Revisiting the Nature of Transformative Learning Experiences in Contemplative Higher Education

Olen Gunnlaugson¹, Renata Cueto de Souza², Steven Zhao², Allen Yee², Charles Scott², and Heesoon Bai²

Abstract

We are interested in the transformative potentials of intersubjectivity as it is enacted through second-person contemplative approaches. Our work here focuses on contemplative practice as a pedagogy that reveals and enacts intersubjectivity within postsecondary education. How might contemplative higher education practice as a pedagogy enable students to access these underlying intersubjective dimensions, thus creating conditions for a shift in the forms of transformative learning that affect the nature of the learner’s consciousness as well as their overall journey of transformation through the course of their studies? We review the theoretical and research literature on postsecondary contemplative education, particularly in its intersubjective dimensions, and then offer data from a qualitative study involving students enrolled in a graduate program in contemplative inquiry that offers evidence of the transformative potentials of these intersubjective, contemplative approaches to learning and inquiry.

¹Université Laval, Quebec, Canada
²Simon Fraser University

Corresponding Authors:
Olen Gunnlaugson, Faculty of Business, Department of Management, Université Laval, Pavillon Palaisis-Prince, 2325 rue de la Terrasse, Quebec G1V 0A6, Canada.
Email: olen.gunnlaugson@fsa.ulaval.ca

Heesoon Bai, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Dr., Burnaby, B.C. V5N 2Y3, Canada.
Email: hbai@sfu.ca
Keywords
transformative education, transformative learning, transformative pedagogy, intersubjectivity, contemplative inquiry, contemplative pedagogy, second-person contemplative approaches, contemplative practice

Preamble
Wisdom traditions around the world have recognized implicitly that what is “inside” human beings—the subjective dimension of our being that encompasses thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, and so on—is invariably projected into the world; and that, therefore, working on our interior condition is of utmost ethical importance in our participation in and engagement with daily life in the world. Basically, we act from the interior place of our consciousness and the nature of who we are. If we are deluded or lack wisdom and compassion, it follows that we impact the world from a place of delusion and ignorance through our moment-by-moment actions. We will call this first principle inner–outer mirroring. For the purposes of our article, we also posit a second principle: what is inside an individual psyche or mind (our subjective dimensions) has been significantly informed and formed as a result of intersubjective interactions via individuals’ subjective dimensions interacting with one another and the shared space of relating. We will call this second principle mutual causality. As a corollary, following from this paradigm of thinking, the objective dimension has to do with “what is,” moment-by-moment, in the unfolding dynamics of the subject and the intersubjective. Finally, we propose a third principle, the dynamic process nature of reality. Although attempting to know “what is” is an aspirational act and activity for humans, we acknowledge the underlying dimension of complex and dynamic interconnectivity which we call reality where the first and the second principles are enacted.

Together, these three principles guide us toward an understanding of the self that is participatory by nature and process, inseparably engaged with the subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions of being, as above. This relational interconnected self exists interdependently and intersubjectively through participation with the world in dynamically unfolding and emergent processes. While the dominant modern paradigm of pedagogy in many learning institutions, from kindergarten to university, is still fundamentally entrenched in an atomistic ontology and epistemology, we explore and inquire into the viability of pedagogically enacting the above mentioned three principles in the context of university education. Specifically, we are interested in the transformative potentials of intersubjectivity (the second principle) as it is enacted through second-person contemplative approaches. Our work here focuses on contemplative practice as a pedagogy that reveals and enacts intersubjectivity.

Gunnlaugson (2009) writes:

As an example, without distinguishing second-person forms of contemplative pedagogy, deeper forms of intersubjective collective knowing may remain dormant, obscured or
completely hidden from our awareness as educators. Acknowledging second-person forms of contemplative pedagogy will help locate and map out the respective depths of intersubjective reality, as well as deeper forms of intersubjective knowing than the conventional varieties that prevail at the physical material and conceptual-mental levels of existence … (p. 44).

We ask the following questions to guide our exploration of the intersubjective: How might contemplative higher education practice as a pedagogy enable students to access these underlying intersubjective dimensions, thus creating conditions for a shift in the forms of transformative learning that affect the nature of the learner’s consciousness as well as their overall journey of transformation through the course of their studies? As learners, in what distinctive ways does contemplative inquiry shift, expand, and ultimately transform our most intimate sense of self? In other words, how might our sense of self become empathically and creatively attuned to the world through intersubjective contemplative pedagogy? Further, what intersubjective discoveries, incidents, and experiences offer clues and insight into the transformative dimension of contemplative learning? Our teaching experience has revealed to us that contemplative inquiry can facilitate a transformative deepening of intersubjective involvement. Our analysis of data collected from students enrolled in a graduate program in contemplative inquiry will further clarify and reveal this transformative deepening.

The next section begins with a brief overview of contemplative educational practice. Specifically, it examines contemplative practice as a pedagogy in higher education that optimizes transformative learning. Our aim here is to assess this field of studies for its transformative potential within an intersubjective context.

**The Development and the Trajectory of Contemplative Practice as a Pedagogy of Transformative Learning in Higher Education**

During the mid-1990s, and particularly around the turn of the 21st century, a growing movement in North American universities began advocating for the introduction of contemplative practice, reconfigured and reconceptualized to secular forms, into a variety of academic fields, programs and courses. Since then, a new burgeoning field of contemplative education has emerged. While Eppert (2013), Hattam and Baker (2015), and Ergas (2016) have addressed this movement as a “contemplative turn in education,” Morgan (2015) qualified it as the “recent reemergence” or “third wave” of contemplative approaches in education.

Historically, contemplative practices have been considered inherently transformational. In his study of the ancient Graeco-Latin philosophical tradition as a way of life and spiritual exercises—deemed the Western roots of contemporary contemplative education (Ergas & Todd, 2016; Stock, 2006; Zajonc, 2016)—(Hadot, 1995) stated that such practices aimed at transforming all aspects of one’s being by shifting their “vision of the world” and catalyzing a “metamorphosis of [their] personality” (p. 82) and deeper personhood and soul. A more extensive examination of contemplative
traditions in general, including non-Western ones, similarly reveals an ever-present concern with human “possibilities of being,” to whose realization contemplative practices would contribute by bringing out “transformed existential and ontological modes” in individuals (Komjathy, 2018, p. 108).

In their more recent configurations, contemplative practices in higher education have continued to be associated with transformation, albeit in a new, field-related light. According to Morgan (2015), before the 1990s—a “pre-contemplative” period in contemporary contemplative education (Ergas, 2016)—a number of contemplative, transformative, and integral approaches “were gathered under the collective title of ‘alternative education,’ with their pedagogy often described as alternative and holistic” (p. 14). In the early 2000s, several contemporary contemplative education writings initiated a dialogue with the field of transformative learning, many of them having been published in this Journal.

Duerr et al. (2003) were among the first to explicitly tie contemplative practice to transformative learning. Recapturing the idea that “transformation is central to all spiritual traditions” (p. 179), they proposed an operational definition of transformative learning that drew, on the one hand, on the critiques of Jack Mezirow’s (1978) view as overly reliant on “rational reflection” to the detriment of embodied, emotional, intuitive, and spiritual aspects and, on the other, on more integrative theoretical frameworks. Transformation of perspective, they argued, “is not a theoretical one but one that is lived” (p. 179); moreover, it spans across stages to include a further development that encompasses transpersonal dimensions of transformative learning. In this context, contemplative practice would serve a pedagogical role in the development of an “ethical and moral sensibility” and the cultivation of “a recognition of interdependence and a re-connection with the natural and social world, and an emergent sense of social responsibility” (p. 180). There is also a psychological dimension to this: as such, contemplative practice as a pedagogy would help create the safety, compassionate listening, and creativity promoting an openness to deeper dialogue across differences.

Building from the contributions of Duerr et al. (2003), Gunnlaugson made a case for the need for more integrally informed transformative learning theories (Gunnlaugson, 2005, 2007). As well, he noted that little attention had been paid to second-person approaches and methods of contemplative education, and defined the latter as the exploration of “contemplative experience from an intersubjective position that is represented spatially as between us, in contrast to inside us (subjective position) or outside us (objective position)” (Gunnlaugson, 2009, p. 27). In order to establish “a more comprehensive epistemological framework” (p. 47) for this “new theoretical domain of inquiry” (p. 27) within contemplative education, Gunnlaugson drew on different conceptions of intersubjectivity, extracting and outlining their ontological, phenomenological, psychological, and epistemological dimensions. Among his findings were distinct depths of intersubjective reality and knowing, different regions of intersubjective experience (with corresponding validity claims and criteria), and varieties of second-person pedagogies. As such, for the purpose of fostering
transformative learning in the classroom, second-person contemplative methods would, to begin with, potentially contribute to creating the preconditions for classroom inquiry “informed by the deeper ontological realms … of the between” (p. 31) through a pedagogy of presence, that is, the cultivation and sustaining of “embodied present-moment-centered awareness” (Gunnlaugson, 2011, p. 6) while students and educators address one another, thus enacting the Buberian I-Thou existential mode of relationality.

Presence, however, is a quality predicated on distinct depths of being and relatedness. As such, presence could take inquiry deeper into the exploration of the intersubjective dimension of collective wisdom, where shared and co-emergent learning arise, as well as “the deeper source of our human experience” (Gunnlaugson, 2009, p. 46), an experience of non-dual awareness that leads to the transformation of one’s sense of self and relationship. As a pedagogy of communion, second-person contemplative methods would soften and, in some cases, temporarily suspend or dissolve our “dualistic tendencies,” “rigid identification with our conventional identities,” and unbending “individual sense of agency” (p. 32), inviting us toward an experience of our selfhood as “interconnected, interdependent and interrelated” (p. 31). By shifting the prevailing classroom ethos from the familiar modern individual-centered one to an in-depth participatory one (Gunnlaugson, 2011), informed by the ethics of care and mutual responsibility, contemplative pedagogies of communion would help students experience “their own processes of inner transformation … as interdependent” (Gunnlaugson, 2009, p. 33).

Transformative Learning in Contemplative Classroom: A Review of the Intersubjective Dimensions of Contemplative Inquiry

On the basis of previous work on intersubjectivity and contemplative practice (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017, 2019), we suggest the transformation of our knowing and relating must encompass the foundations of who we are. Such transformation imparts shifts in the deeper values, worldviews, mind-sets, and being-sets of students and educators. This, in turn, matures the purpose of higher education from knowledge acquisition to a journey of enacted wisdom. By turning inward both within subjectivity and between the respective “withins” of our intersubjectivity, we begin to establish new sites for transformative learning through engagement with students.

The intersubjective dimension of classroom life has been identified as a key emerging site for transformation (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017):

Unlike either third-person or first-person methods, second-person approaches offer the benefits of engagement not only within our own interiority but also between participants within the greater field of awareness and ensuing conversation. The expansion and embrace of second-person methods provide a distinctive learning milieu or context in which collective wisdom and shared learning can begin to emerge from a participatory
rather than individual-centered ethos within groups, teams, and the classroom as a whole.

Second-person contemplative approaches are now increasingly common in post-secondary education, as an extensive and growing body of literature makes clear (e.g., Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Benefiel & Lee, 2019; Dorman et al., 2017; Gunnlaugson et al., 2019, 2017; Keator, 2017). Broadly speaking, these applications in post-secondary education are still relatively new. While implementation across disciplines has been occurring for about 10 years, there are still many unanswered questions concerning the potentials of contemplative, intersubjective pedagogy in facilitating transformative learning. Hence, we seek to address some of these questions. In the next section, we will review a number of existing conceptualizations of contemplative learning with an interest in identifying elements of transformation that might be realized through second-person contemplative approaches.

Gunnlaugson et al. (2019) offer an overview of second-person social technologies available to educators, including silent group contemplative and meditation practice, Bohmian- and Buberian-inspired forms of dialog where participants connect to their depths of shared meaning, presencing, and generative dialog sessions. Possibilities of intersubjective contemplative pedagogies abound, presenting today’s educator with new inroads and vistas for exploring second-person forms of transformative learning in the higher education classroom, even where online forms of higher education are increasingly predominant.

Many of the contributing authors of (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017, 2019), two volumes dedicated to theory and applications of the intersubjective dimensions of contemplative inquiry in education, brought examples of approaches of the exploration of the intersubjective dimension in contemplative classrooms. Jorge Ferrer and Olga Sohmer (2017) introduced “Embodied Spiritual Inquiry” (henceforth, ESI) as a novel, graduate-level, second-person approach to participatory learning and contemplative education (p. 15). The program applies interactive embodied meditation to intersubjectively access different ways of knowing and to mindfully inquire into collaboratively decided questions. The authors posit that “ESI systematically and radically engages contemplative intersubjectivity through mindful physical contact among practitioners” (p. 16) through practices that “seek to foster participants contemplative access to deep layers of human somatic, vital, emotions, and mental worlds and associated ways of knowing” (p. 19). ESI was found to transcend the “Cartesian dichotomy,” providing simultaneous access to both subjective and objective knowledge. The participants of ESI found that “this access can be experienced as both profoundly liberating and personally meaningful, and participants often report significant personal insights during or after the interactive meditations” (p. 26). The significance here is that this embodied approach “drastically augments the depth of relationality achieved by ESI participants” (p. 29).

A similar conclusion is drawn from the work of Lyn (Hartley, 2017). She conducted interviews with faculty members from an annual weeklong summer program held at the Authentic Leadership in Action Institute. This program “includes guided mindfulness
instruction, small group modules related to leadership, and large plenary and dialog sessions, all with a focus on strengthening core leadership capacities” (p. 83). The instructors believe that in order to facilitate intersubjective capacity, “growth of the intersubjective field starts with the development of an individual’s awareness through sitting meditation and then expands through interactive creative arts into large group discussions” (p. 95). Hartley found this heightened awareness creates a sense of openness for transformational learning through shifts in perspectives and underlying beliefs” (p. 98). And “a result of the grounding in meditative and contemplative arts, group dialogue becomes an occasion to rub up against divergent thinking with curiosity, inquiry and openness” (p. 99). With these practices, the facilitators were able to build a “learning container” for the participants, to which one participant said “what is happening inside [the container] can really cook and transformation can take place” (p. 96). Hartley notes that the deepened, contemplatively infused dialogue was a means to a “larger collective energy and interconnected field” (p. 99).

Earlier we asked: “Might there be emerging forms of transformation that are currently not well-accounted for in the literature, but that students and faculty recognize and have experience with?” Mary (Keator, 2017) notes in her work the following transformative findings:

I have found that as students move through the ebb and flow of contemplative intersubjective dialog, they begin to experience the transformational power of deep listening as they sustain attention, suspend judgments, and open to deeper possibilities that are arising in the silence and spaces created. (p. 200) (italics added)

In the introduction, we pointed out that one’s sense of self “exists interdependently and intersubjectively through participation with the world in dynamically unfolding and emergent processes.” In this section, we have offered pedagogically enacted examples of how these intersubjective dynamics, including the development of an “interconnected field,” contribute to a transformation in both our way of knowing and being, opening up deeper forms of transformation that emerge out of such dynamics. Following from this thinking, we acknowledge not only epistemological transformations, but the development of more empathic, relational ontologies. From these cases, we can see that the nature of the self is becoming “intersubjectively, empathically, relationally, and creatively attuned to the world through contemplative educational pedagogy”.

Following from this line of thinking, the contemplative processes of learning in the higher education classroom take place in a “space” that holds and enables such shared processes to emerge. As the interconnected reality where we enact the first and the second principles, this shared space becomes significant to our intersubjective purposes where our learning interactions unfold inside the group field within which we “interare” (Hahn, 2020) and inter-relate with ourselves and one another through subtle forms of contact and relational connectivity.
This deeper ontological shift from being separate to interconnected as learners is important, as has been noted by Taylor and Snyder (2012) in pointing out that “in every review of transformative learning, the role of relationships has been identified as being significant in the process of transformation” (p. 44). Buechner et al. (2020) note the emergence of a “shared feeling of communitas” (p. 87), concluding that “collective transformation is a possible outgrowth of a shared liminal experience among a group that later finds communitas with each other” (p. 109). We would suggest that the experiences that many students report are, to different degrees, manifestations of this collectively generated form of transformation. Moreover, we would suggest these shifts hold the seeds to a more profound and eventual ontological transformation into a more established relational sense of self.

We now turn to explore a case example that brings a contemplative inquiry graduate program into focus. Here we illustrate with examples the transformational context and trajectory that we have been outlining. On the whole, this case example explores aspects of contemplative practice in a transformative educational context and raises awareness and further questions of the educational possibilities of this integration.

Mapping out Transformative Learning in the Contemplative Higher Education Classroom: A Case Study

The Contemplative Inquiry and Approaches in Education M.Ed. program at Simon Fraser University provides a 2-year immersive contemplative educational experience for graduate students. The program builds the foundational human capacity for thinking expansively, clearly, complexly, and creatively, requiring participants to be emotionally connected and relationally open as well as cultivating non-reactive, mentally centered and attuned, somatically grounded, and harmonious ways of being. The curricular and pedagogical approaches center on transformative learning made possible in both the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of contemplative inquiry. This case example is substantiated by the available qualitative research findings of open-ended/semi-structured interviews with past and present students enrolled in the program.

The program founders anticipated the emergence of the transformative potential of the intersubjective experience. They philosophically intuited that such experience is always and already there, even if only in seed-form, as human beings are essentially relational. Hence, they made a case that it was not so much the program curriculum content as it was the pedagogy infused with contemplative approaches that would lead the participants into the richness of uncovering and exploring the ontology of their intersubjective experience. The program does not have a specific course that bears a title indicating the subject matter of contemplative inquiry, although that is the heart of its offering. Instead, the program relies on the teaching faculty’s own committed practice of contemplation, which brings a diversity of approaches to their teaching: yoga and other embodied forms of contemplative inquiry, Indigenous contemplative traditions, Buddhist and Daoist based practices, and so on. A primary faculty commitment is the deepening of sensitivity to the intersubjective, based on lived experience.
of the learning possibilities that emerge through the intersubjective dimensions of classroom life.

Courses include social and moral educational philosophy, developing educational programs, current issues in curriculum, curriculum and pedagogy in teaching specialties, embodiment and education, a fieldwork course, and a final comprehensive exam that offers students opportunities to reflect on and integrate their learning experiences. Again, the contemplative elements are pedagogically infused throughout the program, rendering the curricular subject matters to inform and transform the learning process. That is, the participants grow to experience the transformative power of their own and the group’s intersubjective awareness, as they are studying, reflecting upon, and inquiring into the curricular content.

The above point about practicing infusion with a contemplative way of teaching and learning brings us back to Gunnlaugson’s (2009) work on the pedagogy of presence we cited earlier. Gunnlaugson refers to presence as a quality predicated on distinct depths of being and the quality of relatedness from these depths. It is these qualities of being that faculty foster in their relationships and teaching practice, creating conditions to bring participants into the intersubjective. By learning to teach and facilitate from the deeper immanent presence of being, the teaching faculty draw upon their deeper spiritual natures in a shared relational context as interconnected dimensions of the intersubjective. These dimensions can be experienced simultaneously in overlapping and more fluid ways by shifting between the subjective and the intersubjective. As Gunnlaugson (2011) points out, this contemplative approach aspires to work from an ontological place of fluid embodied presence and awareness that has the power to transform the educator’s as well as student’s sense of self and relationship with one another.

To illustrate the living fabric of this ontological dimension of contemplative education, we now share the experiential narratives of the participating students in the contemplative inquiry program. We draw from the qualitative research data generated from two recent SFU-funded grants that enabled the contemplative inquiry program coordinators to study the learning and teaching that took place in the program.1 For our research purposes we have identified four facets of intersubjective contemplative learning that we feel aptly illustrate key insights into how this modality of contemplative education is fostered by intersubjective pedagogy. According to our data analysis, these four facets include: (a) entering the liminal space of the intersubjective; (b) moving toward the coherent whole through releasing the limiting self; (c) epistemological and ontological transformation as part of the experience of the intersubjective; and, finally, (d) the presence or beingness of the teacher in fostering the intersubjective and its transformative potential: this is the “ontological place of fluid embodied presence and awareness” we mentioned above. In the students’ comments below and our commentaries on them, we will make reference to these four aspects of the transformative possibilities via intersubjective contemplative pedagogy. Following this section, we will discuss the dimensions of “pedagogical infusion” that we feel play a role in contributing to such transformative experiences.
Entering the Liminal Space of the Intersubjective

To begin, we note Hartley’s (2017) assertion that the collectively established “learning container” allows the transformations that occurred in her leadership program. We interpret that this learning container is equivalent to what we have referred to earlier in this article as “new sites for transformative learning.” These “intersubjective sites” and “learning container” present the spaces where transformation becomes possible. One student in the contemplative inquiry program notes the development of a transformative, intersubjective “liminal space” revealed by the contemplative ethos of the program:

I think the wide variety of different individuals and their backgrounds really helped encourage diversity in thought…. There was a learning component within the student cohort of listening to other people’s opinions and sparks that flew off that, and the challenges. And the liminal space that people were knocked into [emerged] because they were re-defining themselves and their own ideas of life and what was important to them.

When you have that sustaining integration, a collection that is greater than the sum of the parts, then there is a level of safety in which people feel that are able to share things that perhaps they would not. So, it is the coherence within the collective consciousness that allows the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts.

Another student notes:

Our interaction was [itself] a contemplative practice. I think people don’t recognize that the intersubjective—when it is actually practitioner, authentic-self or a space for regeneration—that primary consciousness … means that we have an enriching field from which we all can emerge authentically and uniquely out of the same soil. … [it was having] that unified sense of resonance ….

We can see students affirming here the awareness of the intersubjective through second-person contemplative pedagogy. “Enriching field” here would emphasize path-finding possibilities of creative movement and action taking place. When gently invited into a liminal space that is safe and respective, a person may freely embark on exploring creative possibilities that were not previously entertained. In other words, it is in and through the dwelling within the intersubjective that epistemological and ontological transformation becomes possible. Although the faculty are conscious of these gentle invitations, the resulting transformations were nevertheless profound: one student refers to “being knocked into” this transformative space where an ontological transformation of self was occurring. However, another student comment points us back to the sense of safety sensed in the intersubjective, suggesting it opens up possibilities of epistemological transformation or what they refer to as “changing frames of mind”:
Creating that safety throughout allowed that transformation to happen. If you do not feel safe, you cannot take those steps so I would say [intersubjective safety] is a big one. Allowing us to engage in heavy dialogue that was difficult but that led us toward further thinking and changing frames of mind.

**Moving toward the Coherent Whole through Releasing the Limiting Self**

One primary facet of transformative learning lies in the practitioner’s capacity to step out of their existing mental frameworks and ways of comprehending self, others, and the world. When this takes place, students become able to adopt or experiment with new frameworks of comprehension that are distinctly or radically different. Such ability requires letting go of the known, which normally is vulnerable and uncomfortable. One student remarked “… there is a transformation when you move into a new space where you’ve let go of what you knew and all you thought you might know or your preconceptions … and then you are into a transformative state.” The intersubjective and contemplative practices of communion help the participants to let go of the known and embrace the unknown, thus moving toward transformations. As one student said:

… people feel safer and through that safety people were sharing and healing. There was this communal component that was powerful. As Herman Hesse said in *Journey to the East*, it is rare that people can go on these sophisticated journeys alone. Most people need a community in order for transformation to occur.

When people feel safe, secure, and belonging, ego defences come down. Transformation occurs when people’s usual tightly guarded and defended ego structures loosen and become open to change. Another student points to the “coherence within the collective consciousness; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” This shift is indicative of a major shift from a purely individualized and subjectively oriented frame of mind to one that is collective as made possible through intersubjective engrossment. As well, the student recognizes the synergistic, Gestalt-like nature of this state of consciousness, noting its coherent nature. As Bohm (1992) notes, “Coherence requires that the whole be all brought together…. We have a whole that is internally related, which is intrinsically one because each part contains the whole, enfolded.” In this sense, the movement in collective consciousness from an incoherent to coherent state becomes transformative.

Letting go of one’s limiting frame of mind and preoccupations is usually very challenging; yet, such can come naturally to the mind trained to “really listen” and pay full attention to the other:

We explored what it means to listen, to really listen …. I understand the significance of giving someone your undivided attention…. Really listening has opened me up to stories. I have learned more about the lives of people around me, at my work and in my community than I ever imagined, just because we held the contemplative space to listen and honour. To
genuinely listen to and see other people, I have to treat myself with the same respect. I am not just less judgmental with others but also with myself. I added Loving Kindness meditation to my meditation practice.

The student has learned, through deep listening, to engage intersubjectively in the lived experiences of another, opening to new understandings of others that might not otherwise be possible. Moreover, there is, in addition to the new epistemological framing, a new ontological “holding” of self and other that is characterized by honor, respect, and lovingkindness. We now further consider additional evidence of such ontological transformation.

**Epistemological and Ontological Transformation**

In this section, we are considering transformation in two fundamental facets. The first is epistemological, by which we mean that which pertains to knowledge acquisition; the second is ontological, by which we refer to views of reality as experienced by the individual. Being immersed in the intersubjective affords participants an opportunity to shift the perspectives of themselves (Dirkx et al., 2006) and the experience of their lived reality, what Mezirow (2009) referred to as shifts in frames of reference. Another student comment makes it clear that this intersubjectivity allowed an ontological transformation:

There was a much more accepting environment for me as I am, rather than me pretending to be something to fit in with the cohort. So that was the new revelation for me and the major transformation. Once that was established as working heuristic, I was able to relax and not have to strain to compete. I think that was the major impact… there is a transformation when you move into a new space where you’ve let go of what you knew and all you thought you might know or your preconceptions … and then you are into a transformative state.

The felt sense of not having to “compete” academically is noteworthy, as this opens the door to possible epistemological transformation: the student could “let go” of past knowledge or preconceptions, not to mention any sense of insecurity around one’s scholarly capacities—the imposter syndrome so common among many in the academy—entering into the space of “beginner’s mind” where, as Suzuki (1999) put it, “there are many possibilities” (p. 21). Also noteworthy is the student’s felt sense of being accepted as they are, without the socialized pressure of having to fit in. Intersubjective experience in this sense serves as a ground for a deeper ontological shift and a new felt sense of self.

One [event] that sticks out for me was when I read my poem about the stigma associated with [my particular ethnic] community. Just seeing people cry, people who would not identify as [belonging to this community], but who connected with what I had said. That
was one of the most powerful moments of my life. Really, truly. The response that I got from my peers and the instructor [had a significant impact] — and, really, that opportunity does not come ever. So that’s why I found this program transformative. One of the reasons I have kept writing stems from that moment in a contemplative community.

We would suggest experiences of this nature represent a significant shift in the sense of one’s selfhood—bringing into view a new sense of self that is not only seen but deeply recognized and legitimated. In the process of being recognized and validated by the community, the everyday self that tends to be experientially isolated and independent begins to connect to the learning process and the particular community that holds the space for this intersubjective emergence.

For another student, their transformation involved an awareness of self as a white male, emerging out of the collective consideration of issues around race, privilege, diversity, and inclusion. It is again worth noting that this shift was made possible by the spirit of compassionate and collective contemplative inquiry developed in the learning space that was more sensitive to intersubjectivity. It is also worth noting that the student commented that “I take for granted that so much of the program is contemplative that I don’t even talk about it now; the contemplative was part of it all.” The same student continues:

I had to change. Toward the end of the program, I took a real interest in a lot of the equity-based material, shifting my perspective of being a white male in the classroom who was teaching predominantly females and students of different ethnicities and different cultures. I could see the curriculum examples in the teaching materials were very Eurocentric and male-centered. I saw that these were limiting for people. I had never conceptualized these things before. I was really diving into identity and where I come from and how that affects others and how I teach…. It made me really become aware of who I was in my identity, not only as a person, but as an instructor, and the moral responsibility that comes with that. So that was really transformative for me. It really started to place me within my context in a certain type of way.

This particular account provides us with an example of an epistemological and ontological transformation. It is our contention that transformation is made possible through the pedagogical approaches that created an intersubjective “container” where participants were emotionally “held” with respect and compassion, which relaxed them enough to help them to release their tight grip on beliefs and notions that are part of one’s self-identity.

**Presence as Embodiment of Ongoing Awareness**

We noted earlier that presence refers to a quality predicated on distinct depths of being and the quality of relatedness from these depths. Gunnlaugson (2011) refers to experience of presence as a quality of attention that manifests as “the practice, condition,
or state of abiding in embodied present-moment-centered awareness” (p. 6). For Scott (2014), presence denotes the enactment of the whole being and adding that presence fosters engagement with the other. We therefore note that there are both subjective and intersubjective dimensions of presence.

As a result of immersion in the program, one student commented on a focus on “developing greater capacities for intentional presence,” indicating that presence has significance for the students. One of the students in the program commented on the presence of the teachers: “Every single professor and instructor seems to have been carefully chosen to be the lessons, not run them. They created a space that was safe, where the inner and outer really could coexist.” We note here that teachers are the lessons. As in the case of tea infusion, wherein tea leaves are submerged in hot water, pedagogical infusion takes place when students are infused in the contemplative pedagogy of the teacher and their lessons. The source of the latter is the teacher presence: teachers’ quality and depth of beingness. Another student affirms that one of the instructors “teaches through presence about presence.” In the program, teacher presence is neither an abstract concept nor an amorphous and ineffable “thing.”

Even when students’ experience of presence is at first elusive, unfathomable, ineffable, and so on, it is still felt and experienced on the part of the students. The acknowledgment and confirmation are important for the students’ learning to grow. Therefore, as students’ own contemplative ways of knowing and being increase throughout our program, their ability to sense and articulate the nature of their own felt sense of presence and pedagogic presence increase as well. One student writes about both integration and authenticity as expressions of presence:

A theme that has arisen many times throughout my journey in relation to this story is the congruency of the interior and exterior as an expression of authenticity. One is propelled to act from a deep calling, an expression of authenticity … I continue to explore internal callings as I develop a relationship with myself—my whole self—body, spirit, mind and heart.

Another student also comments on the developing awareness of authenticity and self-transformation: “Throughout my journey, I’ve come to understand my authentic self by developing greater capacities for intentional presence, gratitude, empathy and compassion. … I have been changed in immeasurable, intangible ways that I cannot fully describe.”

One student notes the intersubjective presence developed, for example, in the check-ins that would follow a period of silent meditation, noted as “a sharing of presence, which was instigated by the heuristic of each of us sharing a few minutes of what was going on in our lives.” Here is another statement in which a student comments on the lived experience of the program, where the intersubjective container is likened to a “micro-climate”:
I feel more connected to those around me and braver in approaching those whose values and opinions I do not share… I share a bond with my fellow students and lecturers that is hard to explain. I like to think we created a micro-climate where diversity is appreciated and understood as strength and beauty.

**Post-Amble**

Circling back to the beginning, our intention in this article has been to identify and highlight emerging transformative potentials of the intersubjective dimension of contemplative inquiry within higher education. Gunnlaugson and Sarath et al. (2014) note that the intersubjective realm offers important ramifications for shaping new classroom pedagogical approaches and processes of learning. These contemplatively revealed realms of the intersubjective open up new learning horizons where such realities can be explored. In this sense, the interior ontological ramifications of the intersubjective have a promising potential going forward for contemplative educators and students. We began by inquiring into how intersubjective contemplative inquiry might serve as a pedagogical means of effecting transformative learning in higher education. We followed up with an articulation of the theory as well as evidence that the pedagogical approaches we have employed do facilitate such transformative learning. We have offered evidence of transformation in the development of the learner’s sense of self that is more coherent, an embodiment of presence, and relational; transformation in ways of knowing; and the significance of the contemplative and intersubjective “pedagogical infusion,” along with the presence of the teacher, that facilitate these transformations among the students.

We concur with the conclusion of Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) that such second-person contemplative approaches can play a significant role in helping us create deeper, more meaningful, and sustainable relationships with others and with the various ecologies that surround us. In short, we would argue that these approaches offer personal and collective transformative experience that manifests in the realms of the somatic, intellect, emotions, morals, and spirit. Skillfully applied, they create the intersubjective field that generates both epistemological and ontological transformations in those participating. We suggest that the transformative experiences our students report are the manifestations of such generative processes. Moreover, we also suggest that these developments represent the beginnings of deeper ontological shifts into a more established relational sense of self that extends to the transpersonal as well as the forms of collective transformation needed most in our higher education communities today.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: We acknowledge the funding for our research provided by two grants from the Institute for the Study of Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines at Simon Fraser University in 2017 and 2019.

ORCID iD
Olen Gunnlaugson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0376-7966

Notes
1. We acknowledge the funding for our research provided by two grants from the Institute for the Study of Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines at Simon Fraser University in 2017 and 2019.

References
Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2013). Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning. John Wiley & Sons.
Benefiel, M., & Lee, B. K. (Eds.). (2019). The soul of higher education: Contemplative pedagogy, research and institutional life for the twenty-first century. Information Age Publishing.
Bohm, D. (1992). Wholeness and coherence. David Bohm Society. https://youtu.be/-Qpy1FoUrK0
Buechner, B., Dirkx, J., Konvisser, Z. D., Myers, D., & Peleg-Baker, T. (2020). From liminality to communitas: The collective dimensions of transformative learning. Journal of Transformational Education, 18(2), 87–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619900881
Dirkx, J. M., Mezirow, J., & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of transformative learning: A dialogue between John M. Dirkx and Jack Mezirow. Journal of Transformational Education, 4(2), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344606287503
Dorman, E. H., Byrnes, K., & Dalton, J. E. (Eds.). (2017). Impacting teaching and learning: Contemplative practices, pedagogy, and research in education. Rowman & Littlefield.
Duer, M., Zajonc, A., & Dana, D. (2003). Survey of transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education. Journal of Transformational Education, 1(3), 177–211. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603001003002
Eppert, C. (2013). Awakening education: Toward a rich tapestry of mindful and contemplative engagement for social/environmental transformation. In J. Lin, E. Brantmeier, & R. Oxford (Eds.), Re-envisioning higher education: Embodied pathways to wisdom and social transformation (Transforming Education for the Future Series). (pp. 337–351). Information Age Publishing.
Ergas, O. (2016). Knowing the unknown: Transcending the educational narrative of the Kantian paradigm through contemplative inquiry. In J. Lin, R. Oxford, & T. Culham (Eds.), Towards
a spiritual research paradigm: Exploring new ways of knowing, researching, and being (pp. 1–23). Information Age Publishing.

Ergas, O., & Todd, S. (Eds.). (2016). Philosophy east/west: Exploring intersections between educational and contemplative practices. John Wiley & Sons.

Ferrer, J. N., & Sohmer, O. R. (2017). A radical approach to second-person contemplative education. In O. Gunnlaugson, C. Scott, H. Bai, et al. (Eds.), The intersubjective turn in contemplative education: Theoretical approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines (pp. 15–35). State University of New York Press.

Gunnlaugson, O (2005). Toward integrally informed theories of transformative learning. Journal of Transformative Education, 3(4), 331-353. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12140.

Gunnlaugson, O (2007). Shedding light on the underlying forms of transformative learning theory: Introducing three distinct categories of consciousness. Journal of Transformative Education, 5(2), 134-151. https://doi.org/10.1117/1541344607303526.

Gunnlaugson, O. (2009). Establishing second-person forms of contemplative education: An inquiry into four conceptions of intersubjectivity. Integral Review: A Transdisciplinary & Transcultural Journal for New Thought, Research, & Praxis, 5(1), 25-50.

Gunnlaugson, O. (2011). Advancing a second-person contemplative approach for collective wisdom and leadership development. Journal of Transformative Education, 9(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344610397034

Gunnlaugson, O., Sarath, E. W., Scott, C., & Bai, H. (Eds.). (2014). Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines. State University of New York Press.

Gunnlaugson, O., Scott, C., Bai, H., & Sarath, E. W. (Eds.). (2017). The intersubjective turn: Theoretical approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines. State University of New York Press.

Gunnlaugson, O., Scott, C., Bai, H., & Sarath, E. W. (Eds.). (2019). Catalyzing the field: Second-person approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry. State University of New York Press.

Hadot, P. (1995). Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hanh, T. N. (2020). Interbeing: The 14 mindfulness trainings of engaged Buddhism (4th ed.). Parallax Press.

Hartley, L. (2017). Intersubjective insights from teaching contemplative leadership. In O. Gunnlaugson, C. Scott, H. Bai, et al. (Eds.), The intersubjective turn: Theoretical approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines (pp. 83–100). State University of New York Press.

Hattam, R., & Baker, B. (2015). Technologies of self and the cultivation of virtues. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 49(2), 255-273. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12140.

Keator, M. (2017). Lectio Divina as contemplative pedagogy: Re-appropriating monastic practice for the humanities. Routledge.

Komjathy, L. (2018). Introducing contemplative studies. John Wiley & Sons.

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. Adult Education, 28(2), 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202
Mezirow, J. (2009). An overview on transformative learning. In K. Illeris (Ed.), Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists ... in their own words (pp. 90–105). Routledge.

Morgan, P. F. (2015). A brief history of the current re-emergence of contemplative education. *Journal of Transformative Education, 13*(3), 197–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614564875

Scott, C. (2014). Dialogue as an intersubjective contemplative praxis. In O. Gunnlaugson, H. Bai, E. Sarath, et al. (Eds.), *Contemplative approaches to learning and inquiry* (pp. 325–340). State University of New York Press.

Stock, B. (2006). The contemplative life and the teaching of the humanities. *Teachers College Record, 108*(9), 1760–1764. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00759.x

Suzuki, S. (1999). Zen mind, beginner’s mind. John Weatherhill Inc.

Taylor, E., & Snyder, M. (2012). A critical review of research on transformative learning theory, 2006–2010. In E. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 37–55). Jossey-Bass.

Zajonc, A. (2016). Contemplation in education. In K. Schonert-Reichl & R. Roeser (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness in education: Integrating theory and research into practice* (pp. 17–28). Springer.

**Author Biography**

Olen is an Associate Professor in Leadership at Université Laval in Québec, Canada. To date, his work has been published in 13 books as well as 35 articles in peer reviewed journals and chapters in academic books. He has presented and keynoted at numerous international conferences, received five prestigious faculty level awards for excellence in teaching from universities in Canada and the USA and taught several thousand emerging leaders, managers and executives at leading schools in Canada, USA, Austria, Sweden, South Africa and South Korea.