

The Quest for Meaning and Purpose in Education

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Abstract

The quest for meaning and purpose relating to educating youth has recently raised the interest of psychological research. The research surfaces the need for educational institutions to implement open-ended pedagogies and curricula that take into account the complex dimensions of meaning and purpose. However, the scientific, empirical methods as adopted by psychological research fails to fully explain the more transcendental aspects related to integrating meaning and purpose in learning. On the other hand, educational traditions such as those provided by Catholic institutions have consistently and particularly focused on such aspects in the concept of formative education.

Can these two orientations be harmonized, without undermining their different points of departure and aspirations? What benefits, costs, or compromises might be involved in this endeavor? Can this attempt at unification be done in an institutional setting, such as a Jesuit, Catholic university? These are the questions that this paper endeavors to answer.

Keywords: Jesuit Pedagogy, Meaning and Purpose, Formative Education, Jesuit Higher Education, Educational Psychology.

Resumen

La búsqueda del significado y propósito en educación

La importancia de la reflexión acerca del significado y propósitos de la educación de la juventud ha despertado recientemente el

interés de la investigación psicológica. Ello ha puesto de manifiesto la necesidad de que las instituciones educativas apliquen pedagogías y planes de estudio abiertos que puedan tener en cuenta las complejas dimensiones de su significado y finalidad. Es el caso de la dimensión trascendental, aunque los métodos científicos y empíricos adoptados por la investigación psicológica a veces no logran adecuarse plenamente al objeto de estudio. Por otro lado, las tradiciones educativas como la católico-jesuita se han centrado particular y mayoritariamente en esas dimensiones, elaborando modelos que culminan con el concepto de educación formativa.

¿Pueden estas dos orientaciones armonizarse sin menoscabar sus diferentes puntos de partida y aspiraciones? ¿Qué beneficios, costos o compromisos pueden estar involucrados en este esfuerzo? ¿Este intento de unificación puede realizarse en un marco institucional, como el de una universidad católica jesuita? Éstas son las preguntas que nuestro escrito intenta responder.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía Jesuita, Significado y Propósitos, Formación, Educación Terciaria Jesuita, Psicología educativa.

Recent psychological research has shown that when young people have a sense of meaning and purpose their physical and mental well-being is enhanced (Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010). Meaning and purpose serve protective functions by warding off negative lifestyle choices for adolescents (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011). But meaning and purpose cannot simply be taught through transmission models of education, because there are dimensions of meaning and purpose that only can be acquired through an individual's inner quest (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). This quest-like nature of meaning and purpose calls for open-ended pedagogies and curricula that acknowledge subtle dimensions of meaning and purpose. These include approaches integrating those aspects of meaning and purpose that are self-related with those that extend beyond the self, towards other people or to conceptions of God

or the transcendental, however understood (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

A school of education in a Jesuit and Catholic university such as Boston College in the United States would appear well-suited to educate for meaning and purpose. The founder of the Jesuits, Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the Basque countries of Spain developed a set of “spiritual exercises” that focus on the mindful discernment of the Christian retreatant to grow in self-knowledge and in devotion to God (Ignatius of Loyola/Tylenda, 1985.) Over the past 500 years the exercises have evolved in many ways, and have continued to be adjusted to adapt to an increasingly secular world (Traub, 2008). Their spirit of gentle, probing inquiry, conducted in small groups with pastoral overtones, aims to provide a foundational point of departure for “the formation of the *balanced person* with a personally developed philosophy of life that includes ongoing habits of reflection.” (Duminuco, 2000, p. 178)

While there would appear to be many affinities between the aspirations of recent scholars of an education for meaning and purpose and the Jesuit tradition, there also are areas of contradiction or tension. The research on meaning and purpose has been largely conducted by psychologists, who have emphasized the scientific method, guided by empirical research conducted on individuals. The Jesuit tradition has respected empiricism and what Charles Taylor (2007) has described as its “immanent frame,” but also has endeavored to expand beyond that to include a “transcendental frame” that draws upon theological, artistic and philosophical commitments that ultimately are not testable and cannot be operationalized.

Can these two orientations be harmonized, without undermining their different points of departure and aspirations? What benefits, costs, or compromises might be involved in this endeavor? Can this attempt at unification be done in an institutional setting, such as a Jesuit, Catholic university? These are the questions that this paper endeavors to answer.

1. *Meaning and Purpose in Education*

In the US, much recent research on meaning and purpose in education has been informed by Bill Damon's *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (2008). Damon conducted extensive interviews with young Americans and found that only about 1 in 5 of them could "express a clear vision of where they want to go, and what they want to accomplish in life, and why." (p. 8) About 60% had taken part in "potentially purposeful activities" but did "not have any real commitment to such activities or realistic plans for pursuing their aspirations." (p. 8) Finally, about a quarter "express no aspirations *at all*," and in some cases, "they see no point in acquiring any." (p. 8) Because "an extremely ambitious goal is a practical source of intense motivation," its absence is associated with a passive, fatalistic attitude towards life.

Damon's research launched a cottage industry of studies on the quest for meaning and purpose among the young. His research, along with that of numerous critics, prompted Marty Seligman, the popular author of books (2002, 2011) on "positive psychology," to revise his original framework for attaining happiness to include meaning as one of his 5 key dimensions for flourishing. Defining meaning as "belonging to and serving

something that you believe is bigger than the self” (2011, p. 17), Seligman found that meaning could not be collapsed into the other 4 factors of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, or accomplishment. Significantly, Seligman found that meaning “is not solely a subjective state” (p. 17), because it is possible for individuals to judge their actions to be meaningless while others might find them to be filled with meaning.

For scholars such as Seligman and other advocates of positive psychology, there is no inherent contradiction between being happy and being good: it is possible to be both at one and the same time. Indeed, it is the conviction on the compatibility of the happiness of the individual with the promotion of the common good that enables Seligman and his many followers to advocate so enthusiastically for flourishing as the ultimate, highest purpose of the human condition. Positive psychologists have been successful at this undertaking, winning considerable influence in the research and advocacy work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization.

Research by Roy Baumeister (2013) and his colleagues, however, provides a more complicated image of these matters, even though it has been less cited, and one might say, largely ignored. While Baumeister’s group did find that “meaningfulness and happiness are positively correlated” (p. 515) in general, they also found that the two domains had quite distinct sources and were expressed in different ways. Their major finding was that “Happiness went with being a taker more than a giver, while meaningfulness was associated with being a giver more than a taker.” (p. 515) Because our world needs people who are not just takers, “cultivating

and encouraging such people despite their unhappiness could be a goal worthy of positive psychology.” (p. 515)

Positive psychology is unlikely to help in such matters, however, because the entire trajectory of its approach has been to help people to find happiness rather than to uncover reasons to check that drive. In Seligman’s research, meaning is of interest because of its contribution to the individual’s flourishing, and habits of mind that could lead in other directions are seen as problematic. In fact, to choose *not* to optimize one’s happiness because of a desire to rectify an injustice almost appears as a pathology in Seligman’s joyful but nonetheless one-dimensional world. Baumeister’s findings points in another direction. They confirm what everyday observations reveal—namely, that just as there are happy, superficial people, there are others who are willing compromise their happiness in pursuit of a higher purpose.

The ramifications of these findings have consequences for education. If one is serious about an education for meaning and purpose, a number of difficulties ensue, because so much of contemporary education and society is organized around the pursuit of the individual’s happiness. An education for meaning and purpose would appear, at least in part, to entail a readiness to undergo a more rigorous, in some ways countercultural undertaking, which could at times question whether there might be other, more important life goals, than the individual’s happiness or flourishing.

Why would anyone want to bother with such an approach, when the pursuit of happiness enjoys such universal approbation and can evince such tantalizing pleasures? What do issues of meaning and purpose have to do with education, anyway? Why should we care?

2. *The Absence of Meaning and Purpose in Higher Education*

According to one study (2006) by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, a disjuncture exists between what students say they would like from higher education and what their professors provide. For example, while “about two-thirds” of college and university students state that they would like more guidance in regard to issues of meaning and purpose, “more than half of the students ... say that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life.” (p.1) Furthermore, “Nearly half (48%) report dissatisfaction with how their college experience has provided ‘opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection.’” (p. 1)

It is not the case that faculty are not interested in issues of meaning and purpose. Four in five describe themselves as “a spiritual person” and more than two-thirds consider “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” to be an essential part of their identities. (p. 3) Following larger social trends, “faculty are more inclined to view themselves as spiritual rather than religious.” (p. 3) Still, “more than three in five” faculty describe themselves as “a religious person.” (p. 3) Regardless of this personal identification, “only a minority of faculty (30%) agree” with the statement that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development.” (p. 9)

Why is there an apparent reticence to bring up matters of meaning and purpose in higher education, even when student dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs is evident? The UCLA report does not give an answer to this question, but three possible explanations appear tenable. First, it may be the case that faculty feel

unprepared to discuss such topics. Given that faculty members, in the United States at least, form part of a broader social milieu in which the pursuit of individual happiness has become a mainstream ideology, it would seem to require a fair amount of philosophical preparation for faculty to suggest that maybe other values than happiness or flourishing might be of greater merit, even if there is a cost to one's personal happiness.

Second, faculty may feel that issues of meaning and purpose are not germane to their disciplines. Indeed, faculty in schools of education and the health sciences show far greater interest in such topics than do those in the biological and physical sciences, according to the UCLA report. For faculty in the natural sciences, issues of meaning and purpose apparently are not directly relevant to their disciplines and hence do not belong in the curriculum.

Third, it may also be the case that faculty worry about the separation of church and state, and that this explains the far lower numbers of faculty who explore these topics in public institutions than in private ones. Even in private and religiously affiliated higher education institutions, faculty may fear that by sharing their personal beliefs that their students will feel a subtle but nonetheless insidious pressure to agree with them, either out of opportunism or timidity. There are good reasons for maintaining a private faith in the public square, and the most important of these have to do with respect for the students' autonomy (Malesic, 2009).

Whatever the reason—and however well-intentioned faculty motivations may be—it would appear that colleges and universities currently do not address almost half of their students' aspirations for an education for meaning and purpose. They thus indirectly appear to provide evidence proof for Damon's assertion that "the

phenomenon of purposelessness is not widely recognized enough” (2008, p. 21). This is no trivial matter. Amongst the undesirable outcomes of purposelessness, in addition to its inherently problematic nature, are higher rates of anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, and lower academic achievement. Meaning and purpose serve important protective functions. Students need better preparation for adversity.

3. *Formation at Boston College*

Research by the National Catholic College Admission Associate (2006, 2012), has shown that Catholic higher education institutions pay more attention to ethics and the spiritual development of their students than do other higher education institutions--and that students appreciate this level of engagement. Catholic universities have developed program offerings for students, faculty, and staff in the area of what is called “formation,” enabling all members of the university community to probe in a truly significant way into their values, how and whether they are expressed, and the ultimate direction and meaning they give their lives and their work.

In spite of a university’s commitment to formation as a distinctively Catholic or Jesuit process, the term itself may be unclear to many of its members. Some help in this regard can be found in two reports issued by the General Curia of the Society of Jesus in Rome. The first report was published in 1986 and was entitled “The Characteristics of Jesuit Education.” The second report was released in 1993 and called “Jesuit Pedagogy: A Practical Approach.”

Both of these reports reflect the spirit of Vatican II and numerous subsequent Catholic Church documents,

which advocated for a new spirit of openness, engagement, and commitment to social justice by the Church. The General Curia stated that “Ignatian pedagogy from its beginnings has been eclectic in selection of methods for teaching and learning,” (2000, p. 238) and encouraged an exploratory approach to pedagogies. Indeed, the Jesuit leaders asserted that “there exists no single universally recognized curriculum like the Trivium or Quadrivium that can be employed as a vehicle for formation in our times.” (2000, p. 269) Methods or curricula were less important than “the full growth of the person which leads to action—action, especially, that is suffused with the spirit and presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Man-for-Others.” (2000, p. 241)

How have these kinds of ideas about formation been developed in Catholic higher education institutions subsequently? Two reports, both written by Jesuits at Boston College, convey different points of emphasis. The first of these, entitled “The Journey into Adulthood: Understanding Student Formation” asserts that “student formation has three interconnected dimensions—an **intellectual** dimension, a **social** dimension, and a **spiritual** dimension—and a student’s growth along all three dimensions ideally moves toward integration.” (Boston College, 2007, p. 1, bold in the original text). This integrative process should occur through “expert conversations,” informed by the original “Spiritual Exercises” of Ignatius, that entail “a three-fold strategy.” (p. 19) The components of this strategy should involve:

1. “**helping students pay attention to their experience**” so that they are “observing, wondering, opening themselves to the people and the world around them and especially to their own inner lives;”

2. **“helping them to reflect on its meaning”** to attain “the freedom that comes with authentic self-knowledge and accurate knowledge of the world; and
3. **“helping them to decide how to act”** because “the knowledge and self-understanding appropriated by reflection have to be tested in action.” (p. 20, bold in the original text)

In this understanding of experience-reflection-action, previously conveyed in the 1993 report, along with a fourth component of evaluation, formation refers to the ability of students to think for themselves; acquire their own, deeply internalized values; and to take responsibility for one another and the world. The spiritual or the religious dimensions of formation are more suggestive than overt. Such a framing of formation is invitational not only to students who believe in a transcendent being but also to atheists, agnostics, or those who are uncertain of their beliefs.

A second manuscript by Jack Butler, the Vice President for the Division of University Mission and Ministry at Boston College, takes on a somewhat different tone. Butler asserts that a university should be understood as “one large experiment” and that at Boston College, diverse programs and offerings all have “an explicit formative agenda.” (Butler, n.d., p. 6) These programs reflect 6 major themes that “are brought into a system, where they interact with each other to form a whole-cloth approach to learning.” (p. 7) The six themes are:

1. “Intellectual analysis” that develops “critical intelligence;”

2. “Solidarity” that entails “working for social justice” and becoming “a contemplative in action;”
3. “Journeying” which entails “not only travel in the literal sense” but also learning “trust in God’s sense for them, to see God in strangers;”
4. “Leadership and collaboration” as conjoint activities because students and alumni will have to take on “both roles at different points in their lives and will be better at both if they understand what each involves;”
5. “Religious formation and spiritual practices” for the students to “deepen the transcendent direction of their lives, whatever religious background they come from;” and
6. “Facilitated reflection” that is “rooted in the Ignatian concept of discernment” and in which developing critical judgment becomes more than an occasional practice but rather “a way of life.”

While this approach to formation is compatible with the previous definition, here it is the case that formation is more complex and demanding. In what ways?

A belief in God is taken for granted. Formation entails not just discernment, but also the ability to act for specific, predetermined goals, such as “working for social justice.” The notion of a calling—to act in solidarity, to journey or accompany the marginalized, and an obligation to grow into habits of critical reflection is more emphatic.

It may be that the subtle differences between these two reports appear negligible--but they are not. In the history of the Jesuits, “formation” originally referred to the training of the clergy. It meant faith formation in Catholic dogma and the ability to serve mass, listen to

confessions, and to exemplify a life of piety. Since then, many precepts of traditional Catholic and Jesuit formation have been called into question and educational institutions have adapted to a more secular age. "Formation" in much of its usage now in many ways is indistinguishable from "development," with no particular religious or spiritual dimension implied. Its integrative thrust has been mitigated, so that a single class in a single course can be described as "formative," regardless of whether it is disconnected from anything else that a student might be experiencing. Indeed, in everyday vernacular, such usages of the term "formation" are commonplace.

It thus appears that two key dimensions of the Jesuit theory of formation have become so attenuated as to be largely forgotten. The first of these refers to a religious or spiritual dimension in the realization of human potential. The second relates to "the total formation of each student," (2000, p. 176), rather than the partial or one-sided characteristics of an education without any integrating aspirations. If this line of reasoning is correct, then it is impossible to have formation, in the Jesuit sense, without both a spiritual and an integrative dimension in a school or university. Consequently, efforts should be made to either drop the use of the term altogether or to insist upon its spiritual and integrative dimensions as constitutive of its unique, distinguishing properties.

Having said that, there could be some advantages to this ambiguity on matters of religion and this fragmented interpretation of formation. If, as the psychological literature indicates, the search for meaning and purpose is a quest that must be undertaken by the individual, then excessive clarity and direction from a higher education institution paradoxically could prove

detrimental to its attainment. This would then mean that the lack of explicit spiritual content with an integrative thrust is not inherently problematic, but rather a source of plenitude because of its open-ended nature.

Adventure-based learning, the arts, and the measurement issues of programs in primary, secondary, and tertiary education simply provide so many mosaic pieces from which individuals can choose to craft their own meaning and purpose. The practice of discernment, when done with the right light touch, does not need to lead in an integrative direction, but rather can simply help students from time to time to cope with the compartmentalized nature of life in a “runaway world” (Giddens, 2003) in which the only constant is change and the ability to adapt skillfully to unpredictable circumstances is at a premium.

This rather optimistic account may, however, be naïve. Discernment does not happen in a power vacuum, but is influenced by a host of social forces that impact tertiary education. The leaders of Jesuit, Catholic universities, like any other higher education institution in North America, have to be concerned about all of the normal, prosaic, everyday issues entailed in running a large and organizationally complex academic enterprise. Whether students experience their educations as meaningful is not ranked on the *U.S. News and World Report* surveys, and those rankings are watched closely for assessing institutional quality by almost every university’s board of trustees.

The conventional metrics of academic excellence—H-factors, externally-funded grant proposals, and signs of recognition such as prizes and fellowships—are at play at Boston College as elsewhere. They exist in an uneasy, tensive relationship with Catholic

and Jesuit values (and one could say, regularly overwhelm them). Indeed, a perennial preoccupation at Jesuit higher education institutions is that, like a large number of originally Protestant universities, the pull of secularism and markets is becoming so strong that ultimately the universities could be indistinguishable from any other higher education institutions, with their religious origins in danger of ultimate disappearance.

4. *Future Prospects for an Education for Meaning and Purpose: The Case of Boston College*

In 2017 the leaders of Boston College gave formation a prominent placing as one of the university's four strategic directions for the coming decade. Since that time considerable effort has been made by faculty and staff to clarify just what "formation" means in this context and how it should be enacted. On the one hand, several scholars (Groome, 1991; Himes, 2018; Kearney, 1988) in humanistic disciplines such as theology and philosophy at the university have made formation a major emphasis of their life's work. This work, however, has scarcely had any impact in regard to other faculties or the program offerings of whole academic units.

Until recently, the very term "formation" never was used in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development. Foundation courses in the history and philosophy of education once flourished at the Lynch School, but these kinds of courses were dropped after the introduction of teacher testing in the Commonwealth in 1998 (Ludlow, Shirley, & Rosca, 2002). Instead, teacher education programs re-organized their curricula to better prepare students for the state's teacher tests.

This then left the Lynch School in a weak position to contribute to the university's new strategic goal on formative education once it was announced in 2017. Whereas previous deans had largely sought to sequester the Lynch School from larger university commitments, declining enrollments now called for a more collaborative approach. A new dean, Stanton Wortham, began organizing towards the center of the university, demonstrating new engagement with the Jesuit tradition. A scholar such as Belle Liang, who studies meaning and purpose among adolescents, was lifted to new prominence. A scholar like myself, who had largely abandoned early career scholarship in the history and philosophy of education, found new avenues for humanistic inquiry. Faculty in the area of statistics and measurement became engaged, studying programs across Boston College and in our school and university partnerships to see if they were having desired impacts in regard to formation or not.

At the same time that many new directions were being pursued, lines of resistance became evident. The official mission of the Lynch School states that "What unites our diverse work is the underlying aspiration to enhance the human condition, to expand the human imagination, and the make the world more just." For some faculty, staff, and students, the Lynch School's identity was so bound up with social justice that interest in a larger meaning and purpose in life, or even the Jesuit, Catholic character of Boston College, were not only peripheral matters, but symbolic threats. While there might be areas of overlap between selected Catholic traditions and documents—say, with Vatican II or liberation theology, in particular—their interest seemed to lie primarily in mobilizing faith for political ends, rather than treating religious formation as its own end. Such a

baldly instrumental approach could hardly provide a fruitful point of departure for shared inquiry and dialogue.

In addition to criticisms of an education for meaning and purpose on political grounds, the effort to gather Lynch School faculty to engage with the new strategic direction of formation has elicited some cautions from faculty in the areas of philosophy and theology in the School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Theology and Ministry. When two Lynch School faculty submitted a proposal for a conference on formative education, their proposal was only funded once they rewrote it such that the conference would focus on Boston College's programs and in formation. While such an institutional audit could have strengths of its own, leadership literature (Ancona & Bresman, 2007) warns against excessive internal review at the cost of external exploration. At the same time, the shift towards the study of internal developments has pushed numerous constituencies to look more closely at what programs have been established, how (or if) they are at all linked with each other, and what might be areas for further improvement to promote greater clarity and impact with regard to formation. After years of silence on what might be the ends of education and an emphasis upon empiricism and measurement issues, this has opened up hitherto foreclosed areas of inquiry and scholarship for joint deliberation.

Along with talented and newly energized leadership, the new strategic direction is catalyzing wholly new levels of discourse about what the university is attempting to accomplish and why. Faculty now convene regularly from across campus to discuss formative education and an education for meaning and purpose. The upcoming conference on formation, referenced above,

is taking faculty out of their traditional offices to meet with colleagues from across the university. The university has raised grant funding devoted to the study of formative education which has produced a flurry of proposals from all quarters. Two new on-line masters' degree programs were launched in January of last year and in both of them issues of the meaning and purpose of education play central roles.

An institutional renaissance in regard to an education for meaning and purpose is taking place at Boston College. Part of this draws explicitly on Jesuit traditions of formation, with its spiritual and integrative emphases. Part of it is happening at the level of individual courses. The quest for meaning and purpose appears to be larger than the Jesuit concept of formation insofar as its broad ambit can appeal to atheists, agnostics, and those of other faiths. At the same time, the Jesuit practice of formation, by affirming openness to spiritual exploration and the drive by the human personality for integration of disparate bodies of knowledge and experience, brings a well-established architecture to meaning and purpose that could be especially attractive for those for whom "the tyranny of choice" (Salecl, 2010) is a genuine limitation rather than a blessing.

To return to the question which prompted this paper in the first place: Can the Jesuit concept of formation be harmonized with the contemporary psychological literature on the quest for meaning and purpose? From the vantage point of the Jesuit concept of formation, the psychological literature on meaning and purpose can appear truncated—as if meaning and purpose are not inherently of value, but rather are only important because of their beneficial consequences for individual psychology. Such an approach cannot but seem superficial from

the vantage point of a salvific religion that promises redemption in light of divine grace.

On the other hand, the respect granted by the psychological literature to the independent, autonomous individual, who may find fulfillment without any explicit spiritual references, and without any concern for personal integration of diverse aspects of the self, reminds us that there may be many ways to find meaning and purpose. The empirical research respects the right of individuals to exercise their judgment in the pursuit of meaning and purpose in complete freedom, with no need of an explicit *telos* and certainly not one that requires an overarching eschatological direction.

Harmony, then, need not mean conflation. We need to construct dialectical hermeneutics between the quest for meaning and purpose, as developed by psychologists exploring the topic, and the Jesuit construct of formation. To do so, we need greater conceptual clarity, a better understanding of implied and explicit connotations of key terms, and especially more consistency in terms of how we are using the ambiguous but indispensable concept of “formation.”

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