

A framework for cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care

Un framework per sviluppare uno scopo come una pedagogia della cura

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ABSTRACT The goal of this paper was to instigate a discussion on cultivating students' sense of purpose as a critical humanizing practice that educators must strive to achieve. In this brief provocation, we presented a framework for cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care that included five pedagogical processes: exploration, engagement, reflection, articulation, and actualization. We also outlined specific learning activities that educators can implement within technology-driven classrooms. In future, more studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical processes in strengthening students' wellness, academic, and career outcomes in the context of their life's purpose.

KEYWORDS Life Purpose; Wellness; Humanizing Approaches; Care; Meaning.

SOMMARIO L'obiettivo di questo articolo è quello di stimolare una discussione sullo sviluppo del senso di scopo degli studenti come una pratica critica di umanizzazione che gli educatori devono sforzarsi di raggiungere. In questo breve intervento provocatorio, presentiamo un framework per sviluppare lo scopo come una pedagogia della cura che include cinque processi pedagogici: esplorazione, impegno, riflessione, articolazione e attualizzazione. Delineiamo anche specifiche attività di apprendimento che gli educatori possono implementare all'interno di classi guidate dalla tecnologia. In futuro, sono necessari più studi per valutare l'efficacia dei processi pedagogici proposti nel rafforzare il benessere degli studenti, i risultati accademici e di carriera nei contesti dei loro scopi di vita.

PAROLE CHIAVE Scopo di Vita; Benessere; Approcci Umanizzanti; Cura; Significato.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present era of global pandemic and racial reckoning has caused unprecedented struggles, which, while seemingly unique, are not new. Humanity has repeatedly undergone cycles of epidemics, injustice, violence, and systemic oppression (Ikeda, 2017). In response to these struggles, there have been various kinds of revolutions, such as economic, industrial, political, and scientific. Despite these revolutions, there can be no lasting change until people's own hearts and minds transform collectively in the direction of greater

good, which Ikeda (2010a) referred to as *human revolution*. Ikeda (2017) described human revolution as purposefully engaging in actions that are grounded in compassion to positively transform the inner core of our own life and contribute to others' lives. We regard developing sense of purpose as a critical dimension of human revolution since it represents the resolve to achieve a positive change in one's own life and also advance a positive change in others' lives.

Inspired by Ikeda's (2017) philosophy of human revolution, Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003) dimensions of purpose, and our own empirical work (e.g., Sharma, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Kang, 2017; Sharma, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Scarton, 2021; Sharma, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Bernal-Arevalo, in press; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020), we define purpose as people's underlying intention behind achieving their life's most important goals that, when fulfilled, might not only actualize a positive change in their own life, but also in society at large. Here, a positive change at the personal level can refer to people's self-growth, wellbeing, success, happiness, family harmony, and so forth. Advancing a positive change in society can refer to contributing to others' life and making a difference in line with the causes one cares about. We recognize that several scholars have asserted that people are not only motivated by positive, prosocial, and noble purposes but also ignoble purposes (Damon et al., 2003). However, research has shown that in contrast to other types of purpose, prosocial purpose is most positively related to people's wellbeing and life satisfaction (e.g., Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010). Therefore, we have used this brief provocation to assert the importance of cultivating students' sense of prosocial purpose in the direction of actualizing greater good. We have also provided a conceptual framework and specific recommendations on cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care within technology-driven classrooms.

2. RATIONALE FOR CULTIVATING PURPOSE AS PEDAGOGY OF CARE

There were several reasons that motivated us to develop a framework for cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care. First, abundant research has already shown the positive role of purpose in contributing to college students' mental health, wellbeing, self-efficacy, resilience, life satisfaction, hope, positive affect, identity development, contentment, happiness, academic identity, degree commitment, persistence, and retention (e.g., Benard, 1991; Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009; Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). Sense of purpose can further lead to the advancement of a positive social change by inspiring students to engage in committed actions that align with their life's passions and the causes they care about. However, in spite of the critical role that life purpose can play in students' lives, there is a lack of understanding about how to foster students' sense of purpose (Vaccaro, Kimball, Moore, Newman, & Troiano, 2018). As a result, we conducted a series of qualitative and quantitative studies to explore the nature, role, and development of purpose among a diverse group of college students (e.g., Sharma et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2021; Sharma et al. in press; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). In this paper, we have synthesized the knowledge gained about purpose development from various empirical studies (e.g., Sharma et al. 2021; Sharma et al. in press; Damon et al., 2003; Vaccaro et al., 2018; Sharma & de Alba, 2018) to conceptualize key pedagogical processes that could cultivate students' purpose.

Further on, education plays a critical role in strengthening students' purpose by fostering their compassionate wisdom to use knowledge as the means to enhance their personal wellbeing and society's wellbeing (Ikeda, 2010b). Yet, the language of nurture, inner transformation, and care that should form an essential part of educational discourse is often consumed by economism and performance (Addison, 2012), leading

to technology in education being mostly mobilized to promote students' disciplinary knowledge without fostering care (Gleason & Mehta, 2020). This is because the current system of higher education is the result of colonialism, which was based on capitalist exploitation of colonies for their wealth and labour (Enslin, 2017). Postcolonial education must therefore challenge the dehumanizing aspects of higher education and address cultural imperialism by actively fostering pedagogical practices that can advance a positive, humanistic change at a global level (Enslin, 2017). One such dehumanizing pedagogical practice is transmitting knowledge without taking into consideration the individual students' life stories, aspirations, and purposes. This is not to deny the importance of knowledge. However, it is important to recognize that knowledge can be used for destructive purposes such as building weapons or promoting peace. To assume that all students are seeking the same knowledge-content without receiving opportunities to reflect upon the value of that knowledge in achieving their life's most cherished goals is dehumanizing.

Global peacebuilders such as Ikeda (1996) have consistently stressed the importance of using education to steadily and surely pass on the fullness of humanity, and awakening people to the vast potential, sanctity, inherent dignity, and profound purpose of every person's life. Ikeda (1996) stated that education must serve as a propelling force to ensure that knowledge is never isolated from human concerns and instead is used to advance people's true happiness and global peace. There are many ways to conceptualize the constructs of happiness and peace. For Ikeda (2017) happiness is not determined by external conditions of fame, status, and wealth. Genuine happiness can instead be achieved by positively enriching our inner lives, focusing on "being more" than "having more", and engaging in compassionate actions that can benefit others. Further, global peace does not refer to absence of differences but rather it lies in cultivating people's inherent capacities such as their wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living; courage to not fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from such encounters; and compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond their immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places (Ikeda, 1996). Unfortunately, educators often get consumed in the process of "passing down" the knowledge-content to help students achieve external measures of success such as grades and future wealth instead of genuinely making efforts to cultivate student's inherent capacities for living a life of true fulfilment – dedicated to their own and others' wellbeing. We argue that fostering students' inner wellbeing and capacity for advancing a positive social change is even more important than promoting content-related knowledge and that sense of purpose can play a powerful role in contributing to students' wellness.

3. CULTIVATING PURPOSE AS A PEDAGOGY OF CARE

Building upon the pedagogical intent to cultivate students' sense of purpose and previous research on purpose development (e.g., Sharma et al. 2021; Sharma et al. in press; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Vaccarro et al., 2018), we propose a framework conceptualized via the five main purpose-focused pedagogical processes: (3.1) Exploration, (3.2) Engagement, (3.3) Reflection, (3.4) Articulation, and (3.5) Actualization.

3.1. *Exploration*

The goal of the first pedagogical process of *exploration* is to encourage students to actively explore who they are and what they aspire to use their life for within the context of their personal and socio-cultural identity. In line with identity development statuses (Marcia, 1966), purpose exploration has been shown to be the first step towards achieving purpose commitment (e.g., Bronk, 2011; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; Vaccaro et al., 2018). For example, Vaccaro et al. (2018) showed in a qualitative study that in their journey to awaken to life's purpose, college students first began to discover their interests and goals that aligned

with their life's passions and large-scale aspirations. Therefore, we conceptualize purpose exploration as the first pedagogical process that educators can facilitate.

3.2. Engagement

The goal of the second process of *engagement* is to promote students' active participation in community-based and/or altruistic activities that could encourage them to use their knowledge, skills, and inherent strengths to advance a positive change in society. Several scholars have conceptualized the desire to contribute to the matters beyond-the-self as the key dimension of purpose (e.g., Damon et al., 2003; Sharma et al., 2017). Research has further shown that community engagement can deepen students' sense of purpose through strengthening their clarity about the causes they care about and confidence in their own ability to advance a positive social change (e.g., Damon et al., 2003; Sharma & de Alba, 2018). Hence, providing students the time and opportunities to directly engage with their community and the causes they feel passionate about is an important component of cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care.

3.3. Reflection

The goal of *reflection*, the third pedagogical process, is to support students in reflecting upon the value of active exploration and community engagement in shaping their sense of purpose. This component is salient, because many scholars have emphasized the critical role of self-reflection in enhancing students' capacity to find meaning and purpose (e.g., Ikeda, 2010a; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Vaccarro et al., 2018). Although reflection is a constant process, we conceptualize it as the third pedagogical process to provide students dedicated time and space to develop a coherent sense of purpose based on what they learned about themselves and their communities through engaging in the first two processes of purpose exploration and engagement.

3.4. Articulation

The goal of the fourth process of *articulation* is to help students articulate their life's purpose and further identify the connections between their educational goals, career aspirations, and life's purpose. Research has shown the important role of purpose in contributing to students' career decision self-efficacy and motivation (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008). Though everyone's career and educational decisions might not align with their purpose, given the important role of a career in fulfilling one's purpose in life, this module gives students an opportunity to clarify their major and career-related decisions within the context of their life's purpose. Finally, the narration of life stories and future visions are important construction tools for people to strengthen their sense of identity and purpose (Savickas, 2012); therefore, we deem articulation as a critical component of pedagogy of care to provide students opportunities to narrate or write about their life's purpose.

3.5. Actualization

Finally, because fulfilling one's purpose is a lifelong phenomenon that requires goal-clarity and persistence (Sharma & de Alba, 2018), the aim of the fifth and last pedagogical process of *actualization* is to strengthen students' ability to fulfil their life's purpose. Doing so is also in line with Noddings (1984; 2010) assertion that pedagogy of care must not only focus on evaluating students' current knowledge and skills, but also on caring for their long-term success and wellbeing.

3.6. Educator's humanity

Figure 1 shows a Framework for Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care. Notably, we conceive these processes to be reciprocal, iterative, and complementary. Further, these processes can be non-linear and

concurrent and thus, the growth in one component can lead to the growth in the others. Given the interconnected nature between the five processes, we propose a framework that graphically depicts the processes as overlapping circles (see Figure 1). As well, we posit that educators' humanity is the essential contextual background to cultivate students' sense of purpose, also depicted in Figure 1. We ultimately argue that the classroom context can be as humanizing as educators' own humanity (Ikeda, 1996). In the context of cultivating purpose as a pedagogy of care, we define an educator's humanity as the extent to which educators can communicate respect, appreciation, and confidence in all students' potential to live a purposeful life – dedicated to making a positive difference in their own and others' lives.

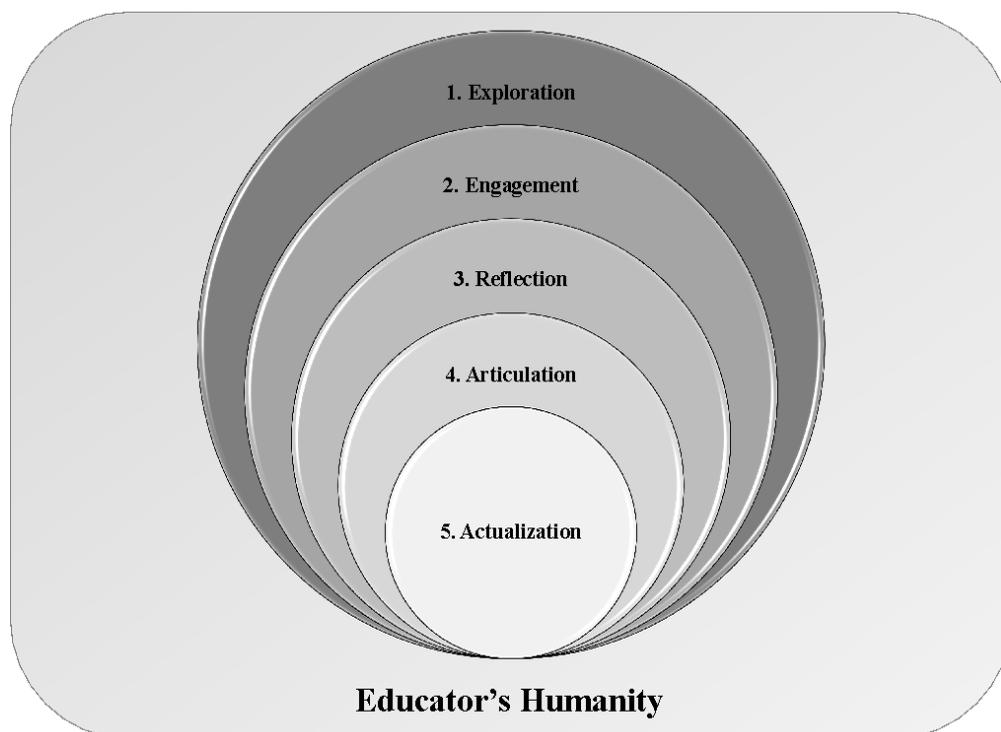


Figure 1. A Framework for Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care.

4. CULTIVATING STUDENTS' PURPOSE IN TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN CLASSROOMS

Informed by recent research on purpose development (e.g., Sharma et al., 2021; Sharma et al. in press; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2018), we have developed an online course on canvas to cultivate students' sense of purpose. This course includes both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. We incorporated an asynchronous format because everyone's journey to explore, engage with, reflect upon, articulate, and actualize their life's purpose is unique and requires personal space and time. We also incorporated synchronous sessions to promote purpose-centered dialogues among peers. In this section, we illustrate the specific pedagogical practices in which educators could leverage technology to cultivate students' sense of purpose within already existing courses or design curriculum specifically dedicated to fostering purpose. The first module on *Exploration* includes a quiz to help students reflect upon:

- 1) the things, people, and experiences that add meaning and purpose to their life;
- 2) strengths and abilities they feel proud of;
- 3) personal values; and

4) self-identity.

Since college students' sense of purpose is not only influenced by their personal identity but also their life experiences and socio-cultural identity (Damon et al., 2003; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2018), this module also requires students to engage in open dialogues with their family and community members to deliberate on collective life experiences, cultural values, and community aspirations that might have influenced their life's purpose.

In the second module titled *Engagement*, we introduce students to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to help them understand the concerns that people are experiencing worldwide and then explain the greater good they envision for society along with the specific causes they care about. We also require students to participate in a discussion post on the most important qualities and attributes that are needed to advance a positive change in society. We further encourage students to actively engage in a minimum of 20 hours of community and/or altruistic activities that might align with their life's purpose.

The third module, titled *Reflection*, includes weekly journal-writing assignments encouraging students to reflect upon the value of the altruistic activities in which they engage towards deepening their sense of purpose in relation to helping or serving others, achieving personal growth or inner transformation, and pursuing their educational or career aspirations. For these reflective entries, we provide students purpose-oriented prompts to select from such as:

- 1) While engaging in altruistic activities and/or service-learning, what did you learn about your own self?
- 2) What is your vision for your own family or community and how can you use your college education to actualize that vision?
- 3) In what ways do you aspire to use your college education to make a positive difference in your communities or world at large?

In addition, we include an assignment for students to create a vision board that could express their life goals (e.g., career, social, spiritual, financial, and/or personal goals), hopes, and visions for themselves and society at large.

In the fourth module titled *Articulation*, we support students to use technological tools such as writing an online journal or submitting a video to express their life's purpose. As part of this module, students will also be supported to participate in virtual career counselling and/or mentoring sessions to clarify their educational and career goals within the framework of their life's purpose. This decision was based on the career counselling scholars' recommendation that career is often a way for people to express their life's purpose (e.g., Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013; Savickas, 2012; Tiedeman, 1968) and those students who make their major and/or career related decisions in line with their life's purpose are more likely to persevere and experience career satisfaction (Kosine et al., 2008). In addition, we support students to identify the resources they might need and the barriers they might encounter on the path of actualizing their life goals.

Finally, the last module, titled *Actualization*, requires students to establish three career and/or education, personal, and altruistic goals that they aspire to achieve within the next 5 to 10 years. To strengthen students' capacity to persevere on the path of actualizing these goals, in this module, we also support students to learn about various self-care strategies that can promote their wellbeing on all eight dimensions of wellness (see Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000).

We assert that educators' own humanity plays a critical role in determining the effectiveness of above-mentioned pedagogical processes. It is therefore crucial for educators to engage in their own human revolution (Ikeda, 2017) as the means to actively and purposefully expand their capacity to embrace and encourage students to believe in the dignity, potential, and purpose of their own life. A simple, yet powerful way to accomplish this in practice is by ending each online module with inspiring quotes and words of encouragement. Apart from engaging with students through synchronous and asynchronous sessions, we also urge

educators to provide caring advising and mentoring sessions. Such efforts align with Sharma and de Alba's (2018) finding that in addition to formal modes of reflecting and learning, the informal experiences of feeling trusted and cared for by faculty mentors play a critical role in strengthening students' sense of purpose. Lastly, educators who incorporate the Framework of Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care in Technology-Driven Classrooms need to examine the tensions that might arise while covering course content, meeting assessment expectations, and conveying genuine sense of care. Since exploring one's purpose in life can be a very personal process, it is critical for educators to actively build trust with students. Leadership literature suggests that "*people buy into the leader, then the vision*" (Maxwell, 2007, p. 169). Applying this principle in the classroom, instructors need to build trust with their students first before expecting students to fully engage with materials. Some trust-fostering strategies that educators could implement are using a learners' profile survey to first learn about students' personal hopes, concerns, and circumstances; remembering students' names and keeping a track of each student's progress; engaging in timely communication; acknowledging students' struggles and connecting students with resources that can promote not only their professional development but also personal wellbeing; creating online spaces where students can ask questions and share resources; increasing the accessibility and usability of online learning materials and tools; and engaging in socio-communicative style that could communicate care and understanding (e.g., see Ko & Rossen, 2017; Wang, 2014). To further normalize students' anxiety and validate their struggles, educators can also share their own personal journeys of awakening to and fulfilling their life's purpose. Through sharing their own journey, educators can forge caring relationships with students (Noddings, 1984) that can further instill within students the sense of hope and courage required to live a life of purpose.

5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Fostering students' sense of purpose is a critical humanizing practice that educators must strive to cultivate. In this brief provocation, we outlined specific synchronous and asynchronous learning activities that educators can implement to incorporate the Framework of Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care in technology-driven classrooms. We speculate that some of the suggested pedagogical practices might be more effective than others. For instance, directly engaging with the causes that students feel passionate about might be more effective than responding to self-exploration inventories. It is, therefore, crucial to conduct pre and post empirical studies to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical practices. Scholars can use self-reflective tools such as the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020) that were designed to assess the recent changes, growth, and active engagement around sense of purpose in life.

Based on the results of previous research studies, we also expect that implementing the Framework of Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care might further contribute to students' personal wellbeing (e.g., Burrow et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2016), college persistence (e.g., Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020) and career development (e.g., Kosine et al., 2008). In the future, more studies are needed to examine the role of proposed pedagogical practices and possible changes in students' sense of purpose in contributing to their wellness, academic, and career outcomes.

Additionally, students pursue education within different contexts, including various backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics. We posit that service-oriented majors, such as education, counselling, and social work might incite students to awaken to their purpose more readily compared to other majors. Therefore, future studies need to also investigate the role of different majors and career specializations in enhancing students' sense of purpose, among other wellness-oriented constructs.

Given the subjective nature of purpose in life and the difficulties that might arise for educators trying to

link care with purpose (e.g., lack of time, managing work-load along with providing mentoring sessions, evaluating students' assignments based on rubrics vs. providing personalized and empowering feedback, communicating care for students' long-term wellbeing while covering the course content), future mixed-methods research is needed to examine both educators' and students' experiences around purpose-focused pedagogical processes. Informed by educators' and students' experiences, scholars can then recommend more humanizing practices, such as using group assignments to promote student to student dialogues (Ko & Rossen, 2017) in further strengthening students' sense of purpose. We also acknowledge that there might be other purpose-focused pedagogical processes that educators can implement. Ultimately, more work is needed to further develop and strengthen the Framework for Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care.

6. CONCLUSION

Cultivating students' sense of purpose is a critical component of pedagogy of care that can advance students' personal wellbeing as well as inspire them to contribute to others' wellbeing. Based on previous research (e.g., Sharma et al. 2021; Sharma et al. in press; Sharma & de Alba, 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2018), we have proposed the Framework for Cultivating Purpose as a Pedagogy of Care that can be used in technology-driven classrooms and exemplified specific synchronous and asynchronous learning activities that educators can engage in to foster students' purpose exploration, engagement, reflection, articulation, and actualization. Future efforts should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the activities within each component of the proposed framework to cultivate students' sense of purpose as a critical humanizing and caring approach to teaching with technology.

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