sound: to notice them begin to form, feel them penetrate their awareness, and allow them to leave on their own. This is the first step toward open-presence meditation, which allows meditators to experience anything that penetrates their awareness without pursuing it, commenting on it, or judging it. People often are surprised to observe that their thoughts and emotions will frequently dissolve quite quickly if they don’t allow themselves to probe or inspect them. These meditations correspond with Application Journals that deal with conversation and listening skills, and they set the groundwork for much of what is to follow since listening skills can include listening to oneself as well as to others. It also includes “listening” to nonverbal behavior and one’s own physiological experiences, which leads nicely into the next meditation.

Meditation 4. This meditation begins by having students doing a body scan and corresponds with the Application Journal for nonverbal behavior. Since students have experience observing their breath by this point, I use that experience as the entrance into experiencing sensations in the body. Then, drawing from Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes, I have students begin at their left big toe and gradually work their way up through their body, noticing any sensations that might be present – pulsing, throbbing, heat, coldness, tingling – or simply being aware of the fact that

they are not experiencing any sensations at all. I couple this meditation with discussions about nonverbal behavior, and we also discuss the fact that people often experience emotions through physical sensations such as an increased heart rate or shaking hands. Observing and thinking about physical sensations in this way sets the foundation for students to understand an important contribution that mindfulness can make to the study of communication. Not only can an increased sensitivity to our physical sensations make it easier to notice the "spark" before the "flame" mentioned earlier in this chapter, it can also teach us how to handle difficult emotions in challenging situations. Conveniently, a communications course often supplies just such an experience: public speaking. When students are nervous about giving a speech, which most of them are, they undoubtedly feel physical symptoms of that nervousness. Mindfulness can help students realize that experiencing those physical symptoms is okay and that they don't have to get wrapped up in the self-talk that often accompanies them.

For instance, if someone is giving a speech and notices that his voice is shaking, he might begin to think, "Oh, boy, I'm sure everyone is noticing how nervous I am right now. They probably think I'm a big loser." As these thoughts continue, he might become increasingly nervous, which can lead to other ineffective speaking qualities such as increased rate of speech or mumbling. However, with mindfulness training, he can learn to observe his shaking voice and accept it as *part* of his current reality. He doesn't have to allow his self-talk to get all wrapped up in it. He doesn't have to fixate on it to the point that his nervousness takes over his entire perception of what is going on in that moment. If he simply accepts his shaking voice as a physiological sensation without piling on "stories" about it, he can remain open to other aspects of that moment which may be present as well: he truly wants to share the content of his speech with his audience,

he likes his peers and his teacher, he has practiced his speech several times and feels knowledgeable about his topic. If he can allow himself to be aware of all of those things, his shaking voice will lose its power. It can remain shaking, and it is no big deal. But chances are, when approached with mindfulness, the shaking will come and go just like the breath, sound, thoughts, and emotions he has experienced during meditation. Without the power of his thoughts and imagination to sustain the shaking, it may simply stop happening altogether. This quality of mindfulness has many applications when it comes to communication – when having a disagreement with a significant other, when put on the spot during a classroom discussion, anytime the “spark” before the “flame” is felt. It is one of the main reasons I believe the emotional intelligence ability of flexibility is a direct result of applying mindfulness to communication theory.

Meditation 5. If the class has become extremely comfortable with meditation and each other (which often happens when using these teaching methods), I will introduce them to loving-kindness meditation. This type of meditation is quite different from focused-attention or open-presence meditation, however, and some students are not ready for it. Consequently, I tread carefully with this one in the classroom. It typically involves repeating phrases to oneself such as “May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live in peace” and then offering those phrases to others. At first glance, these instructions may seem to run counter to the focused-attention or open-presence meditations, which consist of not manipulating our experiences in the moment, but instead on experiencing whatever thoughts and emotions might be present for us – whether we are feeling happy, healthy, peaceful or not. In order to truly observe what we feel in any given moment, however, we need to have nurtured a firm but gentle acknowledgement of whatever it is that comes into our awareness. For instance, once people begin to observe their

self-talk, they may realize that they say things to themselves that they do not like, such as "I'm just dumb. I can't do that." Once people begin to observe what they say and do to others as a result of their self-talk, stories, and interpretation of events in general, they may realize they do not like what they see. Realizations like those can sting, and it is easy to go into denial mode during those moments. To remain present and open to those observations, it is helpful to realize that you can truly accept and love yourself just as you are in that moment. It doesn't mean you have to like everything you feel, do, or say, but you can still accept and love yourself.

That kind of self-acceptance makes room for change to happen. Here, however, we run into a bit of a paradox. On one hand, mindfulness is not about change or about wishing that things are different than they are; it is about accepting this moment just as it is. What, then, do we do when we come face to face with aspects of ourselves that we do not like? Fortunately, Kabat-Zinn has a good metaphor for allowing mindful change to occur naturally as a result of our commitment to being fully present. We can approach making changes in the way we communicate the same way we approach stretching our muscles. When we are stretching our muscles, the goal is to become more flexible; however, the only way to achieve that goal is to be aware of our limits with the stretches we are doing in *this* moment, with a commitment to living at those limits. If we stretch too far right away we will hurt ourselves, yet if we do not stretch to our limit we will never gain any flexibility at all. The same is true when approaching any communication challenges we might face. Perhaps we have noticed that we constantly interrupt others and over-explain ourselves. Chances are if we suddenly try to stop that behavior altogether, we will stumble, become distracted by our inner monologue, or become overly silent. However, if we decide that the

next time we catch ourselves interrupting someone, we will simply apologize and resist the temptation to beat ourselves up so we can listen more attentively, that may be the limit to which we can stretch. Eventually, that might become quite easy for us and we can become acquainted with the new limit that now reveals itself to us when it comes to this communication challenge.

Other Meditations. At this point in the course, I ask students to write me an anonymous note stating whether or not they would like to continue with the meditation. Up until this point in the term, I ask students to try it in class, to give it a fair chance. However, I never make students meditate. I think it is important that students do not feel this activity is forced on them, that they make a conscious choice whether or not to participate in it. Typically, the result of the anonymous notes is that ninety to one hundred percent of my students want to continue meditating. In the twelve years that I have been using meditation in my classes, I have never had a majority of students say they would rather not meditate. If some people express they would prefer not to participate, I simply explain that I will continue with the meditations because that is what the majority has chosen, and I ask those who do not want to take part to find something they can do quietly (reading, sitting and thinking) while the rest of the class is meditating. From then on, we usually do meditations that are a combination of those mentioned above. I improvise the instructions depending on what I perceive to be the needs and interests of the class.

The remaining Application Journals relate to self-concept and assertive behavior. I believe the meditation and mindfulness practice students have experienced by the time we approach these concepts makes them ready to make full use of the material. They're more ready than they were when they first walked through the door to observe elements of their self-concept. They are

more able than they were on day one to observe how they interpret the events of their lives and articulate that in a way that is assertive when it has to be without spilling over into aggressive behavior or without becoming passive (unless, of course, they determine that those responses are the best option in that moment).

Conclusion

The result of these exercises and interactions is often a group of students who have come to understand not only themselves better but others as well. As Kabat-Zinn has pointed out on numerous occasions, meditation brings us more in touch with experiences that all human beings share: impatience, frustration, compassion, peacefulness, distraction, anger, sadness, joy. When mindfulness is taught successfully in the classroom, students embody this realization, treating themselves, each other, and their teacher with respect and interest. As one former student, Jamie, puts it, "Mindful communication has even turned into a sort of game between the students in the class, pointing out backsliding and keeping each other on their toes, while bolstering each other's confidence, knowing that we are all going through this together." From what my students tell me, they carry their self-respect, keen sense of observation, and compassion with them beyond the walls of our classroom as well. They are more self-aware, more empathetic, more expressive, more productive, and ultimately happier human beings as a result. Often there is a sense of sadness when the class ends, but students recognize their learning has just begun: "I suspect that this is just the beginning of a long and interesting process," writes Jamie, "which will last, like my memories of this class, forever."

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