Educating the Youth to Develop Life Purpose: An Eco-systemic Approach

Educando a los jóvenes para desarrollar un propósito para la vida: Un enfoque ecológico

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Abstract

Life purpose is an internal representation of a personally meaningful, prosocial contribution the person intends to engage with over their life span. Individuals' purposes interact within a social-cultural eco-system by directing individuals' perceptions toward situational resources (including others' purposes) that can help enact their purpose. Education can encourage students to explore their purposes within and beyond the classroom. This paper describes a case study of a class offered six times using three different ecological "niches": (1) conceptual understanding eco-niche focused on learning the concept and its relationships to other concepts; (2) resources-application eco-niche focused on reconceiving aspects of the concept as intellectual instruments to apply to real-life cases, including students themselves; (3) iterative practice eco-niche focused on implementing purposes within various contexts and interpreting feedback from those contexts. Using a feedback loop model to interpret how each eco-niche favours a different starting point and development trajectory through Damon's (2008) four dimensions of purpose, this eco-niche comparison (a) emphasizes how "high impact" educational experiences focus not on the students' improvements but rather on the improvements of communities as a result of students' enacting their purpose through their contributions, and (b) offers insights for teachers to infuse purpose development opportunities in their classes.

Keywords: Life purpose; learning ecology; practice; prosocial contribution.

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Resumen

El propósito de vida es una representación interna de una contribución prosocial significativa que la persona intenta realizar a lo largo de su vida. Los propósitos de los individuos interactúan dentro de un ecosistema sociocultural al dirigir las percepciones de los individuos hacia los recursos situacionales que pueden ayudar a cumplir su propósito. La educación puede animar a los estudiantes a explorar sus propósitos dentro y fuera del aula. Este artículo describe un estudio de caso de una clase ofrecida seis veces usando tres "nichos" ecológicos diferentes: (1) comprensión conceptual enfocado en aprender el concepto y sus relaciones con otros conceptos; (2) aplicación de herramientas enfocadas en reconcebir aspectos del concepto para aplicar a casos reales, incluyendo a los propios estudiantes; (3) práctica iterativa enfocada en implementar propósitos dentro de varios contextos e interpretar la retroalimentación de esos contextos. Usando un modelo de bucle de retroalimentación para interpretar cómo cada nicho ecológico privilegia un punto de partida diferente y una trayectoria de desarrollo a través de las cuatro dimensiones de propósito de Damon (2008), esta comparación de nicho ecológico (a) enfatiza cómo las experiencias educativas de "alto impacto" no se enfocan en las mejoras en los estudiantes, sino más bien en las mejoras a las comunidades a través de las contribuciones de los estudiantes, y (b) ofrece ideas para que los maestros infundan oportunidades de desarrollo de propósito en sus clases.

Keywords: Propósito de la vida; ecología del aprendizaje; práctica; contribución prosocial.

Introduction and objectives

Life purpose provides youth both a lens to perceive opportunities and a compass to direct their efforts toward contributions they personally care about that also benefit others and society (Moran, 2009). Purpose addresses the *why* of one's life. It maintains focus on that *why* despite supports or setbacks (Malin et al., 2013; Moran, 2010). Purpose has four dimensions: why the person cares about the purpose content (*meaning*), how the person plans to pursue (*intention*) and act upon (*engagement*) the content, and whom or what—beyond self-gain—the person's actions are expected to benefit (*beyond-the-self impact*) (Damon, 2008).

These dimensions may not develop at the same time and rate (Malin et al., 2013), and integration of all four dimensions into a mature purpose is not inevitable (Hill et al., 2010). One study found only about one in four American youth, age 12-26, described a purpose (Moran, 2009). Most youth were in developmentally immature forms of life goals that miss one or more dimensions: *dreams* lack engagement, *dabbling* in prosocial activities lacks intention to continue them, *self-oriented life goals* lack beyond-the-self impact, and *drifting* lacks more than one dimension (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). Yet, some youth can demonstrate giftedness in purpose development involving tolerance, creativity, moral impact, or other forms of exceptional prosocial influence on others (Bronk, 2012; Folgueiras & Palou, 2018; Moran, 2010; Moran, 2020b).

This diversity of starting points and developmental rates of students who enter a class with a purpose development component creates challenges for educators. First, how can educators design a class that helps students consider (a) how they can meaningfully contribute positively to others' well-being and society, and (b) what they can do now to build momentum toward their own vision of them-

selves pursuing their purpose content—the specific contributions they aim to make? Second, how can educators design a class that provides entry points into the purpose development process regardless of each student's level of purpose development before the course starts? Third, because a person's specific purpose content and developmental trajectory are unique to them, how can educators design a purpose class whose "grading" is based on developmental momentum and integration of purpose dimensions rather than a preset standard?

Why is life purpose and its development important for youth?

Increasingly, youth want to design their own life paths, and they increasingly may be required to do so (Folgueiras & Palou, 2018; Lerner, 1982) as traditional institutional supports for transitioning to adulthood are changing. Stable life paths of clear economic and social roles, passed across generations through social institutions, are giving way to accelerating autonomy and choice (Moran, 2019a).

Development of life purpose may fill this void. When developed, purpose becomes a self-regulating psychological compass to reciprocally influence and be influenced by the *common good* (Moran, 2020a), the repository of valued past and contemporary pro-social contributions shared by all and saved for future generations (Etzioni, 2004). Full responsibility of one's life prospects may overwhelm young people (Schwartz, 2000). Yet prosocial purpose in college is related to well-being in middle age (Hill et al., 2010), whereas taking too long to find one's life purpose is associated with reduced well-being (Bronk et al., 2009). Even youth who face challenges with a life purpose content counter to current norms—such as creative or social change aims—still are buffered by their purpose to persevere (Moran, 2010; Moran, 2022). So educators are called upon to prepare youth for more turbulent careers, stronger civic involvement in fragmenting societies, and increased self-direction amidst numerous choices (Moran, 2016; Pizzolato et al., 2011).

Educating for life purpose

"Education—especially moral education—might be considered a key cultural mechanism for young people to 'thread' their lives into the culture's 'bigger picture' not only of the 'good life' but also of a 'life of good'" (Moran, 2018b, p. 145). Yet many students do not connect school with their budding purposes (Kiang, 2011; Moran et al., 2012). Schooling seems to help students *lacking* purpose to explore, reflect, or develop skills—especially within immersive contexts like arts-based, vocational, or service-learning programs (Bronk, 2012; Malin et al., 2013; Moran, 2010; Moran, 2016).

Educating for purpose development may not be straightforward because of purpose's integrative nature. Educators tend to teach abstractly *about* purpose-related concepts, such as goal-setting or future orientation (Moran, 2016). Or educators only address some dimensions, such as personal meaning and engagement, but they struggle with incorporating future intention and beyond-the-self impact (Moran, 2016). Some educators try to support student purpose development through exploratory activities, role modeling, reflection, and service-learning (Malin et al., 2013; Moran, 2016; Moran & Garcia, 2019; Moran et al., 2012). But many educators limit life purpose to career choice (Dik et al., 2011; Moran, 2016). Educational activities leave out the *why*, failing to link purpose-as-

a-concept to the specific contributions that students aim to make, such as protecting wilderness or raising entrepreneurial children (Moran, 2016).

Yet, educational programs may be particularly powerful for students to learn how to be strategic in choosing opportunities through the lens of their purpose content (Malin et al., 2013; Moran et al., 2012). Students become agentic in their own education and development (Lerner, 1982; Reeve, 2013). As purpose dimensions integrate, students direct their efforts based less on external incentives and more on personal inclination to create valued effects in their communities (Moran, 2016; Moran, 2017; Moran, 2020a). A sense of life purpose is associated with stronger student academic outcomes (Oyserman et al., 2006; Yeager et al., 2014). Focusing on one's purpose can make a difficult task feel easier and feasible (Burrow et al., 2016) and it can keep impulsive actions in the present from derailing one's contribution (Burrow & Spreng, 2016).

It is possible for educators to support youth purpose development through "high impact" educational experiences that (1) not only require *re*flection (looking back to the past) but also anticipation and "*pro*flection" (imagining the future); (2) invest personal meaning into knowledge; (3) require students to act and evaluate their effects in terms of the *contribution* they make to a collective endeavor; and (5) cultivate feedback on students' contributions, beyond teacher comments, so students understand how they *matter to communities* (Moran, 2020a). Young people should understand why their learning is important (Yeager et al., 2014) and why their skills are important to their own ambitions *and* their communities' thriving (Damon, 2009).

Eco-systemic education for purpose development and momentum

In daily situations, life purpose reminds youth of the contribution they intend to make by perceiving the environment in terms of *affordances*—resources that offer action-possibilities to pursue their purpose content more effectively (Gibson & Pick, 2000). Different individuals could perceive different affordances within the same situation because situational resources afford varied meanings. For example, a get-together affords job prospects for one person, relaxation for another, and friendship for a third. As youth develop a life purpose, they more *selectively* pursue affordances that they believe will help them enact their purpose content.

Using principles from ecological psychology, educational experiences within a class can be designed to make visible students' interactions with affordances (Colucci-Gray et al., 2005). Individuals in a situation serve as stimuli for each other and adapt to each other's behaviors and contributions (Heft, 2013; Moran, 2020a). For example, students see how their contributions matter to other students and the class's common good. As they interact, one's purpose filters feedback on their own actions ("did I do well?") and the impacts their actions caused ("did I make things better?") (Moran, 2020b). This is how a life purpose can start and develop. Over time, purpose clarifies which affordances may be more fruitful for the contribution they want to make (Moran, 2017).

Eco-systemic education requires careful thinking about interactions within the classroom that can provide feedback related to personally meaningful beyond-the-self impact. Below I provide a case study of a class specifically designed to develop students' life purpose. The class was implemented six times by creating three different "eco-niches."

Each eco-niche organizes how students interact with the idea of life purpose, with each other, and with the class's affordances of materials, activities, and assignments. One eco-niche focused on learning the concept and its relationships to other concepts; another on formulating aspects of the concept into tools to apply to real-person cases, including students themselves; and a third focused on implementing purposes within various contexts and interpreting feedback from those contexts.

How effectively did each eco-niche affect the meaning, intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self impact of purpose in the class as a whole? Using a feedback loop model to interpret how each eco-niche privileges a different starting point and development trajectory through the four dimensions of purpose (Moran, 2017), this eco-niche comparison (a) emphasizes how "high impact" educational experiences for purpose development focus more on improvements to communities through students' contributions than on improvements in students themselves, and (b) offers insights to infuse purpose development opportunities in classes.
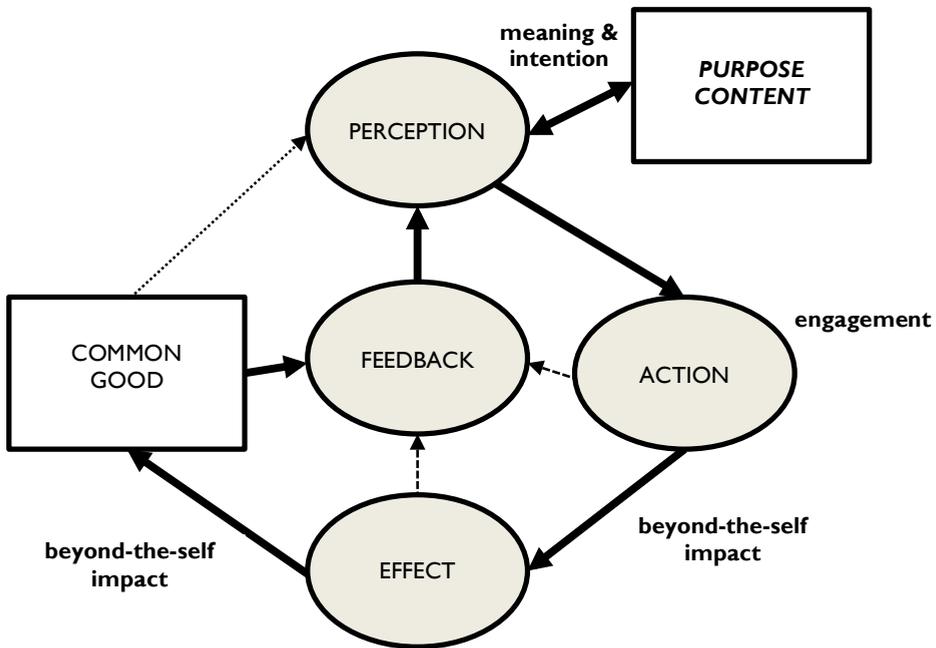

Figure 1. Purpose Momentum Dynamic Model © 2013 Moran (p.5) (Moran, 2017)
Damon's (2008) purpose dimensions in **bold**

The three eco-niches can be portrayed as differential configurations of the purpose momentum dynamic model (see Figure 1; Moran, 2017). This model formalizes the experiential relationships of a purpose's dimensions of meaning, intention, engaged action, beyond-the-self impact, and the common good's repository of prosocial contributions. For example, some eco-niches may start with action, whereas others start with discussions of what students feel is meaningful, and still others may first investigate perceived social problems calling for someone to do something about them.

Particularly important is the central role of *perception of feedback*—evaluations by oneself or others, or observations through one's own perception of actions, specific effects, or a general improvement in the shared capacity for benevolence. Perception of feedback helps launch, develop, and calibrate purpose (Bronk, 2012; Moran, 2020a). Theoretically, as more dimensions connect, the class becomes more cohesive without losing diversity of individuality. That is, each person contributes to the whole in their own way. As the class coheres, students can catalyze the class's momentum toward contributions within the class and between students and others beyond the class (Moran, 2009; Moran, 2020a).

Method

Sample Characteristics

The "sample" for this case study is not persons but class designs. Three class designs ("eco-niches") were created for a semester-long class, "What Is My Purpose in Life?" held once a week for three hours. The class was a seminar for at an American liberal arts university, mostly for juniors but also open to seniors and sophomores. All students who took the class were of majority age. The seminar aims to *apply* knowledge and *practice* skills from introductory classes.

The professor of this class was invited to the university to experiment with class designs that exemplify growing pedagogies which spend less class time focused on professors talking and more time on students *doing* in the classroom: for example, flipped classrooms (Strayer, 2012), peer-to-peer learning (Mazur, 1997), collaborative work (Moran & John-Steiner, 2014), makerspaces (Sheridan et al., 2014), and application, integration and reflective practice (Schon, 1995).

All the eco-niches incorporated some conceptual understanding, tool use, and practice. All ended with students making an original short video depicting their life purpose development so far. These videos were shown in a "film fest" through which students collaboratively analyzed these purpose journeys using concepts and tools from the class.

But the three eco-niches differentially emphasized conceptual understanding, tools application, and iterative practice types of activities, interactions, and assignments:

Conceptual understanding emphasis means that students learn primarily from readings about life purpose and related concepts and demonstrate their understanding through in-class discussions and academic assignments like an academic conference poster and written reflections focused on ideas.

- Tools application emphasis means that students excavate diagrams, question prompts, thought experiments, games and other tools from readings to explore their own life purpose development.
- Iterative practice emphasis means that all activities and assignments in the class focus students on their own espoused purpose from various perspectives: reflecting by using tools and games, and collaboratively exploring published cases of individuals discussing their life purpose status.
- The sample size for this case study is the number of times class designs (eco-niches) were implemented. Each eco-niche was implemented *twice* from 2014

to 2019. These eco-niches were not implemented randomly. Rather, the professor started with a primarily traditional, conceptual understanding eco-niche that 31 students experienced, segued to a primarily tools application eco-niche that 31 students experienced, then segued again to a primarily iterative practice eco-niche that 21 students experienced.

The purpose of this case is demonstrative: to share with other professors and teachers' different approaches for designing educational eco-niches to support purpose development in students. Because of the nonrandom enrollment of students into the course in different semesters and the nonrandom sequence of eco-niches from conceptual emphasis to practice emphasis, the exploration is not generalizable and never was designed to be generalizable.

Qualitative Coding Analysis

A qualitative coding analysis was done of the professor's notes on classroom events and interactions and of students' reflections, various representations of their purpose in different mediums, and their final video assignments of their purpose journey.

Therefore, there were three perceptual stances within this class: each individual students' self-perception through their reflections, assignments and comments during discussion; the professor's perception through observation of students interactions, discussions, and their actions embedded within their final video assignment; and all students' perceptions of each other through comments built upon one another's comments and through the 360-degree evaluations students completed for some assignments.

Codes applied to these sources and perceptual stances were: *meaning* (expressions of what was important or significant to them); *intention* (expressions of their own views of their future and motivations to realize that future); *engagement* (demonstrations or documentation of their own actions that relate to their purpose content); *beyond-the-self impact* (expressions or documentation of others' responses to one's actions); *beneficiary* (who or what they believed benefited from their actions); and common good (the "community" referenced in their description of where they believed their contributions might be retained, e.g., the class, the university, a sports team or extracurricular group, their family, their hometown, and the like). Each of these codes could be secondarily coded for their location—whether they occurred or referenced events within versus beyond the classroom.

Human Subjects Exemption

This case reports only the class-wide tendencies and does not provide percentages, averages, or distributions at the individual student level because the individual is not the unit of analysis. The observations were taken of the class as a whole and were "conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices" to consider "the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula or classroom management methods."

Therefore, this exploration is exempt from human subjects review in the United States per the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, exemption 1 for educatio-

nal practices (45 CFR 46 104 (d)(1)). The author contacted the university's Institutional Review Board Chair, who granted the exemption in writing. With this exempt status, only anonymous and short quotes and descriptions may be used to clarify results.

Results and discussion

Conceptual understanding eco-niche

What is purpose? How does purpose relate to happiness, success, and hope? These were the types of questions the class discussed in the conceptual understanding eco-niche, which emphasized learning *about* purpose. Weekly 200-word explorations of something students found interesting in readings plus both dyad and whole-group discussions on assigned readings and popular media stories formed the bulk of class interactions. This eco-niche is similar to traditional class formats except without lectures.

Although, according to student evaluations of the class, learning about purpose "pushed us to new insights" and "made me think about myself and the world around me," it made little progress toward developing an actual life purpose. Indeed, there was resistance to developing a purpose: students noted wanting to "be ready" to have a purpose when it was "needed" but not wanting to "enter the commitment until it was necessary" so that other options would not be lost.

Students led much of the class. Three-person groups devised questions to launch whole-class discussions. At first, discussions tended to summarize what a reading was abstractly "about." Over time, students encouraged each other to build on prior speakers' comments, eventually producing nuanced insights, some which linked several readings. Still, students stayed close to objective "answers" from class materials.

Students created representations, both individually and collaboratively, to see how conveying concepts through haiku poems, diagrams, symbols or other forms influenced their understandings of purpose and its dimensions. Mid-semester, students reviewed their own explorations and representations for broader patterns of understanding. They compared the patterns across all students' work to map the class's patterns. These reviews were characterized more like objective studying than personal reflection. Most students limited subjective comments to sharing general opinions about what they *liked*. Liking indirectly addressed meaning-making but rarely connected conceptual insights with students' own purpose because liking does not address *importance*.

In terms of the purpose momentum dynamic model, the conceptual understanding eco-niche only accessed a small part of the feedback loop (see Figure 2). *Meaning* was demonstrated, but it was more likely to be defined by the readings than to be related to students' purpose contents. *Engagement* comprised class attendance and participation in "teamwork" projects like the mid-semester research conference poster assignment. The culminating video assignment for students to assess their own purpose progress focused on how well they understood purpose generally rather than how effectively they were pursuing their specific purpose content or integrating purpose's four dimensions.

The conceptual understanding eco-niche produced little effect on *intention* or *beyond-the-self impact*. Students' weekly explorations and videos focused on the near future in college when they were clear what they would be doing. Students enjoyed question-

naires addressing options and supports for purpose but resisted questions addressing prosociality or responsibility. Student teams presented research posters in a university-wide forum, but most did not understand this experience as a contribution to others' understanding of purpose, so it did not register as possible beyond-the-self impact.
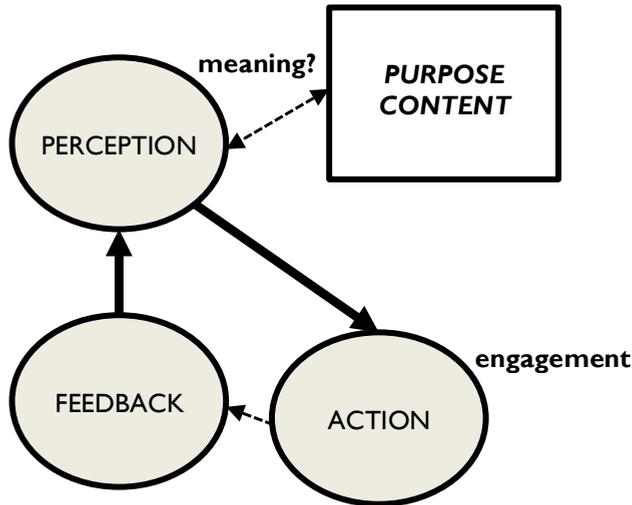

Figure 2. Purpose Momentum Dynamic Sub-model for conceptual understanding eco-niche

Tools application eco-niche

How is purpose useful in daily life? How can I choose a good purpose? These were the types of questions that students asked in the tools application eco-niche, which comprised interactive workshops to transform concepts into practical tools for classmates to pursue purpose as a real-life phenomenon. This eco-niche emphasized learning *how to develop* purpose. More activity-structured than conceptual understanding, students had to create the structures.

This tools application eco-niche produced many outcomes. Students left the class with a practical toolkit to use in the future. Students collaborated and bonded more than students in the conceptual understanding eco-niche because, as tool coaches, they could put more of their own ideas and personality into their contributions. Students gained confidence to influence others positively because the workshop format allowed them considerable feedback from peers: verbal praise, written evaluations, and observation of how peers used the tools they created. As a bonus, the tools contributed to clearer student videos because they helped students produce detailed insights to make their purpose journey more colorful. Many students noted in class evaluations that they felt they became "unstuck" and made progress on their actual life purpose.

The tools application eco-niche was a "middle way" between intellectual and personal perspectives on life purpose. It still drew considerably from a long list of academic readings, but it also started with a personal focus. The first week, students had to commit

to a specific purpose content (or a most meaningful focus), at least for the duration of the class, so they could apply the tools to their own purpose development. Students completed the sentence "My purpose in life is…" by *describing* as many of the purpose dimensions as truthfully applicable without using generalizations like "be happy" or "help others." They also photographed something symbolizing their purpose, *depicting* the future contributions they hope to make, such as coaching a summer camp with students with learning disabilities or holding the hand of an elderly person.

To structure a *need* for collaboration and integration, readings were randomly divided across student teams the week prior to the activities related to those readings. Although students were free to read everything on the class bibliography, each student was only required to read one or two readings per week to develop a tool for the class workshop the following week. That way, students depended on each other to learn all the material from the perspective of usefulness. Outside class, each team formulated a tool from readings, then in class had 20 minutes to coach classmates how to use the tool.

Early in the semester, teams usually shared a tool that was pulled "as is" from a reading, such as a theory, checklist, questionnaire, or category scheme the reading's author(s) used. Over time, teams increasingly created original tools. For example, one team transformed Roberts and Robins' (2000) economic, social, hedonistic, and other life goal domains into a spokes-and-wheel-shaped tool for students to self-assess the degree to which *each* domain was part of their purpose content. This tool produced "starburst" shapes that helped students quickly see the *relative* influence of domains in their life purposes. Eventually, teams began to produce hybrid tools integrating concepts from several readings. One example was a table crossing developmental stages of purpose (Malin et al., 2013) with normative, creative, and tolerant life aim types (Moran, 2010) that was then used to analyze cases from Bronson (2005). For the midterm assignment, instead of student teams creating a research poster about purpose, student teams scaled up their shorter coaching sessions into a completely original activity. They led classmates during a one-hour application of an original tool within a contextualized scenario.

Students' earlier tool-leading sessions helped them better understand the perspective of a novice using something new. So when they designed complete activities, they anticipated perspective-taking—an important skill in building beyond-the-self impact. Coaching others to use tools jolted students' assumptions about learning, perspective, influence, and how they felt helping others develop. The strongest indicator of particularly effective tools was how students used one or more of their own or other teams' tools in their final video assignments.

Examining the tools application eco-niche using the purpose momentum dynamic model (see Figure 3), *engagement* comprised applying tools to transform situations into proactive opportunities; *meaning* comprised a coherent perspective; *intention* previewed how others might be transformed by using the shared tools; and *beyond-the-self impact* recognized how students' perceptions of their interactions with each other change as peer-coaching and feedback made their effectiveness more interdependent. By the end of the semester, students were *intentional* in the effects they wanted to create in their contributions to the class. Students created tools to be used, not just abstractly learned. But the emphasis remained primarily intellectual. Students did not feel a sense of contributing more widely to the common good beyond the class.
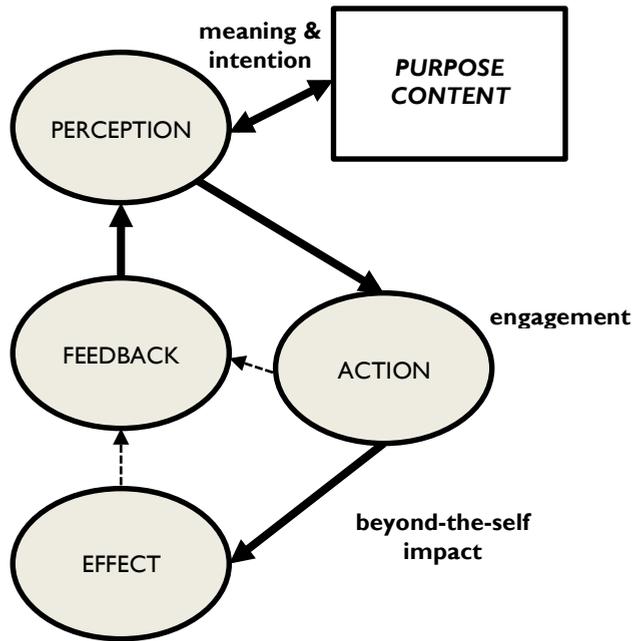
Figure 3. Purpose Momentum Dynamic Sub-model for tools application eco-niche

Iterative practice eco-niche

How can I "try on" possible purposes before committing to one? How do I demons-trate my purpose to others? These were the types of questions that students asked in the practice eco-niche emphasizing prosocial effort. This eco-niche revolved around students manifesting beyond-the-self impact by performing at least 15 hours of community service, such as playing with homeless children, supporting addiction recovery, or aiding neighborhood schoolteachers or elderly residents. This service clearly shifted the class from abstract, academic concepts to concrete, real-world action, emphasizing purpose *influencing life*—especially the interactions between one's own and others' lives.

The practice eco-niche incorporated all parts of the purpose momentum dynamic model (Figure 1). The *effect* of one's actions in the community demonstrated "practicing purpose." *Meaning* indicated the personal "insights" stemming from students' proactive involvement in others' challenges. *Intention* extended a future pathway for further developing beyond-the-self engagements of one's purpose content. *Beyond-the-self impact* widened beyond family and friends to include people students did not know previously. Self-evaluations were based not on "checking off" tasks on a to-do list, but rather on finding evidence that *others* benefited. Indicators that students integrated purpose dimensions included comments about how beyond-the-self impact leads to personal meaning because "you don't fulfill a purpose, it fulfills you."

In part, specifying a purpose content and integrating purpose dimensions were more explicitly part of the class design. To raise awareness of the possible connection

of service to each student's *specific* purpose content (as they currently conceived it), students in the first week had to elaborate how they *anticipated* affecting others: "My purpose in life is to…Because…And the reason it is important to me is…And I hope that others will consider me…." Students noted their prior experiences and future plans for community service. More than the other eco-niches, students gave specific purposes such as opening a daycare, counseling traumatized youth, raising a family, addressing homelessness, and being a rock star. Students also repeated questionnaires during critical points in their service work to check how their purpose and service influenced each other.

Not all students had a clear life purpose content entering the class, nor did all students select a service placement based on an espoused purpose content. Still, practicing purpose provided the clearest indicators of purpose development in relation to a specific purpose content, not just to a general sense of purpose by considering: deepening *commitment* to an already existing purpose content; strengthening *confidence* to pursue one's purpose content; and/or gaining meaningful *experience* to help clarify one's search for a specific purpose content.

Fewer, more targeted explorations, compared to the other eco-niches, asked students to select specific, meaningful instances *from their service* that depicted purpose-at-work: How did what happened affect their image of their future selves? These explorations switched from conceptual to emotional, emphasizing students' *feelings about their efforts* and how they used difficulties to refine their purposes. These explorations suggested that service provided immersive experiences for purpose searchers to see impacts of their actions and consider future ways to contribute, whereas service elaborated or refined details of already purposeful students' purpose content.

Exploration prompts also enhanced perception of the relationships between past, present and future. One prompt asked students to take the perspective of their future self at age 50 already living their purpose content, then as their future self, reflect back on how their service experience at age 20 played a role in where they were 30 years later. This exploration was a difficult assignment—a time-twisting mind-bender—but it was effective in transforming the future from a vague fuzziness into a concrete image of a person-in-action. Students worked up the courage to place themselves imaginatively within the purposeful future they hope for—to make the future *real*.

In-class activities also focused on contribution. For example, Bronson's (2005) cases provided vivid, contextualized stories of how purpose functions in real life from the perspective of the purpose pursuer. Student teams created maps of each case's purpose journey over the lifespan depicted in the chapter. These maps clarified indicators of purpose's functions to foster and prioritize options, motivate action, and build emotional clarity about what matters most to the person and those they want to help. Students came up with an original extension of this activity, introduced speculations of how one case's engaged purpose content could influence *other cases'* life trajectories—especially turning points, dead ends, or insightful moments most important to their different purposes.

To make visible the integration of purpose's dimensions, several class activities were based on the board game Clue (Hasbro Waddingtons Parker Brothers, 1949). Clue puts students directly into interacting roles, contexts, and purpose dimensions.

Just as "Miss Marple did it in the library with the candlestick," class activities asked student teams first to search for key moments in Bronson's (2005) cases' lives, then a week later, for key moments in students' own service experiences. Students also used Clue to brainstorm *potential* contributions they could make in their community service placements by creating different combinations of Hurst's (2014) model of *how* to act, *why* actions would help, and *whom* actions would benefit. For example, "I will perform improvisational dances with the homeless children to help them get in the rhythm of creating positive future momentum for themselves." Finally, Clue provided a framework for students to consider missed opportunities. They brainstormed at least three recent life situations that, in hindsight, they realized they *could have* enacted their purpose content but did not.

This iterative practice eco-niche presented two complementary views of students building momentum in their purpose. The first view is momentum as reorienting direction from experience (what students encounter) to participation (how students step into a role) and ultimately to contribution (what students contribute through the role). End-of-semester reflective dialogues highlighted how students emotionally--even viscerally—understood contribution in terms of ripple effects from their actions to others' well-being. By semester's end, children ran up and hugged student caregivers, or psychiatric clients shared stories of how they did better that week, or English-as-second-language-learners could hold a complete conversation with student tutors. Many students were grateful for meaningful relationships that formed and realized how feedback loops are bidirectional since those they helped, in turn, had helped them. Students left the class more clearly understanding the common good as a prosocial "net" that benefited more than the individuals in a particular situation. For example, students' comments referred to a "general sense of the world being better"; "I was overwhelmed by what I could do"; and "happiness is not enough."

The second view is momentum as real-time adjustment to life direction or effectiveness. All students reflected on service experiences afterward, but several ended with the ability to self-evaluate while they were still at the service site—moving from "reflection-*on*-action" to "reflection-*in*-action" (Schon, 1995). As the semester progressed, students sought—and some "came to crave"—feedback on the *effects* of their efforts. Some developed their own indicators to watch for: facial expressions, moods, mental clarity, or vocabulary before and after their service sessions. A few students created a secondary feedback loop of indicators of their *own* reactions to *others'* reactions to the students' efforts. This second loop created insights like: "I prefer to be part of a group"; "I might actually want to work with kids!"; and "It's best to celebrate the small victories."

The iterative practice eco-niche produced the most vivid end-of-semester purpose videos. Students found it easier than in the other eco-niches to symbolize and convey their purpose path in concrete, sensory ways. They were clearer about how prior actions scaffolded later opportunities. They were less likely to title the video "My Purpose in Life" and instead tended to use metaphors of their specific purpose content. Many students showcased their talents in their videos through original music, singing, drawing, collaging, or humor. Most importantly, these videos demonstrated nuanced understanding of the four dimensions of purpose and how they integrate.

Implications

Moran (2018b) argues that "…life is lived forward as subjective experience…. Perhaps education for purpose development…interweaves individual subjective sense-making and cultural shared meanings so students can envision contributions to their communities as important threads within a larger tapestry" (p. 154). This case study of one class offered six times using three educational eco-niches for life purpose development supports this argument.

The conceptual understanding eco-niche tended to start students at perception of duty toward required tasks, which led to actions to complete required tasks for a grade as the primary feedback. If students entered the class with a purpose content, meaning and intention linking tasks to the purpose content occurred, but such links were not common. The tools application eco-niche explicitly required students to select a specific purpose content to focus their perception on materials to find tools related to life purpose development generally. Actions were primarily extracting tools and coaching others how to use them so that students could observe the effects of their own and their peers' tool use within the class. Meaning and intention were possible and more common, but students tended to maintain an intellectual framing of purpose. The practice eco-niche started with required community service, thus launching the class with actions likely to stimulate effects on and feedback from beneficiaries of the service. Reflection on service transformed intellectual ideas into personally meaningful insights that led some students to imagine themselves perceiving further affordances and opportunities to prosocially contribute in the future.

Although understanding of life purpose as a concept and using tools made by oneself or others relate to important steps in purpose development, they are not as powerful as iterative practice for actually developing purpose. Iterative practice provides students not only the cognitive material that concepts and tools do, but also the emotional feel for purpose that gives purpose its power to build momentum toward making personally meaningful contributions long term. The relationship between community service and purpose development may be bidirectional (Moran, 2018a). Just as service may indicate purpose development, it is possible that life purpose might serve as an indicator of the effectiveness of service-learning (Moran, 2019b).

Some students felt overwhelmed by the openness of the class designs, such as (1) how students had to create their own "right answers" based on their own purpose content and (2) how one assignment's output became the input for the next assignment. But generally, course evaluation comments were less about standard class elements such as instructions or grading. Instead, students emphasized how they themselves changed: "Wow, I learned so much about life and myself…It's truly eye opening and character building" and "What is my purpose in life? ... I could never have imagined actually coming closer to answering that question over the course of just a few months, but I did."

This case study contributes to educational practice by translating recent research on life purpose into an eco-systemic educational approach that emphasizes student *contributions*. Purpose is a psychological compass connecting a person to the common good through the person's contributions. Purpose development requires more than abstractly introducing the concept of life purpose. It needs opportunities for students to act and

learn from feedback. Comparing the three eco-niches suggests educators should consider: (1) extending conceptual reflection into practical anticipation of future contributions; (2) encouraging students to invest personal meaning into class concepts through real-life examples or hopes; (3) including scenarios or representations through which students iteratively can pursue and symbolize their purpose content as it develops; and (4) tying evaluation to students' contribution effectiveness not simply to task completion —how did their actions create effects?

These eco-niches reframe "high impact" education to signify students visibly affecting others, perceiving situational cues for improving their contributory capacity, and increasing proficiency to positively influence social and cultural ecosystems. These insights support recent calls to tie pedagogy to students' autonomy and everyday lives (Pizzolato et al., 2011). The hope is that clarifying eco-niches and their feedback loop structures may help educators design situations in their classes through which students produce effects on others so they can learn to *enjoy the importance* of such efforts and effects. Students use and provide affordances, initially for each other, later for their community, eventually for future generations.

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