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## Traditional Narratives of Higher Education: Cultural tensions and ethical considerations in adult learning

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## Traditional Narratives of Higher Education Cultural Tensions and Ethical Considerations in Adult Learning

Maryann Krikorian, *Loyola Marymount University*

### Abstract

This article pairs critical and contemplative inquiry with autoethnography as a theoretical and methodological approach to uncover Western assumptions in higher education and its impact on adult learning. My desire to provide a counter narrative to Western tradition brought me to theory as a means to understand and deconstruct my academic experience as a first-generation, working-class, multiracial, woman, and the first in my family to speak English as a first language. In this article, an autoethnographic approach is used to self-reflexively explore my lived experience to problematize traditional narratives in current mainstream higher education. With the support of holistic human development and learning theories, I advocate for more integrative approaches to higher education. A contemplative model of higher education is shared, supporting meaningful forms of adult learning via compassion/self-compassion, active listening, and mindfulness practices. With a contemplative lens, educators may integrate diverse meaning-making opportunities to enrich the daily lives of all adult learners, emphasizing higher education as a practice of freedom.

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## **Traditional Narratives of Higher Education: Cultural Tensions and Ethical Considerations in Adult Learning**

Maryann Krikorian  
*Loyola Marymount University*

*This article pairs critical and contemplative inquiry with autoethnography as a theoretical and methodological approach to uncover Western assumptions in higher education and its impact on adult learning. My desire to provide a counter narrative to Western tradition brought me to theory as a means to understand and deconstruct my academic experience as a first-generation, working-class, multiracial, woman, and the first in my family to speak English as a first language. In this article, an autoethnographic approach is used to self-reflexively explore my lived experience to problematize traditional narratives in current mainstream higher education. With the support of holistic human development and learning theories, I advocate for more integrative approaches to higher education. A contemplative model of higher education is shared, supporting meaningful forms of adult learning via compassion/self-compassion, active listening, and mindfulness practices. With a contemplative lens, educators may integrate diverse meaning-making opportunities to enrich the daily lives of all adult learners, emphasizing higher education as a practice of freedom.*

**Keywords:** Autoethnography | higher education | holistic human development | adult learning | contemplative practice

“I believe it unthinkable any longer for Americans to assert themselves to be *free* because they belong to a free country... we need to be continually empowered to choose ourselves, to create our identities ... to act in our freedom to fulfill them, something we can never do meaning-fully alone.” (Greene, 1988, p. 51)

I am a first-generation, working-class, multiracial, woman, and the first in my family to speak English as a first language. To date, I completed three years of community college, three years of undergraduate preparation, two years of graduate studies, and four years of doctoral work, totaling 12 years of higher learning in both public and private institutions of higher education (IHEs). Throughout my undergraduate years, I fantasized about the “American dream,” acquiring a higher education that would alleviate my working-class responsibilities. However, I never imagined the path toward upward social class mobility would cause me greater feelings of undesirable emotions like that of anxiety. Looking back, my status as a multidimensional adult learner challenged my ability to: (a) integrate my cultural background with Western tradition; (b) negotiate cultural conflicts in higher education; and (c) manage academic, financial, social, and personal responsibilities during my academic journey.

This article aims to uncover Western assumptions in higher education culture, impacting my own academic life as well as the lives of many other multidimensional adult learners. To do so, critical theory is used to analyze the sociopolitical movements of the United States (U.S.) and its influence on higher education trends. Then, an autoethnographic approach is used to self-reflexively explore my lived experience to problematize traditional narratives and its impact on adult learning. More specifically, critical and contemplative frameworks are used to examine

reflections from my personal journal, identifying protective tactics in response to emerging cultural conflicts during my higher education experience. Lastly, with the support of holistic human development and learning theories, I advocate for more integrative approaches to higher education. A contemplative model of higher education is shared, supporting meaningful forms of adult learning via compassion/self-compassion, active listening, and mindfulness practices. With a contemplative lens, educators may integrate diverse meaning-making opportunities to enrich the daily lives of all adult learners, emphasizing higher education as a practice of freedom. For contextual purposes, the next section offers a historical account of higher education trends in the U.S.

### **Historical Framing**

The early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony founded the first IHE, declaring its purpose of promoting a moral education based on Christian principals. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Christensen and Eyring (2011) describe a higher education serving European-American males studying to be clergymen. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, higher education moved toward secularization, only serving European-Americans diverse in religiosity. From a critical perspective, higher education culture initially prioritized Eurocentric value-belief-systems, leaving out markers of multiple senses of identity such as, minorities and women (Darder et al. 2009). Consequently, the establishment of the U.S. higher education enterprise perpetuated racism, classism, and sexism, maintaining systems of domination (hooks, 2003). For that reason, Freire (2018/1970) argued that non-traditional adult learners face institutionalized accessibility barriers, facilitating a form of human oppression as it limits the basic human right to education.

As additional IHEs emerged, so did competition for national prestige. The intense rivalry among institutions caused tension between moral education and global recognition, disconnecting IHEs from its founding ethics. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Morrill Land Grant Acts emphasized the scientific method for industrial pursuits, supporting a more sophisticated government (Rossi et al., 2014). Under the likeness of objectivism, Western IHEs began to express a particular form of political bias for the production of capital (Giroux, 2012). The objectification of knowledge instituted hierarchal power structures in higher education culture, shaping the process of teaching and learning to benefit dominant social systems (hooks, 2003). Following the industrial revolution, the standardization of knowledge also heightened a sense of competition for achievement, intensifying a focus on individualism in higher education culture (Purpel, 1989, 1999). Despite greater cultural, social, and economic disparities, targeted attention on Western tradition continued to lead the U.S. in ground-breaking discoveries, governmental advancements, and economic wealth well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As a result, the socialization process led many adult learners to behave in ways that perpetuated domination. Darder and colleagues (2009) cite, “students from subordinated groups are taught early to believe in their own inherent deficit and to accept the uncompromising authority of standardized knowledge, the possibility of transgression can often signal a moment of crisis, anxiety, and intense fear” (p. 23). Much in the same way, Purpel (1989) contends that an overemphasis on objectified and standardized knowledge for economic gains may lead to the rejection of a human reality, causing greater feelings of inauthenticity and an overdependency on productivity. The historical context of higher education demonstrates a socially constructed ideology, where value-belief-systems associated with IHEs change with sociopolitical movements. There continues to be an over-emphasis on objectivism, materialism, and

individualism that denies the multidimensional essence of many truths prominent in the diversity of humanity (Palmer, 2017, 1983). In doing so, a distorted concept of what it means to be human is reinforced in higher education culture (Palmer et al., 2010).

For this reason, an ethical examination of value-belief-systems associated with traditional narratives are warranted as it excludes diverse dimensions of human development and learning. Through a transformativist paradigm, Mezirow (1991) reminds us that cultural assumptions are to be interrogated for advanced meaning-making opportunities. He recommends the practice of acknowledging, deconstructing, and critiquing value-belief-systems to renegotiate Western tradition for greater cognitive congruence — complimentary thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the human mind. Mezirow explains how a greater level of cognitive congruence frees the mental space once occupied by forms of, “crisis, anxiety, and intense fear,” allowing for advanced meaning-making opportunities to enhance the daily lives of all adult learners (Darder et al., 2009, p. 23). Educators may encourage adult learners to operate differently in their daily lives, aligning their actions with personal value-belief-systems for greater wellbeing. Moving ahead, critical and contemplative frameworks are used to examine traditional narratives of IHEs.

### **Cultural Conflicts and Ethical Considerations**

Like hooks (1994), I turned to theory as a way of understanding my past academic experience. In her book titled, *Teaching to Transgress*, she writes,

I came to theory because I was hurting ... I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw theory then a location for healing. (p. 59)

With similar intent, I use theory as a practice of liberation to deconstruct Western assumptions and its impact on my own academic life, as well as the lives of all adult learners. Using personal journal reflections, I self-reflexively examined my lived experience, identifying defense mechanisms used in response to the cultural tensions during my higher education experience. My journaling evidenced greater more intense tendencies toward overworking, compartmentalizing, and perfecting as I advanced in my educational degrees. For example, on August 2008 I journaled,

The world seems to require perfection. Yet, the term perfect remains relative because of its obscure definition. It grants us no finish line to stop the race for flawlessness. We have no indicator telling us when to stop. Why do we feel this innate sense to be perfect when we do not even know what perfect is? It is not perfection we should be in search of. It is the self we should learn to give meaning to.

Looking back, my actions differed from my feelings, causing cognitive confusion. My feelings aligned well with my subjectivity, honoring self-awareness and self-identity as part of my humanity. Yet, my actions were externally motivated and resembled those of Western culture, aspiring for certainty and achievement. Ultimately, this exemplifies a state of incongruence due to cultural assimilation. Sternberg and Williams (2010) understand cultural assimilation as the process by which an individual’s culture comes to resemble that of another.

As way of another illustration, I journaled in April 2011: “The media constantly exposes us to ideologies of perfection and how it is attached to success. I have yet to understand if this sense of perfect is at all healthy.” As noted in the timeline of my journal reflections, the greater my academic success the more I assimilated to Western culture, relying on protective tactics of perfectionism for productivity. My experience is rationalized by hooks (2003), she explains,

“collusion happens simply because we are all products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society” (p. 35). My reflections evidence how Western assumptions surface in higher education culture, conditioning learned habitual behavior reinforced by traditional narratives.

The paradox between Western tradition and my cultural background continued to inflict cultural conflict, slowly altering elements of my behavior to meet Western standards of success. In the same journal entry, I go on to share, “I’ve lost something. What it is I am still unsure, but I know that something is missing. I don’t feel like I used to, I don’t talk like I used to, and I don’t think like I used to.” To help rationalize the essence of my reflection, Alicia Keys writes,

it’s hard to pinpoint the precise moment when we internalize others’ assessments; it’s usually not just a single experience but rather a series of moments that bruise the spirit and lead us to distrust ourselves and those around us. And then we wake up ... and realize we don’t know the last time we’ve lived life only to please ourselves. (2020, p. 29)

The socialization process may condition adult learners to behave in ways that further dominant social systems (hooks, 2003). In order to change this behavior, ethical and moral examinations of traditional narratives in higher education are warranted.

Similar to hooks (1994), my desire “to grasp what was happening around and within me” slowly became a source of healing (p. 59). As a result, I honored my lived experience with the practice of self-disclosure, participating in open and honest dialogue with others about my higher education experience. Modeling vulnerability taught me that many colleagues and friends also share a similar academic past. I also came to learn that recent research shows a like journey for adult learners nationwide (Flaherty, 2018; Schmalz, 2017; Soni, 2019). As a matter of fact, my academic experiences are not unlike many of my colleagues, friends, and other adult learners in current mainstream higher education, all of whom achieved professional success despite similar cultural roadblocks. Moving forward, it is imperative to deconstruct Western assumptions in higher education to explore its validity and impact on adult learning in hopes of enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of all adult learners.

As shown above, Belenky and Stanton (2000) reason that an uncritical approach to the socialization of Western value-belief-systems may cause adult learners to experience poor emotional health and cultural bias. The authors go on to explain that many first-generation minority adult learners identify with backgrounds that do not regard the same value-belief-systems associated with Western culture. For this reason, adult learners may reach a state of incongruence when thoughts, feelings, and behaviors appear to be incompatible with one another (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). If a state of incongruence is reached, the need to survive sometimes prompts an unquestionable assimilation to cultural norms. It is to be expected that cultural assimilation facilitates the type, and extent, of adult learning, potentially reinforcing cultural conflicts in higher education. In turn, adult learners are likely to adopt protective tactics to actualize learning goals such as, polarized ways of thinking, fragmentation of the self, compartmentalized behavior, emotional numbing, obsession with certainty, and isolating and distrusting mechanisms (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Ben-Shahar, 2009; Brown, 2018; Parker, 2004). To invite holistic human growth and wellbeing, learning must be appreciated as an experience that improves life in its entirety, including mind-body-soul.

To date, there is a growing consensus in the literature supporting a relationship between wellbeing and academics. By way of example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CAEL) administered a study indicating more than 77% of educator

respondents agreed that social and emotional competencies impact academics (as cited by Markowitz and Bouffard, 2020). Given the importance of wellbeing, many scholars theorized psycho-social, humanistic, moral, and spiritual lifespan frameworks for consideration (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1963, 1983, 1984; Maslow, 1954). These theories support ethical and moral development through the process and exploration of the self in relation to the world. Wellbeing is a significant outcome of holistic human development and learning perspectives in favor of a person-centered education as a practice of freedom, supporting areas of: (a) identity formation, (b) social belongingness, and (c) meaning-making.

**Identity Formation.** In Western culture, socially constructed notions of success and failure are formulated through rewards and punishments. Through the lens of behavioral theory, the environment is directly correlated to the cause and effect of learning (Lieberman, 2000). In higher education culture, grades, recognition, and merit over-emphasize external motivation, creating a “constant pressure to conform or to endure punishment for non-conformity” (hooks, 2003, p. 20). Western standards of success make it so that adult learners struggle with cultural tension to achieve learning goals based on external measures of success. For many adult learners, the higher education experience may feel like a high-stakes learning environment to prove self-worth by way of external rewards, eliciting undesirable feelings like that of anxiety and stress in pursuit of self-preservation (Flaherty, 2018; Purpel, 1989). Despite external pressures of achievement, Chickering and Reisser (1993) support a more positive sense of competence and confidence when adult learner performance is based on personal standards of growth in IHEs, not external sources of motivation and external reward. The authors argue that the inclusion of personal value-belief-systems supports greater self-awareness for more profound identity formation, positively affecting adult learning goals. Educators may consider prioritizing internalized standards of growth instead of societal expectation to better support holistic development and learning. Next, adult learners and social belongingness are explored.

**Social Belongingness.** In Western culture, individualism is reinforced through the promotion of global competition and economic wealth. This type of social-system formulates a culture of survival. When survival of the fittest is the higher education context, the human collective may be perceived as a threat to individual success. Although individualism is emphasized in IHEs, scholars theorize human growth to be inter-connected with social needs for belonging. Such as, Erikson (1950, 1968) who described adult development to involve the pursuit of intimacy, where individuals seek intimate connections with others to avoid isolation (Sternberg & Williams, 2010). In addition, Maslow (1954) theorized the human lifespan to be comprised of particular needs, arguing that human growth cannot be met without initially satisfying social needs for belonging. In short, both frameworks caution that an inability to achieve intimacy may hinder holistic human growth and wellbeing. In Western IHEs, adult learners may perceive success as a concept that warrants a work ethic of isolation to outperform the other, reducing opportunities for human connection (Brown, 2018; Purple, 1989). Resultantly, Western traditions may contribute to the absence of meaningful social interaction, triggering isolation and loneliness (Brown, 2018; Soni, 2019). Regardless of individualistic cultural norms, Chickering and Reisser (1993) encourage the development of mature interpersonal relationships because it provides adult learners with support-systems, evoking their most authentic self in community with others. Educators may consider building intentional structures of support to encourage social connection and relationship building. Next, adult learners in search for meaning are considered further.

**Meaning-Making.** There exists an intense fragmentation in higher education culture, discrediting diverse ways of knowing (Palmer, 2017, 2004, 1983). Fragmentation may prompt adult learners to attach a moral evaluation to mental dichotomies based on Western tradition such as, thinking is *good* and feeling is *bad* (Ben-Shahar, 2009). Unfortunately, when adult learners fail to recognize their full range of emotion, they are at risk of creating numbing and detached conditions, inhibiting the potential for advanced meaning-making abilities. With greater integration, moral and spiritual theorists propose broader ways of knowing. Suchlike, Kohlberg (1963, 1983, 1984) who established a theoretical framework of moral awareness. He theorized that adult learners initially depended on moral reasoning shaped by social conventions. However, if adult learners are given the opportunity to critically reflect on the confines of a familiar social order, they may adapt the same conventions to ethical principles they perceive as fair. In the end, adult learners become more conscious about internal motivations, moving beyond cultural, religious, and/or social codes of conduct. Relatedly, Fowler's (1981) faith framework includes traditional and non-traditional (e.g. secular worldviews) forms of spiritual awareness. He suggests that adult learners who accept the limitations of rationality are more likely to embrace life paradoxes, assuming more diverse and multifaceted worldviews. Altogether, both frameworks connect the ability to accept emotion with more open meaning perspectives of life. In IHEs, adult learners may learn to silence emotion in pursuit of certainty and absolutism, dehumanizing the higher education experience (Palmer, 2017, 2004). In turn, Western tradition may contribute to feelings of depression and inauthenticity by reinforcing the idea that truth cannot exist inside the self (Palmer 1983). In response to an overemphasis on objective forms of knowledge, hooks (2003) argues:

To function in our nation [adult learners] need to be able to function in diverse settings. If these skills are not learned then there will be no way for [adult learners] to meet the challenge of a world that is ... already incredibly diverse" (p. 80).

For deep knowledge to be acquired, adult learners have to appreciate learning in the context of a complex world, coming to terms with multiple ways of knowing. Educators may consider more integrative approaches to adult learning in IHEs, connecting the will to know with the will to feel.

Given the holistic human development and learning literature, there is strong consensus supporting wellbeing as it relates to academic success (Palmer et al., 2010). Markowitz and Bouffard (2020) stress, "we have reached a point in the research where educators ... can no longer reasonably argue that attention to social and emotional competencies is nice but not necessary. These skills are important enough ... to constitute an equity issue [in education]" (p. viii). It is critical for educators to consider safe spaces for exploration and self-reflection, emphasizing complex understandings of the self and the world (Pisani, 2005). IHEs can be a place where adult learners strengthen congruence between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, equipping them with greater cognitive capacities to enrich their daily lives and realize wellbeing. Next, contemplative methods inform teaching and learning approaches as a practice of liberation, counter-culture to current mainstream higher education.

### **Contemplation as Liberatory Practice**

To counter traditional narratives of higher education, educators have offered the value of a contemplative education. Contemplative thought values human wholeness over societal division (hooks, 2003), serving adult learners in the practice of freedom rather than the preservation of



oppressive structures. Experts in the field of contemplative practice offer five constructs in support of a working definition: (a) emotional intelligence, (b) compassion/self-compassion, (c) active listening, (d), mindfulness and (e) reflection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Given this framework, Krikorian and Busse (2019) understand emotional intelligence theory as one way to conceptualize the theoretical framework for contemplative practice. Also, the researchers conceive reflection as an interdependent variable with the remaining constructs. On that basis, the working definition of contemplative practice includes the following elements for purposes of this article: (a) compassion/self-compassion, (b) active listening, and (c) mindfulness. A contemplative approach to higher education may empower adults to learn in all their humanity, including available senses like that of mind-body-soul (Palmer et al., 2010). This alternative approach generates a multifaceted way of knowing in response to cultural tensions instigated by traditional narratives of current mainstream higher education. Overall, contemplative practice aims to facilitate education as a practice of freedom, enabling growth opportunities in areas of identify formation, social belongingness, and meaning-making for adult learner wellbeing.

Specifically, Barbezat and Bush (2014) define *compassion* as a state of awareness focused on the suffering of others coupled with the desire to see them relieved of that grief. Whereas, *self-compassion* involves self-awareness, practicing kindness to oneself, and understanding failure as part of humanity (Neff, 2003). Educators may consider encouraging adult learners to have compassion, both compassion for others and self-compassion. As an example, Neff (2011) offers a practice titled, compassionate role-play. Using a three-chair exercise, educators may help adult learners reduce self-criticism and strengthen a kinder perspective when learning something new. To start, place three empty chairs in a triangle shape. Ask the adult learner to express an academic-related problem or clinical-experience issue. Then, ask the adult learner to move to the next chair and share the voice of their inner-critic. Next, have them move to the last chair to express a voice of compassion. The process may go back and forth as the participant role-plays all three parts of the self until a gentler perspective is reached. Compassion and self-compassion calls to mind the need for adult learners to develop as whole beings in comradeship with their community (hooks, 2001).

*Active listening* represents those who listen without bias, establish rapport, listen for emotion, ask questions solely for comprehension reasons, and refrain from personalization (Brady, 2009). Educators may encourage active listening to develop trusting didactic relationships. Crook-Lyon and Potkar (2010) suggest how consistent communication may serve as one way to establish rapport. For example, active listening may help to tailor continuous and constructive feedback when determining ineffective approaches when engaging with new material. Also, Palmer et al. (2010) suggest using contemplative inquiry as a mode to ask content related questions. In the process, the authors recommend modeling the same language used by adult learners during dialogue. In other words, educators should not use leading questions that incite specific answers. Further, it is encouraged that educators refrain from always having an answer to all questions, especially if there is uncertainty about a specific problem. Instead, take a moment to reflect for clarity and consult with other adult learners who may offer additional insight. Lastly, contemplative inquiry allows more wait-time for adult learners in between questions, as it may feel interrogating when questions are posed in a quick fashion. Too many questions, absent of time for reflection, may hinder opportunities for meaningful adult learning. The art of listening may guide adult learners in their use of culturally responsive practices while encouraging adaptability in a world of flux (Brady, 2009; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010).

*Mindfulness* is defined as focused and nonjudgmental attention in real-time (Congleton et al., 2017). Mindfulness may guide internal thought processes to avoid past insecurities and future anxieties (Tolle, 2004). Educators may consider encouraging adult learners to focus on the present moment. For instance, Palmer and fellow researchers (2010) suggest asking adult learners to express personal stories in place of ideas to help ease apprehension when learning something new. The invitation to share a story offers a multifaceted way of thinking and learning. Moreover, Ben-Shahar (2009) offers professional journaling as one way to aid in the reduction of past worries and future anxieties. The journaling method allows adult learners to express current thoughts safely on paper to avoid rumination, allowing for greater attention to be placed on the task at hand. The present moment emphasizes a spirit of growth, allowing for meaningful adult learning within the current cultural or communal contexts.

In parallel, when contemplative methods are used, a learning community is also cultivated. Educators may consider prioritizing relationship building to support a contemplative learning community. For example, Crook-Lyon and Potkar (2010) recommend building trusting relationships by setting clear learning goals directly *with* adult learners. Mutual agreements on learning goals, content, and tasks may strengthen the perceived level of control adult learners have over their development. In addition, co-construction of objectives may strengthen the quality of didactic relationships. Developing goals at the beginning of the relationship and revisiting aspirations consistently helps to monitor learning over time. Also, Ancis and Ladany (2010) urge adult learners to question content and share feedback on didactic relationships to disrupt existing power dynamics in current mainstream higher education. In the same way, hooks (1994) advocates for a reassuring and safe classroom environment by modeling self-disclosure, sharing vulnerabilities to emphasize the universal human condition. A contemplative learning community calls to mind trusting and safe relationships, evoking adult learners' most authentic self in community with others.

In design and application, contemplative practice are integrated with curriculum and complimentary to instruction (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Overall, contemplative practice aims to move beyond the mastery of content, attending to holistic human development and learning for overall wellbeing. Wellbeing emphasizes the “living truth of our essential humaneness,” prioritizing personal value-belief-systems above cultural expectation (hooks, 2003, p. 66). Given the contemplative literature, this article utilizes a working definition informed by four principles, summed up in the acronym CALM: (a) **C**ompassion, (b) **A**ctive Listening, (c) **L**earning Community, and (d) **M**indfulness. CALM is one way to educate for the practice of freedom, renegotiating Western assumptions in higher education culture. Education as the practice of freedom empowers adult learners to live consciously, teaching them to act in ways that prioritize the self. Moreover, CALM aligns well with Markowitz and Bouffard's (2020) anchor competencies framework, reinforcing a variety of socio-emotional outcomes that may benefit adult learner wellbeing. In general, CALM approaches call attention to the whole realm of human wholeness often neglected in current mainstream higher education. For a summation of CALM refer to Table 1.

Table 1

CALM Approaches to Adult Learning

	<b>Construct</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Competencies</b>
<b>C</b>	compassion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Compassionate Role-Play (Neff, 2011):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Place three empty chairs in a triangle shape;</li> <li>➤ Ask adult learners to express a work or academic-related problem;</li> <li>➤ Ask adult learners to move to the next chair and share the voice of their inner-critic;</li> <li>➤ Ask adult learners to move to the last chair to express a voice of compassion;</li> <li>➤ Continue until a gentler perspective is reached.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Foster self-reflection,</li> <li>❖ Foster growth mindset,</li> <li>❖ Cultivate perseverance, (Markowitz &amp; Bouffard, 2020).</li> </ul>
<b>A</b>	active listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Ongoing Communication (Crook-Lyon &amp; Potkar, 2010):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Offer continuous feedback when learning new material.</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ Contemplative Inquiry (Palmer et al., 2010):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Prompt adult learners with open-ended questions;</li> <li>➤ Model the same language used by the adults during dialogue;</li> <li>➤ Avoid using leading questions;</li> <li>➤ Refrain from always having an answer to all questions;</li> <li>➤ Reflect for clarity;</li> <li>➤ Consult other adult learners;</li> <li>➤ Allow more wait-time in between questions.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Build trusting relationships,</li> <li>❖ Foster self-reflection,</li> <li>❖ Create community,</li> <li>❖ Promote collaborative learning,</li> <li>❖ Respond constructively across differences (Markowitz &amp; Bouffard, 2020).</li> </ul>
<b>L</b>	learning community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Didactic Relationships (Ancis &amp; Ladany, 2010; hooks, 1994; Pisani, 2005):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Urge adult learners to question content;</li> <li>➤ Encourage adult learners to share feedback on teaching/mentorship/supervision style;</li> <li>➤ Advocate for a safe classroom environment;</li> <li>➤ Model self-disclosure;</li> <li>➤ Process cultural issues and responses to such issues.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Foster self-reflection,</li> <li>❖ Foster growth mindset,</li> <li>❖ Cultivate perseverance,</li> <li>❖ Create community,</li> <li>❖ Promote collaborative learning,</li> <li>❖ Respond constructively across differences (Markowitz &amp; Bouffard, 2020).</li> </ul>

	<b>Construct (Continuation)</b>	<b>Practice (Continuation)</b>	<b>Competencies (Continuation)</b>
<b>L</b>	learning community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Mutual Agreements (Crook-Lyon &amp; Potkar, 2010):                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Set clear learning goals directly <i>with</i> adults;</li> <li>➤ Co-construct learning goals for assessment;</li> <li>➤ Revisit learning goals consistently;</li> <li>➤ Monitor and assess learning over time.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Build trusting relationships,</li> <li>❖ Foster self-reflection,</li> <li>❖ Foster growth mindset,</li> <li>❖ Cultivate perseverance,</li> <li>❖ Promote collaborative learning,</li> <li>❖ Respond constructively across differences (Markowitz &amp; Bouffard, 2020).</li> </ul>
<b>M</b>	mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Storytelling (Palmer et al., 2010):                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Ask adult learners to express personal stories in relation to content.</li> </ul> </li> <li>❖ Journal Writing (Ben-Shahar, 2009):                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Assign a professional journal;</li> <li>➤ Reflect on strengths and growth areas to inform practice;</li> <li>➤ Use theory to critically analyze thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in journal writings.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Foster self-reflection,</li> <li>❖ Foster growth mindset,</li> <li>❖ Cultivate perseverance,</li> <li>❖ Respond constructively across differences (Markowitz &amp; Bouffard, 2020).</li> </ul>

Contemplative practice remains in its early stages of development compared to other theories. Since the field of contemplative practice is relatively new in the social sciences, there is a need for future research. Barbezat and Bush (2014) suggest continued and strong empirical findings be considered, exploring the nature of its practice and need for assessment. For example, conceptual flaws addressed in the literature note the missing consensus of a universal definition. The gap related to the operationalization of the term causes confusion, despite existing but varied working definitions proposed by researchers to date. Since the term has not reached universal consensus, many argue its conflicting understandings cannot be accepted as a valid concept. Further, opponents state a lack in consensus may complicate protocols for assessment and evaluation. Rather than denying this critique, Barbezat and Bush recommend learning from the criticism to strengthen research methods in support of contemplative practice. Despite attempts by researchers to challenge these flaws with anecdotal and descriptive evidence, criticism related to contemplative practice remains.

Additionally, opponents of contemplative practice may argue that, given its intrapersonal and interpersonal nature, educators are not equipped to facilitate suggested strategies as it resembles the work of a mental health professional. It is critical to note, contemplative practices are not intended to substitute for professional mental health advice and consultation. Instead, Markowitz and Bouffard (2020) put it best when they describe socio-emotional approaches as a request to, “work differently to view students from a perspective that encourages and develops their social and emotional growth in support of academic success” (p. xi). Markowitz and Bouffard also acknowledge critics who suggest that parents and caregivers are solely responsible for socio-emotional development. In response to this opinion, they cite, “developing ... social, emotional, and cultural awareness and competence is everyone’s responsibility” (p. 82). Here, contemplative approaches are intended to accentuate the lived experience, promote a cooperative spirit, encourage an ethic of care, and honor the innate human condition for an enriched quality of life and greater wellbeing (Palmer et al., 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Given the political and historical influences, it becomes evident how Western assumptions are reinforced in higher education culture, prompting potential sources of cultural conflict in route to the academic aspirations of adult learners (Palmer, 1983, 1998, 2004; Palmer et al., 2010; Purpel, 1989). Oppressive systems linked to the current mainstream higher education no longer works for the diversity of the people. As shown on U.S. college campuses, adult learners are reporting greater experiences with feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness as they continue to wrestle with personal understandings of the self, the other, and life purpose (Schmalz, 2017). Despite rising mental health concerns nationwide, systemic higher education trends continue to work against integrative approaches (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Moving forward, it is imperative that educators recognize the intersectionality of many identities in a socially, culturally, economically, and racially changing societal majority.

This article aims to contribute to contemplative literature, supporting diverse meaning-making opportunities to enrich the daily lives of all adult learners, emphasizing higher education as a practice of freedom. Educators have a responsibility to uncover, deconstruct, and reassess Western assumptions and its validity. Rather than viewing wellbeing as separate from the aims of higher education, rising statistics for mental health concerns are calling educators to play a more active role in identifying mutually reinforcing ways to support holistic human growth in

IHEs. Like CALM, alternative approaches facilitate integrative and diverse ways of teaching and learning, opposing domination in all its forms. Educators may use CALM to teach in ways that educate for the practice of liberation, establishing classrooms as a place where adult learners discover their own sense of freedom.

Today, I serve as faculty and remain committed to more integrative approaches to higher education. I strive to broaden and deepen understandings of diverse perspectives to recognize historically marginalized voices (Freire, 1970/2018), different forms of knowledge (Palmer, 2017, 2004, 1983), and provide counter narratives to Western assumptions in higher education culture (Mezirow, 1991). It is a moral obligation, in honor of the basic human right to education, that educators work to confront cultural tensions, causing moral injury to adult learners by excessive stressors reinforced by traditional narratives (Purpel, 1989, 1999). A person-centered higher education honors the innate human complexities gifted in all of us, mirroring the diversity of the people. The use of contemplative practice may empower adult learners, creating a positive context for learning to aid in the negotiation process of traditional narratives (hooks, 2003).

In the beginning of this article, I share reflections of my academic journey, including the protective measures of perfectionism used to actualize my learning goals. However, as my academic career concluded, I began to embrace the significance of a complex humanity. In May 2015 I journaled,

I am not afraid to endure pain. I embrace living life fully. I embrace my imperfections and uncertainty. I embrace experiencing emotion in all its capacities. I embrace this because I so confidently understand that this is the way of the world — we live because we feel.

This excerpt indicates the beginning steps of a renegotiation process to address cultural tension supported by Western assumption in higher education culture. Here, I refuse to accept a one-dimensional understanding of life that is contrary to the basic human needs of my humanity. My hope in writing this article is to disrupt the current mainstream higher education system, causing moral harm to adult learners by excessive pressures reinforced by traditional narratives. My hope is to encourage others in joining me towards the advocacy of more open, diverse, and complex approaches to higher education, enriching the daily lives of all adult learners. With a contemplative approach to higher education, educators may diversify ways of knowing, liberating adult learners from the limitations of Western value-belief-systems in dominant culture.

In closing, with respect to Maxine Greene (1988), “to be free ... we need to be continually empowered to choose ourselves, to create our identities ... something we can never do meaningfully alone” (p. 51). Those who join me in the prioritization of wellbeing through the facilitation of contemplative practice simultaneously champion education as a practice of liberation. We can work to cultivate a critical awareness, equipping adult learners with the tools necessary to break from dominant narratives. Educators can utilize CALM as one way of introducing an authentic life aligned with personal value-belief-systems that honor the intersectionality of mind-body-soul. Together, we can change systems of current mainstream higher education so that IHEs are not a place where adult learners are socialized to support dominant culture, but rather where they create the conditions of freedom to discover their true self in pursuit of wellbeing.

## Author Notes

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## Dedication

To my niece Danica and nephew Isaiah who inspire me to make the world a more loving place.

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