WHO DO I WANT TO BE IN THE WORLD?
CREATING SPACE FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND INTEGRITY
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Abstract

The most important asset we bring to the table is ourselves. The pursuit of self-understanding and integrity is a life-long process. The pursuit is one of exploration to the question of “Who do I want to be in the world?” This question opens the opportunity for choice in aligning ones’ vision, behavior, attitudes, values, and action.

This paper will offer three broad learning objectives.

1. Understanding how the brain influences how we think, learn, and achieve.
2. Understand how emotional intelligence nurtures the natural tendencies of the brain for better self-awareness of self, with others, and context.
3. Identification of core capacities and tools that students, scholars, and practitioners can use to create better alignment of one’s vision, behavior, attitudes, values, and action.

The emerging research and literature in neuroplasticity provides an important framework for connecting behavior to how we naturally think, learn, and achieve. What we experience shapes our mind, and our mind shapes how we see and experience the world. Understanding the mind-body connection, the social nature of the brain, and the influence of emotions provides a powerful entry into our perspective of self, others, and context.

The practice of mindfulness, emotional intelligence, or contemplation can assist to disrupt a false sense of knowing when existing patterns of knowing, “habits of mind” are confronted with new sensory information. With these foundational underpinnings in place, individuals are better prepared to respond versus react, think more creatively and critically, work toward collaboration and inclusion, and to navigate through opportunities and challenges.

*Keywords*: neuroplasticity, brain, intelligence, dimensions of intelligence, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, contemplative practices
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CREATING SPACE FOR SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND INTEGRITY

The most important asset we bring to the table is ourselves. The pursuit of self-understanding and integrity is a life-long process that embraces curiosity, courageous leadership, connection, and service to others. The pursuit is one of exploration to the question of “Who do I want to be in the world?” This question opens space for choice. I am not simply my profession, my ethnicity, or the myriad of roles I play, etc. These areas are important parts of me, they influence me, but they are not who I am. They do not define me. The question, “Who do you want to be in the world”, opens the space for reflection, curiosity, exploration, and connection. This question offers the opportunity for choice in aligning ones’ vision, behavior, attitudes, values, and action. Choosing to be your authentic conscious self is the best expression of personal integrity.

Choice is an important theme that runs through all five aspirations for student learning. The pursuit of self-understanding and integrity lies at the center of creating that choice. Both personally and professionally, having the ability to choose enable us to not only recognize what has value or meaning for us, but also to actualize an answer to the question “Who do I want to be in the world?” This paper will explore the areas of neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and contemplative practices as avenues to self-understanding and integrity.

The black box of the brain is still a mystery, but we know so much more now and the one thing we do know is that there is nothing static about the brain. It is changing constantly based on experiences and even thoughts. Neuroplasticity provides insight into the structure and function of the brain and in understanding the nature of the brain we can maximize ways to nurture optimal growth and development both personally and professionally.
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Emotional intelligence speaks to the way of knowing beyond academic and professional education that enables us to know self, others, and the larger environment. The executive functions of emotional intelligence allow us to see the forest and trees.

Emerging mindfulness or other contemplative practices clearly demonstrate that we can train our minds much like an athlete trains, thereby creating choice about how we experience what happens to us. We can’t control what happens in our lives, but how we experience what happens to us is about choice. Understanding the brain, having strong emotional intelligence helps us better connect experiences and emotions in self and others. This paper will offer three broad learning objectives.

1. Understanding how the brain influences how we think, learn, and achieve.
2. Understand how the executive skills of emotional intelligence enable us to nurture the natural tendencies of the brain, and allows us to better manage our inner, other, outer focus for greater individual and collective wisdom.
3. Identification of core capacities and tools that students, scholars, and practitioners can use to create better alignment of one’s vision, behavior, attitudes, values, and action.

**Understanding the brain’s influence on how we think, learn, and achieve**

The emerging research and literature in neuroplasticity provides an important framework for connecting behavior to how we naturally think, learn, and achieve (Bradford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Dickmann & Stanford-Blair, 2009; Goleman, 2011; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Ratey, 2008; Restak, 2006). The capacity of the brain for analysis, conjecture, and imagination are the unique qualities of the brain that enables humans to have choice (Dickmann et al, 2009). Today’s rapidly changing social, economic, political, environmental and
technological challenges invites a deeper reflection on the notion of choice that is “neurally inspired”, borrowing Davidson (2012) terminology. Across major disciplines…education, psychology, medicine, physiology, etc., advances in scientific knowledge are creating informational shifts in perception that shifts behavior. What we are learning about global warming of the planet is shifting how we perceive the environment around us. This change in perception has made us more cognizant of our environmental footprint and thus our behaviors are slowly changing. So too, is the emerging science of the effects of the brain on thinking and learning is expanding our understanding of who we are in the world and more importantly who do we want to be. Some might called this ability of choice within humans, intelligence. From Howard Gardner’s (1983) multiple intelligences to David Perkins’s (2000) Copernican shift of intelligence as multidimensional and malleable, there are many understandings of intelligence. Dickmann et al (2009), define intelligence as the collective attributes of the brain that enable capacity for acquiring and applying knowledge in diverse and novel situations. This paper will utilize this definition of intelligence.

The work of the brain is survival. We now know the brain is in a constant state of evolution and that it is malleable. Our experiences, behaviors, and even thoughts can change the structure and function of the brain (Davidson, 2012). Moreover, such change is not just the benefits of child growth and development, but changes in the brain can occur well into adulthood.

There is a considerable amount of research that speaks to a mind-body connection (Dickmann & Standford-Blair, 2009; Siegel, 2011; Marturano, 2014). Dickmann et al states “the brain is the body and the body is the brain. … What affects one affect the other” (pp. 29). What we experience shapes our mind, and our mind shapes how we see and experience the world.
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With survival as its focus, the brain is constantly monitoring and adjusting how we shape and define our experiences. Dickmann et al characterize intelligence along six dimensions: physiological, social, emotional, constructive, reflective, and dispositional. All six dimensions work in concert to form a foundation for individual wellness. Understanding the mind-body connection, the social nature of the brain, and the influence of emotions provides a powerful entry into our perspective of self, others and the surrounding situation. This mind-body two-way communication offers the opportunity for us as individuals or leaders, but also for institutions like Virginia Tech or work environments to design experiences that foster and encourage optimal thinking, learning, and achievement.

Dickmann’s six dimensions: physiological, social, emotional, constructive, reflective, and dispositional, provides a framework to guide how we can approach greater awareness and understanding of self, others, and the world around us. The physiological dimension of the brain involves a complex platform of biological cells, circuits, and chemicals that has unlimited capacity to process information. Some neural networks are focused on regulatory operations, e.g. respiration, body temperature, etc., others neural networks focus on specific functions, such as vision, movement or language (Davidson, 2012). What’s amazing about the brain is that there are an expansive set of neural circuitry that is undedicated and environmentally responsive. The later circuitry is enriched by education, physical activity that enhances blood flow and oxygenation, professional and cultural activities that introduce novelty and challenge, and perceptions of accomplishment and making a difference (Dickmann, 2009). The reciprocal nature of the brain and body enables human intelligence.

The brain is social. Our natural ability for memory, language, empathy, sympathy, collaboration, and reasoning supports the brain’s need for connection, meaning, and
opportunites to extend learning. The brain’s hyper social instincts go beyond our senses of taste, smell, sight, touch, and sound. The interpersonal tendencies and natural ability of the brain for the construction of social systems for organizing and processing information enables humans to develop, maintain, and adjust emotional and cognitive competencies throughout life. This hyper sensitivity allows us to “observe an expression, detect a pattern of behavior, read between the lines, note an inflection, hear what is not said, feel the tension, smell the excitement, taste the fear, and otherwise detect the nuances that richly informs your understanding and reasoning” (Dickmann, page 111). Social interaction is an essential component of environmental information that contributes to intelligence, and our ability to think, learn, and achieve not only as individuals, but also in concert with others, a collective intelligence so to speak. The prosocial tendencies of the brain toward altruistic and cooperative behaviors are intended to enable replication and survival. The brain actively and intentionally seeks out a variety opportunities, media, and mediums to extend social interaction, for example in music; visual, creative, or performing arts; writing; technology, etc. These and other mediums of expression enable connection with others and extend learning.

Emotions operate at the subconscious survival level, and are biological processes that regulate mind and body responses to internal and external information of what to attend to, evaluate, and act on. Emotions are physiological experiences. Ekman (1984) characterizes six primary emotions: fear, anger, happiness, sadness, surprise, and disgust. At the conscious level emotions can trigger feelings, which with awareness and management, allows us to evaluate incoming information, including considering alternative explanations and possibilities. Feelings are the psychological responses to the physiological emotions we experience. This ability to evaluate an array of information inputs enables rational thought. Without emotion, the
evaluation, there can be no rational thought (Davidson, 2013). The emotional dimension of the brain enables decision making and prioritizing. The very nature of emotions dictates an act-first, think-later response to informational input. The brain is emotionally attentive, judgmental, motivated, and manageable. Emotional intelligence is the degree to which we can recognize and mediate emotional responses. Assessment of ones’ emotional state creates greater options for better productive responses.

The constructive ability of the brain provides the extraordinary capacity for acquiring and applying knowledge from diverse informational sources. The constructive dimension of the brain uses all other dimensions to detect, connect, store, and retrieve information patterns that make sense of the inputs at hand and deciding how they will be interpreted and used. In *Mindful Leadership: A Brain-Based Framework*, Dickmann et al (2009) provides a wonderful chart (see Chart 1) detailing the interconnections of the dimensions for knowledge construction (page 147).

### Chart 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multidimensional Nature of the Construction of Knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The <strong>dispositional</strong> financier</td>
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<tr>
<td>The <strong>reflective</strong> architect</td>
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<tr>
<td>The <strong>constructive</strong> patternmaker</td>
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<td>The <strong>social</strong> supplier</td>
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<tr>
<td>The <strong>emotional</strong> comptroller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The <strong>physiological</strong> construction site</td>
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Multiple dimensions of intelligence collectively contribute to brain capacity for organizing, storing, and retrieving useful information patterns:

1. The physiology of the brain provides the construction site upon which information is sensed, organized, stored, and retrieved in neural networks that are continuously refined
by the construction experience.

2. Social interaction, either direct or indirect, is a primary source of rich environmental experience from which discernment of meaningful information patterns is made.

3. Emotion is both a judge and monitor of what is worth knowing.

4. Constructive pattern discernment composes meaning and memory.

5. Reflection refines and manipulates patterns towards complex constructions.

6. Disposition determines the quantity and quality of intelligence invested in knowledge construction.


All dimensions of intelligence are working simultaneously in the construction of knowledge, and since the brain is constantly evolving then it is safe to say that what we know, how we come to know what we know is an ongoing dynamic process. At the same time, the constructive of the brain to detect, connect, store, and retrieve information patterns can also be limiting. In that our emotions is both judge and monitor of what is worth knowing we can miss or ignore new informational inputs quickly relying on existing patterns of knowing rather than being open to new possibilities. Dickmann, et al calls this ability of the brain a “double bind” (2009). The nature of the brain to create patterns of knowing enables us to respond quickly, and yet we can be swayed by this habitual pattern of knowing and ignore new informational nuances that can help us in seeing things in a new and unique way.

The reflective qualities of the brain provides a governing role that allows one to access, constrain, redirect, and coordinate action from the vast array of informational inputs, particularly the brain’s emotional center (Dickmann et al, 2009). The reflective dimensions of intelligence
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shapes meaning and understanding through the ability to manipulate information from desperate neural networks make connections among the various other dimensions to formulate goals and objectives and then formulate a plan of action to achieve desired results. Reflection, the ability to think about thinking, is mediated and monitored by what is often called the executive functions, which links complex decision making to purposefulness, meaning, and intentionality. Curiosity, creativity, experimentation, imagination, and inquiry allow us to push past habitual ways of knowing and be open to responses and options when faced with unique situations and challenges. Reflection empowers our capacity as humans to see the range of what is possible, thereby creating choice.

Finally, the brain’s need for efficiency and effectiveness causes it to develop and exercise “habits of thinking” or macro patterns of thinking that are habitually applied across environmental experiences. The dispositional dimension of intelligence allows the complex systems of the brain to respond in any given situation. While the brain is wired naturally with certain genetically inspired dispositions e.g. habits, tendencies, attitudes, inclinations, character or temperament, environmental experiences can influence and augment these dispositions (Dickmann et al, 2009). The brains need for survival ensures that dispositional nature to respond is ever present and immutable. The neuroplasticity of the brain enable environmental experiences to influence the qualities of these dispositions or patterns of thinking. The dispositional dimension of intelligence greatly influences the other dimensions’ readiness to enhance or limit opportunities to use environmental experiences to maximize their potential in the construction of knowledge. The reflective qualities of the brain allows for greater awareness and understanding our macro patterns of thinking in order to maximize opportunities of choice. Cultivating positive habits of mind can enable us to step back and determine what dispositions best serve us at a
given moment. Such dispositions may change over time and with the experiences and thoughts that we encounter. Understanding the mind-body connection, the social nature of the brain, and the influence of emotions provides a powerful entry into our perspective of self and the surrounding situation.

**Emotional intelligence**

Daniel Goleman’s (1998) emotional intelligence speaks to a distinct type of intelligence or way of knowing that goes beyond cognitive skills, e.g. verbal, math, and spatial. His framework for emotional intelligence includes:

1) *self-awareness*, the ability to be aware of and understand ones’ own feelings;
2) *self-regulation*, the ability to handle or manage feelings and emotions, especially strong feelings;
3) *motivation*, emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching ones goals;
4) *empathy*, the awareness of others’ feelings, needs, and concerns; and
5) *social awareness*, adeptness in managing relationships and building rapport, the ability to find common ground with others.

While Goleman is the most recognized name regarding emotional intelligence, he is not the only framework on emotional intelligence. Tan (2013) states that the best definition of emotional intelligence is that of Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer and I agree. They define emotional intelligence as:

*The ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action.*
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As sated earlier, emotional intelligence is the degree to which we can recognize and mediate emotional responses. Assessment of ones’ emotional state creates greater options for better productive responses. Attention and focus are essential components in this “how” of knowing. It involves the meta-cognition of thinking about thinking. Our awareness of our awareness or thinking about thinking plays a critical role in strengthening or sharpening this muscle of self-awareness. Greater self-awareness enables us to connect with to the six dimensional aspects of intelligence so that we can better attune to the situation of the moment in self, our interactions with others, and the outer context in which the situation is taking place. We are aware of what’s going on in our bodies, our emotions as they come up, our habitual patterns of behavior, and our genetically inspired dispositions. Viktor Frankl’s famous quote “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our freedom and our happiness (Tan, 2012).” Greater self-awareness provides the space to enable choice. In understanding the constructive nature of the brain and our susceptibility to “perceive” situations within existing patterns of thinking, greater self-awareness enables us to be open in new and different ways.

Self-regulations allow us to mediate new informational inputs against this awareness in order that we might recognize new possibilities or broaden our repertoire of response. Self-awareness and regulation offer the opportunity for choice in how we respond in any given situation. We are not triggered or high jacked by our emotions, rather we can respond with intention, in true alignment with our values, purpose, and beliefs.

Creating a life that enables space to balance the alignment of our values, purpose, and beliefs means that we are living our best self, we are centered in our thoughts and actions. This does not mean that life operates without difficulty; rather we are able to deal with what surfaces
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in a manner that best honors our true nature. In this alignment of “being”, our true nature, with action there can be a life of integrity.

Empathy and social awareness provides a frame of focus on those around us and the larger context in which we find ourselves. As mentioned earlier the brain is social and many of our environmental cues are through interactions with others. Awareness and connection to how others are perceiving, feeling, and reacting to what we do or say, as well as what we don’t do or say, provide valuable input to our assessment of the what’s happening (Dickmann et al, 2009). In addition to our awareness and connection to others, is also an awareness and connection to the specific context we are in as well as the social norms, morays, and systems in which we find ourselves.

Emotional intelligence has been shown to be an important factor in work performance. In one example cited by Tan (2012) of the effects of emotional intelligence was a study of competencies that distinguished star performers in the tech sector. Six competencies were identified as distinguishing the high from average performers:

1. Strong achievement drive and high achievement standards
2. Ability to influence
3. Conceptual thinking
4. Analytical ability
5. Initiative in taking on challenges
6. Self-confidence

Of the six competencies, four are reflective of emotional competencies and only two, conceptual thinking and analytical abilities, are solely intellectual competencies. We all have had
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professors who clearly have the intellectual knowledge in a given discipline but lack the pedagogical knowledge to teach, which has relational elements like connecting with a range of students, surfacing what they know and scaffolding prior knowledge with new knowledge. Pedagogical expertise takes social awareness and an understanding of attention and focus (Goleman, 2012).

Creativity and innovation is another area in which our ability to step back and let go of what we think we know abound. The attributes of creativity and innovation are enhanced by our ability to hold in abeyance existing “habits of mind” such that new information and experiences can connect with existing knowledge and experiences in novel ways. The creativity or innovation is the new association that comes most times when we least expect it (Goleman, 2011). We have all had the experience of working on a problem and having the solution elude us only to have the solution come to us when we least expect it, in the shower or while doing something totally unrelated. Neuroscience has allowed us to study the stages of creativity. Goleman (2013) describes these stages as three modes of focus: first, “selective attention”, where we define and frame the challenge before us. Second, “orienting”, where we seek and immerse ourselves in ideas, data, information, and even past experiences that might provide input to solving the challenge. Finally, “open awareness”, where we let go or pull back to allow space for our creative brain to make connections in new ways. It is this stepping back the openness to new possibilities is where creativity and innovations resides.

This inner, other, and outer focus as describe by Goleman (2013) allows for greater agility for success not only as a student and professional, and but also in ones’ personal life. We are prepared for whatever happens, without judgment, but with a strength of congruence in our
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vision, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, values, and action that speaks to who we are in the world, what matters to us, and what fulfills us.

Mindfulness and contemplative practices

Education is typically defined as what we know or what we should know. Traditional rational or sensory ways of knowing appeals to the brains constructive and dispositional tendencies. Hart (2004) states; “The rational involves calculation, explanation, and analysis; the sensory lives off of observation and measurement. Together these form the rational-empirical approach that has set the standard for knowledge across most disciplines.” (pp. 28).

Contemplation is a third way of knowing that complements rational and sensory knowing. Rather than addressing what we know or should know, contemplative knowing addresses how we know. Beyond academic and professional education, this third way of knowing develops interpersonal awareness, intentional actions, and authentic connections to others.

Assessment of ones’ emotional state creates greater options for better productive responses. Neuroscience also tells us that our visceral experiences, what has meaning for us, what’s relevant to own person history, what we can interpret and put into context, and our lived personal experiences, directs what we attend to and focus on (Bulmaster-Day, 2013). If what we attend to and focus on shapes our worldview (Treisman, 2006), then greater awareness of and capacity to balance attention and focus creates the bridge of what we know or should know with how we know.

Understanding that “I see you through me” provides the space to for greater curiosity, compassion, courageous leadership, and meaningful connections. Self-awareness and management, social awareness, and relationship management (context), allows for greater choice of responses to what’s happening. Regardless of whether we refer to this “how” of knowing as
contemplation, emotional intelligence, or mindfulness, the practice is “designed to quiet and shift
the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration,
and insight” (Hart, 2004, pp. 28). The practice of mindfulness, emotional intelligence, or
contemplation can assist to disrupt a false sense of knowing or judgment when existing patterns
of knowing, “habits of mind”, are confronted with new sensory information, emotions, and other
experiences, thereby, opening the space for a choice in responses and possibilities. Mindful-
based emotional wisdom is at the core of knowing oneself (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014; Tan, 2012).
Seigel (2010) states “Being mindful, having mindful awareness, is often defined as a way of
intentionally paying attention to the present moment without being swept up by judgments” (pg.
83). Marturano (2014) describes the cultivation of this way of knowing as “training the mind”.

Contemplative practices cover a wide range of activities all geared towards developing
the “natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply,
beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness….” (Hart, 2004). The idea is that in
creating an opening of awareness to self, there is also an opening of awareness to others and the
world around us. Again, the reflective dimension of the brain is that quality which holds the
greatest promise for empowering our versatility of seeing and responding to the world.
Meditation, yoga, and mindfulness are the most well-known contemplative practices. These
practices and many others cultivate “an inner technology of knowing and thereby a technology of
learning and pedagogy” (Hart, 2004). Increased attention and focus, concentration, and social
and emotional growth and development are some of the effects of these kinds of practices which
can make learning transformative.

Being fully present or being in the “now” is a common theme in contemplative practices.
Rarely are we fully present. Many of us live in the past, constantly thinking about what we
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should have done or said. Memory or remembrances are one way we identify with our mind. Many more of us live in the future, thinking about what we need to do, want to do, or wondering what lies in store. We identify with our mind via the anticipation of what might be or could be. Yet, all that we have is this moment in time. In identifying with our minds, our emotions become our reality. Our emotions are not our reality. In identifying with our minds we see the world via concepts, labels, images, words, judgments, and scripts of memories from our past or projections of the future (Tolle, 1997). If we are seeing what’s around us via the lens of the past or that of the future, neither of which exists in the now, we are not fully open to or present for what is unfolding before us. In living through memories we are relating to what occurred in the present previously, but we are fixated or stuck there. We have not moved on and we are not fully present to what is happening now. Living in the mind of anticipation is living in fantasy, because the only way to the future is through the present. That which is happening in this moment! By not identifying with our minds we open ourselves up beyond the limiting scripts of what was or what might be. When we are open to what is, the present moment, without judgment we are able to be open for new possibilities. In the practice of mindfulness, this is often called “beginners mind”. When we see children encounter new experiences many times they see things in new and fresh ways.

Meditation, yoga, mindfulness and other contemplative practices create the space for us to observe or witness the patterns of our thinking. In noticing when we are not present, we are able to see more clearly when our mind is hijacked or triggered by our emotions.

Meditation practices trains the mind to be present so that we can notice our patterns of thinking. There are many meditation practices. The basic practice of meditation is:
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- Sitting so that one is relaxed but also alert. The posture is one in which the body sits with intention.

- Usually one is asked to follow the breath, inhalations and exhalations, being mindful of where in the body one feels the breath.

- At some point the mind is distracted or wonders and we are asked to “notice” when this happens, gently and without judgment.

- The practice is not trying to keep a still mind, without thought; rather it is noticing when the mind is distracted or wonders and bringing ones attention back to the breath, without judgment. The practice is in the noticing or awareness of moving from the present.

Tan calls mind training exercise for the mind (2012). The act of noticing or witnessing the patterns of thinking is central to most contemplative practices (Tolle, 1997; Tan, 2012; Maturano, 2014; Hart, 2004). Another essential element is noticing or witnessing without judgment. As humans we are naturally judgmental. The brain is constructive of patterns of thinking and its dispositional nature is to respond to new situations using existing patterns of thinking and behaviors gives us a false sense of knowing. The simple act of noticing interrupts this pattern and enables our reflective qualities to emerge. Our biggest critic is usually ourselves. The scripts or scenarios that repeatedly play in our heads regarding our ability to do or not do are always poised to direct our behavior. Noticing or our awareness of our patterns of thinking pulls us back to the present, offering us space to see the current moment as it is, thereby, allowing us to decide how we want to respond.

Writing or journaling is another way of exercising the mind. In Julie Cameron’s (2002) The Artist’s Way, she suggests writing whatever comes to mind for fifteen minutes straight,
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without interruption. She calls these morning pages (pg. 9). The idea behind morning pages is to release the “artist brain” to encourage flow and our more creative tendencies, as opposed to the “logic brain”, our more rational and logical mind. The goal is to simply write, without stopping or trying to think about what you are writing. If nothing comes to mind she suggests that you write “nothing comes to mind” or “I can’t think of what to write” or some such phase of what is coming up at the moment. Writing she suggests requires you to be in the moment. You can’t get ahead of yourself. While she suggests fifteen minutes of morning pages, Tan (2014) states that measurable results can be seen in far less time.

Tan highlights the study of Stefanie Spera, Eric Buhrfeind, and James Penneaker in which unemployed professionals were asked to write about their feelings twenty minutes for five consecutive days. When compared with the control group, those writing found new jobs at a much higher rate, 68.4 percent versus 27.3 percent respectively, after eight months. He also quotes the Very Short List (VSL): Science (March 2, 2009) website (http://siybook.com/a/knowthyself) in which James Pennebaker, a University of Texas psychologist who wrote that students who wrote about “their most meaningful experiences for fifteen minutes a day several days in a row felt better, had healthier blood work, and got higher grades in school.” In another study from the University of Missouri, 49 college students were ask to write about something they found emotionally significant for two minutes on two consecutive days. Tan (2014) quotes “the participants registered immediate improvement in mood and performed better on standardized measures of physiological well-being” (pg. 97).

This act of writing allows whatever comes to mind to be put on paper, uncensored, for greater self-discovery. Subconscious emotions surface as conscious feelings. In Tan’s approach writing prompts or open-ended sentences provide a jump-start to this process. Staying on prompt
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isn’t really necessary, putting what comes up on paper without judgment or censorship is the goal.

Understanding the nature and nurture of the brain and cultivation of the how of knowing has implications not only for development of self-understanding and integrity, but also in creating an environment for teaching and learning that not only embraces, but also foster all five aspirations for student learning. The practical implications for scholars and/or practitioners include:

• Greater understandings of brain’s influence on how we think, learn, and achieve.

• Integration of emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and contemplative practices in coursework, class discussions, and academic projects across disciplines; and in non-academic experiences.

• Research on how mindfulness, emotional and contemplative practices influence student well-being and academic performance, “trains the mind” for authentic leadership in communities, the workplace, and the world.

Summary

Understanding neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and contemplative practices like mindfulness allows individuals and institutions, in this case VT students and VT, to nurture growth and development in ways the maximizes the potential of students and the institution.

Jon Kabat-Zinn and Richard Davidson (2003) are two forerunners in the area of contemplative neuroscience. In one of their early studies they measured the brain activity of employees at a biotechnology company after just eight weeks of mindfulness training. Near the end of their training the meditation group was also given flu shots. When measuring the brain activity of this group with the control group, the meditation group not only showed an increase in
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the electrical activity in parts of the brain associated with positive emotions, but also developed more antibodies to the influenza vaccine. Other research has shown that mindfulness strengthens circuitry in the brain that governs executive functions, thereby increasing the capacity to manage impulse and action (Tan, 2012).

The construction of knowledge involves all of the dimensions of intelligence. What we know about emotions is that negative experiences stay with us longer and are more intense than positive emotions (Gonzalez, 2012). At times the reflective qualities of the brain enable us to move forward in spite of negative experiences that sometimes weigh us down and the internal chatter encourages a feeling that the emotional experience is our reality. Yet, we also know that positive emotion deepens our attention because the social nature of our brain for meaning, connection, and purpose garners our focus. This maps onto what we know about motivation, specifically that intrinsic motivators are much more effective for high performance than extrinsic motivators like money or status. The very nature of the brain and the dimensions of intelligence supports the three ingredients for intrinsic motivation: autonomy, the need to direct our lives; mastery, the desire to get better and better at something that matters; and purpose, the compelling urge to do something that is bigger than ourselves (Tan, 2012; Golman, 2013).

Optimism is the ability to hold a positive worldview or perspective. People who hold more optimistic perspective usually have greater resilience. In teaching and learning literature, a focus on the strengths of the individual seems to have better outcomes for improved performance than focusing on negative attributes. Building off of the work of Richard Boyatzis, a psychologist at Case Western Reserve, Tan (2012) speculates that a negative focus is necessary to survive but shuts down emotional pathway for curiosity, creativity, and possibility, while a positive focus stimulates openness to new ideas, people, and possibilities. In short, positive focus
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helps us to thrive. Yet, as with most understandings of the brain, the answer isn’t either or, rather we need both a positive and negative focus. Self-awareness allows recognition what emotions arises in us, perceive the emotions in others, relate to those around us and the situation at hand, and the ability to respond based on our values, beliefs, and intentions.

What we are learning about the relationship between stress and performance can serve both individuals (students) and institutions (VI) on both a personal and professional level. Goleman (2013) highlights three states, the Yerkes-Dodson Law, that characterizes these relationships:

- **Disengagement**, when individuals are not motivated, are disinterested, and uninspired
- **Frazzle**, when individuals are overloaded. When frazzled, individuals have less concentration, not open to new ideas and are generally rigid in their response.
- **Flow**, when individuals are at peak in self-regulations, able to recognize and harness emotions in the service of performance and learning.

The first two states impede performance and the last enhances performance. Daniel Pink (2010) in *Drive* speaks to the “Goldilocks” nature of creating tasks with the right flow. He suggests that optimizing motivations requires tasks that create just enough challenge to encourage mastery. Having some autonomy in how to address the task contributes to greater engagement and high relevancy supports the need for purpose and meaning.

With these foundational underpinnings in place, individuals are better prepared to respond versus react, think more creatively and critically, work toward collaboration and inclusion, and to navigate through opportunities and challenges both personally and professionally (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014; Tan, 2012).

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Walking though the doors of Virginia Tech provides an opportunity for academic and professional growth and development, but also personal growth and development. Ultimately the educational experience is about learning a discipline that might will you later in a chosen profession, but these same experiences and the context in which students find themselves also enables learning about self.

Nutritional and environmental experiences in sufficient quantity and quality are required to satisfy the physiological needs of the brain. We know that rest, exercise, nutrition, hydration, recreation, fresh air, and even humor are important to human wellness. These elements in sufficient quantity and quality reduce stress and increase great calmness, focus, and concentration. We all think we can multitask but in fact, the brain is just jumping from one thing to the next and not optimizing attention or focus. Marturano (2013) calls this continuous partial attention. While we might think we are doing the multiple tasks well, research shows that efficiency is reduced because the brain must refocus every time it returns to each task. Neural stimulation of networks is as important as fitness and is equally important for overall well-being. The campus provides opportunities to for new information, challenges, relationships, experiences not only I formal courses but informally also.

Opportunities via clubs, student groups, teams, mentoring, coaching, etc. facilitate brain to brain interactions. Students learn about themselves as they exchange and debate ideas, thoughts, experiences, and learn first-hand from others. The campus experience becomes a way of “trying on” strengths and discovering weaknesses.
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References


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