Transformative Learning and Well-Being for Emerging Adults in Higher Education

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Abstract
The concept of well-being has emerged over the past several years in a significant way in higher education across North America, posing the question of what well-being means in relation to transformative education. The meaning and implications of relating well-being and transformative learning for emerging adults, college and university students aged 18–25, are articulated. Critical thinking, typically cited as the ideal mental activity aimed for in higher education, is explored in relation to mindfulness as a complementary form of mental activity and in both their connections to contemplative education. This unites these sometimes disparate activities many educators see as essential functions for student success, suggests a more holistic conception of student well-being, and promotes transformative education through a process of self-clarification for students in the midst of emerging adulthood.

Keywords
well-being, critical thinking, mindfulness, emerging adulthood

After its emergence in the positive psychology literature, the concept of well-being has taken on new life in higher education across North America (Finley, 2016). In
recent years, there has been a surge of professional discussion and reflection about the importance of well-being for students, staff, and faculty for the betterment of our institutions (Watts, 2017). It is perceived by some as a potentially unifying force, which all members of the higher education community can rally around, as a kind of central focus, with associated activities that might lead to institutional success (flourishing). Well-being or human flourishing is typically defined as a sense that one’s life, generally speaking, is meaningful, satisfying, and enjoyable.

It is important to specify what this means in relation to the university. Most educators would agree that the goals of any institution of higher education are to educate students to think and live well. Yet educators tend to go at these broad tasks from separate perspectives, depending on their role. For most faculty, the holy grail of well-being is critical thinking (CT) and its application to particular academic disciplines and skills that best prepare students for (the mainly vocational) aspects of adult life. Halpern (2014) put it even more boldly when she described “the critical importance of critical thinking as the primary objective of education” (p. 6). Yet there is an extant literature on integrating contemplative education in the classroom (Riley & Elmendorf, 2016), which suggests that CT alone, at least for some educators, is insufficient as an outcome of higher education. For administrators, particularly as the cost of education has climbed, and pressure has mounted to produce measurable outcomes, well-being is conceived in economic terms: student success and efficient progress to graduation, and well-paying jobs for graduates. For student affairs staff, well-being typically means students’ abilities to make healthy choices regarding physical and emotional (mental) health, financial literacy, and engaging in meaningful extracurricular activities, and fulfilling interpersonal relationships. These lines of demarcation lead to the different practices faculty, staff, and administrators engage in. While this is something of an oversimplification, it remains true that university educators struggle with an absence of a unifying philosophy or concept that could bind these areas of practice together. At some institutions, there are efforts to bring these visions of student well-being together; at others, they remain separate and rather unequal. It does not seem that as yet, we have found a satisfactory way to bring these varied, yet related visions of student well-being together, wherein transformative education can occur holistically.

This article aims to identify a more thoroughgoing way to bring these aspects of university functioning closer together in a conception of student well-being through transformative education as a process of self-clarification and development that applies to emerging adults. It proposes a way of thinking about well-being that is functional for the entire university. It also tries to demonstrate that well-being is a concept that at its roots, through the complementary skills and processes of critical and mindful thinking, embedded within a contemplative approach to education, offers the possibility of connecting intellectual development (disciplinary and general knowledge, as well as reasoning), with physical and emotional development, the health and wellness, and vocational aspirations of the individual, so that students may achieve greater self-clarification through transformative education. Practiced
together, these functions promote transformation as self-clarification not just in its cognitive respects but in a thoroughgoing, full-bodied manner contributing to holistic self-knowledge. Further, it can do so in a way that speaks in the native tongues of faculty, staff, and administrators and allows each to adhere to their core principles and activities. Building on previous work in the “contemplative education” tradition, it proposes a way of thinking about student well-being that supports both intellectual and emotional development both in and outside of the classroom. Through critical review and synthesis of several key strands of literature from within the tradition of transformative education, this article seeks to contribute to a more integrative and holistic approach to higher education. To accomplish this, the article first defines emerging adulthood and CT. Next, it explores mindfulness, both in itself and in relation to CT. Following that, there is an exploration of how contemplative education relates to both CT and mindfulness. Finally, these concepts are brought together in a conception of transformative learning and education for emerging adulthood which supports students’ well-being.

**The Educational Needs of Emerging Adulthood**

Many of the key ideas and premises of transformative learning theory apply to emerging adulthood. This is why we have seen extensive application of this theory to undergraduate and graduate higher education, despite Mezirow’s and others’ typical references to adult education. The application of transformative learning and education theory to undergraduate and graduate education has occurred mostly implicitly, without any explicit theoretical distinction, justification, or laying of groundwork for this application. In my experience, most undergraduate and graduate students do not enter higher education in response to a specific life crisis, wish, or need for a dramatic change in lifestyle, resulting in a self-conscious desire for a reevaluation of their basic values and ideas, such as is typically referred to in the adult education literature (Mezirow, 2000). More typically, they do so because it is stage-appropriate, an expected or logical next step in their experience intended to assist them with their development (whatever that might mean to them), and they bring a set of values to higher education that they have been living out most of their lives. These values may or may not be in question, and yet faculty, staff, and at times, other students may pose challenges to reconsider these values and ideas in light of critical reason, and other competing perspectives and beliefs. Hence, it is incumbent upon us to better understand how transformative education applies more specifically to the stage of development applicable to most undergraduate and graduate students in higher education, when they differ in this way. This article, then, also supports and provides theoretical justification for applying transformative learning theory to emerging adulthood.

The theory of emerging adulthood is attributable to Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000, 2004). Arnett’s thesis is that in most current industrialized and postindustrialized societies with information-based economies, where higher education is critical to
achieving well-being, this has resulted in an extended period of identity formation, emerging adulthood. This developmental period occurs between adolescence and young adulthood since schooling is extended from the late teens into the early and even into the mid- or late 20s (most typically ages 18–25) and applies to the majority of undergraduate and graduate students. Arnett also proposed that age 18 be considered the end of adolescence since that is when most students finish high school, tend to leave their parents’ home, and attain legal, adult status in many respects (Arnett, 2000). This period of higher education frequently allows for and involves an extended “psychosocial moratorium” (Erikson, 1968) on major life decisions in the realms of love and work (e.g., choice of a life partner, whether to marry and/or become a parent, career direction).

Arnett made an even bolder claim about development—that it is in this intense period of instability, exploration, and change that the majority of identity formation actually occurs, rather than during adolescence, as has previously been assumed. In fact, he pointed out, it is the increased freedom of this period (since many of these students are living away from home independent of the rules and authority of parents) that allows for this intensified exploration. Even if emerging adults are still living at home, these rules are typically renegotiated and subject to greater flexibility and extension. Ultimately, he conceived of emerging adulthood as a transitional time in life that leads to adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

If adulthood is marked by accepting responsibility for one’s self and making independent decisions (Mezirow’s self-directedness) and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2004), then it is important to note that during this period of time (emerging adulthood), these qualities are in development and usually, in this age cohort, not yet achieved. It is for this reason, he said, that “young adulthood” is not an accurate description for this developmental stage. He said further that typically, students in this period of time do not feel like or consider themselves to be adults since they have not, by and large, made the commitments that characterize adulthood. Rather, decisions are tentative, then refined, and roles are rehearsed (e.g., in internships) and preparations made for taking on these roles in a more permanent and substantial way at some point in the near future, as they make their way into adulthood (Arnett, 2000). It is the instability and transitional nature of this period of time, its “as if” quality, particularly with adulthood on the horizon, that contributes to its unique stressors (American College Health Association, 2018), sometimes below the surface, sometimes explicitly known.

In accord with the meaning of transformative education, Arnett (2000) cited William Perry’s theory of intellectual development during the college years and described how changes in worldviews are central to cognitive development during emerging adulthood. More specifically, worldviews (perspectives) that college students acquired during childhood and adolescence are challenged by exposure to different viewpoints and may result in questioning of these worldviews and their accompanying assumptions. As such, the question of how CT relates to transformative education is discussed below, followed by a consideration of how CT relates to
mindfulness and contemplative education, and then, how all these, taken together, may contribute to student well-being.

**Critical Thinking (CT)**

To most faculty, the hallmark and primary goal of higher education is students’ achievement of CT. Many institutions laud themselves for teaching CT skills that will make a key difference in students’ lives and professional success. What is CT, how does it accomplish this task, and where does it fit into the larger schema of the achievement of well-being in higher education suggested above?

Halpern (2014) defined CT as “...the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. Critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed” (p. 52). It is also clear and precise as well as “effortful and consciously controlled” (p. 10). More simply, it may be conceived as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1987, p. 10). Yet Bensley (2011) argued that the definition of critical thinking (CT) has remained poorly defined and is a “loose conglomeration of concepts without a clear claim to scientific legitimacy” (p. 2). He pointed to the etymological and conceptual roots of CT in early Greek culture, before there were separate subject matter disciplines, suggesting a more holistic application of CT than is imagined today. The origins of the word critical are in words that meant both, “to judge” or “to decide,” and means (or criteria) of judging. In CT, he went on, we talk about students using appropriate methods and criteria to make “reasoned judgements” or to take “a rational approach” (p. 5). But toward what end is this type of thinking most essential? Is it simply a tool for disciplinary knowledge or is it more appropriately taught so students may make reasoned, meaningful, and fulfilling choices in life?

Another important dimension of CT frequently identified and discussed in the literature is self-regulation, which implies “using feedback, monitoring comprehension, assessing progress toward a goal, and making judgments about how well something is learned” (Halpern, 2014, citing Bednall & Kehoe, 2011). It is also, as Bensley (2011) said (citing Halpern, 1998), “a deliberate and purposeful cognitive activity that involves regulation of one’s own thinking and behavior to meet certain standards” (p. 10). He identified as a goal of contemporary CT that it should educate students to be autonomous, self-regulated learners and thinkers. Again, this may be imagined in a narrow way, in so far as it applies to within-discipline subject matter, or more broadly with regard to students’ major life decisions.

Faculty teach and encourage students to use good reasoning skills in thinking about subject matter, although there is some disagreement or variability as to what that set of skills should consist of. Bensley (2011) noted that “Psychological conceptions of CT often assume it is effortful thinking” and that “reasoning likely involves conscious attention” (p. 7). This implies self-conscious or deliberate self-monitoring and self-correcting when improper thinking is used to evaluate or assess a situation or information-related matter, what is sometimes referred to as
metacognitive reasoning (Mezirow, 2003), with the implication that one can become reflectively aware of the type of thinking they are employing, and then, make judgments through this self-observation as to the progress one is making toward a particular cognitive goal. From this process, one can decide whether to modify the type of thinking or cognitive strategy being employed. This all suggests a great degree of cognitive control or “self-regulation” of thinking.

Mezirow (2003) suggested further that the metacognitive reasoning process does not occur in isolation. Rather, in accord with Habermas’s ideas about communicative learning, Mezirow argued that critical judgment is developed in higher education as a process of interpersonal encounters with the alternative viewpoints and perspectives of faculty, staff, and other students. These encounters can challenge and call into question an individual’s previously held ideas, values, and judgments (and a deeper understanding of their historical sources and meanings), and through this process, result in transformative learning. The resulting change has implications for the self as well as future relations with others (and on a broader scale for social justice and democracy). It is also intended to result in fostering “the learner’s skills, habits of mind, disposition, and will to become a more active and rational learner” and more “disposed to transformative learning” (p. 62).

But such cognitive self-regulation is not the whole story of the mind. Halpern herself (2014) acknowledged the “limits or boundaries on how rational people can be” (p. 52). “Because we can never have complete information or know the outcomes of our decisions with certainty” and also because we are both “thinking and feeling beings” “emotions interact with how we think and can lead us to make decisions that are not purely rational” (p. 52). Palmer and Zajonc (2010) made a similar point about the connection between cognition and affect, despite academia’s general avoidance of the latter. I address below how we might expand the important fundamental principles of CT and integrate them with these other essential dimensions of human being, through mindfulness and contemplative education, in the service of student well-being.

Other theories of learning extend the learning process beyond even cognitive transformation and affective experience to include the broader notions of embodiment, embodied learning (Stolz, 2015), or even embodied cognition (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). This position, which may be viewed as rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, argues that the mind/body split, the distinction between thought and feeling, is itself artificial, or secondary. Rather, it posits human being as more holistic to begin with, as always, already situated in the world as lived experience. In this account, there is always a pre-reflective aspect of experience from which thought and feeling derive (or emanate simultaneously). There are obvious biological or physiological aspects of this, but beyond that, embodiment suggests that thoughts and feelings arise thoroughly in relation to the body’s spatial, temporal, and historical positionality in the world. Hence, feelings and/or thoughts that arise in situations, including learning situations, are always already embedded in the body’s positionality in the environment. This positionality implies all the
cognitive and affective aspects of human experience resulting from one’s personal history of relations with other people, and interpretations of and meanings ascribed to socio-cultural and economic conditions. In this conception, “the body is extensively integrated with learning processes” (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019, p. 33).

Still other authors have identified the spiritual dimension of education as critically important in transformative education. While most distinguish the spiritual from the religious, defining what is precisely meant by spiritual, particularly in the context of educational experience, knowledge and understanding (Carr, 1996) is challenging. Love (2001), in his review of the work of Daloz Parks (2000) and Fowler (1981) on faith development, defined spirituality in terms of its relation to the search for meaning, transcendence, and wholeness. That is to say, spirituality is a way of attempting to bring order, coherence, and purpose to life, particularly at the outer edges or “most comprehensive dimensions” (p. 8) of experience, including the self, other, world, and God, “the larger mystery in which our uncertainties are embedded” (Parks Daloz & Daloz Parks, 2003, p. 21). Love (2001) pointed out how under optimal educational conditions, a student’s altering meaning-framework is both challenged and supported in its development.

Chin (2006) defined spirituality more simply and powerfully as “a personal belief and experience of a higher power or higher purpose” (p. 28). Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) in their review of Fowler’s theory of faith development extended the spiritual to also include “image, symbol, and unconscious processes” (p. 371) in knowledge construction. In addition to the aspects of spirituality already cited, they added healing, cultural identity, and authenticity (particularly in relation to vocation). For these authors, “spirituality is about moving toward this greater sense of one’s deepest spirit, or more authentic identity” (p. 374), although this can never be known completely or with absolute certainty. They contend that if learning is to be truly transformative, it must “permeate one’s whole self, which has a spiritual component, rather than being confined to the rational realm of critically reflecting on assumptions” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 37). They go on to say that “Transformative learning is best facilitated through engaging multiple dimensions of being, including the rational, affective, spiritual, imaginative, somatic, and socio-cultural domains through relevant content and experiences” (p. 38). Shahjahan (2004) argued that spirituality should be a central focus in education. This would require a blending of “emotion, our spirits, and embodied knowledge with critical

The embodied, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of transformative education recognized and developed since Mezirow’s original theory was published demonstrate how transformative education theory has become less exclusively cognitive and more comprehensive. These dimensions cannot be broken apart; they are all implicated and connected in the field of human experience. It is for this reason that CT by itself is an insufficient tool for learning and student well-being and, I will argue, requires the types of experiences that mindfulness practice and contemplative education offer.
Mindfulness and Contemplative Education

Simultaneous to the emergence of CT as a primary goal of higher education through the 20th century, exemplified in published works by Dewey (1910), Bloom (1956), Ennis (1987), and Halpern (1998, 2014), for example, the mindfulness, contemplative, and transformative education literature described below reflected other important values that were developing, beginning with Mezirow’s work in the latter decades of the 20th century into the 21st century. Next, I identify key aspects of the mindfulness and contemplative education traditions important to a broad conception of well-being. This will be followed by a similar consideration of the transformative education tradition, specifically as it relates to well-being in emerging adulthood.

Mindfulness

Langer (1989, 2000) and Brown and Langer (1990) made a compelling case for the everyday occurrence of mindlessness, an automatic organization of perception, or perspective through which the world is typically viewed, and the behavior that follows from such a view. The claim was that in ordinary awareness, we mindlessly process experience in terms of our usual categories of perception, however infiltrated they are by our particular values, beliefs, misunderstandings, and so on. In this way, we construct and experience the world that is most familiar to us, and for the most part, taken for granted. In contrast, mindfulness occurs when a person steps out of automatic thinking and takes the time and effort to see the world as a new phenomenon or from varied, novel perspectives. Langer (1989) distinguished her conception of mindfulness, grounded entirely in the “Western scientific perspective” from more Eastern conceptions of mindfulness, expressed for example by Kabat-Zinn (1990, 2003) and Goldstein (1976, 2016). For the purposes of fostering student well-being, we may draw upon both literatures and visions of mindfulness, especially since the latter (Eastern) version advocates implementable practices that students, staff, and faculty can practically engage in to foster favorable educational environments and states of mind.

Mindfulness, according to Brown and Ryan (2003) is an open receptivity, attention to, and awareness of the present. Kabat-Zinn (2003) conceived of mindfulness as a state of mind that may be cultivated by meditation (and other) practices, and is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). There are many forms of meditation and mindfulness practice (e.g., sitting, walking, eating) and guides to instruct students and teachers about how to engage in such practices, both inside and outside the classroom (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Rogers, 2012; Schoeberlein David & Sheth, 2009). Studies have demonstrated that doing so cultivates and results in many benefits: decreased anxiety, enhanced concentration, greater openness to a variety of experiences, both challenging and
pleasurable, and greater resilience, to name a few. There is ample empirical evidence that subjects induced into a mindful state demonstrate greater equanimity in the face of emotionally challenging events, as well as greater ability to concentrate and stay on-task in the face of both internal and external distractions (Bamber & Kraenzle Schneider, 2016; Bamber & Morpeth, 2018; Brown et al., 2007; Shapiro et al., 2011; Zenner et al., 2014). Brown and Ryan (2003) also clarified the “psychological well-being” and “enhanced self-awareness” (p. 822) that is said to follow from mindfulness practices. What is unique about mindful thinking, they said (citing Deikman, 1982; Martin, 1997), in distinct contrast to the conscious control present in CT, is its openness and receptivity to present experience in thought, the body, and the environment.

Consistent with the description above about the interconnectedness of the several key aspects of transformative education (embodiment, spirituality, etc.) existential-phenomenological theorists have demonstrated how “the mindful understanding of reality is always already integrated and interconnected” (Felder et al., 2014, p. 9). These authors described how this pre-reflective unity of experience gives rise to “the revealed givens of human existence” (p. 8) that emerge in mindful awareness. Further, they illustrated how the “person/world unity” of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty described “can give rise to grounded experiences of thought and being” (p. 13). This suggests more specifically why CT alone may be insufficient for true self-regulation and the achievement of well-being and supports the case for the potentially productive confluence of mindfulness practice and the use of CT in higher education settings, that is, between passive concentration and effortful will (conation). This particularly matters for transformative learning in emerging adulthood since the incipient embodied and emotionally laden unresolved life decisions, the thoughts and feelings regarding self, other, and world that the emerging adult is attempting to work out, will most likely not be adequately addressed by CT alone.

In the mindfulness literature, self-regulation has a different, yet related connotation than the meaning it holds in the CT literature. If mindfulness practice opens the individual to aspects of their own experience, or basic needs or wishes that they were previously unaware of, then this enhanced awareness allows the individual to incorporate these newly discovered or comprehended aspects of themselves into their lives in a more proactive, self-regulated manner. Doing so represents a more comprehensive self-understanding and may bring about greater fulfillment and well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Brown et al. (2007) said, “the willingness to ‘look inside’ is foundational to the development of self-knowledge from which regulated action proceeds” (p. 216).

Roeser and Peck (2009) highlighted that for some theorists, self-regulation refers to “the willful and conscious direction of behavior” while for others “the concept of self-regulation involves structures of the self-system that automatically and non-consciously direct behaviors” (p. 121). In their view, self-regulation or self-regulated learning is better conceived as a combination of these forms of thinking. They conceived of consciousness as having the capacity (which they called volition,
and which can be enhanced through the development of mindfulness awareness) to gain insight into the automaticity of being and in a way, to move back and forth from this state into more self-conscious reflection to free oneself from the automaticity of being (thoughts, emotions, etc.). Doing so allows one to redirect the self toward, for instance, longer term academic goals but would also lend itself to the resolution of broader emotional and developmental issues the emerging adult might be grappling with.

A key question for higher education related to these matters is whether the benefits of mindfulness are viewed as valuable and supportive of the efforts of CT. If so (and the previously cited studies bear this out), then the next question is whether it is possible for students to develop such a disposition and ability to shift perspective between them (and again, the evidence from mindfulness research indicates that they are). If they are able to do so, and students can become more inclined to step back from things (e.g., intellectual challenges by which they are momentarily stymied, interpersonal conflicts that are escalating, stress that feels overwhelming and incapacitating, major life decisions that remain unclear) and see them in a new way, and in so doing, through this specific kind of psychological development, become more prepared to respond with the many cognitive skills and tools of CT, then there are good reasons for integrating mindfulness into both curricular and cocurricular aspects of higher education.

How does mindfulness work in conjunction with CT? Langer (1993) offered important insight when she suggested that while CT goes a long way toward encouraging deeper analysis of a position or argument, it does not go far enough.

Paying attention is hard work if it means holding the stimulus constant. By letting the stimulus vary, attention need not be paid—it is freely given. In order to keep something in mind, one has to vary it. To try to keep it still is effortful.

This distinction in the ways or type of thinking employed is a key difference between CT and mindfulness, and it provides the rationale for why they are complementary. In meditative forms of mindfulness practice, the fundamental rule is to allow the mind to go where it will and to simply observe that occurrence without judgment, in effect, to relinquish the ego’s control of the direction of thought. This passive observation of what presently occurs in the mind and the well-being that this results in over time is the opposite of what is encouraged and developed in CT (goal-directed, intentional thinking), wherein control over the thought process is attempted. How then is it possible for these two seemingly opposite ways of thinking to be mutually supportive and compatible for the student’s educational efforts and success? The answer is that mindfulness both gives rise to and supports and enhances subsequent CT, since

A mindful consideration of the world involves the conscious and continuous challenge of the categories and values we use to structure our experience, understand
observations, and generate reasons for our actions, and the reconstruction of new categories, values, and concepts to replace old ones. (Moldoveanu & Langer, 2011, p. 126)

In other words, mindfulness actually supports and enhances possibilities for broader thinking that critical reason can then refine. Langer (1993) implied that the enhanced flexibility that mindful thinking facilitates also makes education more pleasurable and fun, to which we can now add, supportive of enhanced well-being.

**Contemplative Education**

While there are no clear lines of demarcation between the mindfulness and contemplative education literatures, there are distinctions to be made since mindfulness techniques are applied in other realms of experience and practice (e.g., clinical psychology). Techniques such as mindfulness meditation are one form or part of contemplative education, but it is a broader concept suggesting the larger aims of education (Fay Morgan, 2015), as well as the methods and pedagogy that follow from these aims. As Hart (2004) suggested, contemplative education gets at a "way of knowing" (an epistemology) that distinguishes itself from rational, CT, as well as empirical knowledge, and yet, as a third way of knowing, is complementary to them. "Contemplative knowing is a missing link, one that affects [and enhances] student performance, character, and depth" (p. 28). Hart noted how contemplative attention differs from rational thinking in that it fosters a more essential kind of knowing that emanates from the heart and gives rise to character development, empathy, and compassion. It does so by fostering a kind of detachment, a loosening of the reins of immediate consciousness in order that the person may step back and get a broader view of the self and their relation to the world of experience and others (not completely unlike how CT tries to do this from a more deliberative, self-conscious perspective).

These aspects of transformative education frequently occur in cocurricular activities, whether that be in experiences directly linked to the curriculum (e.g., a civic engagement activity) or more commonly, in the extensive realm of activities that occur in divisions of students affairs. Typical activities where these kinds of full-bodied experiences occur are leadership development trainings and roles, peer mentoring activities, club activities that have a service component, and student employment opportunities that entail progressively more responsibility. It is understandable that most of the research on transformative learning, written by faculty members, focuses on curricular or classroom aspects of higher education (Taylor & Snyder, 2012) and the teacher–student relationship. Yet, this overlooks the vast and rich area of the cocurricular and extracurricular, for their contributions to student development, and where a great deal of the current mindfulness and contemplative education activities are occurring in the context of concerns about student well-being.
Zajonc (2006) highlighted the importance of “the development of reflective, contemplative, affective, and ethical capacities” in students, in addition to rational, CT capacities. He described this as an “epistemology of love” or, in a later work (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010) as an epistemology emanating from the heart, which in combination with more traditional curricular learning, leads to truly transformative education—knowledge not only of information but of our essential relation with others and nature, and the moral obligations (ethic for living) this implies. Most importantly, Zajonc (2006, p. 1744) viewed contemplative pedagogies as the heir apparent or natural consequence of the cognitively oriented transformative education theory of Mezirow, as well as Kegan’s similarly oriented developmental theory, which elaborated transformations in psychological stages and the ways of knowing unique to each stage (discussed further below). Fay Morgan (2015) pointed out that the distinctions between transformative and contemplative education have broken down as transformative theory itself has undergone revision and inclusion of contemplative practices by more recent theorists. She cited “a growing intersection of their theories and practices” (p. 211) despite “distrust of the contemplative and subjective in cognocentric and rationalist approaches to education” (p. 212). Felder and Robbins (2016) referred to “the heart-centered art of the attunement process” (p. 122) as a way of characterizing this more unified conception of how ontology and epistemology are related in human experience and require this convergence of mindfulness and CT for a more comprehensive understanding of self-other-world relations.

Palmer and Zajonc (2010) used the broader, somewhat more abstract and inclusive descriptive term, integrative education to imply “alignment of one’s studies with the inner aspirations that give direction and meaning to one’s life” (p. 7), giving credibility to inner or self-knowledge, how it sheds light on connections of the self to others and the outer world, and even further, how this bears upon courses of study and the structure of higher education more generally. They stated that such integration should be intentional and systematic, not coincidental, and should be a major aim of education. These authors implored educators not to be shy about the importance of education for deepened knowledge of subjectivity, and how this insight in turn informs knowledge about the world of entities and relationships, and the ethical implications of such learning. These authors see nothing less than “the present and future well-being of humankind” (p. 153) as at stake in these matters.

Altobello (2007) argued that rather than utilizing meditation for its calming effect (e.g., to relieve anxiety and stress), which may be a side benefit, contemplative practices, which he described as providing “deeper thinking skills” offer a way for students to enhance, focus, and engage attention, and further, to learn to recognize inattention, all prerequisites for successful CT. Similarly, Ergas (2013) argued that our default state of mind is wandering and that this has much to do with our overall well-being (even more than the actions in which we are engaged). He also contended that this tendency of the mind to wander needs to be explicitly addressed if we want students to have the cognitive tools to be successful. This is the basis for stating that
mindfulness practice actually has serious educational benefits and is a “precondition for academic success” (p. 285). That is why he called for a mind-altering curriculum, that is, one that promotes enhanced mindfulness and addresses the unproductive thinking that occurs in mind-wandering. He argued too that such contemplative practices operate beneath the cognitive level of transformation (in the place where thoughts emanate from) that is Mezirow’s focus in perspective transformation, and are what facilitate such cognitive transformation. Such contemplative practices may be mindfulness practice (e.g., meditation) or the more body-based-oriented practices (e.g., yoga), or alternatively, more externally focused, object-related practices.

Beer et al. (2015), citing Kasworm and Bowles (2012), said, “The ultimate goal of engaging in contemplative practice is to increase self-awareness, a type of critical reflection recognized as an important component of transformative learning” (p. 165). These authors alluded to the alignment and support of mindfulness and contemplative practice with transformative learning in higher education but acknowledged the need for further investigation into the nature of the intersection of the two.

Transformative Learning and Education

The more recent history of Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformative learning theory has been extensively documented (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Mezirow’s theory evolved from and is directed toward adult learning and education, for students who have reached full adulthood and returned to higher education after life’s circumstances had essentially changed for them, oftentimes through a crisis which propelled them to search for new meaning. While that might be true for a small number of students on college campuses, even despite the growing number of nontraditional students who do not enter college right after high school, that does not accurately capture the majority of undergraduate, or even graduate students. As such, next we consider how transformative learning theory applies to the situations these students typically find themselves in (from a developmental point of view).

In Mezirow’s early work (1978, 1981), he defined meaning perspective as the way an adult sees themselves, their relationships, and their lives generally (their “personal paradigm”) which is a function of the “Cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to—and transformed by—one’s past experience” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101). Perspective transformation occurs over time as previous paradigms for understanding no longer suffice for present life. Taking alternative perspectives, the perspectives of others, and developing a critical appraisal of a previously held perspective facilitates personal transformation and changes in related self-concept, feelings and actions and signifies developmental maturity. As such, while communicative learning and “critical-dialectical discourse” (Mezirow, 2003) is an important part of changing meaning perspectives and the transformation process, CT alone is not sufficient for these changes. As noted above, subsequent and more recent theories of transformative learning are more integrative of the affective, embodied, and spiritual aspects of this process.
Boyd and Myers (1988) reconceived and altered somewhat the developmental trajectory that perspective transformation outlines. They noted that “In the first half of life the individual must learn to accommodate to the demands encountered in their world and assimilate whatever is necessary in order to obtain the goals which are sought” (p. 265). As such, instrumental education brings the resources of society to help the individual learn what they need (skills, information) to identify and carve out their personal and vocational goals (e.g., in adolescence) and begin to “take their unique place in the community” (p. 266). But what happens when this period of time is coming to an end, and they are transitioning to the next stages of life?

Kegan (2000) clearly stated that “transformational learning is not the province of adulthood or adult education alone” (p. 48). “Much of the literature on transformational learning really constitutes an exploration of what constructive-developmental theory and research identifies as but one of several gradual, epochal transformations in knowing of which persons are shown to be capable throughout life” (p. 59). More specifically, Kegan (1982) described, in a way consistent with the embodied perception of Merleau-Ponty and others discussed above, how the learning that occurs in transformation is not just a change in perspective but rather “the process of evolution as a meaning-constitutive activity” involves “the whole person in development—dynamically, cognitively, behaviorally” (p. 42). He conceived of the changes that occur in development as a dialectical evolution of self-other-world in which the individual undergoes evolving shifts resulting in the evolution of the meaning of experience, over time, that are epochal for an individual, and can fundamentally alter the world as they have known it to that point, potentially creating significant anxiety. Yet Kegan also offers as another possibility, the relaxation of the vigilance that might occur in the person’s attempt to defend against and resist change, the experience of the immediacy and flowing of experience, “a freeing up of one’s internal life, an openness and playfulness about oneself” (p. 231) and delighting in new possibilities. This might be viewed as analogous to the uncritical acceptance of experience fostered in mindfulness—an opening to all aspects of experience that come into awareness. This comprehensive theory of transformation and development which is both cognitive and affective also now enters the realm of the spiritual, in taking into itself the individual’s evolutionary path, how they reckon with the past, resisting, working through and ultimately including broader meanings. More specifically for our purpose, Kegan (1982) described the transformation involved in the period of life consistent with emerging adulthood as one which facilitates intimacy and simultaneously allows the individual to realize their vocational direction and achieve their “individual integrity” (p. 107). The transformational learning that accompanies this stage is quite practical and facilitates concrete directions for a student’s educational efforts.

Transformational education, in this way of thinking, recognizes where students are in their development and provides the appropriate balance of support and challenge appropriate to where they are along this path, providing “a culture to grow in” (Kegan, 1982, p. 276). This means not just employing CT alone to challenge
student’s assumptions (as we typically do in the higher education classroom) but also providing the support they need when they are already in the throes of transition between stages of development. The higher education classroom is much better equipped for the former than the latter. Yet through more recent discussion about student well-being, we are becoming better prepared to provide this support.

How does this broader conception of transformative education apply to, or more specifically, bear upon undergraduate and graduate education for traditional aged students, whom Arnett (2000, 2004) properly called emerging adults? Reminding ourselves of the characteristics of emerging adulthood in terms of constructive-developmental theory informs how we understand the meaning of transformative education and learning for this population. Doing so, I believe, also clarifies how contemplative education can contribute to greater well-being on our campuses.

Application of Transformative Learning to Emerging Adulthood

McWhinney and Markos (2003) defined transformation as “those psychological, cognitive, and social processes of learning and education that follow from a variety of reflective and maturing experiences” (p. 18). As such, learning and education in emerging adulthood can certainly be considered transformative. And while Mezirow (1991) repeatedly stated that his theory of transformative learning helps adults to become more critically self-reflective and rational in problem-solving and action, Arnett’s characterization of emerging adulthood suggests that their learning and development require and involve transformation in this sense as well, with the caveat that this developmental period needs an additional intervention. The kind of transformation Mezirow (1991) described requires “…prior education through which one has learned to assess evidence effectively, make and understand relevant arguments, develop critical judgement, and engage in critical reflection” (p. 199). Ide- ally, undergraduate and graduate education hone these academic skills. But more fundamentally, students also lay the groundwork for future transformation by engaging in an extended moratorium where adult roles are imagined, explored, and more clearly defined for themselves by not only challenging their driving assumptions but also by imagining and opening themselves to new possibilities. As Kegan suggested, this can be anxiety-provoking. It is here that mindfulness can play an essential role in further opening students to more hidden aspects of themselves and other worldly possibilities in ways more acceptable to them. Further, if as Mezirow (1991) said, “Desire becomes interests through the exercise of reason” and that “we make a reasoned judgement that a desire ought to be satisfied,” (p. 216) transformative learning theory is most applicable to emerging adulthood not only in the sense of cognitive perspective transformation but also in terms of the broader insight and self-clarification that mindfulness awareness can bring about in conjunction with reason.
Mindfulness practices can free up and allow the individual to become aware of implicit or tacit aspects of knowledge and perception. CT may then be utilized to further assess and evaluate what has been discovered, which can facilitate deeper learning than either alone. This reflective capacity is not uniquely adult and certainly occurs in emerging adulthood, the transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood. Mezirow (1981) addressed the possibility in education of the “development of self-consciousness,” the linguistic and cognitive ability to become self-aware and challenge previously established categories and related perceptions, the “cultivation of individual subjectivity.” It is through the above-described combination of mindfulness and CT skills that we can best apply Mezirow’s transformative learning and education theory to institutions of higher education and cultivate such awareness and enhanced subjectivity. Such cultivation at the undergraduate and graduate levels should also facilitate and enhance later experiences of adult transformative learning.

**Bringing CT, Mindfulness, and Transformative Learning/Education Together for Well-Being**

How are CT, mindfulness, and transformative education mutually supportive of well-being in higher education? Brown et al. (2007) pointed out that the metacognitive awareness that develops from mindful thinking (the nonattachment and accepting observance of thoughts and feelings) brings with it equanimity, well-being, even happiness that is not tethered to everyday circumstances in the same way that ordinary conscious states are. Mindfulness and its cultivation also fundamentally support “healthy adaptive functioning” (p. 227). While for these authors “mindfulness, as perceptual presence, is not about achieving well-being” per se, that is, as an explicit goal or intention, because “it is purposeless in this sense” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 844), indirectly, it can go a long way toward helping students achieve enhanced well-being.

In encouraging students to move from mindlessness, toward mindfulness, new, potentially creative and productive ways of experiencing and seeing themselves and the world become possible. If those insights are then called upon, and utilized in productive educational pursuits, wherein CT is taught and sharpened, presently unimaginable achievements become possible, and more finely honed, personal decisions become more realistic. Given the instability, stress, and anxiety so prevalent among emerging adults (American College Health Association, 2018; Reetz et al., 2016), mindfulness practice, with the enhanced presence of mind this brings about so students can focus and think critically, with the additional aim of assisting with both self-clarification and development, based in insight and fuller awareness, in a more integrative approach to transformative education, seems like the best pedagogical strategy for the mutually supportive goals of academic success and well-being.
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