

Wisdom in Three Acts:  
Using Transformative Learning to Teach for Wisdom  
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*This paper explores transformative learning as a means for learning to become wise(r). Three major approaches to understanding wisdom are discussed. I locate my work in the third, exceptional self-development, and, based on my research, I present the Emergent Wisdom model. It includes both a developmental trajectory and strategies for teaching wisdom.*

Introduction

A billboard advertising a local college reads:  
“Come for knowledge. Leave with wisdom.”

I doubt it. I doubt it for several reasons. First, wisdom is complex and elusive and is thereby difficult to teach. Thus, doing so must be done intentionally. Second, except for a few rare exceptions, no one teaches people how to become wise(r), or perhaps more accurately, deliberately and purposively guides them in that direction. It is simply not done in education today. Third, wisdom usually comes with life experience and maturity—it includes knowledge but is more than being knowledgeable on a number of topics. Thus, it is a lot, and rather bold as well, for a college to claim that its students will graduate with wisdom.

Wisdom is considered “the pinnacle or hallmark of adult thinking...something we all speak about and sometimes yearn for as we face the many challenges of adult life” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 161), “the pinnacle of successful human development (Ardelt, 2000, p. 360), or “the pinnacle of insight into the human condition and...the means and ends of a good life” (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 122). At the same time, researchers into the subject recognize its elusive and multidimensional qualities (for example, Ardel, 1997; Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Bassett, 2005; Sternberg, 1998, 2001). How can something as complex and abstract as wisdom be taught, much less learned?

This paper will explore briefly how and if wisdom can be taught within the context of three major approaches to wisdom. They are: wisdom as cognitive functioning, wisdom associated with various personal attributes, and wisdom understood as exceptional self-development (Bassett, in press). My own work is located within this last approach. I will present a model of emergent wisdom that I have developed from my research; it provides some strategies for transformative learning that may lead towards wisdom.

Three Approaches to Wisdom

There are three general schools of thought or approaches to the study of wisdom (Bassett, in press). In one, where wisdom is conceived of as intellectual functioning and expertise, the principal proponents include the Berlin School and their associated Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000) and Sternberg’s (1998, 2001) balance theory of wisdom. The former view wisdom as “an expert knowledge system in the fundamental pragmatics of life permitting exceptional insight, judgment, and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition” (1993, p. 76). More recently, they have identified five criteria associated with this kind of knowledge. The first two are characteristic of any kind of expertise (for example, what a student could learn at the college whose billboard I cited); the last three are meta-criteria specific to wisdom. They are: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural (strategic knowledge), knowledge regarding the context of life, knowledge which considers relativism of values and life goals, and knowledge which considers the uncertainties of life. The researchers posit that if the wisdom heuristic is acquired systematically and repeatedly over time, more people might reach wisdom-related knowledge and judgment than exist to date. For learning, I take it to mean that schools should do what they already do—teach factual and procedural or strategic knowledge. In addition, they could include approaches that would look at a larger picture (the context of life); they could emphasize ways in which values and life goals are relative (sometimes even acknowledging that values exist at all would be a major change in education); and they could reflect on the uncertainties of life. Providing a context for students to make a shift away from certainty and towards the toleration of ambiguity and uncertainty is a ripe area for transformative learning.

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Also included in this approach to wisdom we can find the work of Sternberg and his balance theory of wisdom (1998, 2001). He indicates that “wisdom can be defined as the application of tacit as well as explicit knowledge mediated by values towards the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long terms, to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments (b) shaping of existing environments and (c) selection of new environments” (2001, p. 231). Sternberg emphasizes, as other wisdom commentators do, that serving one’s own interests along with those of the common good is what makes wisdom wisdom and not just personal gain. At present, he is engaged in a project teaching wisdom-related thinking in New Haven middle schools. He believes that education should help people understand values, develop the skills of metacognition, and learn to balance different types of interests for the common good.

In contrast to this approach with its emphasis on wisdom as a metacognitive skill concerning the pragmatics of life, other researchers have studied different personal attributes of wisdom. For example, they have examined the role of age, experience, gender, educational attainment, and occupation. For a summary, see my chapter on wisdom in the *Oxford Handbook of Adult Development and Learning* (Bassett, in press). Or, more specifically, see Ardel (1997, 2000, 2003), Denney, Dew, and Kroupa (1995), Webster (2003), and Wink and Helson (1997). Little can be generalized about these personal characteristics, and this approach does not seem as conducive to learning as the others.

A third approach understands wisdom as more than performance and cognitive functioning or personal attributes. Instead, it views wisdom as an aspect of post-formal development. Wisdom is framed as exceptional self-development, including ego maturity and post-formal operational thinking (Cook-Greuter, 2000). While the two are not identical, both focus on stages of thought beyond Piagetian formal operations. Post-formal development is often associated with a decentering of the ego and the ability to think dialectically, wherein an individual is able to integrate various aspects of the psyche and accept inherent contradictions and alternate truths (Becvar, 2005; Kramer, 2000; Labouvie-Vief, 2000). Because my own work is located within this school of thought and because it presents a comprehensive model of wisdom that includes both a developmental trajectory and strategies for teaching wisdom through transformative learning, I will discuss it next.

### Emergent Wisdom

My own work extends the discussion on the exceptional personality development necessary for wisdom and presents a perspective on the integration of processes needed for its manifestation (Bassett, 2001, 2003, 2005, in press). The model of emergent wisdom presents ways to conceptualize wisdom and some learning prompts that may lead towards it. The term “emergent” refers to a phenomenon where the whole is smarter than the sum of its parts, where simple (or relatively simpler) component parts interact, and from this interaction some higher level structure or intelligence appears (Johnson, 2001). This higher level structure in the case of wisdom manifests as a special kind of thinking applied to produce positive results in human life and human relationships and all that supports them. This kind of thinking reflects a shift from simple to complex, from “I am a good person” to “I am complicit,” from independence and individualism to interdependence (Parks, personal communication, April 2005). This means that a person recognizes him- or herself as part of the larger whole, participating in it, willingly or not. For example, some people are against the current war in Iraq and have protested against it. At the same time, they are also complicit in it in that they are part of the fabric of American life, eating lettuce in January that has been trucked from California using imported oil or driving their own cars. This is a difficult perspective for some to grasp. In fact, they become angry because they see themselves as separate from the larger system instead being a contributing part of it, in various ways, consciously or not.

Thus, emergent wisdom understands the biosphere from a systems point of view where people strive to contribute to the common good, which is the continuation of the larger whole in a way that respects all life forms and what sustains and supports them. In this perspective, emergent problem-solving requires a more sophisticated understanding of the world, that includes paradox and dialectical thinking, in comparison to linear cause-and-effect thinking or the outcomes models frequently used, for example, in educational assessment and organizational management. Thinking like this necessitates transformative learning, among other means, for bringing about a complexity of mind that encompasses a sense of interdependence and contributions to the common good, rather than standing outside of it for personal gain.

This emergent wisdom model derives from grounded theory research. I selected 24 thoughtful insightful figures of public distinction, such as university presidents and professors, clergy, public servants, business people, and social activists. Using open and axial coding and the constant-comparative method, I developed this model of wisdom. See Figures 1 and 2, where Figure 1 shows the dynamism of wisdom and Figure 2 as a chart makes the sections easier to read. The major components of wisdom are discerning, which is a cognitive function; respecting which is affective; engaging which is active; and finally transforming, which is reflective.

Reading down the chart, it can be seen that each component has a chief characteristic associated with it, that is, another descriptor for it. For each, there are three proficiencies which manifest as certain behaviors or ways of being, knowing, and understanding. For example, in the first column, *Discerning* manifests as a deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships. A wise person has insight into the human condition, or, to put it in terms of the Berlin School, knowledge regarding the context of life, knowledge which considers relativism of values and life goals, and knowledge which considers the uncertainties of life.

*Respecting* has to do with dealing with others with consideration or thoughtfulness. When this quality is developed in a person, what shows up is often a sense of gratitude for life itself, even negative events, and an expanded sphere of consideration. This means that who you count as valuable and worth taking into account keeps expanding from self to family/tribe to nation to world to globe to universe, including all sentient and non-sentient beings.

*Engaging* means action. It is what a person does and manifests as committed ethical action for the common good. On the other hand, *Transforming*, instead of turning outward, looks inward. It is a reflective function whose manifestation appears as a person who not only tolerates but also embraces paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty, who understands that he or she is part of systems rather than being the center, and who seeks to fathom what supports the system as a whole, that is, the common good. This component, in particular, shows the developmental trajectory of this model. If you picture it as a spiral, development in this dimension leads individuals through an ever-deepening and widening cycle of Discerning, Respecting, and Engaging and then back to Transforming, where their way of thinking may take on the awareness of Kegan's upper 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> orders (Kegan, 1994).

### Teaching for Wisdom

Given this complexity, how can wisdom be taught? Is it possible? As an educator, I must needs think so, at least to some extent. Otherwise, there is no fostering of wisdom—only the haphazard achievement of it by certain lucky or gifted individuals. The last row in Figure 2 shows learning prompts—questions that must become part of one's psyche, that are always present and being asked, as a person probes and stretches to comprehend the human condition more fully, adequately, and compassionately. At this point, these learning prompts are tentative and only suggested. In a fellowship for 2005-2006 I will be exploring which ones work and are useful and what techniques and strategies can help move people towards wisdom.

Because wisdom can be understood as a developmental process, transformative learning, whose major purpose is to create "a deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions...a shift in consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world" (Morrell and O'Connor, 2002, p. xvii), becomes a major tool for fostering the growth of wisdom. Or, as Cranton put it, transformative learning, is a "process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising...perceptions" (1994, p. 26). Mezirow's (2000) disorienting dilemma might appear for some as puzzlement about why people seem to accept superficial ideas (or live superficial lives when there is so much more to be understood and done in the world). Or, they might wonder why some people seem unable to get outside of their own frame of reference or make decisions based only on their own narrow self-interest without any sense of a commons or seem unaware of the interdependence of all the parts of the biosphere. When this kind of cognitive dissonance appears, they may proceed through the steps that Mezirow elaborates. With support, with wisdom-related thinking in mind, this process may lead to growth in wisdom.

Further, this important learning cannot be left to the discursive mind alone. As Kramer (2000) suggests and Dirx (2001) concurs, the imagination must be fostered as well, through art, metaphor, and non-linear "logic."

Such indeed are the tasks for nurturing wisdom—to discern what is important; to take with compassion the perspective of people (or creatures) different from ourselves; to know clearly towards what ends our actions are directed, for what reason, and whose interests they serve; and to realize that we are simply parts of a larger whole

while asking how we can make new and better ways of being emerge. Transformative learning can provide a means to strive towards wisdom.

Figure 1  
Emergent Wisdom

(Note: please see my web site [www.wisdominst.org](http://www.wisdominst.org) for a color depiction of this figure—it is much more clearly readable and understandable that way.)

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (LZW) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 2  
Emergent Wisdom  
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<b>WISDOM</b>				
<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Discerning (Cognitive)</b>	<b>Respecting (Affective)</b>	<b>Engaging (Active)</b>	<b>Transforming (Reflective)</b>
<b>Chief Characteristic</b>	Objectivity	Openness	Involvement	Integrity
<b>Proficiency</b>	Insight  Holistic thinking, systemic seeing into complexity  Balanced interests	Multiple perspective-taking  Compassion & caring/empathy/love  Generosity of spirit/non-judgmental	Sound judgment & adept decision-making  Actions based on determinations of fairness & justice  Moral courage	Self-knowledge  Self-acceptance  Perspective on self as part of systems
<b>Manifestation</b>	Deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships	Sense of gratitude/Expanded sphere of consideration	Committed action for the common good	Embracing of paradox & uncertainty/ Ability to see beyond the self/ Growing recognition of interdependence
<b>Developmental Stimulus/ Sample Learning Prompt</b>	What's really going on? What's true? What's important? What's right?	Whose point of view am I taking? How does someone else understand reality? How can I relate to others with magnanimity?	What guides my actions? To what ends are my actions directed? What means do I use?	What are my values? How do I live them? Who or what is the "I" that I think I am? What am I part of?
<b>WISDOM</b>				

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