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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Practices in Mindfulness

Judy Halden-Sullivan, Book Review Editor

American Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck recounts the following tale in her 1993 book, *Nothing Special: Living Zen*:

Master Ichu picked up his brush and wrote one word: "Attention." The student said, "Is that all?" The master wrote, "Attention. Attention." The student became irritable. "That doesn't seem profound or subtle to me." In response, Master Ichu wrote simply, "Attention. Attention. Attention." In frustration, the student demanded, "What does this word attention mean?" Master Ichu replied, "Attention means attention" (168).

Paying attention or *mindfulness* is a hard sell for both over-committed teachers and students accustomed to a cultural milieu better attuned to diverting attention. Mindfulness—becoming deeply aware of our world and our being with it—demands focused, consistent, disciplined practice. Experiencing mindfulness asks that we *slow down* to consciously and deliberately live our lives, fully awake. But how? And why?

In this issue, Ken DeLuca, a professor in a most pragmatic field, Technology Education, and also a student of Zen meditation himself, evaluates the efficacy of Deborah Schoeberlein's and Suki Sheth's recommendations in *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything* (Boston: Wisdom Publications 2009). In this study, Schoeberlein and Sheth reveal straightforward techniques for achieving everyday mindfulness to awaken teacher and student practitioners to their own lives—both in the classroom and outside it.

Brad Lucas, a writing studies specialist, assesses a series of nationally available teacher seminars on mindfulness to ferret out the do-able from the nebulous in Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley's text, *The Mindful Teacher* (NY: Teachers College Press 2009).

In a related vein, Timothy Shea, an English Education professor, connects mindfulness to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of *flow*—being fully absorbed, emotionally and intellectually, in the moment. He examines ways to invite total immersion in classrooms across the disciplines, the subject of Richard Van DeWeghe's *Engaged Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin 2009).

Finally, in reviewing Robert E. Cummings's book *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP 2009), William Archibald, a composition studies professor with a specialization in technology, gauges Cummings's contention that one of the most effective—and, for professors, seemingly unlikely—paths for inspiring students' mindfulness is letting them do what they already love to do: immersing themselves in electronic engagement, in particular, permitting the social character of the internet to focus writing students' attention in powerfully rhetorical ways.

Attention, attention, attention: as these reviewed books attest, mindfulness is not solely the domain of mystics, but is accessible, practical and transformative—for our students *and* ourselves.



Deborah Schoeberlein and Suki Sheth. *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009.

Kenneth P. De Lucca, Millersville University of Pennsylvania

The all-inclusive subtitle of Schoeberlein's and Sheth's study poses a challenging goal. How can one book cover so much? When I reflect upon my own experience as a Technology Education professor, my twenty-five-plus years of teaching mostly electronics in laboratory-based classes have not resulted in any tendencies on my part toward "kinder/gentler teaching"; sometimes I think I've seen and heard it all, at least every creative excuse ever dreamed. But I've also been a practitioner of Zen Buddhist Zazen (sitting meditation) for about 18 months, and its benefits have reached into my classrooms and laboratories. Zazen's influence definitely allowed me to better understand and have a greater appreciation for authors Schoeberlein's and Sheth's achievement.

In the foreword, Stephen Viola, director of the Transition to Teaching Program at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, states, "Tapping into the potential of mindfulness begins when teachers and students learn to pay attention to the *experience of paying attention*" (xii). This statement expresses the book's intent: how to teach teachers, while guiding and working with their students, to be more mindful, or present, in the classroom. Schoeberlein and Sheth suggest helpful behaviors teachers can adopt to ensure improvement in attentiveness.

Chapter 1, "Teach as You Learn," focuses on developing the ability to teach mindfully: "Take 5 Mindful Breathing (For Teachers)." Mindful breathing is nothing more than paying attention to one's breath. Practitioners notice how their breath fills their lungs and flows back out. While doing this, they think about nothing else. If they begin daydreaming, they return to focusing on the breath as soon as they can. After describing the benefits of mindfulness, both *for teachers*—it "improves focus and awareness, increases responsiveness to students' needs"—and *for students*—it "supports readiness to learn, promotes academic performance"—an exercise is presented that will seem familiar to practitioners of Zazen or other forms of mindful meditation (9). This exercise establishes a method for teachers to "settle down" by breathing mindfully. Instructors cannot notice the needs of others unless they are calm and properly in-tune with their environment.

Chapter 2 explains how teachers may develop "Mindfulness in the Morning" with variations presented on the "Take 5" exercise. These involve noticing thoughts and feelings as one is engaging in the "Take 5" breathing practice. The authors' point in this chapter is that, rather than permitting your mind to escalate your emotions to the level

of “I’d rather experience anything but this class,” instead make the transition into the day with a greater level of equanimity. For example, one suggestion for balanced clarity is being truly present as your significant other departs for her/his work and being able to sincerely wish that person “a good day”: this is “a great gift—for them and for you” (33). Numerous mindfulness suggestions for various occasions, from rising in the morning to a short reflection on the closing day, are described with tips for use in teaching, including “Greeting the day involves witnessing and participating in its arrival . . .” (18), while setting your intentions for the day to “stay patient with everyone, all day” (21). I enjoyed reading about these simple and quick methods any teacher can use to bring mindfulness into the classroom. Another example I thought compelling was, “If you are driving to work” or to class, “it’s best just to let driving be your main focus of attention; don’t try to do anything else as you drive” (36). How many of us are guilty of obsessive worry and planning en route to school?

Chapter 3, “On to School,” is full of suggestions for teachers. It introduces the mindful breathing exercise for students as “Take 1,” a version of “Take 5.” The chapter continues with other activities designed to be introduced by the teacher for use in the classroom. One technique noted in this chapter I have incorporated into my daily practice since reviewing this book: “Your ability to greet [students] with your full attention is a subtle yet powerful teaching strategy that often rapidly parlays into any of a number of desirable outcomes” (40). And this technique is reinforced by the suggestion that, “It’s also well worth taking the extra thirty seconds or minute to pause and ground yourself before you walk through the door and switch your focus to your students” (40).

Chapter 4, “How You See It,” is designed for students. Here they are introduced to *mindful seeing*, or noting the difference “between *looking at* something and *looking for* something” (65). The authors explain, “Simply observing the object is looking for the sake of looking, whereas noticing specific details has a purpose” (65). I must admit that I had to read that last sentence twice, but it began to sink in. Success with the latter task is increased when *mindfulness* is at its core.

Chapter 5, “Kindness and Connections,” begins with specific practices for teachers. *Metta*-meditations (*metta* being a Pali word that can be translated into English as “lovingkindness”) are introduced along with the mindful noticing of kind actions. *Metta*-meditations are designed to first reflect kindness to one’s self and then to others: loved ones, casual acquaintances or individuals about whom one has a neutral feeling (e.g., the mail carrier, a colleague), and finally people who may have caused us pain. Instruction is given to introduce students to this form of meditation, with careful mention of the “weird” thoughts students may have about a practice of this type (73). The authors are quick to point out that the teacher must determine which practices from the many possibilities put forward in this text should be attempted in the classroom. Chapter 5 closes with discussion of the ability of students to *notice kindness*. Students are asked, “to notice unexpected *opportunities* to act kindly” (84). Students are asked during a brainstorming session to list examples of acting kindly: “Suggestions typically range from the profound, such as comforting a grieving friend, to the seemingly superficial, such as opening the door for a stranger” (85).

Chapter 6—“Beads on a String,” Chapter 7—“Body Awareness,” and Chapter 8—“Mindful Words” are about mindful activities for students. Topics such as drawing,

eating, walking, journaling, and mindful speech actions are addressed. For example, in Chapter 7—“Body Awareness,” “Walking with Awareness” is introduced: “The idea is to build on the momentum related to students’ familiarity with walking ‘as if’ they’re tired, proud, or procrastinating, to create an opportunity in which they focus on walking while attending only to the experience of walking” (117). The activity ends with, “Walk while paying attention to every movement you make with each step” (118). Throughout these chapters, I found the authors’ style and suggestions extremely useful; however, not all activities can be carried out with all grade levels. Instead, the authors provide the reader with enough suggestions and specific instructions to at least use portions of these mindful activities with students of all ages. This is the overall strength of *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness*.

Chapter 9, the last chapter of the book, is entitled “Full Circle” and returns focus back to the teacher. The authors write: “Teaching each day is like running a marathon, except after you cross the finish line and students leave, there are still a few more sprints after school” (158). Time after school is considered: from closing down the classroom—“Caring for the physical space of your classroom ...” (159)—to heading home, making sure to “Mark the transition from school to after-school and consciously place yourself in new environments” (160). Mindfulness techniques are made a part of these actions. A method for finding *satisfaction* is provided that includes the “Take 5” practice and reflections upon why you wanted to teach in the first place, high points, and challenges. A daily reflection is suggested, including “find[ing] at least one thing, however small, for which you can express gratitude” (169). Suggestions for setting intentions for tomorrow and practicing being in the *here and now* conclude the chapter.

Appendix 1 (“Summary Encapsulation”) and Appendix 2 (“Formal Instructions and References to Informal Activities”) were very helpful after reading the book, as a thorough understanding of the book’s content is essential to benefit from these aides.

This book is a quick read; it provides many helpful techniques to enhance a teacher’s ability in the classroom. Student involvement in the mindfulness process elevates this book from a self-help manual to a serious work with the capacity to impact many lives. No prior familiarity with meditation practice is necessary to work through the suggested activities; they make sense and they work.



Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley. *The Mindful Teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009.

Brad E. Lucas, Texas Christian University

Part of the Series on School Reform published by Teachers College Press, *The Mindful Teacher* offers readers a distillation of four years' worth of seminars on mindful teaching practices, centered mostly in the city of Boston and aimed to offset the alienation caused by institutional mandates and managerial practices in the public school system. Shorter than an issue of an academic journal, *The Mindful Teacher* is a quick read packed with autobiographical reflections, austere theoretical discussions, and—perhaps most importantly—frameworks to guide teachers toward a daily practice with minimal, or at least minimized, alienation from their work as educators.

Supported by a Boston Collaborative Fellows Grant (and numerous other funding sources), The Mindful Teaching seminars illustrate how good ideas from both K-12 and university settings—coupled with robust funding sources—can have a profound impact on the life world of teachers, especially given that the “contemporary credit crisis and recession are only the economic manifestation of a larger societal crisis of values that has now reached virtually every corner of the globe” (MacDonald and Shirley 1). With teachers facing increasing pressure to sacrifice their pedagogy to accommodate initiatives like No Child Left Behind and a host of other data-driven decision making practices, authors Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley set out to create spaces for teachers to reflect, meditate, and develop strategies for thoughtful survival. In other words, they wanted to seek a path for the future: “What possibilities remain for ethical, caring teachers to hone their craft and to inspire their students with the sheer joy and delight that is to be found in learning?” (2). Emerging from these seminars, *The Mindful Teacher* offers readers a vicarious experience that explains not just possible frontiers but the origins of the current situation, the complex—and highly individualized—challenges that each teacher faces, and the interplay of strategies that localized groups can implement to promote professional, and personal, well being.

Divided into five chapters, the book first documents the dynamics of “The Great Divide” between teachers and administrative pressures driven by institutional mandates, then in Chapter 2 articulates the importance of professional learning communities and their capacity to promote mindfulness. Uniquely, the discussion of mindfulness combines Ellen Langer’s work on cognition and imagination with the teachings of Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. Chapter 3 then offers an extensive account of the Mindful Teacher seminars: [1] describing the eight-part structure of the seminars, [2] identifying the “ten clusters” of questions that emerged from the seminars, and [3] offering what they call “six anchoring illustrations” from seminar participants who “demonstrated aspects of mindfulness to reconceptualize and improve their work as educators” (29-30). In Chapter 4, MacDonald and Shirley take us out of the seminars and into the theoretical frameworks generated from them: “Seven Synergies of Mindful Teaching,” as well as “Three Tensions of Mindful Teaching.” Such numbered lists run the risk of commodification or simple reduction (à la Stephen Covey), but given the compact nature of *The Mindful Teacher*, they accomplish quite a lot in a short space. Ultimately, Chapter 5 encourages readers to

enact a mindful teacher leadership—one that clearly is intended to nurture teachers in their professional support communities, not to promote advancement into administrative positions or purely political leadership.

For the remainder of this review, I'll offer an overview of Chapters 3 and 4, which elucidate the process of the seminars and invite readers to contemplate their own engagement with such practices. The eight-part structure of the seminars began first with an exploration and discussion of "Pressing Concerns," prompting teachers to consider a general range of topics of concern. From there, participants engaged in "Selective Vulnerability," confronting the struggles that individuals faced and generating discussion from those unique concerns that spoke to larger problems. The third and fourth portions of the seminars introduced, respectively, the importance of "Scholarly Research," followed by the practice of "Formal Meditation." In other words, the seminar worked toward a traditional model of sharing the aggregation of research knowledge, but then followed it with an atypical practice of guided meditation. Following the individual meditation session, small groups worked together to troubleshoot "Psychological Intrusions" and consider approaches, if not outright solutions to problems. The sixth stage of the seminar then proceeded to a "Tuning Protocol," a session in which the entire group of participants would, in effect, focus on just one person and her or his troubling issue. The last two stages of the seminar prompted participants to reflect on their discoveries and give themselves assignments to promote mindfulness in their everyday lives in the weeks that followed.

Fortunately, MacDonald and Shirley do not belabor the details of the seminar, providing instead just enough detail to enable readers to imagine the process and contemplate their own participation in it. While this book review cannot reproduce the ten clusters of questions verbatim, I can provide a short list of the central issues around which they gather: conflicted beliefs, dignity and self-respect, a healthy personal life, systematic inequities, teacher leadership, responses to violence, tenacity in teaching, minding different perspectives, developing positive relationships, and awareness of assumptions behind differences (38-39).

Curiously, Chapter 3 ends with six "anchoring illustrations" that provide us with representative case scenarios based on seminar participants and their experiences. At first, I found the chapter's approach to be too compartmentalized, dividing the content into convenient lists. But upon reflection, it occurred to me that the chapter's structure avoids representing the mindfulness seminars as a "treatment," one in which alienated teachers are put through a process that cures or otherwise solves their problems. Instead, by first presenting the seminar design and then the shared phenomenon represented by the question-clusters that emerged, readers can consider each of the six illustrations on its own terms, reviewing the struggles of six teachers who will, by no means, have their problems solved but may, indeed, start a new path that keeps them in the classroom and inspiring their students.

Chapter 4 presents the Seven Synergies of Mindful Teaching, a representational system in which the *combined* efforts of each of the elements are stronger than the sum of the individual contributions. First, "Open Mindedness" prompts a commitment to allow the complexity of the world to present itself. "Caring," loosely based on Nel Noddings's work, attends to the emotional longing, loving, and aspirations that accompany teaching. The third synergy, "Stopping," drives home the importance of resisting the frenetic pace

of daily life: the authors here stress the importance of “taking an inner account of what is transpiring, and not allowing yourself to be rushed into actions that you might regret later” (65). They even prompt the reader to put the book down for a moment of meditation and reflection, accentuating the aims of the authors to *encourage* their practices, rather than simply document them for academic purposes or glory in their successes. The fourth synergy, “Professional Expertise,” assumes the diversity of knowledge and wisdom in the profession, insisting that it must have a place in a mindful practice. The fifth and sixth synergies, “Authentic Alignment” and “Integration and Harmonization,” identify the need for teachers to enact their pedagogies in ways that work within existing structures and constraints, yet seek to find a balance between effectiveness and acquiescence. Seventh, “Collective Responsibility,” sounds a note of idealism in terms of mutual responsibility among individuals and community, but given the lofty challenges of the other synergies, it is a fitting final element that heightens the importance of interpersonal relations. In closing Chapter 4, MacDonald and Shirley identify the “triple tensions” along three spectra: between contemplation and action; ethics and power; and the individual and the collective. Altogether, by identifying synergies and situating mindful teaching among these tensions, this framework offers a handy scaffolding for teachers to pursue a path away from alienation and toward mindfulness.

While I appreciate the streamlined approach taken in *The Mindful Teacher*, I also found myself wanting the authors to practice the art of “Stopping Themselves.” With this extensive work predicated on teacher alienation, the authors give us only a perfunctory gesture to Marx and a rather generic explanation—something akin to “job dissatisfaction”—when I think there’s much more at stake, especially in terms of despair for the profession and an overriding angst about community and the future of participatory democracy. Moreover, while I enjoyed the extended reflections by Elizabeth MacDonald, I was less interested in her journey than I was in those of the seminar participants. I would have gladly traded in a shorter account of hers for one or two more of theirs. Furthermore, MacDonald’s excessive self-reflections drew striking attention to the near absence of Dennis Shirley and his experiences in the project and its processes.

All in all, *The Mindful Teacher* should give readers a clear sense of the transformative power of continuing-education initiatives that promote community, self-awareness, and strategies for transformation. It’s certainly no substitute for the relationships that can emerge from extended discussions of the problems we face in our schools, but it does point us in the right direction, down a path that starts with every one of us taking the time to stop, breathe, and consider the possibilities we face together.



VanDeWeghe, Richard. *Engaged Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009.

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In my visits to public schools, I observe a disconcerting reality. I see adolescents sitting in rows listening and sometimes writing, but barely looking interested in the lesson being taught. Some slump with their heads on their desks, tuned out to the class entirely. Others appear to be paying attention, but on closer examination, it is clear that they are not. Their eyes are glazed, and they look like they would rather be anywhere else but in school. Their questions exemplify their lack of engagement: “Why do we need to learn this? Am I ever going to use it?” In the two decades in which I have taught students of all ages, I have wondered how teachers can consistently find ways to bring meaning and fulfillment into the acts of teaching and learning, when both can seem like losing battles.

On the flip side, in our extra-curricular lives, we all know what it is like to be so immersed in an activity that we lose track of time or our surroundings. It could be a hobby or a sport or an intellectual pursuit. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains in his influential study, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, “For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built . . . for a swimmer it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate passage” (3). It is what is called “flow,” an “all-encompassing state of engagement” (VanDeWeghe 2). It is what teachers recognize as an essential albeit elusive key to learning.

Richard VanDeWeghe, author of *Engaged Learning*, has observed a similar pattern in his over 40 years in the classroom as a teacher and researcher. As important as engagement is in learning, its presence is erratic at best in the classroom. *Engaged Learning* is a result of his inquiry into finding solutions to this perennial problem. He uses Csikszentmihalyi’s ideas of flow as the standard for his inquiry into the roles that engagement plays in learning that involves both the heart and the mind. He draws from his teaching and research expertise to help him make sense of the practical ways that teachers of all levels and disciplines can teach their students the art of engaged learning.

This disparity between school and home engagement was observed by Smith and Wilhelm in their study of adolescent boys’ reading habits both in and out of school. They discovered that boys usually experience flow in some way when they were passionate about some activity. However, what they observed was that “flow” more likely occurred outside of school when they were involved in activities they really cared about, such as fixing a car or playing a video game. These researchers believe that for teachers to replicate this optimal state, they need to focus on creating conditions in the classroom “that will make students more inclined to engage in learning what they need to know,” thus creating a state of “flow” and the essence of engaged learning (53). It is into this understanding that *Engaged Learning* arrives as a guide to helping educators find ways to make the elusive goal of engagement a classroom reality.

VanDeWeghe sets out in this book to find ways to “negotiate the barriers” (ix) between the students’ more engaged “real” world and their less engaged classroom world. He believes that there are authentic, research-based ways to bridge this gap, which could revolutionize our schools as they clash with current ideas about teaching and learning. He

beckons us to consider the dream of classes full of engaged and interested students who make connections between school and home, and who see learning as much broader than a textbook or a stage of life.

The strand that ties this book together is the dual way of looking at engagement. Engagement is both mind- and heart-based. VanDeWeghe argues that these two aspects must be considered together as necessary components of deep, engaging learning. He contends that to separate them is to truncate learning, which leads to apathy and disconnection.

As this is a work of inquiry, it is propelled by key questions:

- What makes students excited about learning and, conversely, what makes them disaffected or only marginally involved?
- What do flow experiences have to teach us about the nature of engaged learning?
- How can we plan our teaching, based on a deep understanding of student minds and hearts when they're truly engaged in learning?
- What do typical classroom activities such as reading and discussing look like when they are guided by mind- and heart-based engagement theory? (xiii)

The book is organized into two parts. Part I provides the background of VanDeWeghe's inquiry into theories of learning and engagement. He closely examines the meaning of flow as defined by Csikszentmihalyi, explaining in full detail the engaged state for which we as educators and learners strive. In this initial section of the book, he first examines the role of flow in engaging brains and then in engaging hearts. He ties these chapters together by explaining ways that an understanding of flow and the ways it can engage minds and hearts can then transfer to instructional planning.

In Part II, VanDeWeghe moves beyond theory to examine specific ways that the engagement defined in the first part can be put into classroom practice. He draws not only from his own teaching experience, but also from observing classes and collecting data across a wide range of grades and disciplines. In this section, he first looks at strategies for modeling engaged learning, and then he discusses the ways that words and discussions can engage learners. At times, he notes, well-intentioned, overly helpful teachers can undermine students' agency. VanDeWeghe posits that teachers who develop engagement in their classes choose their words carefully in order to help their students become independent and, thus, more engaged learners. This observation coincides with Peter Johnston's research that revealed how teacher language has the power to shape students' identities as learners and "help them understand how their brains and hearts work in tandem to improve achievement" (VanDeWeghe 67).

The next two chapters explore the ways teachers can support engagement for both readers and writers. VanDeWeghe ends this section with a chapter on memory pathways and their role in supporting long and short-term memory. The afterword discusses a few of the author's lingering questions, which range from assessment issues to classroom research, acknowledging the organic nature of learning.

When I first picked up this book, my classroom teacher's skepticism set in: I thought it would simply be another education book written by a professor in an ivory tower who was rolling out lofty ideas that looked good in theory but in practice were impractical to implement. While the premise of the book has interested me for decades, leading me to

my own inquiry, I had almost given up hope of finding consistent ways to thoughtfully and genuinely engage learners. Of course, I knew engagement was important to effective teaching, but it seemed more a matter of luck and personality and less a matter of skill developed from empirical evidence. *Engaged Learning* changed that.

It is obvious from the outset that VanDeWeghe is both an experienced practitioner and simultaneously a skilled researcher. He establishes his wide understanding in the fields of “brain research” and learning by logically organizing and building a strong case for developing flow by engaging students’ hearts and minds. As he does, he responds to possible objections to his ideas while supporting them with examples from a range of classrooms, disciplines, and grade levels.

By the time readers finish the first part of the book, they have a clear idea about what flow is and how it is important to learning. They also understand the necessity of engaging both the mind (neurological) and the heart (humanistic) because “teaching and learning are not done by disembodied intellects but by whole persons whose brains cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul” (Palmer 10).

As important as it was for VanDeWeghe to establish his basis for engaged learning in the first part of his book, it was even more crucial for him to show ways these concepts could be enacted in real classrooms—and he does just that. He shows how “common activities” can lead to engaged learning across subjects and levels, K-16 (43). The focus of these activities should center on the instructor modeling effective work habits because our students learn as much, if not more, from observing us than from what we say. He echoes Sizer’s and Sizer’s thoughts on the ways teachers model engagement by living out their love of learning which, in turn, inspires students also to immerse themselves in learning. Models of *teacher* engagement demonstrate flow, instead of just superficially recommending it.

Engaged Learning is true to its title—it is an engaging read. Dr. VanDeWeghe speaks with authority and yet also with warmth. It’s as if we are his students and the professor is imparting his acquired wisdom to help us do what we aim to do, but in relation to which we often fall short. He shows us that engagement is not only possible but also necessary, no matter what we teach. This is one text that will find a place in my required reading list for my methods course in the teaching of English. How it both engages readers and characterizes engagement *for* readers make it an important book.

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William Archibald, Millersville University of Pennsylvania

If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work but rather, teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

When students arrive in my networked classroom, I have noticed that they sit down at their computers and promptly log into Facebook. Once there, they look as if they're travelers upon a vast desert and have come to an oasis where they find the cool water of their friends' words and images. What can we as college writing instructors make of this? One option is to use social media and "crowdsourcing" to teach students to write for real audiences and to be critical of the writing they do.

When you want to crowdsource on the Web, you "split a task into smaller pieces and unleash it to millions of people around the world" (*oDesk*). This way of working is discussed by Robert E. Cummings in his fascinating new book, *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia*. This "lazy," collaborative type of work—a kind of crowdsourcing—began, he says, when computer-hacker culture invented Unix, the first software code for computers. The work programmers did on Unix was lazy in the sense that code used for it was shared and repurposed over and over again. We see it elsewhere in corporate practices like Google's "20 percent time," where "engineers spend one day a week working on projects that aren't necessarily in our job descriptions" (K). Laziness in this sense is a virtue, something done outside of the regular workflow, an activity mobilized in the service of the organization.

In his book, Cummings takes this notion of laziness and applies it to teaching writing to undergraduates. He says,

Thus, 'laziness' serves as masthead for the particular set of conditions where individuals are motivated to work by intrinsic desires rather than solely traditional motivations. To the extent that this condition is persistent in our students' lives, the field of composition must embrace it (124).

The writing we want students to do, he says, can be done much more willingly and creatively by them if we tap into their preferences. Letting students choose their topics as a way to get good writing is old news, but Cummings says that it's not enough; we must give them real audiences, too. The environment that does both is the wiki, specifically Wikipedia. Before I get into Cummings' argument for using Wikipedia as a student-writing space, I want to show how Cummings' ideas dovetail with the growing prominence and usefulness of wikis.

Ushahidi ("testimony," in Swahili), a wiki/ crowdsource application created by the Kenya native, Ory Okolloh, during Kenya's most recent troubles, gave human rights activists and victims alike the ability to tell the world what was happening on

the ground by “collect[ing] user-generated cellphone reports of riots, stranded refugees, rapes and deaths and plot[ting] them on a map, using locations given by informants” (Giridharadas). The similarities between *Ushabidi* and what Cummings talks about in regard to his composition students help illuminate his argument for the epistemological and pedagogical uses of Wikipedia.

Ushabidi data is measured in the same way Cummings talks about measuring his students’ writing in Wikipedia. The difference is that Cummings uses a “limited sample set” of one class of students. Yet the potential is the same. Not every dot on the *Ushabidi* maps is reliable, but the dots show a pattern. Cummings measures the “truth” of his students writing or how well they decipher the rhetorical nature of a Wikipedia page, by the fluency of their posts and how many edits occur in the pages they work on. The difference is that those looking at the *Ushabidi* maps take each point and aggregate it into a whole. The aggregation in Wikipedia goes on too, but the community of readers and writers use aggregation to refine and control the message. The message viewers receive from the *Ushabidi* maps is gleaned from the quantity of similar plottings, which indicates greater concentration of activity.

Ushabidi cannot be said to be lazy in Cummings’s sense because lives are at stake, but the philosophy is the same: make the activity modular and granular—that is, break the task into pieces and have many individuals participate in putting the pieces together into a recognizable whole. Do you come up with the truth when you do this? Both Cummings and Giridharadas—who explains the *Ushabidi* testimonies as “good-enough truths”—would both agree about the practical benefits of wiki technology. In each case, wiki technology modularizes and granulates the process so the truth can emerge bit by bit.

Cummings is sensitive to Composition instructors’ objections that Wikipedia is not a reliable source and thus should not be used to do college research. Jimmy Wales, the creator of Wikipedia, has himself suggested that Wikipedia not be used as a primary source by students (Young). But Cummings has something different in mind: he wants his students to use Wikipedia as a writing space, not as a research tool. The justification of his approach is torturously explained by way of transactional economic theory.

Cummings sets up Wikipedia as a premier crowdsourcing environment that has its roots in the evolution of economics from the market, to a market economy, to commons-based peer production (CBPP), which he cites as the basis of wiki culture. In other words, people first produced commodities for themselves and for their local markets, and then, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, these commodities became modularized. In our information economy, modularization has become granular, allowing very low cost production, increasing the availability of knowledge, and spurring innovation, thus flattening the organization (oDesk).

Why should writing teachers and students care about this transformation from the market, to a market economy, to commons-based peer production (CBPP)? The principle reason, according to Cummings, is that students are going to eventually work in a CBPP system when they leave college, and they need to be prepared for it. Cummings’ basic argument that Wikipedia provides students with real audiences rings true. What is problematic about this wiki-way is that it barely suits the institutions and classrooms that we learn and teach in today. He deals with this problem by giving an example of a Wikipedia assignment he uses in his First Year Composition (FYC) course. The assignment

is the last of the term, which Cummings justifies by noting that, by the end of the term, students have gotten to know one another, thus making collaboration easier. But perhaps his placement has more to do with the perceived reluctance of some students to abdicate assessment of their posted writing to the crowd on Wikipedia, who can be particularly rigorous, if not totally dismissive. Cummings counters this problem of assessment by having students journal and discuss their postings with each other. But the fact remains that having one's contribution to a wiki page removed by a stranger gives students pause, to say the least.

Yet there are good reasons in Cummings's case studies for why some students' postings are preserved, which serves as the crux of his method: students' own vigilance in examining the nature of the wiki community that controls certain pages becomes their ticket to enter a particular discourse community and have their contributions accepted. What it takes to understand and reach an audience with one's writing is something we all want to teach our students. Wikispaces provides these lessons, and, if particular students don't survive the gauntlet of edits, then there is a lesson there, too. But students are often so conscious of the power of grades that it is difficult for them to let loose and trust the reader-centered experience Cummings wants to give them, and for obvious reasons. They have relied on teachers to give them the reward they need to advance in their studies, and now to be told by strangers that their writing may be inadequate is quite a blow.

The job we have as teachers, and Cummings realizes this, is to convince students that these new writing spaces are indicative of the work environments students will inhabit when they graduate. This is not the call to duty that those who see FYC as a skills course might imagine, but a testimony to the realities of social economies, economies of which students are well aware as practitioners of social networks. Yet students may not realize these economies also reflect the jobs that will help build their careers. Cummings wants to bring this news to the composition classroom, and his message is well worth considering.



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