

Preface

More than 15 years ago, when I stumbled upon mindfulness practice, there was little support for mindful teaching. In fact, the term *mindfulness* was not yet widely known. Today there are many helpful texts and resources to support teachers who choose this path. This book differs from any others I know in that it focuses on the “inside” story of mindful teaching. I share my inner journey as I stumbled along my beginnings of mindful teaching. I describe some of what I witnessed when I was able (or not) to be mindful throughout various kinds of teaching experiences, including planning, instruction, assessment, feedback, and individual interactions. I reflect on how my observations informed experiments with myself to cultivate my inner conditions as I chose to actively bring mindfulness into the contexts of my teaching work.

Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. In the pages that follow, I share my exploration of mindfulness of my teaching. I also describe understandings that emerged and the efforts that supported success. I hope these might inform others who wish to investigate their own inner path to foster their capacity for mindful teaching.

By mindfulness, I mean being present and observing what is happening on the outside, as well as my inner experience (i.e., physical sensations, emotions, thoughts), with kind awareness. With awareness, I am learning to bring attention to and accept the realities of my moment-to-moment experience with friendliness and compassion. First, I learned to settle my body. When my body settles, my mind settles. Body and mind can connect as one, both here, now. I become aware of my actual experience in this moment, without judgment. These are the basic conditions of mindfulness for my practice.

Education is complex and multifaceted. For many, across various settings, the work can include some — or even all — of the following:

- long-term and daily planning
- adjusting instruction in the moment
- struggling with student assessments
- working with adult colleagues
- dealing with anxiety before and during instruction
- teaching and interacting with students who are failing our class
- trying to relate to the learners in front of us while managing pain or sadness in our personal life
- learning to communicate skillfully in difficult moments

It includes holding and examining the disappointment when our efforts fall short. Mindfulness helps me grow my capacity to hold it all.

Insights emerged from this multi-year journey. Three conditions are prominent for me in supporting my ability to bring mindfulness to my teaching work: my ability to maintain awareness of, and connection to, my professional knowledge and skills; my inner experience in this moment (i.e., body sensations, emotions, thoughts); and my intention. My intention, which is rooted in my true teacher-self, informed two overarching questions that guide my decisions:

- Who do I aspire to be as a teacher?
- How do I want to impact my students' learning, now and in the future?

My mindful teaching is supported by staying in touch with these conditions, and with my professional knowledge, my

changing inner experience, and my intention. Practices for caring for inner experiences and for cultivating my intention intersect to support me during planning and reflection, and during unpredictable moments of instruction, meetings, and other interactions. I can apply practices to shape more skillful thoughts, plans, speech, and actions. Skillful thoughts, plans, speech, and actions are those that are aligned with my intention. Intention also helps me to notice when my decisions and actions are not aligned with my inner teacher-self. With gentle understanding, this disappointment invites and encourages me to learn and adjust, so that I can more often ensure that my teaching offering emerges from my wholeness, from my best teacher-self.

These understandings emerged from my experiences, as I became curious and chose to deepen my exploration. My story is about what came up for me as I tried to remain mindful after the end of my quiet daily meditation period, into the rest of the day. It's about how I tried to maintain that awareness and bring mindfulness to the actual work of teaching. These insights emerged from my successful and unsuccessful explorations, and from listening to beginning teachers talk about their efforts. I also share some comments about mindful teaching experiments from pre-service teachers I taught and supervised in my faculty role in a graduate teacher education program.

As mindfulness became central to my teaching, I experienced unexpected benefits, some of which emerged early in the process. I had renewed energy for my work and clarity about my role and decision making. I developed increased trust in my ability to make difficult decisions and to communicate in trying situations, and I felt this stability not only in my thoughts, but also in my body.

This sense of renewal was, I think, related to my deepening understanding of my self and the wholeness of my capacities, rooted in connection to my inner life. Over the course of my

career, I had become so focused on the outer demands of this work that I was often reacting to these without a strong connection to my inner teacher-self. Instead of operating from anxiety about the limitations of the systems I was preparing teachers for, I had a growing sense of agency, and I began to hold desired possibilities less rigidly. While the difficulties of transforming school conditions did not consciously bring me to mindfulness, these connections revealed themselves through my practice and deep looking.

In recent decades, some shifts in educational policies and practices have impacted many of us as teachers. In too many settings, the commodification of schooling can distance teaching from values and leave educators feeling isolated, disempowered and stressed. An over-emphasis on narrowly defined learning outcomes, productivity and competition for resources has caused genuine losses for both students and educators. Differentiation, culturally relevant curricula, rich inquiry learning, collaborative learning, social-emotional learning, and the human needs of students (and adults) are often devalued and are disappearing in many educational settings. The greatest costs are to marginalized learners. In my field of special education, after 20-plus years of progress demonstrating effective practices for inclusive education and meaningful curriculum for the full range of students, we have experienced what feels like a swift reversal toward exclusion and re-segregation. For many students, especially the most complex learners, this has meant a serious loss of learning opportunities.

I recognize now how the anxiety I experienced about this direction in education fueled my focus on preparing the most competent teachers: those most likely to survive and make a meaningful offering, in spite of the difficult conditions. These, I thought, would be teachers who could bring the vision and capacity for transforming educational systems. I realize now that I was missing an essential element.

My mindfulness journey has helped me to view complex change differently. My teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, developed and birthed Plum Village practices while he and his followers were immersed in the fires of war. His teachings about cultivating peaceful families, organizations and societies, and about healing other complex social issues such as racism and climate change, always emphasized our need to stop, and get in touch first with our own inner suffering. He teaches that transforming ourself is the necessary foundation for bringing the right energy and clarity to individual and collective actions for change on every level.

“Practicing mindfulness in each moment of our daily lives, we can cultivate our own peace. With clarity, determination and patience — the fruits of meditation — we can sustain a life of action and be real instruments of peace.” (Nhat Hanh, 1991)

Christiana Figueres, international climate change leader, and a student of Thich Nhat Hanh, expressed it in this way:

... intentional cultivating of a mind of love and joy is so critical to our personal resilience, to our personal regeneration, to our personal agency, to our capacity to engage. Without it, there is no capacity to engage in a positive manner, in a constructive manner, in a transformational manner with anything outside ourselves. (Figueres, 2023)

As educators, many of us came to our path wishing to make our best offering to the students who would be part of our journey. But many conditions of our educational institutions (and society) make it difficult to stay connected to the nobility of our work as a precious offering. I believe that for many of us, this direction of changing conditions in educational communities has disconnected us from our source.

Mindfulness helps me begin to find my way back to balance and wholeness to revive the spirit of my teaching. The power of this teaching path flows from the inside. Mindfulness reawakens this inner energy of my aspiration and can help me to sustain my connection to it. It can guide my best decisions, large and small, in times of reflection and planning, and in the moment. Mindfulness helps me to remember who I am at the heart of my teacher-self, and how I aspire to make my offering. This can support me, in difficult conditions, to know the meaning I bring to my teaching. This is the first step; my individual reawakening and transformation is the foundation I need to gain clarity about how I might contribute to changing limiting outer conditions.

My professional work and examples shared in this book may differ from your teaching roles, curricula, students, and contexts. I don't believe that matters. Our inner teaching lives have plenty in common. First, I believe that most of us choose teaching based on a noble intention to be of benefit to our students. Second, my experience has convinced me that, as long as we are solid and engaged in our field, and professionally prepared for our role, where or who or what we teach is irrelevant to the process of developing a mindful teaching practice.

What is clear to me now is that mindful teaching is an inside job. I believe we all have the capacity to bring increasing mindfulness to our teaching. As someone whose life's work was teaching, I want to share my story with you, my fellow educators. These practices can have a profound impact on our teaching, though they are not specific to education. This book emerged from exploring my practice as an educator, with school-age children who had challenging learning characteristics, and with adult graduate school learners who were in a rigorous professional preparation program. The fundamentals of my mindful teaching practice were the same across learners and settings. Perhaps my insights about conditions that support my ability to bring mindfulness to teaching are relevant to other

educators, in other settings. My primary wish is that these stories be of benefit, whether you teach college physics or kindergarten, whether your classroom is in a public school, a university, a community space, or a prison.