

Learning and Development in Emerging Adults of Traditional College Age

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I first read the term “emerging adulthood” several years ago as I reviewed the day’s recent news. I found the term somewhat amusing, as it seemed that, like many generations of adults before, my parents’ generation was attempting to categorize “what’s wrong with the kids these days.” Emerging adulthood was described as a period of turmoil, instability, transition, and exploration that young people experienced following adolescence. As I reflected on the newly described stage of the human lifecycle, I found that my experience appeared to follow the trend. I attended a liberal arts college where I enrolled in organic chemistry and anthropology, or general biology and art history courses in tandem in an effort to decide upon an educational path. After graduation, I hopped from job to job, trying to determine the career in which I truly wanted to dedicate my life. When I happened upon the emerging adulthood article, I was employed as an adjunct, my future yet uncertain.

College students of traditional age fall within the earlier years of the emerging adult timeline. They are no longer adolescents living in their parents’ homes, but they have not yet assumed the adult responsibilities of finances, family care, or career. In their university environment, are their experiences, then, consistent with the tenants of emerging adulthood? What of their learning and development? I suggest that the developmental patterns of traditional college students do follow the characteristics often observed in emerging adults. Additionally, their cognitive development and motivational deterrents toward learning seem consistent with several aspects of adult learning theory. This indicates that inclusive educational environments designed for adults, allowing for cognitive development and promoting diverse learning perspectives, may also be effective for traditional-age students.

Our society has become information-dominated and increasingly globalized (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As technologies improve and the rapidity with which new

information is created, greater demands for education arise. Merriam and her colleagues assert that continued learning is now a necessity and higher-level skills are required to obtain gainful employment in many fields. Arnett (2000) indicates that as the need for greater skills increases, many young people extend their years of education into their early and mid-twenties, delaying their commitment to traditional, long-term adult roles. For example, in the United States, the median age of marriage for women has increased in the last forty years from 21 to 25 and among men, the median age has risen similarly from 23 to 27. Arnett asserts that such demographic shifts in attained levels of education and age at entry into traditional adult roles has lengthened a period of transition between adolescence and young adulthood. As recently as 2000, he termed this culturally constructed stage of the lifecycle “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000).

Tanner, Arnett and Leis (2009) identify emerging adults as those individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. This particular stage in life occurs most commonly in industrialized, economically developed cultures, as the constant evolution of new technologies, as mentioned above, demand increasingly higher levels of education. Additionally, individuals of minority cultures and lower socioeconomic status tend to have fewer opportunities afforded to them, and as a result are less likely to experience the lengthy transitional period of emerging adulthood before settling into adult roles. Middle-class and upper-class individuals may experience this life stage more predominantly, although Arnett (2000) indicates that further research is needed to validate this conclusion.

During this newly recognized interval in the lifespan, individuals engage in a period of exploration, where potential directions in life are considered (Arnett 2000, Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). This period is made possible because individuals are no longer child or adolescent dependents, but, through the delay of traditional adult roles such as parent, spouse or employee,

they maintain a degree of independence not found in later life stages. Arnett (2000) acknowledges earlier theorists such as Erikson (1968), Levinson (1978), and Keniston (1971) who described a period of prolonged adolescence, or a time of shifting roles and instability existing from the late teens through the twenties. Dramatic demographic changes occur during this period, with roughly one third of individuals entering college and spending a portion of time in a semi-autonomous living arrangement, where certain responsibilities are independent, while others are managed by adults such as parents or those who maintain the university structure (Arnett, 2000). Other individuals leave their parents' homes to live in complete independence, or live at home while attending college or working.

Tanner, Arnett, and Leis (2009) identify five characteristics that define emerging adulthood, but maintain that due to the heterogeneity of the life stage, not all individuals will experience these five features. They describe emerging adulthood as “1) the age of identity explorations, 2) the age of instability, 3) the self-focused age, 4) the age of feeling in-between, and 5) the age of possibilities (pp. 1551).” They explain that identity exploration is important because it is in the years following adolescence that individuals seek job opportunities, romantic partners, or make other life decisions based on what they know of themselves, their interests, and abilities. In many college students of traditional age, it seems that these identity explorations may occur as individuals choose their course of study, join social organizations that support causes falling in line with personal beliefs and passions, and develop new and potentially different friendships from those of childhood.

Instability arises, maintain Tanner and colleagues, from frequent shifts in educational and work trajectories, interpersonal relationships, and living arrangements, which often serve as a source of anxiety. The self-focused dimension results from a relative degree of independence

unique to this life stage, as people are often no longer bound by the decisions of their parents, and their lives lack the structure created by long-term adult roles (Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). The effects of instability and new-found independence may be compounded in young traditional college students, as many have just recently left a familiar and potentially organized home environment for the college campus. Their change in living arrangement and interaction with an array of students from varying backgrounds, in combination with the autonomy to make daily decisions that may impact success or failure may heighten anxiety. It is important to mention, however, that not all students will have experienced stable family interactions prior to entering college and may be impacted differently, or not at all, by instability and self-focus.

The fourth feature of emerging adulthood described by Tanner and colleagues is an age of feeling in-between, as many emerging adults are unable to categorize themselves as either adolescents or adults (Arnett, 2000; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). Many young people view self-sufficiency as a primary characteristic distinguishing full adulthood, and this process of making independent decisions, taking responsibility for one's own actions, and becoming financially independent are still under development during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998, Arnett, 2000). Traditional college students often live in an environment structured by the adults that maintain the university. Dining, housing and related accommodations are generally provided. Financial obligations may be the responsibility of parents. In these respects, college students have not attained full adulthood, even by their own standards. However, from determining what courses to take to deciding whether or not to attend class, they are exercising their ability to make independent decisions, and they must take responsibility for the outcomes that result.

The last characteristic described of emerging adulthood by Tanner and colleagues (2009) is that of an age of possibilities. They report that many people in this period view the future in a positive light, expecting that they will achieve the goals they have set, such as finding a career that is fulfilling and enjoyable, reflecting their interests and personalities, even when current circumstances are less than ideal. From my own experience, many college students certainly seem to embody this principle. In their first-year, despite their unfamiliar environment and performance anxiety, they see themselves as future doctors, or veterinarians, or neurobiologists. As they progress through their studies, their grades may suffer in a particular area or new interests may awaken, causing focus to shift, but the potential to realize a satisfying career rarely seems to evaporate.

Because of the relative fluidity, the instability, evolving independence and uncertain directions of the emerging adult phase of life, the cognitive underpinnings of individuals at this stage seem important to consider. Labouvie-Vief and a number of colleagues (2006) performed a longitudinal study examining a group of individuals from suburban communities in the Midwest. These individuals, in addition to participating in other cognitive and socioemotional tests, were asked to write a description of the self. Results showed that the majority of adolescents provided responses that were coded Level 1, indicating that these individuals viewed themselves through the values present in their immediate community. Individuals from age 20-29 demonstrated a dramatic reduction in Level 1 responses, with many responses evaluated at Level 2 or higher. A Level 2 perception of the self was more internalized, defined by self-directed values. A view of the self that was contextual, relating to historical and psychological factors was considered Level 3, and Level 4 demonstrated a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted understanding. The highest-level responses were seen for people in their late forties and fifties.

From these results, Labouvie-Vief (2006) contends that “individuals in the emerging adulthood period begin to profoundly restructure their sense of self” (pp. 68). She further asserts that the development of mature forms of thought is highly dependent on education. In a study she describes, conducted by Kitchner, Lynch, Fischer, and Wood (1993), individuals from 14-28 years of age were given a reflective judgment task under two conditions. In one condition, individuals were provided with instructions, but no further support. The second condition provided participants with guided questions to highlight critical concepts before completing the task. Results found that complex cognitive stages were demonstrated in the responses of individuals in the “high-support” condition by roughly the age of 20. Nearly all participants in this condition demonstrated complex stage responses by age 25. The study showed that more complex reflective thinking develops during emerging adulthood, but also, importantly, that conditions under which high levels of external support are given may be necessary for individuals to transition to higher-order stages of thinking (Labouvie-Vief, 2006).

The studies examined above seem to suggest that educational endeavors that foster or provide the opportunity for development of reflective or more complex forms of thinking may assist emerging adult individuals to achieve their full cognitive potential. Educational environments that encourage developmental growth seem consistent with the argument made by Taylor (1996) regarding her position on the use of developmental theory in the adult classroom. Taylor feels that students often need instructors to set goals that they would not otherwise set for themselves. She explains that unless an individual reaches a higher stage of development, he or she may never realize the value in attaining such levels.

Case (2008) cautions, however, that a cognitive focus on student learning should not be the only perspective that is considered, as such a viewpoint separates the learner from his or her

social and cultural context. Instead, she advocates for a more holistic view of the student in higher education, one that accounts for the student's entire experience. In her 2008 article, Case's objective was to develop a theoretical perspective that would account for the issue of alienation experienced by students in a higher education setting. Through her review of literature, she explains that some students are alienated immediately upon entry into postsecondary education due to the utilitarian cultural context of our society. Rather than realizing the autonomy to choose a course of study based on personal values, individuals may choose a degree path based on the value it holds in the economic marketplace. Still others may feel that pursuing higher education is not a choice at all. Furthermore, the existing structure of academia serves to place students in a subordinate position to faculty as well as other students, and this placement may be compounded by race, gender or other factors. Lastly, the assessment measures, such as examinations, that are most often utilized in higher education also function to subordinate students and place them into a position of either success or failure. As a result, some students may even employ the alienation they feel as a coping strategy to avoid further engagement in the educational environment (Case, 2008).

A lack of choice (Illeris, 2003) or a sense that one exists within a dichotomy of success or failure (Silverman and Cassazza, 2000) can serve as a powerful deterrent for adult learners, and it seems, from the positions examined by Case, that younger, or emerging adults, face similar motivational deterrents. Tanner, Arnett and Leis (2009) explain that "Prior to emerging adulthood, learning and development within the role of student is socially mandated, not assumed by choice. At emerging adulthood, learning and development become the responsibility of the individual . . ." (pp. 1508). Illeris (2003) shows that this is not always the case, however, and that compulsory nature of children's schooling has become, often through necessity, true of



adult learning. It seems that this characteristic extends into the experience of traditional college students as well. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States (Earnings and Employment, 2013) reports that among individuals whose highest level of attained education is less than an Associate's degree, unemployment rates are well below the national average. It is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve a stable career without a college education, and this appears to be reflected in the attitudes of students discussed by Case in the previous paragraph. When individuals feel as if they have no choice in their education, they may employ non-participation as a strategy to resist learning (Illeris, 2003; Case, 2008).

Additionally, the assessment measures often utilized in higher education place students in a position of either failure or success (Case, 2008). Weiner's Attribution Theory (1984, 1990 as cited in Silverman & Casazza, 2000) explains that actual success or failure is less important than how an individual explains success or failure. Individuals who view failure as inadequate ability may view success as an element beyond their control. Further, if an individual's self-worth grows linked with his or her ability to achieve, failure may result in a withdrawal from learning (Weiner, 1984, 1990; Covington, 1993 as cited in Silverman & Casazza, 2000).

To combat motivational deterrents such as alienation, produced either through a lack of choice in the educational environment or through a lack of self-worth, an educational program that emphasizes inclusion and respect (Wlodowski, 1999) as well as relationship building (Silverman & Casazza, 2000) may be beneficial. In a brief article by Chickering and Gamson (1987), they outline several principles for effective undergraduate education. Two of the primary principles discussed are encouraging interaction between faculty and students, and encouraging collaboration and exchange among students. Silverman and Casazza (2000) explain that designing a learning environment that encourages the development of relationships among

faculty and students can allow instructors to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing a student's withdrawal from learning. Knowledge of such underlying factors then enables the instructor to provide greater and more specialized assistance to the student. Furthermore, building such relationships may help to foster mutual respect, reducing the alienation a student may feel from the hierarchical structure of academia.

In addition, trust and inclusion must be generated among students to encourage interaction in the classroom. For students to feel safe expressing their values, beliefs, and opinions, the instructional environment should emphasize diverse learning perspectives (Silverman & Casazza, 2000). Individuals may have a negative perception of their abilities in some areas, but a more positive perception of abilities in other areas (Bandura, 1986 as cited in Silverman & Casazza, 2000). By providing an environment where students have an opportunity to utilize the learning methods they feel most personally effective, they may regain a sense of choice in their educational experience, and may revalidate their own self-worth through demonstrating competency in a particular arena. Additionally, through examination of differing perceptions on knowing, students may grow to better respect the abilities and beliefs of their peers, and may even discover advantageous learning strategies never before considered.

Peers can serve as a beneficial source of motivation as well. Bandura (1986, as cited in Silverman & Casazza, 2000) explains that by observing the success of students with which a person identifies, the individual may grow to believe in his or her own possibility for success. Further, social persuasion by peers can counter self-doubt by encouraging individuals to rise to group expectations. If students, functioning within a respectful and inclusive classroom, recognize that their experience and beliefs are valued, that their learning styles are accepted, and if they are encouraged by both faculty and peers to envision the potential for their own success,

anxieties or feelings of disconnection from the learning community may be reduced. With a reduction in negative emotions, or an understanding that peers within the community share similar apprehensions, energies can be redirected toward the learning endeavor (MacKeracker, 2004). Such an environment may incite or rekindle in students an optimistic view of exploration into diversifying interests and future possibilities characteristic of emerging adulthood.

The learning approaches I have briefly discussed above, providing an environment that allows for increasing cognitive development, structuring an inclusive atmosphere that emphasizes mutual respect and diverse learning perspectives, are indicated as effective methods for diverse populations of adult learners (Taylor, 1996; Wlodowski, 1999; Silverman & Casazza, 2000) and appear appropriate for emerging adult learners as well (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Case, 2008). It is important to mention, however, that in my discussion of the newly categorized emerging adult developmental stage, I have focused primarily on middle-class traditional college students. Because emerging adulthood is predominantly observed in economically strong and industrialized cultures, as mentioned previously, those individuals afforded the most opportunities are more likely to attend college and to experience an exploratory period within this life stage. Arnett (2000) indicates, however, that with the expansion of globalization, the prevalence of emerging adulthood in underdeveloped nations should increase as well. Developing countries are rapidly being integrated into the global economy and demographic shifts in age of marriage or childbirth have already begun among young people in these societies (Arnett, 2000). As a result, while an investigation into the experience of traditional college students and other adults of emerging age from diverse backgrounds should be considered, emerging adulthood seems an important developmental period worthy of continued study.

Lastly, much of my discussion of deterrents and means to improve motivation among college students has come from adult learning literature. In my search for literature regarding higher and adult education, I did not locate many comparison studies. Because the educational strategies I describe appear appropriate for both groups of learners, it seems that a comparative study examining the similarities and differences between the structure of traditional college learning techniques and student preferences for learning styles and those strategies and preferences of adult learners would be advantageous. Additionally, as emerging adulthood as a separate and distinct stage of development has arisen only within the last ten to fifteen years, it seems that a specific investigation into the learning of this group of individuals would enlighten instructional techniques both in the traditional college environment as well as within the adult learning classroom.

Through my own undergraduate years, I experienced the instability and exploration characteristic of emerging adulthood as I navigated friendships and my educational endeavors. I experienced the feeling of existing in-between adolescence and adulthood, making independent decisions and accepting the consequences, while much of my external environment was controlled under the organizational structure of the university. I observe these same dynamics in my students today, their shifts in majors and career goals, their sense that life has not yet truly begun until one has graduated. In college students of traditional age, their sense of adulthood is still progressing, yet their cognitive development has increased beyond adolescent levels. Learning environments that emphasize inclusion and mutual respect, as well as diverse learning perspectives may effectively counteract the withdrawal from learning sometimes experienced in both adults and emerging adults. Such instructional methods have the potential to reduce or redirect negative emotions, expand ways of knowing, and improve self-worth among students.

Continued investigation into the emerging adult stage of life should incorporate individuals from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, examine learning styles, perceptions of knowledge, and cognitive development to further advance effective educational strategies for traditional undergraduates as well as adults.

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