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The relationship between symbolic interactionism and mindfulness in the context of new media: implications for teacher education

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Abstract

Integrating symbolic interactionism and mindfulness into teacher education enriches both theoretical understanding and practical application in contemporary classrooms, as new media tools are the main actors in shaping today's students' learning. This study examines the interplay between symbolic interactionism and mindfulness within the context of new media, exploring its implications for teacher education. Symbolic interactionism explains how individuals make sense of their social world through micro-level interactions and shared symbols. In parallel, mindfulness, the practice of conscious, non-judgmental awareness, offers individuals strategies to resist the emotional and cognitive manipulation often driven by digital media environments. Together, these frameworks provide educators with critical tools to decode student behaviors, develop inclusive pedagogical strategies, and cultivate emotional resilience in increasingly complex and symbolic classroom environments. This study argues that integrating symbolic interactionism and mindfulness in teacher education enhances teachers' ability to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively, interpret student interactions meaningfully, and foster mindful and ethically grounded classroom cultures.

82

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the teaching profession has evolved well beyond simple knowledge transmission. Teachers working with digital-age students are expected to be professionals who can interpret technological changes and manage their psychosocial effects on learners. This shift requires a rethinking of teacher education programs using interdisciplinary methods. In this context, the theories of symbolic interactionism and mindfulness provide valuable insights and tools for understanding and enhancing teacher-student interactions in a media-rich environment.

In the post-2020 educational landscape, teachers' roles have expanded far beyond simply transmitting knowledge to include symbolic interpretation, emotional regulation, and critical engagement with digital media environments. As digital technologies become deeply integrated into daily life, teacher education programs are now required to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that blend sociological, psychological, and technological perspectives. Symbolic interactionism, which examines how individuals create meaning through social symbols, offers a powerful perspective to understand the changing identities of both students and teachers in mediated environments (Wendt, 2020). Meanwhile, mindfulness—defined as being consciously aware and emotionally regulated—has become a vital pedagogical tool for fostering resilience and intentional teaching amid digital distractions and psychological manipulation (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2023). The symbolic and emotional complexity of today's classrooms calls for teacher skills that go beyond technical proficiency. Teachers must be prepared not only to interpret the symbolic world of new media but also to develop mindful awareness that supports reflective, ethical, and inclusive teaching practices (Redecker, 2020; Fawns, 2022). Incorporating symbolic interactionism and mindfulness into teacher education is therefore a crucial strategy to train educators who understand both the social construction of identity and the intrapersonal dynamics of emotional engagement.

In the new media age, especially with the widespread use of social media tools, individuals of the new century who encounter hundreds of symbols daily are likely to become lost amid numerous interactions without awareness. When we are with others, we often wonder what they think about us. Most people live with this curiosity. We interpret our actions and words after understanding others' opinions and decide how to respond (Blumer, 1969). If we understand who we are by observing others, today, due to social media and interaction, others form a vast and varied group. Therefore, to truly understand ourselves, we need to focus on awareness, which we refer to as mindfulness—an individual's awareness of how to observe and define their thoughts and inner experiences. The process of developing self-awareness begins in early childhood and continues throughout life. Over time, self-awareness is strengthened through exposure to and reactions to physical and emotional stimuli, social interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication, self-evaluations and thoughts, recollections of past events, and ongoing cognitive processes (Morin, 2011). People with higher levels of mindfulness tend to adopt effective coping strategies during stressful times and are at lower risk for maladaptive and self-destructive behaviors (Baer, 2009). Similarly, individuals with high mindfulness levels are expected to utilize effective strategies to resist manipulation often encountered in the new media age.

This paper aims to explore the interplay between symbolic interactionism and mindfulness within the context of new media and its implications for teacher education. Symbolic interactionism explains how individuals make sense of their social world through micro-level interactions and shared symbols.

Concept of New Media and the Changing Landscape of Teacher Competencies

In this century, communication has become much more intense through traditional and new media tools, impacting individuals and society. Technological developments have become so extensive that people now learn and evaluate events they could not experience firsthand, by reflecting on them through the media (Kaya, 1999: 24). All new media objects are composed of digital code, they are essentially numerical representations. That is, all new media objects can be described mathematically and can be manipulated via algorithms. (Sorapure, 2004: 1-5).

It is possible to define new media as all virtual environments that emerge from the development of computer, internet, and mobile technologies, where users interact independently of time or space (Bulunmaz, 2014: 25). One of the key benefits the internet provides is that users are no longer just content consumers or followers; they also become members of spaces where they can meet others and share information (Polat, 2009, p. 32). In other words, new media offers unlimited opportunities for sharing and interaction. The interactions created with new media tools lead users to produce new meanings, causing significant shifts in perceptions and interpretations. Media has a structure that, through its own tools,

sometimes corrupts culture, reveals events that influence individual personality traits or cause deterioration in societal structures, and at other times contributes to the development, survival, and enhancement of individuals' mental health by creating, spreading, and preserving culture (Scannell, 1992: 13).

New media plays a crucial role in shaping society because its influence over information and communication tools is too significant to ignore. The ongoing advancements in new media features impact the culture that sustains social life and lead to the emergence of a new media culture. Moreover, this new media culture is increasingly dominating social culture and beginning to shape social life (Fuchs, 2016).

New media has fundamentally transformed how individuals interact, learn, build communities, and shape their identities. Students are no longer passive recipients of content within classroom walls; instead, they are active participants in global digital networks through social media platforms, online games, forums, virtual worlds, and interactive learning tools (Fuchs, 2016). Consequently, the lines between formal and informal learning environments have become more blurred.

This shift requires a corresponding evolution in teacher skills. Modern educators must go beyond traditional teaching methods and adopt new media literacy—the critical ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce messages across various media formats (Kellner & Share, 2007). Teachers need more than technical skills to operate digital tools; they must also have the cognitive and cultural literacy to interpret the complex web of symbols, signs, and narratives in the digital spaces where students spend more and more time.

Practically, this means teacher training should focus on helping future teachers understand the symbolic worlds their students navigate online. Emojis, memes, GIFs, profile pictures, hashtags, and viral videos are not mere trivial expressions but rich semiotic texts conveying identity, belonging, resistance, humor, and values. For example, a meme shared among students might have subtle meanings related to gender, race, or authority, which can reinforce stereotypes or challenge them.

Additionally, these digital artifacts are shaped by algorithmic systems that often prioritize visibility based on engagement metrics rather than pedagogical or ethical considerations (Noble, 2018). Teachers must therefore develop not only an awareness of symbols but also a critical understanding of the political economy that influences the distribution of digital content.

A teacher competent in new media literacy will be better positioned to:

• Recognize how digital content influences student attitudes, behaviors, and worldviews.

• Foster critical thinking by guiding students to question sources, motives, and implications of online material.

• Promote digital citizenship and ethical participation in online communities.

• Design learning experiences that bridge students' digital cultures with formal academic knowledge.

Ultimately, the teacher is no longer just a content expert, but a cultural mediator who helps students navigate the symbolic and emotional complexities of the media-saturated world. This expanded role necessitates a profound pedagogical shift—one that places critical reflection, symbolic interpretation, and media ethics at the heart of teacher training programs.

The Concept of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction argues that we can understand society by examining small particles at the micro level. It emphasizes that understanding daily interactions among individuals can provide insight into the whole society. (Macionis, 2012) Symbolic Interactionism is an approach originating from the work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) in sociology during the 20th century. According to this approach, people's perceptions are shaped by their interactions within social networks. The term Symbolic Interactionism highlights how subjective meanings are formed in everyday life, as explored in Blumer's studies. In this context, meaning is a product that results from social interaction. According to Symbolic Interactionism, the meanings individuals assign to objects are formed through social interactions with others (Wallace & Wolf, 2012, p.292). It is a relatively new theory that aims to interpret social change and address problems arising from it, especially during the transition to an industrial society characterized by increasing industrialization and urbanization. As one of the interpretative approaches in social sciences, it offers a systematic perspective on social behavior (Benzies & Allen, 2000). Today, people overwhelmed by media messages and new media tools are losing their differences, becoming a uniform structure, and turning away from their unique characters that do not resemble others.

According to symbolic interactionists, "the meanings we attribute to things," that is, symbols, are the result of interactions between individuals. Society should be viewed as a product of these interactions.

Language, words, behaviors, objects, gestures, and facial expressions that facilitate communication between people are the most important symbols for symbolic interactionists (Bozkurt, 2009, p. 42).

According to Horton Cooley, an individual's self-concept cannot be separated from the social environment in which they are part. Cooley explained the self, which develops through interactions with others in society, with the concept of the "looking-glass self." Everything that occurs in the human mind results from social interactions. The American sociologist states: "I am not who I think I am, I am not who you think, I am who I think you think." Symbols acquire meaning depending on the environment they are in, serving as the foundation of social life, and this meaning is shaped through interactions among individuals. Society evolves as a product of these interactions. From this perspective, it is essential to understand and apply the concept of mindfulness in the digital age to generate a positive social impact through the multitude of symbols shared via social media tools.

The Concept of Mindfulness, Symbolic Interactionism, and Micro-Level Analysis of Classroom Interactions

"Sati," a Buddhist concept, was first translated from the Pali word as "mindfulness" in 1881 by Thomas William Rhys Davids, a British linguist. This translation was based on the understanding of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta, which emphasizes watching how things "are" and how they "pass away" (Gethin, 2011). Nyanaponika Thera interpreted the concept from a secular perspective, considering conscious awareness from a traditional and religious framework to a universal sense applicable in daily life. He focused more on ideas such as mental clarity, balance, and self-control (Thera, 2008). In secular societies, mindfulness is interpreted, developed, and applied in various contexts, including self-discovery, self-experience, and self-transformation (Schmidt, 2011). As described by Kabat (2005), mindfulness is an active process of focusing on the present moment by giving unconditional, accepting, and compassionate attention to what is happening externally, such as images, sounds, smells, as well as the physical and mental states of the body, thoughts, and feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Mindfulness teaches individuals to make peace with negative emotions instead of avoiding them. It helps people realize that they often avoid certain emotions during stressful times, while also enabling them to experience intense emotions directly rather than suppressing or hiding them as unexpressed feelings (Stella, 2010). Overall, mindfulness can be described as a person's awareness of their own thoughts, deliberate planning before taking actions, and making decisions, as well as organizing thoughts and evaluating the appropriateness of outcomes after taking action. In this sense, mindfulness involves reviewing cognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, and thinking (Brown & Ryan, 2003). It is a process focused on the present moment, non-conceptual and non-judgmental, independent of words, liberating and exploratory, with purpose and requiring observation. It involves directing attention to what is happening now with an open and loving attitude (Snel, 2016).

Awareness, which we call "mindfulness" in this context, refers to an individual's knowledge of how to observe and define their thoughts and inner experiences. When a person chooses to recognize and define their cognitive processes better, they must first observe and recognize everything about themselves (Howell et al., 2010). The individual's awareness, and therefore the regulation of their actions and thoughts, determines how they will develop a connection with the outside world. As Evans et al. (2009) note, mindfulness can be a particularly self-generated belief system or a learned value system that promotes self-regulation. Many studies show that the synchronicity and independence of time and space, which are among the features of new media, turn users into addicts who cannot live without the internet or social media after a while. Individuals who fulfill their socialization and communication needs in these environments require mindful approaches for proper use. Mindfulness is the skill of getting out of automatic pilot. Therefore, as this skill develops, rote behaviors decrease, and we begin to enjoy our actions by becoming aware of them, being selective, perceiving what we see, and understanding what we hear. Mindfulness can serve as a remedy against the long-term loss of time spent on media tools and the manipulation we are exposed to by establishing many interactions.

People who emerge from autopilot through mindfulness practices become individuals who are aware of their actions. In other words, they stop being individuals who perform their actions by thinking about what others think about them, as described in the symbolic interaction approach, and instead gain the habit of consciously choosing their own actions in the moment and by being aware of what is going on.

Symbolic interactionism posits that social meanings are constructed through micro-level interpersonal interactions (Blumer, 1969). In teaching, this theory helps us understand how student-teacher communication is shaped by symbolic exchanges, including language, gestures, tone, spatial

arrangements, and evaluation practices. These symbols are not neutral; they are interpreted differently by students based on their prior experiences and cultural contexts.

The concept of the "looking-glass self" introduced by Charles Horton Cooley helps explain how teachers form their professional identity in response to perceived student and peer feedback: "I am not who I think I am, I am not who you think I am, I am who I think you think I am" (Cooley, 1903). Hence, teacher education should cultivate an understanding of how identity is socially constructed through interaction, encouraging candidates to reflect critically on their role in shaping classroom dynamics. Mindfulness refers to the practice of being fully present and aware in the current moment, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Teaching, as an emotionally demanding profession, requires teachers to develop resilience, emotional regulation, and focused attention—competencies that mindfulness practices can significantly enhance (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Baer, 2009).

In teacher education, mindfulness should be viewed as a pedagogical tool rather than merely a personal wellness trend. Mindful teachers are more effective at managing classroom stress, resolving conflicts, and fostering inclusive learning environments. Additionally, mindfulness helps teachers tune into their students' emotional needs, which enhances relationships and improves the classroom climate. Dönmez (2018) found that individuals with higher levels of mindfulness exhibit lower rates of online gaming addiction and greater life satisfaction. This has important implications for educators: as students spend more time online, teachers trained in mindfulness can guide them toward healthier digital habits.

Symbolic interactionism, a micro-sociological theory mainly developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, suggests that human behavior and social structures arise from the meanings people assign to symbols during interaction (Blumer, 1969). In education, this theory explains how teacher-student relationships, classroom routines, body language, feedback, and language choices help create meaning and identity. Teachers and students constantly exchange symbols—through words, expressions, gestures, and even silence. For example, a teacher's smile, a student's question, or the seating arrangement can act as powerful symbols that influence classroom culture. These interactions shape how students perceive themselves (their academic identity) and others.

From the teacher's perspective, mindfulness helps in recognizing personal biases, automatic responses, and stress triggers—thus enabling more thoughtful and deliberate interactions with students. For students, mindfulness fosters metacognitive awareness, emotional stability, and resilience—essential traits for lifelong learning and academic success. Fundamentally, both symbolic interactionism and mindfulness are concerned with awareness—one social, the other intrapersonal. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how meaning is built through interaction with others, while mindfulness focuses on how meaning is experienced through self-awareness. When used together in educational settings, they create a powerful synergy.

• Teachers who understand symbolic interactionism can become more intentional in the symbols they use and the meanings students derive from them. When coupled with mindfulness, they gain the ability to pause, reflect, and respond rather than react—leading to more empathetic and effective teaching and learning.

• Students benefit by learning to interpret social cues more accurately (symbolic interactionism) while also managing their emotional responses and behaviors mindfully. This dual awareness enhances social-emotional learning (SEL) and academic self-regulation.

Teacher preparation programs that integrate both symbolic interactionism and mindfulness can develop educators who are socially perceptive, emotionally balanced, and pedagogically responsive. For example:

• Mindfulness can enhance a teacher's ability to reflect on how their actions are interpreted symbolically by students.

• Understanding symbolic interaction can help teachers anticipate how classroom dynamics might affect learning and identity formation.

• Combined, these approaches promote reflective teaching, inclusive environments, and deeper student engagement.

Practical Implications for Teacher Training Programs

Classroom Role-Plays and Symbolic Interpretation Activities

Teacher candidates can benefit from structured role-play scenarios that allow them to reflect on verbal and nonverbal cues, interpret student reactions, and examine how symbols such as language, tone, and gestures shape meaning in classroom settings. These exercises, grounded in symbolic interactionism,

help future educators develop their interpretive skills. Symbolic interactionist pedagogy emphasizes the micro-analysis of classroom behavior and the meanings students attach to teacher actions (Blumer, 1969; Wallace & Wolf, 2012).

Mindfulness Workshops and Reflective Practice Sessions

Including mindfulness-based training sessions in teacher education can enhance emotional self-regulation, attention control, and overall well-being–key skills essential for effective classroom management and teacher resilience. Mindfulness practices boost awareness and help reduce automatic, stress-driven reactions among teachers, leading to better instructional quality (Baer, 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Evans, Baer, & Segerstrom, 2009).

Digital Media Reflection Journals

Assigning teacher candidates to maintain media journals enables them to critically reflect on their media consumption habits and the symbolic worlds they engage with. This encourages media literacy and increased self-awareness. New media environments influence user identity and meaning-making through symbols; deliberate reflection on this process is vital for educators (Fuchs, 2016; Polat, 2009).

Media Literacy Modules Integrated into Pedagogical Courses

Courses that incorporate critical media literacy enable teacher candidates to interpret and respond effectively to manipulative or ideologically loaded messages in digital media. Such modules also prepare them to guide students through similar evaluations. Teachers should be trained to deconstruct symbolic content in media, helping students become critical consumers of information (Kaya, 1999; Scannell, 1992).

Sociocultural Sensitivity and Symbolic Meaning-Making

Teacher training should include sociological frameworks that help educators recognize how symbols gain different meanings across cultures, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds. This promotes inclusive and equity-based teaching practices. Symbolic meanings are socially constructed and vary depending on the cultural context; thus, teachers must be prepared for diverse classroom realities (Wallace & Wolf, 2012; Bozkurt, 2009).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the educational challenges that arose after 2020, especially those exacerbated by the rapid digital transformation, it has become increasingly important for teachers to develop both symbolic and emotional literacy. Recent research emphasizes that incorporating mindfulness into teacher training facilitates emotional regulation and enhances pedagogical presence, enabling teachers to respond thoughtfully to complex classroom situations (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Fawns, 2022). Additionally, constructing identity through social media interaction requires teachers to have critical semiotic awareness (Wendt, 2020). According to Redecker (2020), teachers' digital skills need to grow beyond just using tools to include reflective engagement with meaning in digital settings. As students experience more digital overload and screen-related stress, mindfulness-based strategies have been shown to boost resilience and focus academically (Twenge et al., 2023). In conclusion, combining symbolic interactionism and mindfulness in teacher education offers a double benefit: it enhances teachers' self-awareness. It prepares them to navigate the symbolic, emotional, and ethical aspects of contemporary teaching.

Integrating symbolic interactionism and mindfulness into teacher education enhances both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in modern classrooms. This integration not only demonstrates how future educators perceive their profession but also how they engage with students in a digitally connected society. These frameworks enable teachers to interpret the symbolic aspects of student interactions and media use with critical awareness. As teachers develop these reflective skills, they become more than just transmitters of knowledge–they become mindful, socially aware facilitators of learning and growth.

Symbolic interactionism provides a microsociological perspective for analyzing classroom behaviors and student-teacher interactions, highlighting how identities, roles, and meanings are socially constructed. Mindfulness, on the other hand, strengthens educators' capacity to manage their emotional responses, stay present, and respond intentionally to classroom situations. Together, these approaches foster a more reflective, responsive, and humane teaching style–especially in a media-rich world where students' identities are shaped not only through face-to-face contact but also through symbolic participation in digital

networks. Teachers trained in mindfulness can resist the pressures of performative teaching and instead connect with students authentically and with awareness. Likewise, teachers who understand symbolic interactionism can see how their words, gestures, and even silences impact students self-view and engagement in learning.

Furthermore, both theories align with the goals of social-emotional learning (SEL), critical pedagogy, and inclusive education. They encourage educators to become not just transmitters of knowledge but also cultural interpreters and emotional guides, capable of supporting students' development in cognitive, social, and emotional areas. In today's educational climate, marked by distraction, disconnection, and digital overload, fostering mindfulness and interpretive awareness may be among the most essential skills for future teachers. Therefore, teacher education programs should not view these frameworks as optional extras but as core elements in developing critically aware, ethically grounded, and socially responsive educators.

To teach with awareness is to teach not only content but also how to interpret the complex symbolic environments students encounter daily. Ultimately, teacher education should aim to develop not just intellectual skills but also symbolic understanding and mindful agency in educators. It is believed that having mindfulness skills will have a calming effect on the impacts caused by many effects of the new media era. For example, in Dönmez's (2018) study examining the relationships between online game addiction, conscious awareness, and life satisfaction with a sample aged 12-55, it was concluded that as the level of conscious awareness increases, online game addiction decreases and life satisfaction increases. Domingues-Montanari (2017) investigated the effects of media on children in her study. This study showed that media, especially violent media, can have negative effects. In general, high amounts of screen time have been linked to physical problems, including poor nutrition, obesity, and insufficient sleep.

The symbolic interaction approach argues that we shape our lives by observing others and emphasizes that people base their actions and decisions on the expectations of others and their experiences with them. The desire for approval from others can sometimes lead to positive outcomes and sometimes to negative behaviors. For example, in a community where reading is common, the expectation of reading fosters positive actions. In contrast, in a community where harmful substances are prevalent, it can lead to the adoption of negative symbols. From this perspective, the perception created by the numerous symbols in our minds, constantly present thanks to social media in the new media, transforms the shape and content of what is expected from us. Individuals with strong mindfulness skills assess what is truly important behind all this and objectively evaluate the influence they are exposed to, demonstrating the ability to accept positive information and reject the rest.

Symbolic interactionism offers a significant micro-sociological perspective in education by helping to understand classroom behaviors and student-teacher interactions. It uncovers how identities, roles, and meanings are socially constructed, enabling educators to comprehend the subtle communication and interactions that shape the learning environment. These symbolic interactions directly impact the quality of education and student motivation. Meanwhile, mindfulness supports teachers in managing their emotional responses, staying present in the moment, and responding thoughtfully to classroom dynamics. This helps teachers remain calm and focused during stressful or complex situations and respond more sensitively to students' needs. Together, these approaches are vital for fostering healthy communication and positive learning environments in education.

If teachers lack knowledge of symbolic interaction and mindfulness, several challenges may emerge in the classroom. Without understanding symbolic interaction, teachers might misinterpret students' behaviors and miss the deeper social meanings behind them. This can lead to miscommunication, labeling, or biased expectations, which can negatively affect students' sense of identity, belonging, and motivation. Students learn through symbols—words, gestures, images, and routines—all of which serve as symbolic tools that shape their understanding. When these symbols are consistently repeated and reinforced, they become embedded in students' memories, making learning more lasting. Teachers who understand the power of symbols in learning can use this knowledge to design more effective and meaningful instruction. By deliberately using consistent language, visual cues, and structured routines, educators can promote deeper understanding and long-term retention. Approaching students with awareness of how symbolic learning works allows teachers to create a more engaging and cognitively supportive classroom environment.

Similarly, without mindfulness, teachers are more likely to react automatically and emotionally in stressful situations rather than respond thoughtfully and calmly. This can lead to teacher burnout, poor classroom management, and strained relationships with students. A lack of emotional awareness and presence might also prevent teachers from recognizing students' emotional needs, offering empathetic

support, or creating a positive learning environment. Therefore, both symbolic interaction and mindfulness are vital for fostering effective communication, emotional stability, and supportive classroom dynamics.

The best way to understand the idea of mindfulness is to use the term mindlessness. Even everyday awareness shows that we are surprisingly mindless, without fully understanding what our usual state of mind is doing when we think about thinking itself. We spend most of our time lost in memories of the past and fantasies of the future, not in the present. We often operate on "autopilot," with mind and body not fully integrated. Therefore, the excessive screen time that affects us through symbolic interactionism causes a lot of manipulation without giving thoughtful consideration to things.

It may be unsettling to realize that we spend most of our lives mindlessly wasting time and that symbols from social media and the media can fill that void, but we shouldn't forget that the level of mindfulness can be developed just like any other skill through practice. People who intentionally choose their actions and regulate their emotions through mindfulness practices stop being passive individuals defined by the symbolic interaction approach, who plan their actions based on how others perceive them, and instead develop the habit of consciously choosing their actions by being aware of what is happening at that moment—aware of their actions and their likely outcomes.

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