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# **Mind –Body- Spirit Connections for Student Success in Higher Education**

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**Abstract:** In response to crisis, poverty, violence, famine and stress across many aspects of our local and global worlds, this paper integrates contemplative education, mind-body-spirit connections and transformative learning for student development in adult and higher education. The potential applications and benefits of these interdisciplinary intersections include improving student concentration and focus, attendance, self-discipline, performance, and retention. Studies of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) in higher education demonstrate effectiveness in building student awareness, broader perspectives of understanding, and more inclusive worldviews. Moreover, authors have described similarities between transformative learning theory and the spiritual beliefs and discipline of ancient Confucianism, regardless of philosophical differences (King & Wang, 2006). In addition, several researchers and authors have discussed the potential of contemplative education in higher education (Miller, 1994; Roeser & Peck, 2009; Sun, 2010).

This paper presents and describes the implementation of an interdisciplinary model for higher education instructional design and practice. An extensive literature review grounds the theoretical basis of the paper and model across not only andragogy and pedagogy, but also mind, body, and spirit literature, contemplative pedagogy, Eastern religions, transformative learning, adult learning, and feminist perspectives of inquiry. Recommendations from this model include institutional and faculty responses which can effect change in student awareness of contemplative applications for student and professional success. Foundational elements include dynamic co-learning approaches, personal and professional growth learning activities, institutional faculty training and resources, and policies which recognize the merit of such practices.

## **Introduction and Need**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are many demands and pressures on learners in higher education around the globe, which many people may find staggering when compared to recent decades. As learners engage in study, considering delayed career placement and repaying their loans, they are also faced with a host of troubling trends. Examples of disturbing trends and pressures which higher education learners have little control over include an enduring recession spanning much of the globe, high unemployment rates, increased demand for graduate degrees as requisite for professional careers, and national economic crises rolling across the world. In the midst of the

customary stresses of life as a college student, how are they expected to cope successfully with this multitude of uncertainty and crises?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we also know that answers for political, social, economic and educational problems are not easily found. Instead the theme of the age of knowledge construction is “interdisciplinary education.” In part, this perspective is effective because information is developed at a more rapid pace now than ever before in human history. Additionally, knowledge construction yields solutions to more complex problems than traditional models, where intelligentsia is held in silos, are capable of producing. It should be no surprise then to learn that the answer to cultivating student success strategies for higher education learners emerges from interdisciplinary perspectives. Specifically, when we bring together major philosophies, models and theories of different disciplines in order to understand the changing needs of our students and their world context in new ways, we have the opportunity to develop new solutions.

It may be surprising for some readers to realize that nontraditional students vastly outnumber college students in our institutions (NPR, 2010; U. S. Department of Education, 2007). Therefore, considering them as adult learners, one realizes that they have complex lives involving not only the stresses listed above, but also family and work responsibilities. These copious pressures demand new coping strategies. The literature of philosophy, education and social science include potential direction to develop recommendations, answers or models. Using these sources as a foundation, this paper presents a model which builds upon the framework and perspective of mind, body, and spirit connections (Miller & King, 2011) specifically from contemplative pedagogy, Eastern religions, transformative learning, adult learning, and feminist perspectives of inquiry. The goal of this model and paper is to provide a foundation for

approaches inclusive of mind, body, and spirit connections, thereby offering new coping perspectives and strategies.

By building such interdisciplinary intersections focused on increased understanding of mind, body, and spirit connections, this model provides strategies to address the educational, physical, cognitive and support needs of learners. Learners with needs spanning learning disabilities, different learning styles, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, and stress will find assistance which is seldom offered through traditional western education. The benefits of helping students learn mind-body techniques to support their higher education efforts may include not only personal and professional development such as greater student concentration and focus, self-discipline, academic achievement, and stress coping strategies, but also academic outcomes important for higher education institutions. These outcomes include increased class attendance, retention, graduation rates, and GPAs. It will be essential to closely monitor such efforts to determine the specific results, and continue to refine the model and programs.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

In order to provide a robust theoretical foundation for the proposed model, this section briefly exploring critical aspects of contemplative pedagogy, Eastern religions, transformative learning, adult learning, and feminist perspectives of inquiry. The discussion and synthesis of critical literature, research and models introduces and connects concepts which are often less familiar too many educators and are seldom applied together to address educational issues.

## **Contemplative Education and Eastern Religions**

Contemplative education is a holistic practice which incorporates the worldview/philosophy and meditative practices of several eastern religions with the aim of improving learning success and breadth. Upon examining the contemplative education literature, it is quickly evident that there are many definitions for this frequently used term (Garrison Institute, 2005; Hart, 2004; Roeser, & Peck, 2009). Fortunately, Roeser and Peck provide a broad definition which neatly includes many of the variations in the academic literature.

Contemplative education is described by Roeser and Peck (2009) as

...a set of pedagogical practices designed to cultivate the potentials of mindful awareness and volition in an ethical-relational context in which the values of personal growth, learning, moral living, and caring for others are also nurtured. (p. 424).

This definition immediately highlights significant differences from mainstream Western understandings of education. Consider that with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era dawning in the past decade and continuing presently, the focus of public K-12 education has been to achieve academic standards which can be tested, tracked and compared (U. S. Congress, 2001; U. S. Department of Education, 2010). In recent years, this continuing trend has developed into a press for higher education to implement additional accountability, measures, and documentation forms supported by quantifiable assessment to demonstrate competency, learning, and the very value of the system and the individual institutions alike (Arnone, 2004; Basken, Field, & Hebel, 2008; Fischer, 2011; Leveille, 2006). Most recently, political and public pressures on higher

education have shifted to focus on programs which “produce” graduates who can fill the high demand jobs claiming to exist now and anticipated in the near and distant future (Center for America, 2011; Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010).

Instead of valuing and focusing solely on external benefits of learning, contemplative education emphasizes personal development. Considering models of adult development, literature such as Bloom’s (1996) and Piaget’s identifies the need for adults to grow in many dimensions. Some of these dimensions include Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner’s (2006) cognitive models, moral development as described by Kohlberg (In Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner), Roger’s theory of identity formation/individuation, Maslow’s self-actualization, social and family roles and responsibilities, relationships, and generativity in middle and older adulthood (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner).

Several authors continue the discussion of contemplative education to describe how learners must be active participants led by a competent teacher or set of teachings (Hart, 2004; Holland, 2004; Rockefeller, 2006; Wall, 2005). The modality usually mentioned is an “experiential learning opportunity” which assists learners’ development of concentrated and clear “states of awareness.” Moreover, the milieu, or context, of this development is not merely intellectual assent, but personal growth. Indeed, the more familiar construct of character education is referenced when the contemplative education literature describes aspirant values of “humility, curiosity, open-mindedness, open-heartedness, and caring for others” (Roeser, & Peck, 2009, p. 424) Linking contemplative education with the framework previously discussed in this section may yield new opportunities for the support and success of learners in higher education.

## **Mind, Body, and Spirit Connections**

In contrast to traditional western higher education formats, the experiential learning experiences described above align well with adult learning practices in higher education (Fink, 2003). Contemplative education is an example of integrating mind, body and spirit in order to focus on developing a disciplined practice which might involve any one or combination of the following (or related) activities: the use of natural settings, artistic activities, physical training through prescribed systems of movements (e.g., yoga, Tai Chi), using visualizations, or practicing meditation. While philosophies of education which ground traditional higher education are rooted in philosophies of rationality and scientific method, eastern religions and contemplative education provide a long history of developing frameworks and strategies for cultivating the practice of integrating mind, body and spirit.

The especially fragmented and harried lives that most adult students experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provide a compelling need for the benefits available through such training. It is an exciting prospect that developing awareness of and skills to coordinate the powers of one's mind, body and spirit may contribute to greater success in personal and professional performance.

## **Transformative Learning and Student Development in Adult and Higher Education**

Transformative learning theory originated with the work of Jack Mezirow at Columbia University in 1978. His first study which grounded the emergence of this theory was based on a study of eight women returning to college later in adulthood. Since that time interest and research in the theory has dominated the field of adult learning (Cranton, 1994; King, 2005, 2009; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Mezirow & Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 2000) and now transitioned into different variations in the Student Affairs field (Blimling, & Whitt, 1999).



Transformative learning is a powerful concept and model which describes how adults cope with confusing situations and transition through defined phases to potentially arrive at a radically new frame of reference. Terms used in this theory and model (originating from Mezirow (1978)) include “disorienting dilemma” to describe the initial experience of disruption, cognitive dissonance or confusion; and “perspective transformation,” which describes the final radical change in understanding. Fundamental elements in the phases of transformative learning lean heavily on cognitive process such as questioning prior assumptions, critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, testing new assumptions, reorganization of priorities and developing new perspectives.

This paper proposes that even though transformative learning is a highly cognitive and rational approach, this researcher and others have seen great evidence of its affective impact on the learner during and after the experience. For instance, when adult college students struggle with new suggestions, beliefs or concepts of diversity from those which are ascribed to their religious, cultural or family beliefs, this disorienting dilemma is often not solely intellectual. Instead, angst, heartbreak, concern, worry, fear, anticipation and excitement may be experienced throughout different stages of the process. The model proposed in this paper is that including mind-body and spirit in the transformative learning process may provide new dimensions and facilitate fuller understanding, coping and adjustment.

### **Feminist Perspectives of Inquiry**

Considering feminist perspectives of inquiry affords a stance to question prior assumptions and reified power: in this case, the standard constructions of transformative learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). In addition, feminist inquiry is inclusive of diverse

perspectives (Hesse-Biber, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner). Indeed, some academic traditions might refer to this orientation as taking the view of “The Other” or giving voice to underrepresented groups.

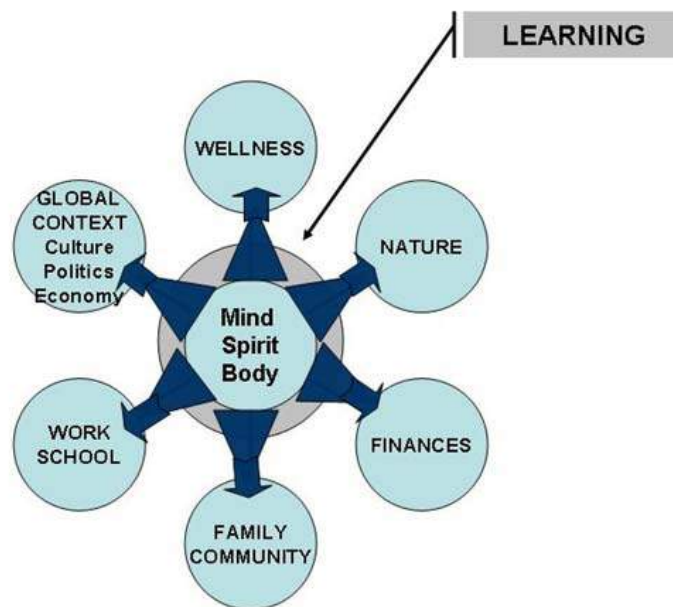
In the case of considering mind, body and spirit connections with transformative learning and student success, feminist inquiry provides a coherent framework for integrating multiple frames of reference, and welcoming collaborative efforts of meaning making (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Miller & King, 2011). The model presented in this paper offers a starting point for interdisciplinary discussions. The purpose is to collaborate with experts across several related fields and disciplines to construct new understandings which will ultimately help higher education institutions, faculty and staff better support student success immediately and for lifelong learning.

### **The Model**

Considering the literature described above, several dimensions emerge which help form a model of student success not only grounded in andragogy and pedagogy, but also mind, body and spirit connections. During the unusually stressful economic and political times being experienced globally, tapping the academic research and practice association with each of these areas; a more holistic approach to student success can provide new opportunities for assisting our higher education students today. This model provides an opportunity to appropriate the richness of interdisciplinary advancements and understandings to address this urgent need currently dominating higher education.

### **Mind-Body-Spirit Learning Model**

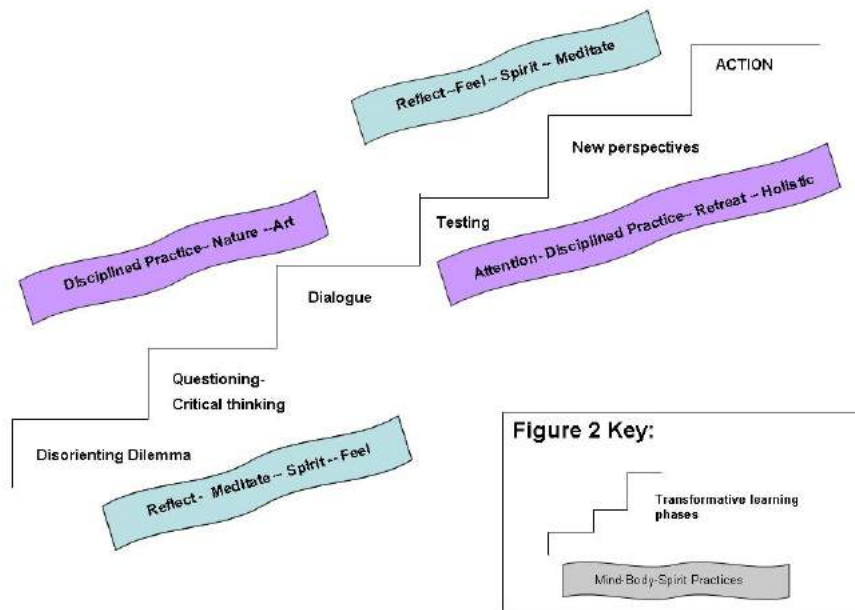
Figure 1 portrays a graphic representation of the Mind-Body-Spirit Learning Model and reveals the inter-relatedness of its many dimensions, providing a foundation for adult learners to cope with their personal and professional (student) lives. The center of the model illustrates that the mind, body and spirit are all involved in learning experiences. In fact, the design accurately depicts the relationship as making all three pieces essential for full learning ability. Using only one or two of these dimensions will cause the individual to lose major capabilities for learning success.



**Figure 1 Mind-Body-Spirit Learning Model**

The outward arrows of the diagram point to the several major areas, in which adult learners will interact, engage and cope across their daily personal and professional lives. In this manner, using all three dimensions of themselves in learning means to cope with stresses, problems, situations and opportunities in each realm (e.g., work, family, etc.) affords a more integrated approach to meaning making, learning and creating solutions.

In Figure 2, The Holistic Model of Transformative Learning specifically illustrates how the dimension of contemplative learning and mindfulness may inform the original transformative learning model. Instead of an explicitly cognitive series of phases, the interweaving strand represents the involvement of body and spirit in the transformation of understanding and perspective. Mezirow (1997, 2000) and much of the related transformative learning literature does not include discussions of how spiritual lives might inform or even become essential to the process. However, even more critical is the fact the involving one’s body in transformative learning is excluded regularly in research discussions.



**Figure 2. Holistic Model of Transformative Learning**

When considering the benefits of incorporating mind-body–spirit in the transformative learning model, several specific results emerge immediately for consideration, including strategies for coping with the transformative learning process, and strategies to include mind-body-spirit connections in research about transformative learning experiences

If one includes mind-body-spirit in coping with the transformative learning process, new options become available. Table 1 reveals that calling on the abilities and dimensions of the mind, body and spirit individually and collectively greatly increases the number of strategies available to adult learners. The traditional models of transformative learning, which are rooted in Western thought and philosophies, do not recognize the benefits of aligning thinking with feeling, of bringing physical peace through meditation and relaxation. It is by leveraging these “forgotten” resources that new, powerful possibilities awaken.

<b>Transformative Learning Strategies</b>	
<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Mind-Body-Spirit Learning Model</b>
Think – reflect	Think – reflect
Question	Question
Dialogue	Dialogue
Test	Testing
Action	Action
	Meditation
	Prayer
	Quiet
	Relaxation techniques
	The Arts: music, art, dance, drama
	Resting- being
	Attention
	Nature
	Physical – Yoga, tai chi..

**Table 1. Transformative Learning Strategies Compared:  
Tradition and Mind-Body Spirit Integration**

Consider for instance my recent autobiographical account of coping with disability over the last 7 years (King, 2011). Western medicine failed me; and trying to navigate my situation in new ways, framing new perspectives did not eliminate the debilitating pain. Instead, it was only as I journeyed through learning mental relaxation techniques, undertaking music therapy and

studying/practicing meditation that I attained some moderate relief from the physical pain. In my experience, most medical doctors never mentioned mind-body-spirit connections. However, those who assisted me in successfully regaining my health and well-being depended on my ability to use meditation and relaxation techniques as they performed outpatient procedures while I was conscious. These three doctors (two from NJ and one in FL) are all immigrants from India having received some of their medical training there.

In the last two decades, clinical psychology and social work has embraced mind-body-spirit techniques to complement psychotherapy and pharmacology treatments. And although the educational world has many learners who could benefit from such support, institutions, faculty and support staff have been slow to recognize the value of these approaches and seldom broach the issue.

Consider those adult learners whose lives include great present or past stress: veterans, disabled people, victims of domestic violence, war and crimes, individuals with ADHD, anxiety, depression. How much could their academic and professional pursuits benefit by cultivating mind-body-spirit connections while developing specific relaxation and focusing strategies using the same? From war refugees to test anxiety, domestic violence victims to veterans, disabled people to undiagnosed ADHD adults, we have scores of students cycling through our student support services, failing and transferring to different schools. Yet help could be close by.

If one ignores the integration of mind-body-spirit in research about transformative learning experiences, entire realms of coping, understanding and meaning are omitted from the data. Based on the literature and model above, research developed and conducted from a cognitive-only perspective of transformative learning will miss many dimensions of influence,

coping, processing, etc. which participants may be using consciously or unconsciously, but researchers do not inquire about, or consider relevant.

### **Recommendations**

Introducing this model of mind-body-spirit learning opens new opportunities for institutional programs, faculty and staff to consider a wider breadth of strategies, and support systems to support learning needs in higher education. Phases of implementation in western colleges and universities necessarily would include introductory seminars to discuss the orientation and meaning of such a model, questioning prior assumptions, and considering the pros and cons of using a new framework, building understanding, ownership and a group culture with which people identify and feel comfortable (Caffarella, 2001). It is essential to be mindful of individual and collective needs while engaged in these activities and build a safe environment/climate in which to explore these changes. Introducing awareness of contemplative education and mind-body-spirit model applications for student and professional success is a sharp contrast to many secular postsecondary institutional cultures and missions.

Once achieving these preliminary steps student and academic affairs can develop programs and strategies which will discover the needs of their students across the mind-body-spirit paradigm and develop lists of available resources or new programs to address those needs. Examples of learning support consistent with this model which may be explored or introduced faculty and staff

#### **Organizational Elements**

- Holistic mission and vision statements
- Holistic academic and student service programs: Wellness, spiritual, relaxation, mindfulness, academic training, counseling, guides, support groups, workshops, retreats

- Diversity statements and policies inclusive of multiple understandings of mind-body-spirit

The institutional response necessarily includes both institutional faculty training and resources and policies which recognize the merit of such practices.

Regarding institutional faculty training and resources, faculty need to engage in experiential learning of the Mind-body-spirit learning model. The purpose would be for faculty to discover their individual understanding of the Mind-body-spirit learning model, to cultivate their understanding further based on their interest and then develop a learning plan consistent with their revised understanding and learning goals. The following recommendations are a few of the many options for faculty teaching approaches consistent with the Mind-body-spirit learning model.

#### **Faculty Approaches and Actions**

- Revised course objectives, assignments and assessments consistent with understanding of mind-body-spirit learning model
- Holistic approaches to student-centered learning
- Mentoring- guide relationships among class and instructor where applicable
- Dynamic, active learning techniques
- Co-learning strategies
- Collaborative learning projects
- Personal and professional growth learning activities
- Unconditional respect through dialogue, and discussion
- Focus dialogue, discussion, and collaborative projects on critical thinking, understanding other perspectives and developing new understandings
- Exploring moral, ethical and value oriented perspectives of courses, learning and content
- Constructing new knowledge- analysis, synthesis
- Experiential learning activities: For example, nature, artistic expressions, autoethnography, reflection, physical exploration
- Many more...

#### **A Word about Sustainability**



While many excellent programs, efforts and strategies are piloted and encouraged across universities and colleges each year, only those which become part of the institution have a chance of being sustained. Such institutionalization has to be cautiously approached and implemented to understand the many factors involved, implications and perspectives of the proposal across each campus constituency. Even when this process is successfully navigated, faculty and staff will adopt and consistently practice those changes which include incentives or merit within the organization (Arnone, 2004; Glenn, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

This paper provides a theoretical foundation and practical recommendations, for a higher education mind-body-spirit learning model. This interdisciplinary model includes applications across academic and student affairs realms in order to increase student learning and success through higher education. The literature review places the model in the context of not only andragogy and pedagogy, but also the mind-body literature, contemplative pedagogy, Eastern religions, transformative learning, adult learning, and feminist perspectives of inquiry.

Implementing the model requires faculty and program administrators to explore the mind-body-spirit learning model through experiential activities in order for it to be a truly authentic representation of understanding. The specific manifestations and applications of the model to different institutional and departmental cultures will be necessarily unique.

The significance of the model and its implementation in higher education is the ability to address many challenges for accountability of higher education with programs and learning which provide holistic learning capable of better supporting students through the stresses of their learning experience and their lives beyond higher education. In contrast to traditional Western education, this holistic education based on contemplative education cultivates new strategies to

integrate the potential of mind, body, and spirit in understanding and solving the problems and needs which we encounter across our lives.

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