

Mindfulness Meditation as a Form of Uptake for the Mind and Body

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In this article, Rowan shares his experiences with mindfulness meditation to help the reader better understand the often-understated bodily experiences necessary for uptake. He also shows how meditation as uptake works in the same way as uptake in other literacy activities.

Uptake was one of the more puzzling of the concepts about writing I've learned about. When I was first learning about uptake the first words out of my instructor's mouth were something to the tune of, "uptake is one of those things that you understand perfectly until you try to explain it to someone else." Angela Sheets' definition of uptake is the foundation for my understanding of uptake. In her article entitled "Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap" defines uptake as:

"The process we go through to "take up" a new idea and think about it until it makes sense (if we get that far with it—sometimes we don't!). Our uptakes are highly individual because we all have different past experiences that impact the way we see the world. Say your instructor comes in and says, "There will be an ice cream social for our class on Friday afternoon." One student thinks, "I bet there will be waffle cones!" Another thinks, "Awesome! Class must be cancelled." Still another laments, "Ugh, forced socialization!" Notice that the instructor didn't say any of those things, but because of each students' past experiences or beliefs about ice cream socials, they take up the news to mean very different things (136).

While this definition helped me tease out the basic principles of uptake, it fails to account for the bodily experience of uptake. In my quest to better understand uptake I turned to mindfulness meditation.

I have been practicing mindfulness meditation for a little over fifteen years now. This form of meditation is designed to help practitioners identify and accept the pressures and stresses of everyday life in order to have a more peaceful existence. For me, mindfulness meditation is a form of emotional uptake that I do intentionally to better understand my mental and physical state. Uptake, in short, is the way in which we take in new information and process it in terms of our prior knowledge and experiences.

Uptake also has an element of interruption built-in. When it comes to writing, these interruptions help us understand why we write in certain ways; with mindfulness meditation, the interruption helps you understand your mental and physical state. In both cases, this interruption helps you identify things that can be changed, and things that you may need to let go of because they are interfering with your processing, and may be something you cannot change. While acknowledging experience is a part of the meditation, it also requires an acknowledgment of the practitioner's current physical and mental state. Mindfulness meditation may not be the perfect representation of every form of uptake, but it does provide a reference point for this somewhat obscure concept.

Guided Meditation

My first experience with mindful meditation was through a guided meditation at the beginning of a religion class I was taking to meet my school's general education requirements. Myself and about twenty-nine of my closest strangers were asked to sit with our feet flat on the floor and relax our bodies. We were then told to take normal breaths and concentrate on the inhale and exhale. If we found our minds wandering, we were told not to get upset and gently bring our attention back to our breathing.

I will not lie and say that this was the hardest thing I had ever done, but it was extremely difficult the first time around. I had trouble stopping my mind from thinking about the next class, the readings the night before, even if I was doing it correctly. Looking back, part of the difficulty was my ignorance of how distracted I was by all the pressures and influences in my life. With practice and repetition, I got to a point where I could keep my mind focused on my breathing for longer periods of time, and when I did stray into other thoughts, I was able to bring myself back and not become upset and blame myself.

The guided meditations were designed to help us work on our focus and concentration. One key to understanding uptake is to think of it as a way of focusing on what you are learning and how you are learning. Many of the uptake genres, activities created to help articulate uptake that are used in the writing classroom, function as a tool to help us focus on our uptake. In the same way that the emotions and pressures made it difficult to focus during meditation, the influences and prior knowledge within you can interfere with how you process new information.

Mental Scan of the Body

After several sessions of trying to concentrate on our breathing, the instructor introduced us to full-body scans. Instead of simply focusing on our breathing, we would consciously focus on sections of our body, starting at our heads and working our way down to our feet. During these sessions, we acknowledged the tensions, aches, and other physical manifestations of our mental state.

I was a non-traditional student as an undergraduate. Before going to college, I served in the military and had several civilian jobs that were very taxing on my body. To compound these things, I did not have the best home life as a child and was going through a divorce when I took this class. So, when I began to explore my body in this way, I discovered the tensions I was holding and the tiredness I had been ignoring. Just being present in the moment and acknowledging these things helped me feel more in control of my wellbeing.

We were discovering that our bodies were physical manifestations of the things we were taking up like stress, anxiety, nerviness, and other mental and emotional bombardments. Learning in the writing classroom happens in much the same way. When we learn, we are not just receiving the information in a simple transfer, but instead that information is interacting with everything that makes us who we are. We mostly go along, ignorant of the effect it has on our own learning and knowledge acquisition. Hannah Rule's book, *Situated Writing Process*, offers an interesting look at student's writing processes. In chapter four of the book, Rule examines the spaces that students write in. Alice's story in this chapter stuck out to me because she maintained a writing desk where she never wrote. I have a similar desk that I maintain for writing but have come to realize that this space represents a learned ideal that I was trying to live up to. My writing uptake, like my meditation, made me aware of the effect my environment had on me, like when I was trying to write a paper sitting on the couch with my laptop while my son was rocking in the chair beside me. By acknowledging all the things

that interact with our taking up of information, we can begin to feel more in control of our learning.

Identifying Thoughts and Feelings

After we had really honed our focus through many meditation sessions, we opened our minds and let them wander wherever they wanted to go. When something came to us, we shifted our focus and worked through trying to understand what we were feeling, why we were feeling it, if we felt like we could change what was causing those feelings, how we might change the things we felt we could, and finally trying to put aside and let go of the stresses that came from the things we could not change.

After the struggle of learning to focus past the distractions and concentrate on my breathing, I thought I had mastered the hard part of mindfulness meditation; needless to say, I was very wrong. The true purpose of mindfulness meditation is to get to where you can acknowledge the stresses and distractions that are coming from your past, your current situation, and the worries of the future. Then, after you acknowledge these things the real work begins, you have to start processing the stressors.

I discovered a lot about myself during these sessions. Coming from the South, I had several competing ideologies—some from my family back home, and newer ones that I had taken up as a result of my exposure to a more diverse culture through both my time in the military and multiple colleges. I realized that I could not change my family, but I could be aware of their influence on how I think and not let it shape the person I was working to become. I also realized that I was letting the stress from my schoolwork cause physical tension in my body. This was something I could work on and change to improve my well-being. Facing some of the pressures and influences was painful and took time. Other elements of my past were hard to face, only because I was in denial about their existence and did not want to be honest with myself. The key I found, was to take my time and really examine what was causing me to lose my peace. The lessons from the breathing practice really paid off during this phase because I was able to let myself fail and not become angry about that failure, but gently bring my focus back to the task and continue working.

Like the uptake occurring in my mindfulness meditation journey, the first time you attempt uptake in a writing class you may feel silly or have trouble identifying everything that is influencing your taking up of new information—I know I did. Like the emotions and stressors that I discovered

in my meditations, your prior knowledge and current circumstances are going to shape your taking up of new ideas. Some of these influences will be helpful and will aid in your understanding of the new material, and others may not. The important thing to remember is not to judge yourself during the process, but to acknowledge what you can. None of these elements are static, and we can never fully identify everything that influences us because we live in a dynamic world and we are dynamic individuals.

The Interruption

After we had taken the time to identify and acknowledge the stressors that were influencing us, the instructor moved on to dealing with these pressures. Once we knew what we were facing, we could begin to work through the problems and make changes to better our mental and physical states. The instructor made it clear going in that we would not be able to work through every problem and that it would be hard to let go of the pain that some of them caused, but that it was important to not cause new pain by becoming annoyed with our inability to be perfect.

My own barrage of mental pressures was extensive, and I had my share of difficulty dealing with them. The main idea was to interrupt the interference that comes from these pressures. Some things causing me stress were easier than others to work through. I was always the student who waited until the last minute to do the reading for class and homework almost never got done. This procrastination caused me unbelievable amounts of anxiety and stress. Once I had identified the problem and acknowledged that it was something that I had the power to change, I could take steps to create a schedule and eliminate that source of stress in my life. Other stressors were more complex and did not have a simple solution. My Southern upbringing and family caused me a lot of stress once my values changed due to my surroundings. I had begun to understand the value of diversity and equality, and to question the prejudices that had been taught to me. I wish I could jump into a time machine and rewrite the past, but as others have realized, we cannot. I also could not remove my family from my life because I love them, and they are a part of me. Luckily, I did not have to eliminate all the stresses to alleviate the pain they caused. By acknowledging the influence my upbringing was having on my mentality, I could choose not to let them shape the way I think. That is not to say the thoughts never happen, instead, I was able to have the thoughts and evolve them into something more in line with what I had learned about the larger world. This thought process not only helped me become a better person, it also allowed me to bring a unique

perspective to the communities I chose to be a part of. When things like my family and the entrenched beliefs they held came up and I had no power to change them, it was easier to set them aside and disregard their influence with less pressure from my past and a deeper understanding of how I got where I am.

The act of interruption is also an important part of uptake in the writing classroom. Everyone comes from a different background and lives in different conditions. So, it is only logical that the way another person process information would be different. Our past experiences shape how we view the world, and our current situation can change how we receive information and how we process it. In the same way, you can acknowledge emotional influence and you can choose how these outside influences shape your learning once you acknowledge that they are influencing you. Sadly, we cannot always control our world and our situations, but if we are aware, we can minimize negative influences and seek help in the areas that we are deficient. It is also not all bad, many of the influences from our lives help shape our learning in unique ways and allow us to see the world differently.

Metacognition

While the seated breathing focused meditation that we practiced in class is what I used to think of when I thought about meditation, it does not have to take place only in that setting. Near the end of the section on meditation, we explored some cultural origins of mindfulness meditation. This form of meditation has its roots in Buddhism. Buddhist monks practice a form of mindfulness meditation that encompasses every moment of the day. One of the most common adaptations of this practice involves taking slow, deliberate steps and focusing on the feel of your entire foot against the earth. While this is interesting, it also serves as a transition to mindfulness meditation as a metacognitive practice. By being aware of stimuli as they happen, you can start the process of dealing with the new pressure on your mental health as they come and prevent them from building up.

I practice this form of mindfulness meditation more than I do the guided breathing these days. I can stop for a moment when I get overwhelmed and identify what is causing my stress and shift my focus to alleviate that pressure on my life. It took a good bit of practice and repetition to get to where I am today, but I think it was well worth it. I am able to maintain a better standard of mental health, and I have the tools to cope with my ever-changing environment. Meditation is not a one and done solution to the

world's problems, but it does acknowledge the dynamic nature of the world and helps me acknowledge how it is affecting my thinking and wellbeing.

A similar idea can be applied to the writing classroom. Uptake does not have to be something you do when prompted. Anytime we write, we should consider what is influencing our writing. We should think about how we process new information differently so we can better engage with what we are learning and bring our own unique perspectives to the classroom. Uptake allows us to gain more control of the world around us and lets us shape our destiny.

Conclusion

Okay, so maybe shaping our destiny is a bit dramatic, but uptake both as meditation and in the writing classroom helps us to improve. This improvement comes from an awareness of the factors involved in the taking up of new information and processing it. Meditation serves as a form of uptake that deals with emotions but still involves coping with some of the same elements we face in the writing classroom. Life is dynamic and requires dynamic tools to help us process the ever-changing conditions we will face. So, the next time you are asked to describe your uptake, meditate on it.

Works Cited

- Rule, Hannah. "Writers as Situated Process Researchers." *Situating Writing Processes*. WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado, 2019. 99-128.
- Angela Sheets. "Angela Rides the Bus: A High Stakes Adventure Involving Riveting Research, Amazing Activity Systems, and a Stylish Metacognitive Thinking Cap." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015.



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