


December 2024

Intentional unlearning practices in postmassified university systems: Reformation for the metamodern era

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Recommended Citation

Lynn, M. A. (2024). Intentional unlearning practices in postmassified university systems: Reformation for the metamodern era. *Journal of Global Education and Research*, 8(3), 222-235. <https://www.doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.8.3.1334>

Intentional unlearning practices in postmassified university systems: Reformation for the metamodern era

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Abstract

A crucial aspect of the learning cycle, unlearning has recently received more attention in academic discussions about the future of higher education. In an attempt to improve equality and equity of access to quality educational experiences in the wake of postmassification, the recent literature has highlighted the need to incorporate unlearning practices to transform university learning experiences. This literature review examines the role of the unlearning process in engaging diverse student populations in tertiary learning environments. First, traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of unlearning are explored. Next, specific issues related to unlearning in higher education are discussed before synthesizing current studies describing extant strategies employed to foster conditions necessary for unlearning. Findings suggest that creating unlearning contexts, promoting contemplative practices, and using strategic foresight methods have the potential to enable the unlearning process. However, further research is needed to triangulate findings from emergent studies on unlearning practices in higher education.

Keywords

intentional unlearning, higher education, constructivism, knowledge management

Revisions

Submission date: Sep. 8, 2023; 1st Revision: Nov. 4, 2023; 2nd Revision: Dec. 23, 2023; 3rd Revision: Oct. 3, 2024; Acceptance: Dec. 1, 2024

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Intentional Unlearning Practices in Postmassified University Systems: Reformation for the Metamodern Era

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Abstract

A crucial aspect of the learning cycle, unlearning has recently received more attention in academic discussions about the future of higher education. In an attempt to improve equality and equity of access to quality educational experiences in the wake of postmassification, the recent literature has highlighted the need to incorporate unlearning practices to transform university learning experiences. This literature review examines the role of the unlearning process in engaging diverse student populations in tertiary learning environments. First, traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of unlearning are explored. Next, specific issues related to unlearning in higher education are discussed before synthesizing current studies describing extant strategies employed to foster conditions necessary for unlearning. Findings suggest that creating unlearning contexts, promoting contemplative practices, and using strategic foresight methods have the potential to enable the unlearning process. However, further research is needed to triangulate findings from emergent studies on unlearning practices in higher education.

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Introduction

The democratization of access to higher education (HE) that boosted enrollment rates across previously marginalized student demographics has engendered benefits and challenges for tertiary systems of education worldwide in ensuring responsiveness to socially, academically, and culturally diverse populations. As HE systems in developed and most developing nations have transitioned into a postmassified stage enrolling over half of the age cohort, its stratification, digitization, and marketization tendencies have added new dimensions of inequality of access and opportunity, quality of educational experiences, and commodification of knowledge reinforcing instructivist approaches (Czerniewicz et al., 2023; Marginson, 2017). Contemporary debates within the HE sphere also question the role, meaning, and function of this high-access postsecondary education and call for a new model of HE learning to deliver excellence through adopting transversal practices that emphasize criticality and creativity to destabilize the status quo presumption and dividualization trends of the *McAcademy* (Beighton, 2018; Tight, 2019). Such profound changes require a reevaluation of not only current HE mission, policies, and practices but of the epistemological mindsets that inform, influence, and to some degree mold these in order to undertake the necessary unlearning for transformative change (O'Reilly, 2018).

Meaningful contributions to society in the 21st century rely on the ability to unlearn and relearn with the pace of change driven by the fourth industrial revolution; therefore, HE graduates need to change from consumers to creators of knowledge which is enabled by flexible mindsets driven by unlearning (Nevshehir, 2022). This ability to adapt and successfully function amidst mind-boggling rates of technological and social change is predicated on being fully engaged in the unlearning process in a HE academic environment that intentionally fosters this process for all its learners. However, an approach to knowledge construction with a concomitant shift to a student-centered approach involves a refocus on the purpose of learning and the role of the curriculum, as O'Connor (2022) points out that the complexities of the curriculum and learning conditions required for learning to occur within a constructivist approach have been largely disregarded in HE. Within the framework of constructivist learning theories, learners should be provided with the essential conditions to complete the cycle of learning which includes the unlearning step. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of intentional unlearning practices on diverse learner engagement in postmassified HE systems.

Historical Summary

Formal teaching and learning processes are informed and influenced by philosophical perspectives, developments in psychology that drive learning theories, and socio-economic contexts. As such, the role and relevance of HE are contingent upon fulfilling its stated purpose at both an individual and societal scale as it positions itself in a specific political, economic, and socio-cultural setting to convey and/or further develop knowledge. With the advent of HE massification, human capital theory has largely informed the purpose and practice of HE to be primarily that of equipping graduates with the skills and knowledge needed for a successful professional career through implementing standardized approaches which turned learning into a systematic, linear, generic process (Kromydas, 2017). However, postmodern era technological, political, and societal developments as well as contemporary globalization and sustainability concerns have contributed to considerable debate about the ontological and epistemological underpinnings for reframing the role of HE to prepare graduates for successful participation in shaping a common future within a more equitable, inclusive, and personalized educational environment (Kromydas, 2017; Wanti et al., 2022). Notwithstanding its theoretical or philosophical framework, human learning involves not only the acquisition but also the modification of “knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors,” thus change is identified as a criterion for demonstrating learning conceptualized as “capable of doing something differently” (Schunk, 2020, p. 2-3). Consequently, each major learning theory attempting to predicate educational approaches conceptualizes the *change* aspect of learning, or what could be envisioned as unlearning, differently, as discussed below.

Traditional Approaches to Unlearning

While unlearning as a so-called distinct concept is currently emerging in contemporary HE literature with applications at both the individual and organizational level as discussed in subsequent sections of this article, all prominent psychological theories of human learning also implicitly address the process of individual unlearning of behavior, knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes as learners' prior knowledge and experiences not only foster but also hinder learning in inadvertent processes referred to as forgetting or discarding of knowledge or behaviors (Brod, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). This recognition underscores unlearning as an important facet of the

learning process that focuses on the importance of managing existing knowledge or experiences that can hamper the acquisition and development of new knowledge or skills (Mehrizi & Romero, 2013). Therefore, the implications of unlearning in knowledge management include the validation that neither individuals nor organizations are blank slates as well as the acknowledgment that the unlearning process may require careful consideration in designing successful learning experiences that foster thoughtful questioning for intentional rather than accidental release of prior knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Becker, 2018).

Through a behaviorist lens, human knowledge is epistemologically conceptualized as functional where learning is situationally specific (Schunk, 2020). Behavior change or modification strategies such as corrective feedback or positive reinforcement are used to facilitate adaptive behaviors when prior habits are no longer relevant in a different context. In the Pavlovian and Skinnerian traditions, unlearning is promoted through certain stimulus-response associations which would lead to the extinction or inhibition of irrelevant or undesirable behaviors (Schunk, 2020). Behaviorist research indicates unlearning could also be encouraged through developing a metacognitive understanding of the conditions when the stimulus-response association is relevant or not, as proposed by parenthesis learning (Mehrizi & Romero, 2013). As a result, behavioral unlearning would result in an individual's ability to relinquish past habits, practices, or behaviors in favor of new ones (Becker, 2018).

From a cognitivist perspective, human learning involves developing meaningful knowledge through processing information and reorganizing mental schemas via observation (Schunk, 2020). New perceptions of reality can render knowledge obsolete, and cognitive dissonance is fomented when outdated mental models filter out new information leading to incorrect decisions or misinterpretations. Cognitivist research suggests that some invalid knowledge can be unlearned through critical feedback, critical reflection, and disconfirmation of beliefs although the latter represents a challenging, multifaceted, arduous process when it involves deeply rooted schemas requiring motivation to expose one's assumptions and deal with criticism (Mehrizi & Romero, 2013). Analogical reasoning and *plausible theories* methods can also foster unlearning and provide opportunities to identify biases in the cognitivist tradition (Lee, 2003). Conscious thinking supported by critical reflection may also be difficult as such cognition can expose power structures and further be limited by attentional capacity. Thus, cognitive unlearning could also be facilitated by "developing a meta-awareness of the context" where reliance on extant cognitive models is inappropriate, or what has been theorized as tuning – "the slow modification and refinement of schemata [...] when using them in various contexts" (Mehrizi & Romero, 2013, p. 16; Schunk, 2020, p. 203).

The constructivist view of learning postulates that humans create knowledge in a subjective process of interacting within their physical and social environment (Schunk, 2020). For dialectical constructivists such as Vygotsky, human learning is a socio-culturally mediated process requiring active engagement in creating subjective or personal knowledge (Schunk, 2020). Accordingly, knowledge thus created acquires not only relevance to a certain context, as in cognitivism, but also value for a certain community. Disequilibrium or cognitive conflict can be promoted through feedback, but since social interaction is necessary for new meaning to emerge, conflicting social views require resolution within a social environment. Unlearning in this case also involves delegitimizing prior knowledge that is no longer relevant nor valuable in a different social context (Mehrizi & Romero, 2013). Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development which identifies

reversibility in thinking, conceptual change research also highlights the crucial role of learning environments that can promote cognitive dissonance and create awareness of misconceptions about the world to support reevaluation of one's epistemological and ontological beliefs (diSessa, 2022). All in all, the process of unlearning irrelevant prior knowledge or experience whether deep-seated behaviors, mindsets, and socially-legitimized paradigms could be initiated and managed internally or externally through feedback, criticism, and critical reflection.

Contemporary Conceptualizations of Unlearning

Unlearning as a concept and phenomenon so coined became an explicit subject of scholarly debate in the late 1970s, originally in business management literature, and was initially theorized and shaped in this context as a process of intentional elimination of obsolete knowledge or experience impeding new learning at organizational level (Nguyen, 2017). Although many aspects of organizational and individual unlearning still lack consensus in spite of a large body of related literature, the notion of unlearning has also entered public discourse and attracted scholarly interest in the field of education in the past decade. Based on conceptualizations of organizational unlearning as “abandon[ing] knowledge, values or behaviors” and cognitivist approaches to undermining old learning, Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2016) explore the possible conceptualization of individual unlearning and unlearning contexts in a HE setting to foster individual reorientation through appropriate change in cognitive structures or key assumptions regulating behavior (p. 261). Also, criticizing early definitions of unlearning, Grisold and colleagues (2017) apply a connectionist approach to clarify that cognitive unlearning involves a process of “reduc[ing] the influence of old knowledge for the sake of creating new knowledge and/or patterns of thinking” rather than its elimination or removal as formerly conceptualized (p. 4617). The unlearning process is further contextualized within Kolb's experiential learning theory which highlights the creation of new knowledge as a transformation of experience and the need for enabling spaces where learners can safely engage in this process (Becker, 2018; Grisold et al., 2017).

Contemporary examination of individual unlearning has contributed to further distinguishing it from organizational and team unlearning as well as clarifying that unlearning is clearly distinguishable from learning (Becker, 2018). In addition, recent research indicates that unlearning represents just one stage in the updating or selective types of learning while not a stage in accumulative learning in which learners simply extend their extant knowledge (Matsuo, 2019). Thereby, individual unlearning is currently conceptualized as “consciously choos[ing] to give up, abandon, or stop using outdated knowledge, values, or behaviors” or making necessary changes to beliefs and routines that affect one's attitudes and behaviors (Matsuo, 2019, p. 466). This definition strongly differentiates deep unlearning from superficial unlearning as deep learning requires the deliberate action of examining one's values or assumptions or “problematic frames of reference” which associates deep unlearning with higher-order learning, especially in an adult context, such as transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (2003, p. 58). Grounding his quantitative study in transformative learning theory, Matsuo (2019) also found that individual unlearning contributes to increased engagement through reflection and critical reflection, especially, as theorized in double-loop learning which requires analysis of prior experiences, knowledge, or assumptions contributing to a negative outcome.

Tome (2021) also highlights the criticality of reflection in the unlearning process while stressing the importance of considering the possible effects of aging on brain plasticity. As a complex

multistep process, transformational learning includes unlearning invalid knowledge and collaboratively reconstructing new, legitimized knowledge thus requiring “both individual and collective motivation” to understand oneself and the environment (Tome, 2021, p. 8). Fostering unlearning is thus predicated on a revised conceptualization of learning and education that goes beyond an exclusive view of learning as a rational process and instead also considers learners’ physical, emotional, and intellectual needs to create welcoming learning spaces and meaningful educational experiences that promote self-discovery (Tome, 2021). The character of these learning spaces and experiences is paramount in promoting unlearning as in addition to reflection, the process also relies on learners experiencing humility and vulnerability in recognizing that subjective experiences cannot qualify as valid criteria in other contexts and must be differentiated from general rules. In reconceptualizing learners as whole beings, Tome (2021) extends the theoretical framework underpinning unlearning to include Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory, Goleman’s emotional intelligence theory, and Freire’s critical pedagogy to lend the unlearning process the goal of acting to transform reality based on newly, collaboratively created knowledge.

Current Research and Strategies

Numerous articles in current HE literature discuss the imperative need for this sector of education to engage in various unlearning practices in reframing its societal role and adopting policies and pedagogical approaches that serve its increasingly diverse student population. Accordingly, HE narratives related to its purview, scope, values, power structures, curriculum, practices, and resources are discussed to identify gaps in the individual and collective opportunities and benefits portended by the shift to mass enrollment (Evans et al., 2021). This, in turn, can inform the meaning, scope, and role of unlearning processes and practices that can contribute to updating the tertiary education system in order to reshape it as a university of the future, also through what has been hypothesized as vertical literacy (Scharmer, 2019).

Contemporary Issues Concerning Unlearning

The stratification, marketization, and learnification of high-participation HE have led to increasing credentialism and competition in a knowledge-based economy, so Dunne (2016) argues that this process of updating HE should begin with questioning the narrative of learning, to interrupt its politics as a ubiquitous element of progressive, endless growth that turns lifelong learners into mere consumers of knowledge and equates learning with education (Biesta, 2015; Marginson, 2017).

Transition Pedagogies

Moving successfully from one stage of formal education to another involves learners in a process of transition that includes unlearning assumptions, attitudes, and practices that are no longer required or relevant in the new learning environment. The transition to a HE setting is a complex and stressful process that demands active unlearning because different aspects of knowledge, ability, and beliefs are related to students’ learner identity (Vandesteeg, 2012). For example, as Vandesteeg’s (2012) research indicates, most students need to unlearn their perceptions of education, their role in the learning process, or their attitudes towards the purpose of reading, how to read critically, and their dependency on others for their own learning. For some students, unlearning may involve changing negative self-perceptions and attitudes about the intellectual

potential and skills to succeed or making sociocultural and psychological adjustments related to factors of marginalization such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background (Williams et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2019). However, unlearning in an academic context has remained an understudied concept, resulting in a scarcity of practical information on how to support adult learners in the unlearning process in the postsecondary classroom (Bonner, 1989). Also, there is limited empirical evidence that has established that student support services or student assistance programs (SAPs) are effectively decreasing inequity on contemporary college campuses that have experienced significant shifts in student demographics and attrition and retention challenges (Fishman et al., 2017; Mead, 2021; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020).

Some researchers maintain that since unlearning includes various aspects of students' identity as learners and human beings and requires their active engagement in new meaning-making within a new academic community, giving students a voice in the unlearning process can support dialog with other community members and reveal how interventions can best support unique student needs (Turner & Tobbel, 2018). Gravett et al. (2020) also argue that a critical examination of the contemporary narrative around transition in the related literature indicates a prevalent deficit theme where students are largely perceived to be at risk which is limited in finding appropriate approaches to assist students. As their research shows, the deficit narrative overlooks additional non-human factors that impact student transitions such as institutional spaces or curriculum sequencing, thus suggesting HE may also need to engage in systemic unlearning to address inherent pedagogical frailty and expand scholarly debate to also include environmental and contextual deficits of HE institutions. Moreover, as critical reflection inherent in the process of cognitive unlearning as a collective practice to enable transformation reveals power structures and their impact on interpersonal professional relationships, traditional power hierarchies within HE learning environments can further contribute to inequity in engagement, especially for historically marginalized learners (Meisenhelter, 2006). The research of Alhadad et al. (2021) using collaborative reflections demonstrates how power inequalities can dampen the impact of student as partners programs (SAPs) designed to empower students to participate in the educational process as collaborators. Accordingly, their research suggests a need for unlearning power and intentional program designs to diminish power inequalities in educational contexts.

Decolonization Theories

Some HE critics also maintain that fostering educational experiences that honor diversity and strive for student inclusion and equity also mandates the need of unlearning the Eurocentric settler perspective that informs institutional culture, curriculum practices, and pedagogical approaches by decolonizing HE systems. Korteweg and Fiddler (2018) examine innovative teacher education programs that aim to assist faculty in unlearning their colonial identities and preparing for respectful relationality by actively challenging assumptions and biases about other cultures and developing genuine relationships with minority students and Indigenous learners. Their research maintains that actively engaging in critical reflection about academic interventions and practices in the classroom can assist with decentering colonial perspectives and embracing cultural humility in the classroom. Ultimately, the unlearning of one's role in the classroom could lead teachers to embrace alternative pedagogical approaches that can foster learners' creativity, such as McWilliam's (2009) meddling pedagogy. Parry (2022) further explains how the use of colonial language in course descriptions can hinder non-native English speakers in HE settings in understanding and relating to course content. Her study purports that a revision of the wording

used in course descriptions and other instructional materials can also contribute to decolonizing students' learning experiences by using inclusive language that avoids stereotyping and recognizes different worldviews.

The recent inclusion literature also distinguishes between diversity and decolonizing HE with the implication that while research on improving diversity is perceived more positively in academe, efforts to decolonize the curriculum may yield more significant changes for equality (Arshad et al., 2021). While being cognizant that decolonization is not a mere synonym for diversity, a realization that the process goes beyond adding diverse perspectives to a course also requires that decolonization is operationalized to allow the process of unlearning to begin (Capan et al., 2020). Therefore, as faculty, Capan et al. (2020) contemplate whether the systemic transformation envisioned by decolonizing HE curriculum could be fully sustained by unlearning instructional pedagogies, practices, and privileges at the individual level. As Lumadi (2021) and Parry (2022) specify, decolonizing may be a complex, laborious process, inherent in unlearning, that requires restructuring HE systems to not only allow representation in the curriculum but also legitimization of knowledge of the diverse cultures participating in the university community. Depending on the national context, unlearning Eurocentric approaches to HE may involve actions ranging from decentering Western knowledge, foregoing Western seminal texts, changing the language of instruction, or adopting culturally relevant frameworks and methodologies.

Current Approaches to Unlearning

While the use of evidence-based HE educational practices that promote engagement and integrated learning for diverse student populations such as high impact practices (HIPs) have been found to make positive contributions towards the quality of undergraduate experiences, equity and opportunity considerations remain to be further addressed in considering how HIPs may also benefit historically marginalized populations (Kinzie et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2022). In addition to curricular and co-curricular interventions, attempting to foster unlearning in light of contemporary cultural, socioeconomic, and political issues also calls for updated methodologies and environmental changes that enable critical reflection to further promote transformative, integrated learning. Classrooms and institutions as a whole must provide safe, engaging spaces for learning and unlearning processes where strategies are in place for cultivating the participants' well-being as they must embrace the sense of personal vulnerability and humility that are inherent in one's journey from mindset to consciousness in order to co-create a sustainable future (Kothari, 2021). However, few contemporary strategies have attempted to address these types of challenges in facilitating unlearning in spite of much scholarly debate calling for unlearning at both individual and institutional levels.

Unlearning Contexts

Dropout rates of over 20 percent for first-time undergraduate freshmen in spite of extant student support services and SAP programs and intentional curriculum-mediated transition practices highlight the challenges of transitioning or adjusting to a HE environment and existing gaps in assisting students to successfully negotiate those challenges (Hanson, 2022; Kift et al., 2010; Shipley & Walker, 2019). Thus, several strategies attempt to manage students' unlearning and well-being as they navigate this first-year HE experience and attempt to create or modify knowledge and skills for engagement in the academic community. Creating an intentional

unlearning context in the classroom environment for learners to experience the cognitive destabilization necessary to induce questioning of assumptions/habits and critical reflection has been demonstrated to have positive effects on undergraduates (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016).

Using counter-knowledge – defined as “inappropriate or incorrect interpretations of certain events or sequences of facts” – as a trigger for the unlearning process, Cegarra-Navarro et al.’s (2016) empirical research found statistically significant correlations indicating that the unlearning context mediates students’ engagement in task achievement through an effect on their regulatory goal orientation (p. 261). Regardless of students’ year of study or field, Matošková’s (2020) empirical research provides additional support for a mediating effect between students’ tacit knowledge and academic performance, where tacit knowledge is conceptualized as a “knowing how” that includes the ability to “detect and correct lapses in [...] operations, [and] to improve upon successes” of “unarticulated mental models,” emphasizing the importance of freshmen engaging in reflection of the appropriateness of their behavior in academic settings (p. 879). These findings indicate the reflection and collaboration aspects of the intentional unlearning process can support students’ learning from their educational experiences to further influence their adaptive engagement in the learning environment (Cegarra-Sánchez & Cegarra-Navarro, 2017).

Unlearning Conditions

Since the unlearning process relies on creating awareness and fostering emotional support to engage in critical reflection, tackle conflict, and negotiate meaning with others, the unlearning environment must address the emotional, psychological, physical, and social well-being of the participants. Recent empirical research into mindfulness practices or contemplative approaches shows significant correlations between mindfulness and all domains of transition to university, even after controlling for social support and self-efficacy, as mindfulness supports awareness at intra- and inter-personal levels (Mettler et al., 2019). Data from a pilot study integrating mindfulness in the curriculum for historically marginalized students suggests the intervention fosters students’ awareness, critical thinking, sense of control, and social belonging (Tillott et al., 2015). When used in conjunction with activities that foster students’ critical thinking skills, mindfulness has the potential to assist undergraduate learners’ ability to develop the metacognitive awareness necessary for healthier adaptive engagement in educational environments (Sherman, 2021).

In addition to assisting with building a sense of community and deeper connectedness with peers and instructors necessary for collaboration, students report increased engagement with course content and activities through mindfulness practices (MacQuarrie et al, 2021). Woloshyn et al. (2022) also found that collective mindfulness practice embedded within a social-constructivist framework to guide academic writing activities fostered deep collaboration and self-regulation that promoted empathy when exploring individual values, experiences, and identities in order to promote a change in perspectives. Because mindfulness approaches share similarities with diverse spiritual practices, such methodologies can be incorporated in culturally responsive contexts to create safe, nurturing educational environments, as Indigenous students report not only improved participation in their courses but also developing awareness of their own academic potential (Ragoonaden, 2017). To transform the culture of HE, compassionate, respectful interactions with students are expected within the entire university ecosystem not just in the classroom, thus Beer (2010) argues that contemplative practices would also prove beneficial for staff and administration.

Unlearning Methods

In an effort to reduce the influence of old knowledge or mindsets during the unlearning process, the strategic foresight method has been developed to facilitate the creation of new knowledge as participants are guided to interact with a mentally constructed desired future (Kaiser et al., 2016). The modified strategic foresight method called Learning from an Envisioned Future requires setting a priori goals when engaging in this unlearning context of the imaginary future environment which is characterized as an enabling space for disconnecting from past knowledge and experiences. Empirical evidence from Grisold et al.'s (2017) research indicates this method of facilitating cognitive unlearning enables knowledge creation and diminishes the effect of prior or current mindsets in doing so, thus producing more innovative ideas compared to an intervention where participants were only required to engage in reflection about previous experiences in order to generate ideas. The study links this type of intentional unlearning context with both individual and organizational learning which highlights its potential usefulness in driving the innovation process needed by HE systems to transform themselves into a new model for the 21st century. Munck and McConnell (2010) argue that the foresight approach provides the flexibility needed for HE to continually adapt, cope with uncertainties and complexities of 21st-century changes, and disrupt the cycle of habitual, dogmatic thinking that informs most current educational practices and policies.

Epistemological Underpinnings

As an intentional process, unlearning is not only predicated on awareness and critical reflection but unlearning proper also requires transformation of the self and, through one's actions, transformation of the world as well. Kolb (2014) predicates his learning cycle on the transactional relationship between the social environment and the learner which results in a process of autopoiesis – self-creation as a human adaptation to realize one's potential and to meet societal needs. This implies that intentional unlearning is a participatory process demanding active engagement with both self and others to collectively determine valid criteria for legitimizing (re)constructed social knowledge (Tome, 2021). Achieving integrative fulfillment from an experiential learning perspective promotes an integrated approach of not only academic but also personal and moral development of the whole person underpinned by integrity and humanistic ideals (Kolb, 2014). As educators, staff, and learners interact with others in learning environments, especially with those from other cultures, faiths, or backgrounds, ethical practices that foster respect, dignity, trust, courage, justice, and empathy should guide interactions within such diverse communities in pursuit of lifelong learning as a continuous process of human adaptation to the continual changes in the physical and social world, as envisioned in Kolb's (2014) philosophy of learning. This approach contributes to connect the relatively newly-formed heterogeneous community of the high-participatory HE system of the 21st century in order to achieve consensus on the welfare of its stakeholders in light of the dialectical nature of knowledge and its commodification in the digital era to better cater to their students' divergent needs and perspectives in endeavoring to appropriately and adequately equip them with the skills required to collaboratively tackle contemporary and future issues facing the world.

Triggered by cognitive dissonance and guided by ethical principles, the intentional unlearning process engages the learning community in active reflection, initiating with self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, their reactions to adversity or threats, and how the former and the

latter impact others. Kolb's (2014) theory envisions learning as a holistic process of self-discovery enabled by a conscious exploration of one's identity that assists in discerning the alignment to set principles for actualizing one's potential rather than self-satisfaction to ultimately engender development from registrative through interpretative to integrative consciousness. Educators or learners engaged in intentional unlearning must act to transform their reality by pursuing and enacting justice, unity, peace, respect, and dignity within their academic community, and by subsequently enacting the positive action needed to achieve their goals and transform society. Attention, intention, and compassion as components of mindfulness represent indispensable aspects in sustaining conscious awareness which leads to transformation that is ultimately enabled by the realization of failure or wrongdoing. This transformative breakthrough of intentional unlearning requires time, patience, and support enabled by systemic change of HE. Therefore, faculty, staff, and institutional leaders must be willing and active participants in the unlearning process alongside their students by working actively to remove remnant barriers and deficits of a HE system that has catered successfully to the needs of specific student demographics to fulfill the requirements of a bygone era.

Thanks to Erasmus, a corrected translation from the Greek into Latin of *metanoieite* affirms that true transformation of self requires fundamental changes at both cognitive and emotional levels as opposed to simply acquiring wisdom or *sapientia* (Cook, 2007). New information, an unfamiliar environment, and encountering different people are triggers for unlearning, even for the best educated, as exemplified by the idiom-worthy experience of St. Paul on the road to Damascus (Michael & Wilson, 2021). In spite of being very intelligent and well-educated, Paul's infamous deficiencies in relating to a new, different lifestyle and belief system required several days of experiencing humility and the acquisition of sufficient courage to ask and accept assistance from others who held divergent ideas. More importantly, Paul's *metanoieite* or transformation was the result of mutual vulnerability as his helper also had to overcome his own doubts and fears to engage. As a cultural epitome of transformation, this experience further serves to demonstrate that all participants must engage in the unlearning process, a person's role in the activity proper notwithstanding. Indeed, all involved, regardless of deeply felt personal philosophy, sectarian prejudice, socio-cultural bias, or the paucity, surfeit, or want of all the former, must engage in critical reflection and materialize themselves in the communicative interaction that embodies their relationship in order to transcend information transfer and enable transformation (Kuhn et al., 2017).

Conclusion

From its inception, HE has been the nexus of society's knowledge, creating and disseminating ideas, but the metamodern era seems to add a (re)creation aspect to interacting with knowledge in the 21st century (Cunff, n. d.). Accelerated by societal changes and fourth industrial revolution developments, the need for innovation is also impacting HE systems as they attempt to address an increasingly diverse and complex role. As HE endeavors to better serve its diverse student population and fulfill its modern social function, this sector of education must capitalize on the transformative impact of the unlearning process for learners, faculty, and administration in challenging current mindsets, pedagogies, and policies. As the traditional, instructivist view of learning as simple acquisition of knowledge translates to stagnation in a current and future professional environment requiring employees to be open to cycles of upskilling and reskilling, students must be accustomed to taking an agile approach to learning. This underscores the

importance of providing all learners with equitable access to the conditions that support engagement in the learn, unlearn, relearn cycle. Kickstarting this process would require the HE academic community to come to a consensus on firmly grounding individual intentional unlearning in learning theory to adeptly contextualize the practice of intentional unlearning to tertiary settings.

Because unlearning is not only a personal journey but also a sojourn that is embedded in a community that provides feedback and support, a transformed HE model would foster whole-being, collaborative, paced learning for deep engagement with the academic community. Such a model could resemble Stanford University's *learned from the future vision* to become an Open Loop University, or perhaps such a model could bear a resemblance to several other currently proposed alternatives to the liberal arts model that reconceptualize learning spaces and interactions with knowledge (Staley, 2019; Stanford2025, n. d.). However, while structuralist/poststructuralist theory may provide the impetus for "the event of thinking" that enables the process of deconstructing contemporary HE systems and their equity and quality challenges, the inherent risk to drive egocentrism into the unlearning process through fragmentation cannot be overlooked (Beighton, 2018; Dunne, 2016, p.17). Ultimately, the underlying tenet implicit in the unlearning phenomenon as contextualized in experiential and transformative learning is represented by personal and academic humility as well as cognizance and acceptance of vulnerability. Thus, the unlearning journey to Damascus is reliant on communicative relationality and a steadfast ethical compass in order to generate the transformation sorely needed in an epoch of steadily increasing personal and social uncertainty.

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