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Transformative Learning and Life Competencies

This article explores the intersection of Transformative Learning and the European Commission's *Life Competencies* (LifeComp) framework. Transformative Learning highlights changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world, while LifeComp outlines nine key competencies that foster personal, social, and lifelong learning abilities. Combining both approaches creates a model that is practical grounded for higher education. Universities can thus prepare students not only for professional success but also to develop resilience, adaptability, and social responsibility—competencies that are crucial for navigating the complexity and uncertainty of the twenty-first century.

Keywords

transformative learning, transformative education, life competencies framework, life competencies

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Transformatives Lernen und Lebenskompetenzen

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Schnittstelle zwischen Transformative Learning und dem LifeComp-Framework der Europäischen Kommission. Transformative Learning betont tiefgreifende Perspektivwechsel durch Reflexion, Dialog und ganzheitliche Auseinandersetzung, während das LifeComp-Framework neun zentrale Lebenskompetenzen beschreibt, die persönliche, soziale und lebenslange Lernfähigkeiten fördern. Durch die Verbindung beider Ansätze entsteht ein praxisnah fundiertes Modell für die Hochschulbildung. Universitäten können Studierende damit nicht nur fachlich vorbereiten, sondern auch in ihrer Resilienz, Adaptivität und gesellschaftlichen Verantwortung stärken – Kompetenzen, die im 21. Jahrhundert entscheidend sind.

Schlüsselwörter

Transformatives Lernen; Bildung; Kompetenzen; Lebenskompetenzen

1 Introduction

Going to university is portrayed as a major life transition filled with excitement, possibilities, and uncertainty (Paul & Quiggin, 2020). It marks a coming-of-age moment where students face new environments, ideas, and people, gaining independence and the chance for deep personal and intellectual growth (Paul & Quiggin, 2020). The experience is thrilling not only because of the change it brings, but also because of the unknowns ahead (Paul & Quiggin, 2020). Paul and Quiggin (2020) state that a successful university education goes beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge—it can lead to epistemic transformation, which reshapes how individuals view the world and themselves. This transformation involves a deep shift in understanding, not just the addition of new information. When such epistemic change scales up, it results in personal transformation with broader social implications. Experiences like leaving home and entering college often trigger this change, unlocking new beliefs, desires, and perspectives (Paul, 2016).

Entering university has always been a major milestone for young adults, but today the context has changed: Society as a whole is calling for transformation, and the pressure to address ecological, political and social challenges is more present than ever. Situations arising from transformative changes are often strongly influenced by the characteristics summarized under the acronym VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Universities should contribute in preparing students for the challenges they face when leaving into their jobs and life situations in the future.

“It is no longer enough for education to provide basic literacy and numeracy; now it should equip individuals to be agents for sustainable change and to be able to tackle the global challenges” (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2021, p. 4).

Since the 1960s adult education thinks about ways how education and training students and citizens meet the challenges of transformation (Hoggan, 2023). Nevertheless, the concept of Transformative Learning often lacks clarity and concreteness (Hoggan, 2023; Hoggan, 2016). In the context of the interdisciplinary perception of

modern societies from the 1990s onwards as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), a concept of Life Competencies was developed that explores the question of what core competencies people can possess in order to deal with possible future changes.

To address potential future challenges, it can be useful to combine Transformative Learning and Life Competencies—two concepts that, until now, have mostly been discussed in separate contexts. Educational institutions and educators could benefit significantly from aligning them. Life Competencies can be seen as the potential outcomes or goals of Transformative Learning, making the latter more tangible and easier to integrate into higher education settings.

This article explores the question:

How can Transformative Learning and Life Competencies be meaningfully combined, and how they can be applied for higher education?

It examines the parallels and distinctions between the two approaches and considers how they can be effectively applied in university teaching. Initial reflections and analytical perspectives on this topic can already be found in Helferich, Heidbrink, Pleil, and Rademacher (2025), particularly with regard to the education of communication professionals.

This article addresses first the relationship between Transformative Learning and Life Competencies, followed by practical teaching strategies for higher education. These methods can be incorporated into curricula and teacher training programs alike.

2 Transformative Learning & Life Competencies

The idea of transformation holds strong appeal in modern educational thinking (Yacek, 2020). Especially the term Transformative Learning was reviewed intensively over the past 45 years, numerous scholars have contributed to Transformative Learning theory. Hoggan has played a key role in analyzing this body of work, framing Transformative Learning as a meta theory that encompasses various approaches (Hoggan, 2023; Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023; Hoggan & Higgins, 2023). Mezirow (1991) developed the concept of “perspective transformation”, which emphasizes individuals’ meaning-making processes and promotes greater reflection, openness, and emotional readiness for change. Hoggan und Higgins add a (2023) metatheoretical definition to the discourse:

“Transformative Learning refers to processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world” (Hoggan & Higgins, 2023, p. 71).

The focus on Transformation is also seen in German educational philosophy, particularly in discussions of *Bildung* as transformation (Koller, 2016, 2023). In this sense *Bildung* can be seen

“as a process of the transformation of world- and self-relations which may develop when humans are confronted with certain problems without being provided with the means necessary for solving them” (Koller, 2011, p. 377).

This means

“*Bildung* and Transformative Learning, therefore, are concerned with the human subject’s being in the world. They must formally be distinguished from learning, which relates to dealing with and appropriating fragments of the world—so called subject-matters and skills. Within such learning processes horizons related to subject-matters and skills may also be transformed” (Nohl, 2017, p. 100).

In this sense—even if it would need to be discussed in more detail—*Bildung* as term in German educational philosophy and Transformative Learning can be understood as comparable concepts in different linguistic and scientific fields.

One question that has been widely discussed in Transformative Learning discourse over the past decades is the ambiguity surrounding the term “transformation” (Hoggan, 2023). Transformation can take many forms—for example, individuals may increase their cognitive complexity or become more empathetic (Hoggan, 2023). Therefore, Hoggan (2023) emphasizes the importance of clearly specifying the type of transformation being discussed and the theoretical framework being applied when engaging with Transformative Learning. In his work framing Transformative Learning as a metatheory, Hoggan also conducted a literature review of articles published between 2003 and 2014, identifying six categories of learning outcomes (Hoggan & Higgins, 2023). These categories are not unique to Transformative Learning; whether an outcome qualifies as transformative depends on the degree to which it demonstrates depth, breadth, and relative stability. Nevertheless, the categories derived from Transformative Learning research offer a valuable framework for describing the various ways individuals may change through learning, as outlined on the left side of Table 1.

In recent years, the framework of Transformative Learning—which emphasizes deep, meaningful changes in learners’ perspectives, experiences, and abilities—has gained prominence as a key approach for universities to address current challenges. Simultaneously, academic discourse in the field of education has increasingly focused on the role of competencies that enable students to navigate the complex social, ecological, and professional demands of contemporary life. This article argues that combining Transformative Learning with the development of Life Competencies offers a more comprehensive, practical, and nuanced understanding of how higher education can effectively prepare students to face today’s challenges.

There have been numerous proposals and discussions regarding essential competencies (Chen, 2023), with current frameworks focusing on skills needed to address the

challenges of the 21st century (Chen, 2023), often referred to as “future skills” (Kotsiou et al., 2022). In his review of 21st-century competency frameworks, Chen (2023) found that many of the highlighted competencies—such as problem-solving and critical thinking—are not entirely new. However, he notes that the growing use of the term “21st-century skills” reflects an increasing urgency to challenge and transform the traditional structures of educational institutions, which have largely been inherited from the past.

The competency framework that aligns best with the principles of Transformative Learning in order to make it more concrete and applicable in higher education settings is the *LifeComp Framework* (Sala et al., 2020), published by the European Commission. It was developed with a focus on higher education, and it includes competencies for lifelong learning. According to the authors,

“LifeComp offers a conceptual framework for the ‘Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn’ key competence for education systems, students, and learners as a whole. It aims to formalize the need to enhance personal and social competencies through education and lifelong learning, as well as to promote learning how to learn” (Sala et al., 2020, p. 4).

With this focus the framework offers a combination of competencies that can be useful for any domain and therefore relevant in every possible job scenario. The framework outlines nine core competencies across three domains: Personal (P), social (S), and learning-to-learn (L) (Sala et al., 2020). Personal competencies are self-regulation (P1), flexibility (P2) and well-being (P3), social competencies are empathy (S1), communication (S2) and collaboration (S3), finally learning-to-learn competencies include growth-mindset (L1), critical thinking (L2) and managing learning (L3).

All of these nine competencies can be assigned to the six categories of learning outcomes proposed by (Hoggan, 2016) as depicted in Table 1: To bring about changes in one’s (1) worldview, critical thinking (L2), a growth mindset (L1), and empathy (S1) are essential, as they enable individuals to adopt new perspectives. Transformative change within the (2) self—for example, developing a new self-concept or

sense of purpose—requires self-regulation (P1), flexibility (P2), and well-being (P3), including the resilience and confidence to accept that change is both necessary and beneficial. On an (3) epistemological level, adopting extra-rational ways of knowing or becoming more open-minded is supported by critical thinking (L2), empathy (S1), and a growth mindset (L1). These qualities foster creativity, openness to new solutions, and the ability to identify reliable information. (4) Ontological changes require both a growth mindset (L1) and a sense of well-being (P3)—for example, when individuals aim to cultivate greater mindfulness or develop personal attributes such as patience. (5) Behavioral change, in turn, is closely tied to interaction with others, relying on communication (S2), collaboration (S3), and effective learning management (L3), such as when acquiring a new skill. Finally, changes in (6) capacities also depend on a growth mindset (L1) and the ability to manage one’s learning (L3). For instance, striving for higher levels of cognitive development is supported by the confidence that such progress is both possible and achievable.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Learning Outcomes</i>	<i>Competencies LifeComp Framework</i>
(1) Worldview	Changes in assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations New ways of interpreting experience A more comprehensive or complex worldview New awareness/new understandings	Critical Thinking (L2) Growth-Mindset (L1) Empathy (S1)
(2) Self	Sense of self-in-relation to others or the world Change in identity/view of self Change in sense of empowerment Increased self-knowledge Change in personal narratives ○ New meaning/purpose in life	Self-Regulation (P1) Flexibility (P2) Wellbeing (P3)
(3) Epistemological	More discriminating Using extrarational ways of knowing Becoming more open-minded	Growth-Mindset Critical Thinking Empathy
(4) Ontological	Change in moment-to-moment affective experience of life Change in habitual tendencies and dispositions Increased mindfulness Change in attributes (for example, more patient)	Growth-Mindset (L1) Wellbeing (P3) Communication (S2)
(5) Behavior	New behaviors consistent with new perspective New skills, necessary for other changes to occur	Managing Learning (L3) Communication (S2) Collaboration (S3)
(6) Capacity	Higher level of cognitive development Higher order of consciousness Greater sense of connection to something greater than oneself.	Managing Learning (L3) Growth Mindset (L1)

Table 1: Six categories of learning outcomes identified by Hoggan (2016); Higgins & Hoggan (2023) and *LifeComp Framework* Competencies (Sala et al., 2020) (own representation).

The combination of Transformative Learning and the *LifeComp framework* offers not only the advantage of incorporating the well-established concept of lifelong learning, but also provides a practical set of methods and tools (Sala & Herrero Ramila, 2022) that support educators in adapting their teaching strategies to foster these competencies. This integration helps to ground and operationalize the broad concept of Transformative Learning, making it more applicable to higher education. The competencies outlined in the *LifeComp framework* can be embedded into curricula, thereby better preparing students for future challenges in their professional and personal lives.

The key question is how these competencies can be effectively integrated into curricula and how educators can implement them in their courses and teaching approaches. Many universities already offer extracurricular courses such as self-management or communication skills. Another way to promote these competencies is through varied didactic formats and teaching strategies integrated into regular academic programs. There are notable overlaps between the strategies recommended by Sala and Herrero Ramila for developing Life Competencies and those proposed by scholars such as Baumgartner (2019) and Cranton (2023) for fostering Transformative Learning.

The following section presents strategies that support both Transformative Learning and the development of Life Competencies.

3 Foster Transformative Learning and Life Competencies

Transformative Learning is highly effective for developing general competencies such as managing learning, critical thinking, and self-awareness. Drawing on the *LifeComp Framework* (Sala & Herrero Ramila, 2022) and insights from (Baumgartner, 2019) and (Cranton, 2023), Transformative Learning offers methods that foster personal growth, critical reflection, and adaptability in uncertain, complex environments, that can be used by universities to equip students for the complex challenges of the 21st century.

The following key elements can foster Transformative Learning (Baumgartner, 2019; Cranton, 2023; Sala & Herrero Ramila, 2022): *Individual Experience* plays a central role, since learners build on both their prior experiences and what they encounter in the current learning situation. These experiences serve as the starting point for reflection and change. *Critical Reflection* enables learners to question deeply held assumptions. Techniques such as journaling or guided reflection activities help them reconsider long-standing beliefs and discover new perspectives. *Dialogue* is essential for meaning-making. Trustful and respectful communication with peers and instructors provides opportunities to challenge old viewpoints and to test new ideas.

Holistic Engagement means addressing not only the intellectual but also the emotional and imaginative dimensions of learning. Storytelling, drama, music, or other creative approaches help learners engage with the process in a deeper way. *Sociocultural and Personal Factors* influence how learners process new perspectives. Their background, culture, and personal context shape the pace and depth of transformation. *Authentic Relationships* between teachers and learners, as well as among peers, provide the trust and openness necessary for transformative change. Genuine connections make it easier to take risks and explore new ways of thinking.

Educators can apply these elements in the classroom through a variety of strategies, as outlined in Table 2. These approaches are designed to foster multiple competencies from the *LifeComp Framework*. Often, a single strategy addresses more than

one competency simultaneously. Below, each strategy is briefly introduced. The specific competencies they support are indicated in Table 2:

	Self-regulation	Flexibility	Well-being	Empathy	Communication	Collaboration	Growth mindset	Critical thinking	Managing learning
Attention signal	X				X	X			
Thumbs up, thumbs down	X								X
Novel ideas		X				X	X	X	
Give one, Get one, Move on (Go, Go, Mo)						X			X
Think/Write/Pair/Share		X		X	X		X		X
Text to text, Text to Self, Text to World	X			X					X
Accountable talk		X		X	X	X		X	X
Reciprocal learning strategy				X	X	X	X		X
Anonymous peer assessment							X	X	X
Jigsaw					X	X	X	X	X
Fishbowl				X	X			X	
Create an agreement on the rules for the (online) learning spaces	X	X	X		X				
Creating SMART goals	X	X	X						X
Gratitude Journal	X		X				X		
Hope project: a path through goal setting	X	X	X						
Role-playing				X	X			X	

Table 2: Methods for enhancing competencies mentioned in the *LifeComp Framework* (Sala & Herrero Ramila, 2022)

- *Attention signal*: A pre-agreed non-verbal signal is used to quickly regain students’ focus and silence, especially after interactive activities. This strategy helps manage transitions and maintain attention (p. 52).

- *Thumbs up, thumbs down*: A quick method for learners to indicate their understanding, agreement, or energy level using thumb gestures. This visual check-in supports real-time formative assessment and self-regulation (p. 54).
- *Novel ideas*: Learners connect images with curricular content to generate unconventional ideas, first individually, then collaboratively. This strengthens creativity and abstract thinking (p. 56).
- *Give one, Get one, Move on (Go, Go, Mo)*: Learners list key takeaways and share them in rotating pairs. It encourages metacognitive reflection and reinforces peer learning (p. 58).
- *Think/Write/Pair/Share*: Students respond to a question individually, write their thoughts, discuss with a partner, and share with the group. This boosts active engagement, critical thinking, and communication skills (p. 60).
- *Text to text, Text to Self, Text to World*: Learners connect a text to personal experiences, current events, and other texts—fostering deeper comprehension, critical thinking, and empathy (p. 62).
- *Accountable talk*: Small groups discuss open questions using sentence stems to support reasoning and respectful dialogue. Learners assess the quality of discussion, promoting self-awareness and group dynamics (p. 64).
- *Reciprocal learning strategy*: In pairs, students coach each other through problem-solving tasks, alternating between learner and tutor roles. This builds autonomy, collaboration, and comprehension (p. 66).
- *Anonymous peer assessment*: Students define evaluation criteria and give constructive feedback on anonymous sample assignments. They then discuss and revise feedback in teams—fostering critical thinking and assessment literacy (p. 68).
- *Jigsaw*: Learners study different parts of a text in “expert groups,” then return to their “home groups” to share knowledge. This enables efficient peer teaching and synthesis of large content volumes (p. 70).

- *Fishbowl*: Two concentric circles allow one group to discuss while the other observes and reflects. This format builds listening, empathy, and communication confidence (p. 72).
- *Create an agreement on the rules for the (online) learning spaces*: Students co-create and agree on shared rules for respectful and effective (online) learning environments. This encourages ownership and psychological safety (p. 74).
- *Creating SMART goals*: Learners set personal goals using SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based), reflecting on motivation and planning (p. 76).
- *Gratitude Journal*: Students write weekly reflections on what they are grateful for, optionally sharing with peers. This fosters emotional wellbeing, resilience, and a positive learning mindset (p. 78).
- *Hope project: a path through goal setting*: Learners define meaningful goals, develop strategies to achieve them, and create a multimedia representation. This encourages agency, goal-setting, and long-term motivation. (p. 80).
- *Role-playing*: Students embody different roles in a real-life scenario or dilemma to explore motivations, viewpoints, and emotional dynamics. This promotes empathy, critical thinking, and embodied learning (p. 82).

When educators deal with these elements and methods they

“set up a stage for working towards Transformative Learning, but this does not ensure that learners will engage in critical self-reflections or revise their habits of mind. There is no way that an educator (or anyone else) can ensure that Transformative Learning takes place. Learners must decide to undergo the process themselves, otherwise we are venturing into indoctrination, manipulation and coercion” (Cranton, 2023, p. 105).

4 Conclusion

The comparative relation between Transformative Learning and the *LifeComp framework* reveals that both approaches provide powerful lenses for rethinking the practices and goals of higher education. While “Transformative Learning emphasizes on changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world” (Hoggan and Higgins, 2023, p. 71), the *LifeComp framework* focuses on a structured set of competencies that enable lifelong adaptability, resilience, and social engagement. When combined, these perspectives form a complementary foundation for preparing students to meet the challenges of the 21st century, marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Universities have always been institutions of intellectual and personal formation, but the demands placed on them today go beyond the transmission of knowledge or even the preparation for specific careers. As the global context shifts, education must also address urgent ecological, social, and technological transformations. Transformative learning offers a theory of change that highlights the importance of critical reflection, dialogue, and holistic engagement in enabling students to question their assumptions and expand their worldviews. At the same time, the *LifeComp framework* translates these broad educational goals into nine clearly articulated competencies across the personal, social, and learning-to-learn domains. This synthesis ensures that the ideal of transformation does not remain abstract but is anchored in practical strategies and measurable outcomes.

The mapping of LifeComp competencies onto Hoggan’s six categories of Transformative Learning outcomes demonstrates the compatibility and mutual reinforcement of these two concepts. Critical thinking, empathy, self-regulation, and a growth mindset, for example, are not only central competencies in the *LifeComp framework* but also necessary conditions for achieving transformative shifts in worldview, epistemology, and self-concept. Similarly, collaboration and communication support behavioral change and the development of new capacities, while flexibility and well-being provide the resilience required for ontological transformation. In this way,

competencies serve as pathways that make the profound but sometimes elusive goals of Transformative Learning more accessible to both learners and educators.

Practical methods derived from both traditions further illustrate this convergence. Techniques such as reflective questioning, journaling, role-playing, simulations, and arts-based activities provide learners with opportunities to engage critically and creatively with their own experiences. Group work, peer networks, and authentic relationships between teachers and students foster the trust and openness needed for transformation. Meanwhile, structured approaches from the *LifeComp* literature, such as creating SMART goals, reciprocal learning, and peer assessment, ensure that competencies are systematically nurtured. Taken together, these practices set the stage for Transformative Learning while simultaneously strengthening personal and social skills that extend beyond academic contexts.

It is important to emphasize, however, that transformation cannot be imposed. As Cranton reminds us, educators can create the conditions and provide the methods, but learners themselves must ultimately choose to engage in the process of critical self-reflection and to revise their habitual ways of thinking. Any attempt to force transformation risks crossing into indoctrination or coercion. This recognition highlights the ethical dimension of fostering Transformative Learning: universities and educators must balance guidance with respect for learners' autonomy. Nevertheless, the integration of Transformative Learning theory with the *LifeComp framework* offers a promising way forward. It provides higher education with a practical toolkit to cultivate students who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable, reflective, and socially responsible. Such an approach acknowledges that education today must address more than academic success; it must equip individuals to navigate uncertainty, contribute constructively to society, and act as agents of sustainable change.

In sum, the intersection of Transformative Learning and Life Competencies creates a powerful synergy. Transformative Learning brings depth and meaning, while the *LifeComp framework* offers clarity and structure. Together, they present a holistic vision of higher education that recognizes students as active participants in shaping

their own development and, ultimately, in shaping the world around them. By embracing this integrated approach, universities can better prepare students not only for professional life but also for the broader task of engaging thoughtfully and responsibly with the complex realities of the 21st century.

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