

placed in situations where we must learn something new. If we think that it is inappropriate to ask for help, we will be reluctant to ask for the help that we require. Without us even being consciously aware of it, we fall into moods of resignation and confusion, which may lead us to give up. To successfully learn what we set out to learn, we must learn to be sensitive to the moods that we find ourselves in. These moods give us the first clue of the assessments and standards that we have that may impede our learning, and they also give us the first clue as to what actions we can take to make sure we continue to work towards achieving our learning objectives.

Our moods and our assessments are intimately linked. In particular, our moods can be decoded as involving automatic assessments of our situation as a whole, including our possibilities for intervening in the situation and changing it in some way. This link between moods and assessments gives moods their power to influence how we are predisposed to act and respond to a situation, but it is also what enables us to have influence over our own moods. If we can gain sensitivity to our moods and an ability to alter the assessments we are operating with, we can open the possibility of shifting our moods. Such a shift will then empower us to overcome the negative impact of moods that block us from learning or engaging with others. In the next section I say more about moods and how by coming to appreciate the connection of moods to assessments and standards, we can also cultivate the skills of shifting out of unproductive moods.

Cultivating a Predisposition to Learning: Moods

Learning to learn requires that we be in a mood that is conducive to learning. Often we are not. Working with people to help them develop new skills, we have seen over and over how many of us fall into negative moods that derail our quest for learning, or hold us back from embarking on our learning quest in the first place.

What do I mean by moods?¹⁶ Moods are “attunements” to the situation we find ourselves in at any given moment which predispose us to certain actions. Someone who is in a blue mood will not be disposed to go to a party, while someone who is in a bored mood does not find any possibilities attractive. Someone who is in an annoyed mood will be likely to lash out at someone for trivially whistling a tune, while someone in a joyous mood might whistle along. Moods are like the coloring of how

¹⁶ Moods are a vast domain whose detailed exploration is well beyond the scope of this work. What I focus on in this writing, and in the work that we do during the WEST course, is but a sliver of this topic. Much of my writing in this section is based on many conversations and collaborations I have had with Fernando Flores. In a forthcoming work, he calls many of the moods that I highlight here, along with the moods that tend to show up when we work with teams, “moods of pragmatic engagement.” He also identifies a broader range of moods, including, among others, the shared socio-political mood of a nation (e.g., the mood of distrust in current American politics), and the overarching mood of a whole era or epoch (e.g., the mood of uncertainty in the age of climate change). For a reader interested in diving deeper into the theme of moods, the philosopher Martin Heidegger’s writings on moods and how these constitute our “being-in-the-world” may be of interest. (*Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, 1962). For an interesting discussion on the difference between moods and emotions, see Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson, *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994). See also Paul Ekman, *Emotional Awareness: Overcoming the Obstacles to Psychological Balance and Compassion: A Conversation between the Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman, Ph.D.* (New York: Holt Paperback, 2008).

we encounter the world around us, what it says to us or how it appeals to us. Moods and emotions are different even though they normally come together. Emotions are directed at some particular person or some particular thing. You may be angry with your boss, and feel it in the burning of your face and the curling of your toes, because your boss did not give you the promotion she promised you. You may be sad, feeling a sinking emptiness in your stomach, because you experienced the sudden loss of a dear family member. You may be ashamed, feeling like you want to hide, because you lied and you believe that lying is wrong. Moods, although similar to emotions in that we can also sense them in our bodies, are more in the background. Most of the time, we are not even consciously aware of our moods, but they nevertheless show up in our behavior and demeanor, and the sense we have about what is possible or not possible.

In our work, we interpret moods as involving assessments that people have about their future. Sometimes we refer to them as automatic assessments, because, as mentioned above, we are usually not aware of many of the assessments that we operate with. Our history, including past experiences and culture, colors how we see the future, and predisposes us to act a certain way in the present. If we have experienced something not working in the past, we may be in a mood of resignation about that changing in the future and will be reluctant to try to take action in the present. *I have made many offers to help people on my team in the past, but no one responds to my e-mails. I guess everyone is too busy. I am not going to keep trying. Or, here they come again with a new change initiative. They will do a lot of stuff, but in the end nothing will change. It's always this way. I am not going to do anything to try to support what they are doing.* If we are in a mood of ambition, however, and committed to producing a result, then obstacles show up as hurdles to be overcome, not as evidence that we are never going to be successful. *I am committed to succeeding as a team, and my team member does not know what she is doing. I am going to offer to train her so that she can perform her role. Or, I am committed to developing a stronger relationship with our clients and I think that what we are doing will lead to that. I know that we've made mistakes in the past, but we have learned from these, and if we continue down this path, we will get there!*

We must accept our moods as facts – as human beings we are always in some mood, sometimes even multiple moods at a time – but we don't need to be hostages to them, particularly if we find that we have fallen into moods that close possibilities for us. When embarking on the process of learning something new, or even when considering embarking on the process of learning something new, we can fall into certain negative, unproductive moods that make learning much more difficult, if not impossible. We feel anxious, confused, resigned, or insecure, which makes us feel stressed and want to flee the situation. *I have no idea what to do. I'd rather quit than feel embarrassed when I fail. I'd rather give up than feel anxious all the time. It's too stressful. Who needs this?*

There is nothing wrong with us if we fall into negative moods. At some point or another, all of us do. Contrary to what many believe, we cannot control our moods, but if we are committed to our learning, we must learn to not allow negative, unproductive moods to get in the way of accomplishing our objectives. It is important to emphasize, however, that moods are not simply things that happen to us. They are automatic predispositions toward certain possibilities, and away from others, based on our past, and grounded in the standards of behavior we have acquired over the course of our lives. As we alluded to in the previous pages, the standards that we've acquired throughout our lives that give rise to our predispositions are not usually explicit. They operate and guide us in the background, unexamined, waiting and available to be discovered. Moods, on the other hand, are sensed.

Since moods are sensed, and since they are intimately connected with our standards for behavior and our automatic assessments of our situation, we have found that by exploring the moods we have fallen into, we can learn to shift them when necessary, and thereby open up new possibilities for action, including the possibility of declaring new standards for ourselves. This is relevant at a general level, but it is of particular importance when it comes to overcoming obstacles that may get in the way of our continued learning. The first step in developing the skill for shifting out of negative moods that block our learning is developing an ability to recognize negative or unproductive moods when they come over us.

MOODS THAT CAN BLOCK OUR LEARNING

Moods are windows to our assessments and to the standards that support them. If we become sensitive to our moods, we may be able to open the curtains and observe how we see things, and discover whether our automatic predispositions help us achieve our learning objectives or block us. The chart below reveals certain unproductive¹⁷ moods that routinely can get in the way of learning. This is not a comprehensive list of moods that may not be conducive to learning, but I highlight those that I have observed most frequently during our work. Of course, people can also be in moods that are conducive to learning. I turn to such moods after examining the moods that block learning.

17 For the sake of this writing, I call these moods "unproductive moods." This label does not mean that these moods are inherently bad, wrong, or to be avoided at all costs. We fall into the moods that we fall into. By learning to be sensitive to them, however, we can learn not to be trapped by them if we find that they are blocking us from taking the kinds of action that we may need to take to continue to learn. The moods listed here are the moods I have often observed block people's learning. It is important to note, however, that in some situations, some of these moods may not be necessarily detrimental to our learning.

For example, a mood of impatience may or may not get in the way of learning. In some situations, it may prompt us to take action, to practice, to take risks, and to not over-analyze, which may be exactly what we need to continue to learn, particularly as we become more competent. In other situations, however, it may prompt us to disengage too quickly and not take the actions that we need to take to continue to learn. We may prematurely conclude that we are not "cut out" to do something simply because we did not give ourselves the time to learn. Similarly, the mood of skepticism may help us to take action to continue to learn, or it may block us from taking action. There is a difference between what I consider a healthy skeptical mood, where people don't blindly trust what others promise them and choose to move prudently to ensure that they are embarking on a learning process with people who are qualified to teach (e.g., check references, interview past students, etc.) and a skeptical mood that closes possibilities, where they simply refuse to believe that another person or group has something to teach them despite the evidence (e.g., results, case studies, references, degrees, etc.). If we find ourselves in a mood of skepticism, it is important to acknowledge it, and pause to explore how it is influencing our behavior. If we find, for instance, that our standard is that we should move with prudence and do our homework to make sure that the teacher we are hiring is competent, then continued learning is possible. If we find that our standard is that no one could possibly teach us anything because everyone is incompetent and not trustworthy, despite the evidence, we may want to see what we can do to begin to build trust with people who may be able to mentor us, otherwise learning may be much harder, if not impossible, for us.

Notwithstanding the helpfulness of this list for identifying the moods that we may be in, it is important to keep in mind that a mood is the window that allows us to peek in; it is up to us to do the work to discover what is inside – our automatic assessments and the standards that they are based on – and to determine whether we need to rearrange things so that they don't block us from reaching our learning objectives.

Moods that get in the way of learning

Unproductive Mood	Sample assessments that could trigger this mood
Confusion	I don't understand what is going on here, and I don't like it. Being confused is a bad thing. There is nothing of value for me here. Being confused is not good for me. I need to quickly escape this situation!
Resignation	I am too old to learn this. I am never going to be able to do this, no matter how much I try, so what's the point? This involves numbers; I was never good at math, so I am not going to be able to do this. This game requires reading a map; I am bad with maps. There is no point for me to even try this game. This is not possible.
Frustration	I tried to do this, but failed. I expected to be able to do this already. I am not getting this as fast as I think I should. This isn't working like it should.
Arrogance	There is nothing new for me to learn here. I already know all there is to know about this. Or I already know all I want to know. This is a waste of my time.
Impatience	(Often coupled with arrogance.) There is no value in what we are doing here. We need to move on. This needs to go faster. We're wasting time.
Boredom	There is nothing of value for me here. There is nothing I can do to make it less boring to me.
Fear/Anxiety ¹⁸	I don't know how to do this. I may make mistakes. Mistakes are bad and I may not recover from them. I don't know what the right course of action is. I am going to quit, because making a mistake is worse than simply not trying.
Overwhelm	There is so much I don't know, or can't do. There is no one I can ask for help. I just have to work harder and harder, but I'll probably still fail because there isn't enough time.
Lack of Confidence (insecurity)	I am not competent to learn this. I have always been bad at math, so I am not going to be able to learn to do this since it requires math. I've never done this. I can't do this. I am not good enough to be here. Others are way smarter than I am. I am never going to get this!
Distrust or Skepticism	I don't trust that my colleague will take care of me if I tell him I don't know what to do. I think my colleague talks a good game, but I don't think she knows how to teach me what I need to know. I am not going to ask him for help as I don't think he is competent to give it to me. This process may be working for some people, but I am skeptical that it will really work for me.

18 By anxiety here I mean a mood of anxiety that is often reported by the people in our courses, an anxiety/fear connected to uncertainty, to not knowing what to do or to making mistakes. I am not referring to clinical anxiety or depression where a person may have lost a sense of meaning in his or her life and may not see any possibilities, impairing his or her capacity to function.

If we learn to become aware of our moods and are able to identify one or more of these moods that are not conducive to learning, we can then explore the assessments that we have about the situation, and discover the standards to which we adhere that support those assessments. This is critical to the success of the learning process. Participants in our courses regularly discover that they have fallen into moods that get in the way of achieving their learning objectives. Yet when they explore these moods, they often discover that their assessments are based on standards that are either: not relevant to the situation at hand – as with the military person not currently acting in a chain of command who must now negotiate with others to determine what actions he is going to take; or not useful for achieving their goal, as with the top college student who excelled in every topic by making sure she knew everything that would be covered on the exams, but who must now learn to make decisions while coping with uncertainty. As a result of discovering the standards to which they adhered and their inappropriateness to the current situation, participants begin to see actions that they can take to shift their unproductive moods and continue on their learning quest until they achieve their objectives.

As previously mentioned, in our courses we use an online multiplayer game as part of our learning environment. Many participants have never played this game before, or any like it. They are absolute beginners, but instead of rejoicing because they are about to learn something new, some of them quickly fall into the following moods:

Confusion: "I have no idea what to do and I don't like it!"

Impatience: "I should be getting this quicker!"

Anxiety: "I don't know what to do and if I make a mistake my team will think poorly of me."

Frustration: "I should know how to work my avatar already."

Insecurity/lack of confidence: "I have no clue what is going on here and I am never going to get it. I am bad at games. I am bad with technology. I am not going to be able to contribute to my team."

Although they can intellectually understand that they are beginners, they are not comfortable allowing themselves to be beginners and to undergo the learning process that goes along with it. By exploring their assessments, however, they begin to discover that they have unreasonable expectations for themselves: *I should be competent right away. I should contribute right away. By not knowing what to do, I am holding the team back.* As they discover the standards that they are holding themselves to, they realize that these standards are not helpful for learning to play the game with others. They begin to see that a beginner is not expected to contribute as an expert right way, but rather that the role of a beginner is to be a beginner: follow instructions, ask questions, and practice. If they don't follow instructions, ask questions, and practice, then they are not contributing to the team; they are not taking their role as a beginner seriously. When they realize this, their stress begins to diminish and they often begin to experience learning the game as an enjoyable process, instead of as a torturous undertaking where they have to hide their lack of skills so that others do not judge them as incompetent and undesirable members of the team.

My son, in the example about math, fell into the following moods:

Confusion: "I don't understand these math problems. I am totally confused and it is not good to not understand."

Frustration: "I should get this quickly. I am not."

Impatience: "I should understand these problems faster."

Lack of confidence: "Smart people get things fast and I am not getting this fast."

Resignation: "Since I am not getting these problems quickly, I am not good at math. I am not going to study anything that has to do with math when I get older."

In exploring these moods with him, we discovered that he had the assessment that he was not smart in math, and that he based that assessment on a standard he had already adopted for evaluating whether or not someone

is smart: smart people understand things fast; if you don't understand something quickly, then you are not smart in that subject matter. Consequently, he concluded that he should not aspire to study anything that requires math when he gets older because he was no longer good in that subject. Luckily, after a number of conversations, he came to realize that this way of assessing his intelligence would not serve him well in his educational and professional career, where he will encounter, if he wants to, bigger and more difficult challenges that don't have obvious answers that people can get right away. We talked about cancer, and how many people have been trying to find a cure that is not obvious, yet how important it is for people working on a cure to persevere and not give up on trying. We talked about scientists and astrophysicists quitting their field the moment they do not get an answer right away, and what a waste that would be. My son began to see that for these people, lack of knowledge means a new frontier to explore, not something to avoid or be embarrassed by. Instead of resignation, they are in moods that are much more conducive to exploration and continued learning, such as the moods of *wonder* or *ambition*. I highlight these moods and a few others in the next section.

MOODS THAT PREDISPOSE US TO CONTINUING TO LEARN

Fortunately, just like there are moods that may limit or block our learning, there are other, opposing moods, that can predispose us to embark and stay on our learning journey. Again, this is not meant to be a comprehensive list. These are moods that we have observed repeatedly in our work and that our students strive to cultivate as they work to shift from negative moods that get in the way of their learning objectives.

Moods that are Conducive to Learning

Mood	Sample assessments that could trigger this mood
Wonder	I don't know what is going on here, but the world is full of opportunities, and I like it! Even though I don't have a clue what is going on here, I trust that there is something for me to learn, and I am excited about it. <i>Unlike a mood of confusion, when in a mood of wonder (or perplexity, described below) ignorance shows up as something positive, a new frontier to explore, an inspiration for our learning, not something to be embarrassed by or to be avoided.</i>
Perplexity	I am totally confused, but I feel it is important to explore more and possibly get answers that may be important to me. I am going to stick with this until I persevere.
Serenity/ Acceptance	I accept that the past is the past and is not in my control. I accept that the future is uncertain, it will be full of surprises, and I cannot predict it. Both good and bad will come unexpectedly, and I am grateful to life. <i>Unlike resignation, when we are in a mood of serenity, we accept the past as the past, but we are not resigned about our future possibilities, and we are free to take action to embrace these or walk away from these.</i>
Patience	I accept that learning requires that I practice recurrently over a period of time. That is the way learning works.
Ambition	I see opportunities here. I may not be fully prepared and I am not certain of everything that may come my way, but I am convinced that my full commitment to this is valuable. I am committed to take action. <i>When we are in a mood of ambition, setbacks show up as challenges to navigate and master, not as evidence that what we set out to accomplish is not possible, as they might be interpreted by someone who is in moods of resignation, insecurity, or anxiety, for example.</i>
Resolution	I see opportunities here and I am going to take action right now.
Confidence	I have successful experience in this area, and I am competent to act in this situation. I have been able to learn new things before, and I am going to be able to do it again. I have people that I can ask for help, who will take care of me. <i>When in a mood of confidence, lack of competence shows up as something to master, not as a reason to give up.</i>
Trust	I am learning from people who have experience in the area I want to learn from. They have produced results. They have a good reputation. I can learn from them. They care about supporting my learning. They are not going to judge me negatively if I don't know something.

Learning to shift from unproductive to productive moods is a critical aspect of learning to learn. As we learn to become aware of our moods, and are able to observe ourselves in a negative mood that blocks us from achieving what we want to achieve, such as resignation, we can choose not to remain hostages to this mood, and take action to cultivate an alternative mood that is more conducive to achieving what we set out to achieve.

SHIFTING FROM UNPRODUCTIVE MOODS TO MOODS THAT ARE CONDUCTIVE TO LEARNING

As you might expect, the first step to developing the ability to shift your mood is to become aware of your mood(s). This is a skill that takes practice, but with practice it can be learned, and the more you practice, the easier it becomes. When we first introduce the distinctions of moods to participants in our courses, some are a bit perplexed and the conversation may seem a bit awkward to them, but as the weeks go by, they become much more aware of their own moods, and the moods of their colleagues.

Meditative practices and mindfulness can be very useful in helping us to develop the ability to be present to the moods we find ourselves in, but when engaged in the process of learning something new, it is essential that we not stop at simply observing the moods and emotions that we find ourselves in, but that we do so for the purpose of seeing what action we may need to take to make it possible for us to continue to learn and eventually achieve our objectives. This is not necessarily inconsistent with a practice of mindfulness. As B. Allan Wallace argues, mindfulness also includes "*retrospective* memory of things in the past, *prospectively* remembering to do something in the future, and present centered recollection in the sense of maintaining unwavering attention to a present reality."¹⁹ Nevertheless, I think it is important to emphasize the importance of combining learning to be aware of our moods with a wider practice of reflection aimed at helping us to successfully navigate the learning process.

¹⁹ Ekman, *Emotional Awareness: Overcoming the Obstacles to Psychological Balance and Compassion*, 56 – 57.

In our work, although we have not included meditative practices, we do focus on cultivating an awareness of our moods in a given situation for the sake of discovering what mental habits, or predispositions, we may need to abandon, modify or cultivate, and for coming to a resolution on action we may want to take to accomplish what we want to accomplish in the future, including learning a new skill. We have found that asking people to reflect on their moods, either when they are immersed in an activity or immediately afterwards, begins to focus them on observing how they observe what is going on around them. Among other things, they become aware of the following: their bodily sensations, such as increased heart rate, stomach tightness, or increased blood flow to their hands; their assessments of the situation and the underlying standards upon which they base them; what they think should or should not be happening; and what they see as possible or not possible. With our guidance at first, they ask themselves questions that help them to identify and explore their mood and their past experiences that may have molded it, they are then encouraged to evaluate whether their automatic interpretations are appropriate for the situation at hand or whether they block their learning and what they would like to achieve. If the latter, then participants can explore what action they can begin to take to modify these and to cultivate alternative moods that are more conducive to their continued learning.

If we become aware that we have fallen into an unproductive mood, sometimes we can cultivate more productive moods simply by doing exercise or listening to music. We can go for a run to clear our head. Or, we can watch a beautiful movie and get inspired by new possibilities. A college professor once told me that she adopted the practice of auditing graduate seminars whenever she began to feel that it was not possible to do anything new given the bureaucratic demands of her institution. She said, "It's contagious to be around people who are excited and ambitious about what they are doing!" But if these things are not enough, and usually they are not if we have a deeply embedded predisposition regarding what we can or cannot do, we can learn to shift our mood(s).

If you become aware that you have fallen into an unproductive mood, the following process of reflection and action can enable you to take action to shift this mood and not allow it to block your learning:

1. *Reflect on your learning objective.* Reflect on the future that you are committed to bringing about. In other words, why do you care to develop this skill in the first place? For the sake of what is this skill important to me? If you don't abandon your learning process, what would you be able to do that you can't do now?

For example, if I want to develop my delegation skills, why would this be of benefit to me? Perhaps I want to be able to take on more responsibility at work so that I can be promoted. Or perhaps I am working 24/7 and would like to be able to do other things. If this is important to me, then does it make sense to keep the status quo and give up on learning to delegate effectively? Or, if I have a top-down style of leadership, why is it important for me to learn to work in a more inclusive style of leadership? Do I need my team to be stronger and more independent of me so that I don't have to be involved in every detail and perhaps can begin to focus on other things that I care about? Or do we need to produce bigger results than we are producing, or that I can produce by myself even if I work non-stop?

Articulating why developing this skill is important and of benefit to you and/or others can enable the emergence of a mood of ambition that will motivate you to continue learning, despite the challenges that you face. Unproductive moods are part of the process, obstacles that you will likely encounter along the way, but not allowing yourself to be trapped by them is crucial to reaching the learning objectives that are important for you.

2. *Identify and explore the unproductive mood.* Is the mood similar to one of the ones identified earlier in this book? Reflect on past experiences that may trigger the mood that is not conducive to you achieving your learning objectives. What are the assessments that you have about yourself in this learning situation? What are the standards giving

rise to those assessments? Are these relevant to the situation that you find yourself in? Do they help you reach your objectives or do they hinder you?

For example, if you discover that you are in moods of resignation and impatience about learning to build a strong team in order to focus on things that you are not able to focus on today, you may find that you have the following types of assessments:

- *My team is incompetent.*
- *My team can never learn to become competent.*
- *No matter what I ask of them, my team is always going to do a poor job and I am going to have to do the work myself.*
- *There is no point to delegate anything to members of my team because whatever I delegate will simply come back to me, and I will have to do it.*
- *It's best if I do things by myself instead of wasting time making requests of my team.*

Are these assessments well grounded?²⁰ What are the standards that you are using for assessing the team's competence? Do you expect everyone to be ready to fully contribute on day one? Is there a learning curve or should you expect people that report to you to be just as competent as you? Should they know their roles and your expectations without you talking with them about it? Are they new to the company? To the industry? To your team? Are there some things that they can be trusted to do? And are there some things that are important for them to learn so that they can perform more effectively in the future? Is there really nothing that can be done to increase your team's competence? As you explore these questions, you may find that your assessments are not helpful to reaching your objective, and that there are, in fact, actions that you can take now to begin to build a strong team.

²⁰ For more on assessments, including what it takes to ground them effectively, see section 5 of this book.

3. *Identify moods that would be more conducive to reaching your learning objectives.* What are the assessments that are connected to these moods?

For example, if you are in a mood of resignation, a mood of ambition and resolution may make it possible for you to continue to work towards reaching your objectives. If you are in a mood of insecurity, developing confidence could be important. If you are in a mood of distrust, what could you do to cultivate trust?

4. *Speculate what action you could take to shift the unproductive moods to moods that will be more conducive to your learning objectives.*

In the example in number 2 above, if you identified that you have fallen into moods of resignation and impatience, what can you do to begin to cultivate a mood of ambition and resolution instead? *I see opportunities here. My full commitment to this is valuable. I am committed to take action.* These are the kinds of assessments behind moods of ambition and resolution. What are the opportunities here for you? If your team becomes more competent, what will they be able to do that they can't do now? What would you be able to do if you were able to delegate more responsibility to them? What can you do to begin to shift out of a mood of impatience? *I accept that learning is a process and it requires time and perseverance. I can take action to create the future I want to create.* These are assessments that could help you cultivate a mood of serenity and patience about the process, moods that will help you stick to your learning process rather than abandon it at the first hurdle. What can you trust your team to do? What is missing? What can you do to help them develop further so that they can incrementally take on more responsibility? By reflecting on these moods, and exploring possible actions to take that will enable you to successfully grow your team, you will likely become more resolved to not give up on your learning objective, and to take action to help you achieve it instead. As a result, you can resolve to take different types of action, such as: request someone to help you train your team; declare the practice of meeting with your team members on a regular basis so that you

can orient them more to your business and to the challenges the company or your team has to meet; and/or continue to practice delegation, but commit to giving people feedback right away so that they can take corrective action and/or learn to do it better next time.

5. *Take action.* Learning a new skill requires that you take action. You are very unlikely to learn to do something new without actually trying to do it and engaging in continued practice over a prolonged period of time. Since the early 1990s, advances in neuroscience have demonstrated the plasticity of the brain, the notion that the brain is "neither immutable nor static, but continuously remodeled by the lives we live."²¹ In other words, the human brain is not fixed after childhood; it is malleable, flexible and it can continuously learn to adapt to new situations throughout our lives. By engaging in a practice of reflection and action, you are not only evaluating how you are doing and making adjustments to your behavior accordingly, you are also making new connections in your brain and, to borrow the word of Dr. Richard Davidson, "remodeling" it.²² And, like any remodel, it requires action and some time. Further, learning a new skill often requires unlearning deeply embedded interpretations that show up as automatic emotional dispositions and habits that may make you want to quit. Giving yourself the gift of patience and the gift of time is essential.

By committing ourselves to a learning objective, we embark on a roller coaster ride of moods, some of which are conducive to reaching our learning objectives and some of which may derail us if we don't pay attention. This is an inevitable part of the learning process, but fortunately, it is something that we can learn to successfully manage by taking steps such as the ones I have

²¹ Richard J. Davidson and Sharon Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel and Live – and How You Can Change Them*, (New York: Plume Publishers, 2012), 172. For another fascinating book on brain plasticity, see Norman Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (Penguin Books, 2007).

²² Davidson and Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, 172.

outlined here whenever we find ourselves in unproductive moods that may block us from advancing towards our learning objectives.²³

²³ To this end, I believe that efforts to bring to the classroom new practices inspired by Professor Carol Dweck's book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, such as Mary Cay Ricci's *Mindsets in the Classroom: Building a Culture of Success and Student Achievement in Schools* (Prufrock Press, 2013), are helpful and an important start in educating children about the fundamental role moods play in the learning process. While Professor Dweck focuses on "mindset," I prefer to focus on "moods," although there is clearly an overlap. Nevertheless, I think it is important to differentiate between the two as I am confident that we can go further in helping children (and adults) develop the ability to successfully navigate the shifting moods they experience and accomplish what they want to accomplish in the classroom and beyond for the rest of their lives.

By reminding us about the plasticity of the brain and the connections that get made when struggle and eventual learning take place, Professor Dweck argues that we can cultivate a *growth mindset*, which will in turn lead us to become more perseverant, resilient, less fearful of making mistakes, and more capable of committing to the effort required to achieve what we want to achieve. While I agree that taking action to cultivate moods that are conducive to learning, like self-confidence and perseverance, is very important to accomplishing our learning objectives, it is also important to acknowledge that *all of us* – even those who are committed to being open to learning and to cultivating a *growth mindset* – will fall into negative unproductive moods from time to time, and if we don't pause to explore them and resolve to shift them, these can end up limiting our learning.

Moods are not fixed things that happen in an individual's mind. We fall into them as a result of the way we engage with and interpret the world around us. Hence, aspiring to a growth mindset can be helpful, but the end objective is not whether you judge yourself to have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset, but whether you can learn to cultivate moods that will enable you to be more open to learning and to accomplish what you want to accomplish, which, I am sure, is Professor Dweck's objective too. As I state earlier in this book, human beings are always in a mood, multiple ones at once, which color what we see as possible or not. The mood we may find ourselves in is triggered by predispositions that we have that are based on our past life experiences and the values or standards that we have come to adopt, consciously or unconsciously. No matter what, we will find ourselves experiencing a roller coaster of moods on a regular basis, and learning to identify, explore, and shift these when they block our learning is an important part of the learning process, and it is something that we can, with practice, certainly learn to do.

Navigating Each Stage of the Learning Process

If we succeed in overcoming the obstacles that deter us from allowing ourselves to learn something new, then we can be on our way. Simply embarking on the process of learning, however, does not guarantee success. There will be breakthroughs and breakdowns along the way, and although these are important for our learning, we need to be aware that often accompanying the inevitable breakdowns there will be negative moods that may preclude our learning, unless we learn to identify and navigate them. In this section, I discuss the various stages of the typical learning process, and the common moods that tend to arise at each stage. By familiarizing ourselves with these, we will be better equipped to be on the lookout for negative moods and to take action when we find that we have fallen into moods that are not conducive to our learning.

DREYFUS' SKILL ACQUISITION MODEL

In a very useful paper for reflecting on what happens when we embark on a learning process, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus present a model for the acquisition of skills.²⁴ They propose six stages of learning: beginner, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, expert, and master. They argue that depending on the stage of learning that we find ourselves in, we can expect to

²⁴ Stuart E. Dreyfus and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Direct Skill Acquisition*. (U of California, Berkeley Operations Research Center, 1980).