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# Fostering Mindfulness Through Embroidery and Reverse Community-Engaged Learning in Moroccan Higher Education

**Smita Kumar**

Independent educator & researcher

*Teaching hand embroidery as part of an academic course on mindfulness was found to enhance students' learning and foster mindfulness. It functioned as a bridge between mindfulness theory and practice and helped students limit compulsive thinking, develop a beginner's mind, engage in metacognition, experience presence, promote therapeutic benefits, and in some cases, manifest wisdom. Students were learning to add mindfulness to their daily lives through body-oriented pedagogy. Further, inviting an embroidery teacher from the local community promoted reverse community-engaged learning. It challenged students' and educators' assumptions of privilege, power, and class and helped form new ties based on mutual respect. This interpretive phenomenological analysis is part of a larger study based on teaching mindfulness as an academic course for two years. I adopted double hermeneutics to analyze data from critical reflective journals of 24 consenting students and from semi-structured interviews with 20 students.*

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In the fall of 2018, I taught a three-credit academic course on mindfulness at a Moroccan university. In addition to daily breathing practice, guided meditation, weekly critical reflective journal writing, a mindfulness retreat, and multidisciplinary readings, I introduced a weekly class in hand embroidery. I did this for two main reasons: to foster a deeper mindfulness practice and to enable students to transition from silent meditation to real-life activities. Regular practice is one of the most important aspects of developing mindfulness, but it is challenging for beginners to sit silently or practice breathing every day with no measurable outcome.

However, it is antithetical to have a measurable outcome from such activities (Choi et al., 2020). The hand embroidery classes allowed students to work through these challenges and have a smoother transition into the abstract nature of mindfulness.

It is believed that doing something with our hands “can bring us into the present moment. It feels soothing and refreshing after a day of mental activity, and we feel once again embodied” (Watt, 2012, p. 166). Hand embroidery involves active doing while sitting in silence. This provides an opportunity to be aware of one’s thoughts and breathing. Furthermore, engaging in a creative pursuit requires individuals to be open, flexible, alert, curious, and to take risks (Barron & Harrington, 1981; Martindale, 1989; McCrae, 1987). It is similar to fostering the notion of a beginner’s mind in mindfulness practice when individuals are receptive to what emerges, remain alert, and are curious (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 35). Several of these aspects of hand embroidery connect with mindfulness practice, and by bringing hand embroidery into the traditional higher education classroom, I was inviting students to explore new ways of learning.

Moroccan textile arts, including hand embroidery and weaving, are integral parts of the nation’s cultural heritage and reflect “its geographic and tribal identity” (Davis & Coca, 2018). This cultural familiarity was an additional reason to select embroidery as a mindfulness activity. To do this, I engaged an embroidery teacher from a local community organization. She had the formal responsibility of teaching and evaluating students and received monetary compensation for the weekly classes. This practice is aligned with community-engaged learning (CEL), an approach based on a partnership between community members and an educational institution (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010). This experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice; further, “service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989, p. 1). While inviting an embroidery teacher from the community was not a traditional CEL, it had similar goals.

In this article, I share the relevance of bringing hand embroidery into higher education, its pedagogical impact, and its influence on students’ mindfulness practice.

## Background

### The Nature of Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness is considered a basic “human capacity” that enables us to observe on purpose and in a nonjudgmental manner, enabling us to be present in the moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 146). The real goal of mindfulness is to investigate our true nature, which may lead to personal transformation (Bush, 2011; Olendzki, 2010). Mindfulness practices such as meditation teach one to focus attention, observe experiences as they emerge, be aware of thoughts, and remain open and less attached to what emerges (Lutz et al., 2008). However, along with the relaxed or calm experience, practitioners also experience physical, emotional, and mental discomfort. Usually, it is the preexisting discomfort that the practitioner becomes aware of as a result of paying attention. According to Buddhist texts, these experiences are part of the practice, and hence, it is important to learn with the right teacher and in a proper manner so as to build a practice aligned with its philosophical and ethical principles (Vörös, 2016).

Our brain is known to engage in constant compulsive thinking about the past or future, also referred to as the default mode network (Buckner et al., 2008; Raichle et al., 2001). This automatic, continuous, and often redundant thinking requires disciplined, committed, and sustained mindfulness practice to move away from compulsive thinking.

### Embroidery and Mindfulness

Needlework, textile arts, and hand embroidery have been research topics for those interested in art, history, and women’s domestic work (Giunta & Sciorra, 2014). Hand embroidery is a medieval art form that involves different techniques, materials, and methods. More modern adaptations involve working with thread on textile. Embroidery has been done for aesthetic purposes and has largely been considered women’s work (Lalarge, 1999), offering opportunities for women’s empowerment or economic independence (Sinclair, 2014).

Hand embroidery, when done attentively, can help individuals experience facets of a sustained mindfulness practice. In a study on women

engaged in hand embroidery, Swinnerton (2015) argued that mindfully practicing embroidery can promote wellbeing. Due to limited research on embroidery, I draw upon knitting, another form of needlework. Knitting is considered to be a space where individuals are “quiet and active at the same time” (Derry, 2011, p. 184). Mindfulness meditation, too, requires practitioners to be quiet and active yet engaged in nonjudgmental awareness. In this section, I examine three aspects of hand embroidery that are relevant for mindfulness practice: repetitive, manual, and creative.

**Repetitive.** Both hand embroidery and mindfulness practices are repetitive and require discipline. Choa (2011) argued that practitioners engage in “repetitive practicing . . . [and] beyond a certain point, an effect akin to that acquired by deep meditation could kick in and one could only become stronger and develop more plasticity in both bodily and brain functions” (p. 319). The repetitive nature of an activity helps to promote focus, concentration, and mindfulness. Studies have also shown that repetitive movement increases serotonin, known to reduce depression and pain (Jacobs, 1991). Further, scholars have argued that knitting promotes relaxation and wellbeing among its practitioners (Riley et al., 2013). However, we also need to be aware that such activities can cause repetitive stress injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome when done in an improper manner (Dittrich, 2001).

**Manual.** Manual practices reinforce body-oriented pedagogy for mindfulness. Connecting with the body, feeling sensations, and becoming aware of what emerges promote deeper mindfulness (Ergas, 2014). Scholars have argued that knitting involves creating with the hands, which leads to feeling relaxed (Riley et al., 2013). This is similar to practicing hand embroidery. This manual craft requires the practitioner to keep track of the stitches through counting and focusing on hand movement, which releases stress and fosters the experience of being in the present moment (Swinnerton, 2015; Watt, 2012). Apart from its psychological benefits, engaging in a handicraft such as knitting has been shown to have physiological impacts such as reducing heart rate, slowing breathing, and improving proficiency in manual work (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007).

**Creative.** Integrating art into regular education fosters cognitive abilities such as tolerance of ambiguity, perception without judgment, and emotional experience (Eisner & Powell, 2002). However, bringing art into the classroom is often not considered real education, and introducing hand embroidery into an academic course was received skeptically by the students. In addition to cognitive benefits, immersion in art may result in experiencing a mental state similar to meditation, although, unlike mindfulness, it may not be arrived at through a conscious process (Swinnerton, 2015). A conscious process is a distinguishing aspect of mindfulness practice. At the same time, mindfulness has been shown to promote creativity as individuals become open to new perceptions (Langer, 1997). Because being immersed in art may support mindfulness, and mindfulness promotes creativity, it was almost intuitive to add an art form to the mindfulness course. Further, both art and mindfulness encourage individuals to become receptive to what emerges while suspending prior assumptions.

### Research Design

This article discusses an aspect of a larger study of teaching mindfulness as an academic course in a Moroccan higher education institution; more details on the mindfulness practices, course design, and original research can be found in another article (Kumar, 2021). Weekly critical reflective journal writing was an integral part of the course, based on Ash and Clayton's (2009) DEAL approach to critical reflection, enabling individuals to deepen their learning by critically reflecting on experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and emotions. For the hand embroidery, students were engaged in a weekly class taught by the teacher from a local community.

I adopted interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) for this study. IPA allows researchers to understand of how the participants make meaning of the phenomenon while situated in their social context and provides a nuanced and exhaustive interpretation of their understanding (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, the researcher is supposed to have "a true and deeper understanding of the participants 'lived experiences'" (Alase,

2017, p. 12). Being the course facilitator allowed me to be embedded with the students in the learning space.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Researcher reflexivity, used since the initiation of this study, was beneficial in understanding my assumptions and biases about bringing contemplative pedagogy, embroidery, and mindfulness practices into higher education in the Moroccan culture. My teaching and research on mindfulness is grounded in my two decades of personal practice from yogic and Buddhist traditions. As I was embedded in a Moroccan culture where mindfulness was a foreign concept, it was extremely important for me to neither impose nor misrepresent it but rather create a safe learning space. I was conscious of ensuring that students gained knowledge of the philosophical and ethical foundations of mindfulness and developed their personal practice aligned with their personal and social context. I was supported in teaching and researching this course as the institution was involved in developing the first Arabic translation of mindfulness: *Yah-khah-dha Dhih-ní-a*, translated as the mind fully awake and observing (Reoch, 2016). However, I did face questions from faculty and students on whether this course on mindfulness and hand embroidery had the academic rigor needed for higher education. Embroidery is often considered domestic work and, in this culture, is usually practiced by uneducated women from a lower socioeconomic class. Nonetheless, after open discussions about the relevance of embroidery, I invited students to engage in it as an experiment.

### **Data Collection**

Since the first research effort, the study has expanded to include data from two years of teaching the course to 28 undergraduate students. The students, largely from the Middle East and North African region, voluntarily enrolled in the course. Data were collected from the critical reflective journals of 24 consenting students and semi-structured interviews with 20 students. To reduce the inherent power difference in the classroom, students were informed about the study after they received their grades. The critical reflective journals comprised more than 375

pages, and audio-recorded interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes each. The interviews were conducted two to four months after course completion, allowing students to have time for reflection. All interviews were conducted in common learning spaces (private rooms) in the library. To protect student privacy, all students were given pseudonyms, except for one student and the embroidery teacher who wanted to use their given names.

### **Data Analysis**

In IPA, researchers engage in double hermeneutics as they try to make sense of how the participants are making sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This study adopted double hermeneutics to analyze the data and provide rich and descriptive narratives to present the students' experiences of doing hand embroidery as a mindfulness practice. After reading the interview transcripts and journals multiple times, I independently coded two transcripts. Using Atlas.ti software for coding, I arrived at an initial list of 59 codes. After merging similar codes (such as "fear of failure" with "high expectations"), I had 49 codes and 10 categories that led to five themes, which are presented below. Themes such as "learning to practice" emerged from two categories, "challenging practice" and "support from teacher."

To ensure trustworthiness, I started with researcher reflexivity and constantly questioned my biases and beliefs through the analysis phase (Smith et al., 2009). I also shared the interview transcripts and initial list of themes with the students for member checking (Doyle, 2007) and provided rich quotes from the participants.

### **Findings**

#### **Learning to Practice**

One unique feature of this course was the invitation for students to sign a commitment statement at the start of the semester. Students expressed that signing the document made them realize the seriousness of the course. In the beginning, most students were unable to relate to learning hand embroidery in an academic setting. They described frustration with

body pain, challenges of learning embroidery, and wandering minds. As the embroidery teacher gently encouraged students to correct their posture and focus on the stitch, students began to feel a sense of ease. Nafiza said, “I felt physical pain in different parts of my body including my neck, back, and fingers. It was painful to get into the right body position and adopt new habits.” She added, “The teacher often said, ‘Hold the embroidery hoop at chest level or else you will have a neck pain and keep your back straight to avoid back pain.’” According to the embroidery teacher, correct body posture is the first step in embroidery, as physical discomfort is distracting.

Students also spoke about the challenging nature of embroidery. Lamia emphasized, “One of my biggest challenges [was] disciplining myself and keep showing up to the group sessions.” Having signed the course commitment, students found it difficult to disregard it. Further, students also struggled with overwhelming thoughts as they started embroidering. However, they were beginning to notice the similarities between silent breathing practice and embroidering. Meriem said, “I believe that embroidery is a form of meditation.” Nonetheless, some students questioned its relevance or spoke about losing motivation due to their friends’ opinions about learning embroidery at an elite higher education institution.

### **Engaging in Metacognition**

The students were learning to thread the needle, follow embroidery patterns, and, when necessary, repeat each stitch to correct mistakes. Through this process, they became aware of their thoughts of failure, competition with their peers and the teacher, frustrations with mistakes, or their lack of interest in hand embroidery. Kiara spoke about having high self-expectations. She said, “Within my embroidery practice, I have noticed that when I place expectations on myself and on the project, it takes me away from being present in the moment.” Lamia noticed the lack of self-compassion during the practice. She said, “I am, for the most part, relaxed and at ease while practicing, but I am also literally showing no mercy to myself when the tiniest of mistake is committed.”

Ria shared her frustrations of feeling competitive in the embroidery class:

I constantly find myself comparing my technique to my teacher's, even though she has so much [more] experience than I do. I compare how quickly she is able to complete a stitch, I compare the way she holds the needle and the thread to the point. I sometimes feel like I will never get it right. I end up wasting so much of my time forcing myself to do it like the teacher rather than doing things the way that works best for me.

Some students became aware of their lack of interest in the embroidery classes, while others noticed their overattachment. However, all wrote extensively about their observations and experiences in their journals. Meriem said she was aware of her inability to focus on embroidery without getting lost in her thoughts.

I like precision. However, since I am still not familiar with embroidery, and as a human being that makes mistakes, I tend to feel discomfort in my body, to the point that I could hardly stay in place. I would blame myself and feel that I was broken all at once.

She also spoke extensively about her fears and expectations of this practice.

The repetitive aspect of this activity was the main thing that I feared. Nevertheless, I believe I took mindfulness class to discipline myself and see how far I could challenge my convictions and habits. My main goals were to get self-disciplined . . . push myself to do something that I was afraid of, [develop] self-compassion that I still struggle with sometimes, and that I could grow through doing and accepting my mistakes while [doing] embroidery, and finally completely focusing on one single task.

This ease in the embroidery practice became more apparent with time. Nafiza became familiar with the art and noticed reduced challenges. She said, "It was in the fifth class that I observed some changes at the level of finger and neck pain. . . . It had dramatically decreased, if not disappeared, [as] the exercises had become familiar."

### Self-Discovery and Connection to Daily Life

Students moved beyond learning a new textile art form to gain self-awareness and engage in metacognition. Ria expressed transformation of physical and emotional struggles, which led to some profound realizations:

I allowed my hands to take in control and do less thinking. Before I would feel tense and my back would hurt for sitting up so straight because of all the stress I felt with knowing that I did not practice and felt I was wasting the teacher's time. However, after starting to repeatedly practice and enjoy it, I am not focused on trying to prove to her [the teacher] that I learned something. Therefore, my body was much more relaxed, and it did not ache. . . . I learned that I have a hard time because I put my mind over my body.

The learning from embroidery sessions moved outside the classroom into other spheres of life. Repeating a stitch until it was correct made students more forgiving of themselves. They were slowing down to deal with pressures and engaging in self-care. Meriem gained deep self-awareness about making mistakes and developing compassion for self and others:

I used to be very self-conscious about any sewing mistake. I would feel discomfort, resent my own self, and be disappointed. . . . [I knew my] lack of self-compassion will only have bad repercussions, not only on people around me, but also on my productivity in the sewing practice. More pressure = less results. I now happen to and more often be the one telling others that the mistakes make the product beautiful and authentic and ask them to be more forgiving to themselves.

For Said, consciously practicing embroidery helped him relax during anxiety attacks. He became aware that embroidery had a role in his wellbeing:

I wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare or anxiety attack, and my mindfulness practice [embroidery] is my go-to [practice] to try and calm myself down to move past the overwhelming feelings. My practice has also led me to deepen my reflection skills.

For Salim, embroidery helped him quit smoking. “I started carrying the embroidery hoop in my bag, as it allowed me to do something with my hands. I am trying to quit smoking. So, whenever I can, I do embroidery, my hands are used.”

Meriem also shared how embroidery was transitioning into other spheres of life—alleviating pressure and helping her slow down. “Practicing has helped me ease the pressure and the overwhelm of my weekly work and allowed me to take time to slow down.” Ria spoke about her enjoyment of embroidery and process of self-discovery:

As the practice [of embroidery] continued to grow on me, I fell more and more in love with it. It became a time of the week I looked forward to . . . and something I picked up whenever I was not in the best mood. However, this made me learn more about myself, that I often attach feelings and emotions to the things I do.

For Salma and Kiara, embroidery moved beyond creating something into increased self-awareness. Salma said, “I believe that I have come a long way. . . . Now I am aware when I harm myself—be it sleep deprivation or having negative thoughts.” Kiara said that when doing embroidery she came to “recognize the areas that I was strong in and where I need more work and assistance.”

### **Connecting with the Community**

Embroidery allowed students to connect with their family and friends in a new way. Several students shared how embroidery helped them relate to their grandparents, parents, and relatives who practiced textile art forms. Students became emotional while practicing embroidery as they recalled fond memories of their loved ones. Meriem described how her mother felt a sense of pride in her own creation, and she wanted to

have a similar feeling: “I remembered a creation my mom embroidered, a picture of a horse. I can still see how proud she is of it and I realized that I would love to see a creation of mine with the same admiration.”

Students spoke about new connections they formed through these classes. They were seeing their classmates in a different way, having shared experiences, and forming bonds that moved beyond the classroom. Ria commented:

When we first came in the room, everyone was scrambling, trying to get themselves together and did not really care about what the next person was doing. However, as we started to get deep into embroidery, I felt a change in the room. The vibes were more relaxing, and we were all being mindful to one another. If someone needed a translation to speak to the teacher, students translated, and if someone was having a hard time learning, someone helped. I think the major reason to the shift and of being able to help each other was because we all felt calm and comfortable after practicing for a little while.

A deep connection also formed between the students and the teacher. Having a teacher from the local community, someone with no formal education, was an unsettling concept for some students. The teacher taught weaving and embroidery at a local women’s not-for-profit organization and also managed her own handicraft cooperative. Nafiza said, “Being taught by Teacher Mrs. Hafida helped me acquire a new eye on other people I considered so far as ‘ignorant’ . . . [and became] more ready to listen to those I considered before as ‘out of my league.’” Nafiza, through personal experience, was learning to change her perceptions and stereotypes about social class, education, and more.

Students addressed Mrs. Hafida as *Usteda* (female teacher in Arabic) or *Khalti* (“my aunt” in Arabic). Meriem’s account presents her respect, fondness, and appreciation for the teacher: “I am very grateful for our embroidery professor, for her patience, gentleness, and open-mindedness when it comes to how we are supposed to behave during the

session.” Nafiza noted that their teacher’s personal disclosures helped to build trust. “She shared aspects of her life and trusted us enough to share some sad moments that she had been through.” All students spoke about the compassionate nature of the teacher who had *created a safe and compassionate environment* and would gently correct their mistakes and patiently encourage them.

### Deep Insights and Wisdom

In addition to personal awareness, embroidery also provided an opportunity for deep insights. For Kiara, embroidery was becoming more than a course requirement; it was leading to a sense of pride in creating something with her own hands:

I felt more connected with the work that I was creating and there was a sense of peace that came with that because I felt I was doing something meaningful. The fact that what I was creating was coming from my own hands made it more personal for me and it became something that I was proud of. I look forward to the final product of my creation.

Similarly, Lamia spoke about learning to simply show up for the embroidery classes by “whispering [to herself] multiple times: can we do it just this time? The idea of *gently inviting* myself . . . [was] one of my biggest take-aways from the class.” For both Kiara and Salma, realizing the lack of being mindful helped them come closer to mindfulness. Kiara said:

I noticed that there are times where I would be working on my design but forget that I am in the class or where my mind goes blank for a moment and all I can see is the different colors of the thread and the motions of the needle. I believe that in this moment, when I catch myself from either daydreaming or unconsciously stepping into another realm is when my mindfulness practice comes in hand. Being able to recognize that for a split second I was not in the same mindset helped me to understand the interpretation of mindfulness.

For Lamia, the notion of witness or watcher emerged as a connection to the present moment, watching herself as performing the act of embroidery, speaking to her classmates, and observing her emotions like she was watching another person. She soon realized it was the watcher as captured in the mindfulness literature. Lamia shared:

It took a fair amount of time and introspection to realize that this was the birth of my “watcher” that kept subtly and gently growing every day until its presence became more prominent and visible. I knew that the person I would truly be is the one practicing not the one chatting, and the practicing entity in these moments would be the best representation of a watcher: present, still, calm, and witnessing whatever is happening without engaging in any further internal discussions or speculations.

Lamia also shared the notion of detachment from her emotions and realized she was not the same as her emotions: “As I am walking towards the class . . . my feelings of discomfort and fear are still there, but I am no longer carrying them. They are walking side-by-side with me, as if we are not the same entity, because eventually we are not the same entity.” Lamia added, “Welcoming the dark sides as much as the bright ones came to be so powerful for me. Because it gave a platform to all the feelings and thoughts that would wrestle inside, without allowing them to harm or ‘haunt’ my being.”

Some students, like Meriem and Salma, shared their feelings of becoming lost in the act of embroidery, losing the sense of time, and feeling peaceful and relaxed. Meriem explained, “I used to sew continually for the entire hour and a half, without even feeling the time passing.” Salma could feel her mind become blank—she referred to it as a “peaceful void”—and said, “During embroidery, I feel nothing and my brain abstains from its never-ending thinking and overthinking. . . . It’s perfectly blank until someone brings [me] back to earth. Once I’m back from that peaceful void, I feel good and relaxed.”

## Discussion

The findings of this study raise three subjects for discussion: a) hand embroidery as a body-oriented pedagogy in practice, b) hand embroidery as a mindfulness practice, and c) a *reverse* form of CEL.

### Body-Oriented Pedagogy in Practice

Body-oriented pedagogy is based on the idea that “‘body’ (*sensations*) is a more faithful representation of the present moment than ‘mind’ (*thoughts*)” (Ergas, 2013, p. 8). The findings here support the proposition that engaging in a body-oriented activity such as hand embroidery invited students to move away from their thoughts to purposefully stay connected to their bodies. Sensations occur on a real-time basis, and by focusing on them, students were more present and inclined to make decisions based on their real-time experiences of the moment. Because the students were asked to focus their attention at the exact point of their needle, hands, and each stitch, they were learning to watch their mind wandering. This helped reduce discursive thoughts or compulsive mind wandering, which Kudesia and Nyima (2015) described as an essential outcome of mindfulness practice. When we give importance to sensations rather than thoughts, we promote presence in education. Experiencing presence encourages students to develop an ability to choose their actions rather than repeat past patterns (Ergas, 2013, p. 11). This experience of presence usually occurs when the practitioner is engaged in doing yet is not overdoing—“the rift between the poles of controlled and uncontrolled doing” (Ergas, 2014, p. 289).

However, this study expands the conceptualization of body-oriented pedagogy, arguing that when we adopt a practice of hand embroidery in a contemplative context, it brings forth cognitive, in addition to body-oriented, learning. The students were making meaning of their experiences of embroidery, questioning their old patterns, and making choices to change their behavior and beliefs. This form of manual learning through a textile art form reaffirms the importance of using art to promote cognitive learning (Eisner & Powell, 2002; Langer, 1997). It also expands the notion of body-oriented learning from the very physical practices of

yoga, tai chi, and martial arts to an art form like hand embroidery that is associated with limited bodywork yet brings forth deeper mindfulness.

### **Hand Embroidery as a Mindfulness Practice**

This study shows that a textile art form such as hand embroidery may have immense potential for promoting and transitioning mindfulness into day-to-day life. When practitioners are engaged in working with their hands, doing the same thing repeatedly, experiencing similar emotions, and being silent, it becomes like meditating with a heart-hand connection (Wickham et al., 2013). Both formal and informal mindfulness practices, when done repetitively, tend to increase state mindfulness (Mantzios & Giannou, 2018). Since mindfulness is supposed to promote creativity (Langer, 1997) and immersion in art promotes mindfulness (Swinerton, 2015), creativity and mindfulness are intertwined, especially when practiced consciously. Similarly, regular practice of hand embroidery with awareness allowed students to deepen their mindfulness, and they increasingly displayed creativity in their embroidery work, writing, or class presentations of work.

The concept of mindfulness was new for most students, and introducing hand embroidery, a familiar art form, made mindfulness less foreign or abstract. It helped students transition mindfulness into their daily activities and relationships. Knitting and embroidery have been used by women to deal with depression and promote wellbeing (Reynolds, 2000; Swinerton, 2015), and in a study with anorexia nervosa patients, knitting was shown to reduce anxiety, have therapeutic effects, and be calming (Clave-Brule et al., 2009). Since repetitive activities increase serotonin (Jacobs, 1991), students in this study experienced therapeutic effects as they intentionally practiced hand embroidery to deal with chronic fatigue, depression, anxiety attacks, attempts to quit smoking, or efforts to calm themselves in challenging moments.

Practicing hand embroidery fosters wellbeing, but it also teaches students to be present, to observe what emerges in a nonjudgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Students are able to get in touch with their bodily sensations, experiencing a wandering mind and silence. They begin experiencing a meditation-like state while practicing embroidery, as in-

dividuals engaged in knitting have experienced (Kingston, 2013; McKay & Tatum, 2019). Further, some students develop deeper insight, such as the notion of a watcher or witnessing themselves. They learn to *not* give power to their thoughts, emotions, and behavior patterns. Instead, they learn to *detach* (Mirdal, 2010). This is also known as “meta-awareness, . . . state of detached self-observation,” when one is aware of the emotion but is not reacting based upon these emotions (Kudesia, 2015, p. 199). Unlike mindfulness practices, hand embroidery has a specific visible outcome. This experience with a tangible outcome could motivate students to continue their embroidery practices, but there is a need to be cautious in not instilling the notion of progress and measurement in mindfulness practices.

### **Reverse Community-Engaged Learning**

Bringing a teacher from the community to teach this art in a higher education classroom expands the current conceptualization of CEL. CEL is aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice, benefitting both the community and student learning. It is conducted in a community context and focuses on driving change in the community. However, teaching hand embroidery *reversed* the current practice. Students were not learning in a community context or driving change in the community; instead, a community member was instructing the students, and that was driving change among them. This pedagogy raises questions about the power dynamics between the community and the educational institution and about who is driving change. It makes us reflect on the implicit power that students and educational institutions have over the communities in CEL.

This form of CEL, involving members of the community who often do not have the same privileges as university students or faculty, challenges conventional roles. I refer to this as *reverse* CEL, and it can challenge the assumptions that students and educators hold about privilege, power, and education and forge stronger alliances. Students spoke about othering those who are different and confessed to considering them *ignorant*. Nevertheless, as they started learning and working with the teacher, they began to change. They were learning how community members can

teach them more than hand embroidery—they were learning life skills. And, students were experiencing “decentering, . . . removing the focus of attention from the self toward others, in other words in becoming less egocentric and more receptive and attentive” to the learning of their teacher (Mirdal, 2010, p. 8).

Inviting a community member into the university as a teacher increased the teacher’s pride, confidence, and self-worth. When asked about the remuneration, the embroidery teacher gave an emotional reply, “The fact that I can walk inside the university gates as an *Usteda* [female teacher in Arabic]—I have earned more than my teaching fee.”

### Implications for Research

Teaching to stop compulsive thinking and implementing mind-altering and body-oriented pedagogies can have a favorable influence on students. This research presents how practicing hand embroidery led students to stop (during practice) or reduce thinking and learn to rethink. More research is needed in this area to understand brain functioning and the implications of such a pedagogical approach. However, researchers caution us about not letting “personal activities [like embroidery] become solely academic” (Wickham et al., 2013, p. 43). The embroidery classes gave students a personal space to practice, learn, relax, feel connected to the larger community of embroidery practitioners, and simply enjoy the creative pursuit. While there is research on knitting, there is a dearth of research on other art forms such as embroidery that promote mindfulness. Similar to knitting, hand embroidery too has therapeutic and meditative effects, and this needs to be examined further.

We need to explore the concept of *reverse* CEL, because when we invite community members to impart knowledge or skills, we flip power. We need to undertake studies on how reverse CEL promotes a new understanding and relationship between students and community members with limited educational backgrounds and resources. We need to examine the notions of literacy, beneficiaries, poverty, and privilege as we continue to engage in traditional CEL or reverse CEL. Who holds the power in CEL, and what is the impact of reverse CEL on the students’ perception of the community? Do the community members feel they have the power to teach or contribute to the educational institution?

## **Implications for Education and Learning**

In addition to existing pedagogies, we need to make spaces and opportunities to implement body-oriented and mind-altering pedagogies (Ergas, 2014). As we continue to teach students to think, we also need to teach them how and when to think, to pause, and to stop thinking. Teaching how to think allows for emotional issues to be revealed and addressed (Ergas, 2014). Emotional energy can be a huge drain on students' wellbeing; hence, teaching body-oriented pedagogy can free students from emotional baggage and lead to greater wellbeing. Through the hand embroidery classes, students not only engaged in body-oriented learning, but were learning to pause, to stop thinking, and to relearn how and when to think.

It is important to note that teaching similar arts needs to be aligned to the educational purpose for more meaningful learning and be contextualized in the local culture. Educators need to foster a conducive learning environment for both community members and students. There is a need to set expectations and boundaries for students and community members without overengineering the learning environment. Finally, educators also need to consider personal factors like physical or emotional abilities that may discourage some students from practicing the craft.

## **Conclusion**

Body-oriented pedagogical learning has the potential to allow students to stay authentic in the present moment and stay away from constant and compulsive thinking about the past and future (Ergas, 2014). In this study, hand embroidery was introduced to bring body-oriented pedagogy into practice to foster mindfulness. The findings of this study show that hand embroidery has the potential to promote presence when practiced with attention. While other art forms can also foster presence, it is pertinent to note that hand embroidery by its very nature is similar to mindfulness meditation and, hence, can be adopted as a mindfulness practice. Practicing hand embroidery allowed students to move mindfulness into other life activities, helping them pay attention to their behaviors, thoughts,

and emotions outside the classroom. Through regular and conscious practice of hand embroidery, students experienced less compulsive thinking, developed a beginner's mind, engaged in metacognition, experienced presence, and in some cases manifested wisdom. Students engaged more actively in transitioning mindfulness practices into other life activities. Hand embroidery was able to bridge the gap between mindfulness theory and practice.

This study has several limitations. Hand embroidery was one of several activities promoted to foster mindfulness; hence, it is unknown if teaching hand embroidery by itself would have similar findings. Further, other art forms can be leveraged for this purpose. However, it is important to examine how individuals connect to other art forms, the ease of teaching these art forms, and their alignment with mindfulness practices.

Finally, bringing art forms into the regular academic classroom can introduce new and diverse ways of learning, challenging stereotypes about learning modalities, power dynamics, teachers, communities, and the boundaries of what and how to learn. It is important to note that an age-old practice of hand embroidery, usually limited to women's household craft, has the potential to promote mindfulness, has therapeutic effects, and challenges existing power dynamics between students and community members.

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