Chapter 15
Lifelong Learning, Mindfulness and the Affective Domain of Education

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Introduction

Recent discussions of trends in lifelong learning (Field and Leicester 2000; Aspin 2007) have been concerned to mark the differences between an older tradition of adult/continuing education which was holistic, idealistic and all-embracing and newer perspectives which are narrower and more utilitarian (Hyland 1999). The differences are well brought out in the contrast between, for instance, the 1972 UNESCO report *Learning to Be* (Faure et al. 1972) influenced by Lindeman's notion that the purpose of education is 'to put meaning into the whole of life' (1926/1989, p. 5) and the 1998 Department for Education and Employment Report *The Learning Age* which saw learning as the 'key to prosperity' since 'investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century' (DfEE 1998, p. 7). The contrast is between a humanistic conception of lifelong learning which incorporates social, moral and aesthetic features of educational development and a predominantly economistic model in which education is concerned mainly with industry and employment.

Given the narrowness of recent lifelong learning developments, it was refreshing to note in a recent issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* that the editor, Paul Standish, welcomed the fact that 'questions of happiness and wellbeing are prominent in contemporary social policy and practice, and in current policy initiatives they abound' (2007, p. 285). The idea here was that the ultimate ends of education – self-esteem, job and life satisfaction and the promotion of trust and social justice in the wider community – seem to be taken rather more seriously these days than they were in the drab neoliberal and utilitarian 1980s and 1990s. Standish went on, however, to qualify these observations by noting – in the context of a review of recent books recording the rise and fall of progressive education – how

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certain central features of progressivism (creativity and individualism) are grossly mutated and manipulated in current policy and practice to serve non-progressive and exclusively technicist ends.

This qualification is certainly necessary at a time when the affective dimension of learning – in the form of criticisms of an alleged 'therapeutic turn' – is under attack. A few years ago, I offered a tentative response (along with Veronica McGivney, Hyland 2005) to Kathryn Ecclestone's (Ecclestone 2004a, b) concerns about adult educators' obsession with developing self-esteem. Ecclestone (2004a) was particularly concerned about the growing popularity of notions such as 'self-esteem' and 'emotional intelligence' in educational circles. This has led to:

> new professional activities in emotional management, life coaching, mentoring, counselling, and interventions to build self-esteem and make people feel good emotionally in the pursuit of motivation, educational achievement and social inclusion (p. 11).

Moreover, it was claimed that the 'professional and popular support for these ideas' is now so strong 'that they have become a new social and educational orthodoxy' (ibid.).

Hayes (2003) advanced similar arguments in investigating recent policy trends in vocational education and training (VET) in the post-school sector. The proposal is that – alongside the 'triumph of vocationalism' over the last few decades – there has been a 'triumph of therapeutic education', a 'form of preparation for work' arising out of the 'changed nexus between work and education' (p. 54). He goes on to explain that:

> The new vocational skills that are required in the workforce are sometimes called 'emotional' or 'aesthetic' labour. If post-school students are being trained in personal and social skills as well as in relationships, this is training in emotional labour…training in emotional labour… requires and receives a personal and wholehearted commitment to workplace values (ibid.)

What results is a form of VET in which the pursuit of knowledge – and the values of 'rationality, objectivity, science and progress' – are replaced by a set of post-modernist relativistic values concerned only with developing 'self-esteem' (ibid.).

It seemed to me then and still does so now that the so-called therapeutic turn is no more than a proper concern with the affective dimension of learning and, moreover, that this needed to be emphasised in the face of the relentless economising of education – what Avis et al. (1996) described as the 'vocationalisation of everyday life' (p. 165) – under the label of behaviourist skills and competences (Hyland 1999). The original worries and concerns, however, still seem to be around. Ecclestone et al. (2005) continued to argue against the 'idea that education should play a prominent role in fostering students' emotional intelligence, self-esteem and self-awareness' (p. 182), and Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) have recently collaborated on a book which charts the 'dangerous rise' of therapeutic ideas at all levels of the system. A central claim is that:

> Sponsored enthusiastically by the British government and supported by numerous academic researchers and a huge professional and commercial industry, a deluge of interventions throughout the education system assess the emotional needs and perceived vulnerability of

> children, young people and adults and claim to develop their emotional literacy and well being (ibid., p. ix).

Offering general support for these critics of therapy within the context of the discourse on adult education theory and practice, Jane Thompson (2007) has expressed similar misgivings. She observes that:

> In the popular wisdom of adult education practice it is certainly the case that ideas about confidence, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem are commonplace. The literature of funding applications, project reports and evaluation exercises are full of claims by policy-makers and practitioners alike that interventions targeted at so-called non-traditional learners and socially excluded groups give rise to increased confidence and self-esteem (p. 303).

Such developments, Thompson argues, are dangerous – not only in their tendency to neglect or marginalise some of the traditional core values of adult learning concerned with developing knowledge and understanding for active citizenship, but also in their tendency to suggest that 'developing confidence and self-esteem can remedy a wide range of personal and social problems' with the result that this 'distracts attention from the structural causes of inequality…and from the widening gap between rich and poor more generally' (p. 304).

Does this dystopian vision of contemporary adult learning and education accord with reality? What do these claims about a therapeutic turn actually mean, and are they justified against the background of recent trends in post-school education and training? More significantly, for the purposes of my particular concern with the importance of mindfulness in personal educational growth and development, do the new emphases amount to anything more than giving due and proper attention to the affective domain of learning?

If it is indeed the case that traditional goals linked to knowledge and understanding are being replaced by personal and social skills for post-school students, this trend should be forcefully criticised and resisted. The alleged mutation of VET into some form of employability counselling also needs to be vigorously challenged, as does any transformation of the traditional social, political and cultural objectives of adult education into psychotherapy. Before completely endorsing this crusade, however, we need to ask whether the claims about the therapeutic turn are sensible, coherent and justified.

In earlier observations, it was noted (Hyland 2005, 2006, 2009) that the bleak picture of a post-school sector dominated by objectives linked to self-esteem and emotional intelligence was not one which was easily recognisable. On the contrary, it seems reasonable to suggest that the current educational climate is seriously impoverished through the dominance of prescriptive skill-talk and behaviourist competence outcomes (Lea et al. 2003; Hyland and Winch 2007). However, although the worries about the rise of therapy are, in my view, exaggerated and unjustified, the concerns of critics are sincere and need to be addressed. One way of doing this would be to show how educational and therapeutic processes are interrelated. There are two main ways of making sense of any such questions: through empirical investigation or by philosophical/conceptual analysis. I intend to examine the therapeutic arguments by means of each method in turn.

English Education and the Therapeutic Turn

First of all we need to be certain of what exactly we are looking for in the form of a turn towards therapeutic education. Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) assert:

> We define any activity that focuses on perceived emotional problems and which aims to make educational content and learning processes more 'emotionally engaging' as 'therapeutic education' (p. x).

As indicated already, I am concerned to advocate an enhancement of the affective domain of learning and would not naturally choose to use the term 'therapeutic education' but – since this seems to have become the label of choice which informs the debate in this sphere – I will use it as a short-hand way of referring to those features of educational development I wish to discuss. I would not object to the heavy emphasis on emotions revealed in the above quotation since standard accounts of affective learning include references to emotions. However, it needs to be pointed out here (and this will be stressed throughout the chapter) that the cognitive and affective domains can be viewed as integrally connected and mutually dependent (Peters 1972; Hepburn 1972), and that the references to emotions in an educational context directs attention to learning experiences which encapsulate quite complex activities such as receiving, internalising and organising information from a wide range of sources, in addition to 'developing a value system and demonstrating self-reliance' (Fawbert 2008, p. 90). There is a cognitive aspect of all emotions and an affective dimension of cognition; this is what Scheffler (1991) is wanting to emphasise in his work on the 'cognitive emotions'.

There may be some truth to Furedi's (2003) critique of contemporary society in terms of its fostering of a 'victim culture' in which a preoccupation with emotional well-being and self-esteem serves to anesthetise people in times of social and economic risk and uncertainty. We might accept that there is simply too much emphasis on personal counselling and individual rights and not enough on active citizenship duties and responsibilities in current times. It must also be acknowledged that – if all this is true – it is regressive and disempowering. What is difficult to discern, however, is how this putative change in general attitudes and ethos is influencing educational trends to any great extent. Many of the actual examples cited by Ecclestone (2004a, b), for example, are drawn from the general field of counselling and the popular press, not specifically from educational contexts. She regrets the replacement of 'optimistic Rogerian ideas about humans' innate potential and drive for empowerment' with 'pessimistic images of people locked in cycles of social depression caused by emotional problems' (2004a, p. 13). If this were true, it would be most regrettable. However, it could be argued that – apart from a highly theoretical, inspirational impact akin to that of Paulo Freire on adult literacy tutors – Rogers has never had any *practical* influence on the English post-school education system. I would suggest that the alleged pessimistic perspectives have no greater impact or influence on the business of learning and teaching in the post-16 sector.

Similarly, although there may be some evidence for the rise of the 'diminished self' (Ecclestone et al. 2005) in popular culture, claims about its transference to

specifically educational contexts require more justification than references to the use of Goleman's writings on emotional literacy and intelligence in a number of contemporary projects (this is discussed in more detail later). In this respect, we can reflect again on the popularity of Rogers and Freire in post-school learning texts, and the *actual* impact these have on everyday practices. The 'learning prescriptions' mentioned by Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (ibid., p. 186) seem to be unduly distorted for the purposes of criticism and do not reflect the huge advances made in learning support services at all levels of post-school provision. More recently, Hunt and West (2006) have suggested that – far from offering a diminished conception of learning – the integration of educational and therapeutic processes through the use of psychodynamic notions can be empowering for learners and teachers alike. The discussion of mindfulness ideas and practices later is intended to engage with just such notions of selfhood by examining their place in educational debate.

However, staying with developments in the post-compulsory sector for the moment, I think the idea of a diminishment of learners and learning may, indeed, have some purchase as a result of the predominance of utilitarian and economistic conceptions over the last decade or so. Policy studies of this sector (Ainley 1999; Lea et al. 2003; Hyland and Merrill 2003; Avis et al. 2009) suggest that the key trends at this level over recent years have been the rise of undifferentiated skill-talk, an obsession with prescriptive learning outcomes and the dominance of competence-based education and training (CBET). The so-called therapeutic turn pales into insignificance alongside the damage wreaked by CBET and the behaviourist outcomes movement, bringing with it the radical deskilling of countless occupations (including teaching), the downgrading of vocational studies and the rise to prominence of a perversely utilitarian and one-sidedly economistic conception of the educational enterprise in general. Emphasising affective goals and fostering motivation and confidence in learners is, arguably, far less dangerous than suggesting that all that counts in education and training is providing bits of evidence to satisfy narrow, mechanistic performance criteria.

Moreover, many of the initiatives referred to by Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) in further education (FE) colleges which point 'towards a strong caring and nurturing ethos' (p. 66) are, as Cripps (2002) explains, a necessary counterbalance to the competitive, economistic and managerialist ethos which has transformed those institutions in recent decades. Avis (2009) has argued that the resulting 'performativity…operates within a blame culture', where accountability becomes a means by which the institution can call to account its members' (p. 250) and that this has led to a decline in creativity, risk taking and trust in the post-school system.

Although I am primarily concerned with post-school education, it is worth referring to the arguments of Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) about the rise of therapeutic practices in the school sector at this point. Their account includes references to the use of 'circle time', 'feelings trees', 'worry boxes' and 'psychodrama' in primary schools (pp. 28–35) – in addition to a discussion of such initiatives as peer mentoring, personal, social and health education and citizenship modules in the secondary sector (pp. 55–60) – but there is little attempt to link such trends with the radical transformation of these sectors over recent years by the performance, accountability

and managerialist culture mentioned above. The obsession with standards and league tables in the school sector since the 1990s is directly connected with the emergence of concerns about the affective side of education. As Cigman (2008) suggests:

> A standards agenda involves identifying and possibly shaming children and schools that fail. The social consequences of educational failure include disaffection, delinquency, violence and so on: the very problems that the standards agenda set out to address…It was this concern that led to a supplementary agenda focusing on so-called non-cognitive traits like confidence, motivation, resilience, well-being and self-esteem…The idea emerged that there are necessary affective conditions for successful learning, and that these can be usefully boosted, heightened or enhanced' (p. 540).

Writing in a similar vein about the revival of concerns about happiness and well-being in educational discourse, Smith (2008) observes that:

> As I have described it, the 'long slide to happiness' begins with the unexceptionable observation that an education system dominated by targets and testing is experienced as arid by both pupils and students on the one hand and those who teach them on the other (p. 570).

Since the post-16 sector has been influenced even more than schools by the imposition of top-down policy changes (a fact specifically mentioned by Ecclestone and Hayes 2008, p. 65) linked to the skills and employability agenda, it is not difficult to understand why a post-16 counter-agenda concerned – as in the schools – with affective learning outcomes might well emerge. My argument, however, is that this reaction has been far too timid, lacklustre and indiscriminate, and that there should be a more vigorous and systematic re-emphasis of affective objectives in this sector. Most learners in the post-school sector are either studying (increasingly preparing to *resit* examinations these days) for GCSEs/A-levels or pursuing vocational qualifications, so the notion that such programmes are more than marginally concerned with building self-esteem or emotional intelligence is difficult to accept (basic skills or 'skills for life' discussed below is, of course, extremely vocational and employment led, and has little to do with the affective domain).

There is more than enough scope to argue that much of this post-16 learning is grossly *deficient* in precisely this affective area; it does not connect or engage sufficiently with the emotions, values and wider interests which learners bring with them to post-compulsory institutions (Hyland and Merrill 2003). Writing about American education in recent years, Palmer (1998) noted similar tendencies and criticised educators' 'excessive regard for the powers of the intellect…our obsession with objective knowledge' and recommended learning programmes which stress 'subjective engagement…the power of emotions to freeze, or free, the mind' (p. 61). The increase in mental health and emotional/behavioural problems in the post-school sector is now being acknowledged with a view to researching and implementing strategies to remedy the main problems (Warwick et al. 2008). All this is symptomatic of the wider emotional distress experienced by many people in Western industrialised states which Harvey (2005) has linked with the relentless rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s.

It does not seem sensible to suggest that a sector which has been dominated for the last decade or so with ill-founded skill-talk and behaviourist CBET is somehow awash with affective objectives. It is true that certain features of competence-based

learning have been perversely (mis)matched with progressive, individualised and student-centred strategies (Hyland 1999), but this pedagogic absurdity no longer confuses or misleads anyone working in the further and higher education sector. Moreover, it is difficult to make much sense of Hayes' idea that basic skills (2003, p. 55) – a self-evident prerequisite for learning of *any* kind – is an example of the reduction of education to therapy. For learners, young or old, who have achieved little at school and associate learning with anxiety, grief and failure, a 'therapeutic' concern with foundational skills, attitudes and motivations – that is, a focus on the affective domain of learning linked to feelings, values and processes – may be exactly what is called for.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) provide lots of evidence in their book based on conversations with teachers, and analysis of mission statements of schools and management industry – but, as Kinman (2008) noted in her review of the book, the 'authors provide little in the way of peer-reviewed evidence for the strong assertions in the book' and 'rely heavily on "pop psychology" texts and unsupported hypotheses' (p. 50). To be fair, Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) do confront this issue of evidence for the therapeutic turn fairly and squarely and argue that they are charting a broad 'cultural shift' in politics and society which has become a 'central focus for education policy' (pp. 146–7). However, even though I think it is better to maintain a reflective agnosticism about the precise extent of a therapeutic turn, my case is that, if there is little evidence of such a trend, then it is a great pity since the widespread transformations of the system mentioned above do seem to merit a resurgence of attention to this dimension of education.

Education, Therapy and Well-Being

A central slogan in the progressive education movement of the earlier twentieth century was 'we teach children – not subjects', and this was, as Dearden (1968) suggests, a direct reaction to the drab authoritarianism and inhuman social utility of the elementary school tradition in England (graphically depicted and satirised in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*). What was to become the paradigm text of the progressive movement – the *Plowden Report* published by the Department of Education and Science in 1967 – described the ideal school environment as 'one in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as adults'. It was recommended that schools should set out to 'devise the right environment for children, to allow them to be themselves', and special emphasis was placed upon 'individual discovery, on first-hand experience and on opportunities for creative work' (Plowden Report 1967, pp. 187–8).

Although there was always more rhetoric than reality (in a way similar to that surrounding the impact of Rogers and Freire on post-school education) about the claims that progressive philosophy was transforming English schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Hyland 1979; Lowe 2007), such ideas did inspire the open education movement in America as the earlier influences of Dalton and Dewey were

rediscovered and applied to new times. Rathbone (1971), one of the leading open education exponents of the period, claimed that Plowden's views on the nature of childhood underpinned the 'open education ethic' which entailed treating children with 'courtesy, kindness, and respect…valuing [the child] as a human being whose rights are no less valid than those of an adult' (p. 112). In a similar vein, the new openness in education was described as 'a way of extending the school's human dimension' (Pluckrose 1975, p. 3) and, more grandly, an 'attempt to create a new human and social world' (Bremer 1975, p. 18). In the stress on student-centredness and individualised learning, such perspectives later came to influence post-school education (Hyland and Merrill 2003) as well though – in an era of behaviourist outcomes – any such affective aims could never be more than marginal to the acquisition of qualifications for working life.

In the midst of all the rhetoric, it is not difficult to recognise a number of fairly unexceptionable notions about the fact that education is surely about personal development as well as acquiring knowledge and skills, and that even Peters' (1966) liberal conception of education as the development of knowledge and understanding for its own sake must, in some sense, be linked to more general ends such as human happiness and flourishing or the promotion of a just community. To be sure, the subject matter of education cannot just be, as Whitehead (1962) once grandiloquently put it, 'Life in all its manifestations' (p. 10) nor, as Dearden (1972) correctly argues, can the 'aim of education *simply* be happiness, quite without qualification' (p. 111). However, as Dearden goes on to emphasise, there 'is no question of whether or not happiness is valuable…the question is rather that of how important happiness is, compared with other values, in a specifically educational situation' (p. 109). Similarly, Smith (2002) suggests that 'self-esteem can usefully be admitted into our educational scheme of things as a significant good, but not one pursued directly, still less exclusively' (p. 99). For educational purposes, what needs to be attached to all-embracing external ends about self-esteem, happiness or human flourishing are internal objectives concerned with the development of knowledge, understanding, autonomy and values which will enable those being educated to construct and participate in communities which promote and reinforce such flourishing. The affective dimension of educational activity – linked to both processes in terms of stimulating learners' interests and motivation and also to content in the acknowledgement that knowledge and skills cannot be completely separated from human values and emotions (Palmer 1998; Hyland 1998) – is arguably what is being highlighted in referring to the therapeutic function of education.

Wilson (1972) has pointed out that there are many connections and overlaps between education and therapy. He observes that:

> Education involves initiation into activities, forms of thought, etc. which conceptually must be…worth while or justifiable. Different types of justifications, or different descriptions of the mode in which they are worth while, may apply to different activities or groups of activities. Thus some may be called 'therapeutic', others described as 'enlarging the personality'… These justification phrases may be said to represent the 'aims of education'; and 'therapeutic' or 'contributing to mental health', may represent one such aim (pp. 91–2).

Peters (1972) has demonstrated the clear and distinct connections between human emotions, motivation and the sort of reasoning associated with the development of knowledge and understanding. In considering why we attach the label 'emotions' to concepts such as 'fear, anger, sorrow, grief, envy, jealousy, pity, remorse, guilt, shame, pride, wonder, and the like', Peters argues that our main criterion for selection is 'the connection between emotions and the class of cognitions that are conveniently called appraisals' (pp. 466–7). He goes on to suggest that such appraisals are:

> constituted by seeing situations under aspects which are agreeable or disagreeable, beneficial or harmful in a variety of dimensions. To feel fear is, for instance, to see a situation as dangerous; to feel pride is to see with pleasure something as mine or as something that I have had a hand in bringing about (ibid., p. 467).

Since 'emotions are basically forms of cognition', we may legitimately refer to and recommend the 'education of the emotions' (ibid.). Wilson (1972) is getting at something similar when he argues that 'we can say that certain educational processes just *are the same as* some processes which increase mental health: that some forms of teaching are identical with some forms of psychotherapy' (p. 89, original italics). In a similar vein, Smeyers et al. (2007) forcefully 'reject the idea that there is a sharp conceptual division between education and therapy' (p. 1). The idea is that both learning and therapy involve the development of knowledge, values, emotions, understanding, reason, skill, experience and insight, and both are equally necessary for accessing work, social relationships and the wider communities of practice which constitute the good life.

In this sphere of philosophical conceptions of educational well-being, it is worth concluding this section by referring to the very last sentence in the book by Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) which serves to bring out the profound differences between us. They conclude with the claim that 'What makes humanity is the intellectual and an education based on *cogito ergo sum* not *sentio ergo sum'* (p. 164, original italics). Reflecting back on the open education literature mentioned above, my case is that an education based only on one at the expense of the other would be a diminished one since it does not develop the whole person.

Descartes' infamous *cogito* has, arguably, been responsible for more philosophical wrong turnings than anything else in Western thought. Ryle (1973) demonstrated how 'Descartes' myth' had resulted in the 'intellectualist legend' which wrongly assumed that there was 'an antithesis between the physical and the mental' (p. 32), and this led to the false dualisms between mind and body, theory and practice and knowing how and knowing that. Similarly, Searle (1985) criticises the legacy of Descartes on the grounds that it has led to an 'inherited cultural resistance to treating the conscious mind as a biological phenomenon like any other' (p. 10). Placing all this in the context of human evolution, Pinker (1997) explains clearly 'why we have emotions'; he argues that the

> emotions are mechanisms that set the brain's highest level goals. Once triggered by a propitious moment, an emotion triggers the cascade of goals and sub-goals that we call thinking and acting…no sharp line divides thinking from feeling, nor does thinking necessarily precede feeling or vice versa. (p. 373).

This connects well with the earlier discussion of the education of the emotions, particularly with the analysis by Peters (1972) and Scheffler's (1991) notion of cognitive emotions. Commenting on Scheffler's thesis, Standish (1992) explains how it is a 'rationality which transcends the dualism of head and heart' and

> explicitly rejects the common assumption that cognition and emotion are worlds apart and illustrates coherently the ways in which rationality and the passions are intertwined. What is of interest to the scientist and what is understood in the work of art…involve a combination of perception and feeling (p. 117).

Having argued the case for an education of the emotions, I want now to suggest that this form of therapeutic education may be enhanced by the theory and practice of 'mindfulness'.

The Nature of Mindfulness

In advocating and seeking to justify a form of therapeutic education along the lines outlined above, I want to draw attention to both the intrinsic and pragmatic value of the concept of 'mindfulness'. This is a core concept in Buddhist philosophy and practice – traditionally the seventh strand of the eightfold path leading to nirvana and the end of suffering – and is currently attracting widespread attention in a large number of spheres far removed from its natural and original home. In the context of the *Dharma* (literally the fundamental nature of the universe revealed in the Buddhist canon of teachings and precepts, Keown 2005), mindfulness is of overriding importance.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) – the renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and campaigner for world peace and justice – describes mindfulness as being 'at the heart of the Buddha's teachings'. It involves 'attention to the present moment' which is 'inclusive and loving' and 'which accepts everything without judging or reacting' (p. 64). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994) and associates have been largely responsible for transforming the original spiritual notion into a powerful and ubiquitous therapeutic tool based on forms of meditation and mindful practices. Mindfulness simply means 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally' in a way which 'nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality'. Such practice – whether this involves breathing or walking meditation or giving full non-judgemental attention to everyday activities – can offer a 'powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back in touch with our own wisdom and vitality' (Kabat-Zinn 1994, pp. 4–5). Such a simple idea has proved astonishingly successful in a vast range of contexts including the treatment of depression, addictions of various kinds and the promotion of physical and mental health and well-being generally (Baer 2006). Harris' (2006) robustly secular notion of such strategies – which are applicable to any everyday activity such as driving, washing dishes or solving problems, not just to contemplative or meditative practices – describes them in terms of 'investigating the nature of consciousness directly through sustained introspection'(p. 209).

Like any process or activity which is concerned principally with introspection and a focus on inner thoughts and feelings, there seems to be a natural tendency to assign it a limited value because of its apparent passivity and subjective inward-looking character. The description of mindfulness by Williams et al. (2007, p. 48) brings out the active, developmental and educational features of such practice. They note that mindfulness is:

1. *Intentional* – concerned with cultivating an awareness of present moment reality and the choices available to us
2. *Experiential* – focussing directly on present moment experience rather than being preoccupied by abstractions
3. *Non-judgemental* – it allows us to see things as they are without a mental assignment of critical labels to our thoughts, feelings and perceptions

In a similar context, Smith (2002) observes that some sort of 'inward turn' is 'often (but wrongly) associated with therapy in general' (p. 95). However, mindfulness does seem to be able to deal with such criticisms effectively, particularly when the concept is interpreted within the context of its original home in Buddhist philosophy and practice. In recent years, there has been a lively debate about the relevance of Buddhist thought to Western psychology and psychotherapy (Segall 2003; Epstein 2007), and a consensus seems to have emerged about the commonalities and mutual objectives of the different traditions. Rubin (2003) explains how 'Buddhism points toward possibilities for self-awareness, freedom, wisdom and compassion that Western psychology in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, has never mapped' (p. 50). These possibilities are realised in the growing range of therapeutic mindfulness strategies used in health programmes (Garfinkel 2006; Williams et al. 2007) and in the demonstration of the educational value of mindfulness (Langer 2003; Siegel 2007).

The immense potential of paying close attention to our thought processes should not be underestimated. In its normal state, the mind is often in flux as it fixes on one object after another in a random and dissipated manner. By 'cultivating mindfulness', the Dalai Lama (2005) reminds us, 'we learn first to become aware of this process of dissipation, so that we can gently fine-tune the mind to follow a more directed path towards the objects on which we wish to focus' (p. 160). It is important to note that such attention has

> a deliberate intention that helps us select a specific aspect or a characteristic of an object. The continued, voluntary application of attention is what helps us maintain a sustained focus on the chosen object. Training in attention is closely linked with learning how to control our mental processes (ibid., p. 161).

This control – which can be an end in itself in the therapeutic uses of mindfulness – is linked to the central Buddhist enterprise in the process of eliminating unhelpful and misleading conceptions of the self. There is, of course, a similar critical tradition in relation to the concept of self-hood in Western philosophy stemming from Hume's famous observation in his *Treatise* that 'I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the

perception' (1964, p. 239, original italics). Within the Buddhist tradition, the notion of 'non-self' is remarkably similar to both Hume and the social constructionist perspectives of more recent times. Brazier (2003) explains the position clearly in observing that

> the Buddhist approach is neither to build nor to abase the self. It is to recognise the reality of our existential position in relationship with the world. It recognises our dependency upon conditions, and especially upon our physical environment… The teaching of non-self is not a denial of the existence of the person as a complex entity, functioning in a complex world. Non-self theory places people in dynamic encounter with one another and with the environment they inhabit. It acknowledges the ever-unfolding social process and the ways in which people provide conditions for one another (p. 138).

In a similar vein, Epstein (2007) has explained how this conception of 'non-self' has proved so fruitful and valuable to psychologists and psychotherapists who have explored this tradition.

Mindfulness and the Critique of Therapeutic Education

There seem to be two main criticisms of the therapeutic function of education and I will address each in turn, drawing on mindfulness conceptions and cognate ideas in the attempt to answer the principal concerns.

1. The emphasis on therapeutic objectives such as self-esteem, emotional intelligence, confidence and the like is said to marginalise traditional goals linked to knowledge and understanding, thereby disempowering learners. Philosophical answers – in the form of explicating links between educational and therapeutic processes, between the cognitive and the affective – were outlined earlier, as were empirical considerations questioning the extent of this influence on learning and teaching as opposed to popular culture. It has been argued that much educational activity – both at school but especially at post-school levels – is affectively impoverished and deficient in its treatment of humanistic as opposed to employability matters (Langer 2003; Palmer 1998; Hyland 1998). The personal growth and development of learners – whether this is called fostering self-esteem, confidence or emotional intelligence – is an important educational objective, and the cultivation of mindfulness can assist in its achievement. As a dimension of the learning process, mindfulness practice can effectively link all forms of learning (perhaps especially the undervalued basic skills and vocational kinds) with the needs, interests and values of learners, thus fostering engagement, motivation and that form of 'studentship' which, as Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) have shown, is crucial in allowing post-16 students to make sense and take ownership of the various programmes they are following. The 'present-moment reality' developed through mindfulness is widely acknowledged in educational psychology as not just 'more effective, but also more enjoyable' (Langer 2003, p. 43) in many spheres of learning, and there is now

a wealth of evidence aggregated through the Mindfulness in Education Network (http://www.mindfuled.org) about the general educational benefits of the approach. (There is also an established centre for mindfulness teaching and research at the University of Wales, Bangor, http://www.bangor.ac.uk/imscar/mindfulness.)

2. A related concern of critics of therapeutic education – particularly in adult education circles – is that the perceived inward-looking features associated with this activity sever the connections between learning and wider social and political issues. Thompson (2007), for example, is worried that 'lifelong learning has given up on teaching an understanding of the world, let alone trying to change it', and that there is 'every encouragement for the belief that because you cannot change the world, you must strive to change yourself' (p. 302). Such claims, if true, would indeed be a cause for concern, but I think they are misguided and unduly pessimistic. The world can only be changed by people, and often the reflective capacity to change ourselves is precisely what is required before any wider social change is possible. The power and potential of mindfulness in engaging with a wide range of such issues has been amply demonstrated in both the therapeutic (Baer 2006; Williams et al. 2007) and socially engaged aspects of mindfulness (Keown 2005; Brazier 2003; Garfinkel 2006).

The letting go of self in mindfulness practice results – interestingly in terms of the standard criticisms of the passive navel-gazing involved in fostering self-esteem and related qualities – in people stopping 'relying on self-power and starting to rely more on other-power' (Brazier 2003, p. 143). This is the definitive conception of empowerment which is prized so highly by adult educators concerned with social movements, and is fully realised in the impact of Buddhist mindfulness in countries around the world. In the form of 'socially engaged Buddhism' (Garfinkel 2006; a movement pioneered by Thich Nhat Hanh) – mindfulness practices are now employed in prison education, peace negotiations and the regeneration of village communities in deprived areas around the world. As Garfinkel explains, such practice is

> being applied to augment mental and physical health therapies and to advance political and environmental reforms. Athletes use it to sharpen their game. Through it, corporate executives learn to handle stress better. Police arm themselves with it to defuse volatile situations. Chronic pain sufferers apply it as a coping salve. (p. 3)

Conclusion: Mindfulness and Lifelong Learning

Smith (2002) is quite correct to locate self-esteem amongst the legitimate aims of education, and a qualified role for this dimension of education has also been advocated by Cigman (2004) and Kristjansson (2007). According to Smeyers et al. (2007), 'education, rightly understood, is…one of the richest kinds of therapy' (p. 6). I have

tried to provide a justification for a more general therapeutic function based on the notion of mindfulness. Mindfulness serves to remind us that – in addition to the important goals of developing knowledge, understanding, vocational skills and the critical examination of issues of inequality, prejudice and social exclusion – there are people with identities, needs, values and life stories who are engaged in the struggle to deal with all this. Much current educational practice fails to capture this struggle and does not fully engage with the emotional aspects of the enterprise.

In a number of writings over the last few years, Oliver James (1997, 2007, 2008) has argued that levels of emotional distress in industrialised, urbanised societies are much higher for English-speaking countries such as Britain, the United States, Canada and New Zealand than they are in other nations such as France, Spain, Belgium, Japan and the Scandinavian states. Using the WHO definition of emotional distress to include illnesses such as 'depression, anxiety, substance abuse and impulse disorder', James (2008, p. 10) contends that – contra recent trends – such distress has little genetic causation but is directly linked to both parental upbringing and the impact of 'selfish capitalism' which expounds radically materialistic values in conjunction with bringing about a deterioration of income levels and working conditions for millions of ordinary people in mainly English-speaking countries over the last 30 years or so. More recently, the report sponsored by the British Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Mental Health and Wellbeing,* noted that the most recent available national survey indicated that 16.4% of the UK population has some form of mental illness, and that this figure would be greatly increased if we looked at mental health or flourishing as opposed to illness (Government Office for Science 2008, p. 12). Estimated costs of mental illness have been placed at '£77 billion per year for England when wider impacts on wellbeing are included, and £49 billion for economic costs alone' (Government Office for Science 2008, p. 21), not to mention the untold suffering to individuals, families and society. More recently, according to a survey conducted in March 2010 by the mental health charity *Together – UK* (http//:www.together-uk.org), it was revealed that 62% of people in Britain (71% of women and 52% of men) have had at least one time in their life when they have found it difficult to cope mentally.

James' solutions to these problems are strikingly simple, and now have a more urgent ring to them as the present economic recession seems to be deepening. Instead of the neoliberal selfish version of capitalism stemming from Reagan, Thatcher, Blair and others, 'our politicians must start the work of persuading us to adopt the unselfish variety' (ibid., p. 230) which eschews possessive, individualist materialism and values the emotional well-being of people as much as their economic productivity. Since this is an essentially educational task, the reassertion of the social and moral purposes of the endeavour in the face of the relentless vocational utilitarianism of recent years is, I would suggest, fully in line with what Thompson (2007) and other post-school and adult educators might wish to advocate. However, such a task will not be achieved by understating the affective/emotional dimension of learning but in recognising that our provision is deficient in just this crucial area.

This is where mindfulness comes into its own since its raison d'être (at least in its contemporary therapeutic role) is exactly that of maintaining emotional balance

and well-being in a radically destabilising, materialistic culture. There is now a body of evidence from neuroscientific studies pointing to the 'neuroplasticity' of the brain – the idea that 'experience can create structural changes in the brain' (Siegel 2007, p. 31). The idea is that by attending to our thoughts and perceptions, focussing on and reappraising various aspects of them, we can actually influence brain chemistry and function (see Bakhurst 2008 for a discussion of neuroscience within an educational context). Since such internal awareness and focus of attention is central to mindfulness strategies, such practices can serve valuable learning and therapeutic purposes, and this explains the successful use of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) strategies by Baer (2006) and by Williams and co-workers (2007). As Siegel (2007) concludes, 'mindfulness not only helps us feel good and recover from negative feelings more quickly, but it can actually improve our medical health' (p. 32).

Langer (1989) has similarly indicated how mindfulness can help older learners to maintain alertness, motivation and commitment, and utilising MBCT with patients suffering from depression, Segal et al. (2002, p. 315) demonstrated that major depression relapse rates were reduced using mindfulness techniques. In addition to helping to alleviate the emotional distress referred to above, such approaches can serve as valuable support mechanisms to learning at all levels, and the mindfulness and education networks are producing increasing evidence of such effectiveness (Langer 2003). The research in this field is now increasingly acknowledged in UK educational circles, and the *Mental Health and Wellbeing* report outlined evidence which indicated clear relationships 'between positive emotions and cognitive processes' and noted that such findings had led to an increasing interest in the positive benefits of 'mindfulness meditation' (Government Office for Science 2008, p. 11).

The Buddha famously said that he taught 'one thing and one thing only: that is, suffering and the end of suffering' (Salzberg 1995, p. 102), and this core teaching is of inestimable value in our current social, economic and political climate in which education has to function. In helping us to let go of the often mindless and restless striving which lies at the heart of our mental processes and habit-driven behaviour, mindfulness prepares the way for genuinely rich and deep learning and the journey from self-obsession to a fuller engagement with life and with others. This is a worthwhile educational ideal. As Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) puts it:

> Mindfulness helps us look deeply into the depths of our consciousness…When we practice this we are liberated from fear, sorrow and the fires burning inside us. When mindfulness embraces our joy, our sadness, and all our mental formations, sooner or later we will see their deep roots…Mindfulness shines its light upon them and helps them to transform (p. 75).

All of us will at some stage of our lives have to engage with emotions such as hatred, love, joy, sorrow, pride and envy, and an education which failed to address such issues is bound to be one-sided and incomplete. Thus, contra Ecclestone and Hayes, I would want to conclude by saying that educational aims based only on *cogito ergo sum* would, indeed, be likely to produce diminished learners. Educational aims concerned with the development of the whole person require the *cogito* to be balanced by and harmonised with objectives based on *sentio ergo sum.*

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