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Curricula for Meaningful Work through Listening in a Different Voice

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"It is not more vacation we need – it is more vocation."– Eleanor Roosevelt (Zur, 2010)

Curricula for meaningful work is becoming increasingly important in today's societies and cultures. As we enter into the third decade of the 21st century, it is no longer acceptable for education to ignore the critical dimensions of meaningful work. This is especially important because right-brain dimensions, such as meaning, empathy, and the creative capacity to synthesize divergent perspectives are essential for success in education, life, and work in the 21st century (Pink, 2011). Despite the fact that most students desire meaningful work, there are few indications that curricular practices to facilitate meaningful work are being widely implemented at K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. While the purposes of education are certainly more comprehensive than mere preparation for work, it is problematic that many college graduates never experience meaning in their work (Bates-Gallup, 2019). This problem in education, which impacts human flourishing and well-being, might be addressed by implementing curricular practices that facilitate students to listen in a different voice—that is, to listen for vocational callings.

The quest for meaningful work is an age-old phenomenon that necessitates imminent attention in today's K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. For many people, working to pay the rent or to satisfy one's ego simply is not enough; rather, we seek vocational callings that are tied to a sense of life purpose and meaning (Zur, 2010). To demonstrate, a recent Gallup report indicates that while 80% of American undergraduate students seek purpose and meaning in their work, less than half of these students actually fulfill this desire after graduation (Bates-Gallup, 2019). The same report identifies that only 28% of undergraduate students participated in a college class or program that helped them think about meaningful work. Notably, college graduates who experience meaningful work are nearly 10 times more likely than college graduates with low levels of meaningful work to report overall well-being (Bates-Gallup, 2019).

This connection between life purpose, meaningful work, human flourishing, and well-being is of particular interest to positive psychologists. For instance, Martin Seligman and his former student, Angela Duckworth (2016) offer abundant evidence of the benefits of meaningful work infused with a sense of purpose. Defining purpose as the intention to contribute to the well-being of others, Duckworth goes to great length to articulate a curricular lexicon that weaves together passion, persistence, and purpose in service of meaningful work. Clearly, the benefits of a life-affirming curricula for meaningful work are not only personal, but also extend well beyond the self.

Human flourishing and well-being are increasingly coming to the forefront of education, life, and work. As such, it is beneficial for students, parents, educators, and administrators in K-12 schools, colleges, and universities to recognize how the nature of work is evolving well beyond industrial-age manual work, past information-age knowledge work, to post-information age conceptual work. Best-selling author Daniel Pink (2011) explains: "We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age" (p.1-2). These changes mean that reliance on externally-defined jobs and careers is lessening. Coming to the cultural forefront is work that people are called to do. Educational activist Parker Palmer (2000) voices this vocational calling in the form of a poignant question: "Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?" (p. 6)

Thanks to increasing societal and cultural affluence, these more personal, expansive, and integrative possibilities for education, life, and work are becoming increasingly available. For instance, the scarcity-based survival drive that actively declares "I need to take a job to get by right now" (e.g. working to pay the rent) is increasingly growing into the future-oriented strive drive that actively declares "I want to plan a career to achieve my personal and professional goals" (e.g. working to satisfy one's ego). As this affluence continues, a thrive drive tied to a sense of life purpose and meaning emerges to reflectively ask and listen in a different voice. More than actively declaring, this voice first reflectively inquires: "What is it that I am here to offer the world? How do I uniquely connect with and through the world? How I am called to uniquely serve the world?" Consequently, the asker is oriented to listen to intuitive faculties, prior to actively declaring a professional direction.

This trajectory, which draws on Abraham Maslow's (1943) self-actualization theories, suggests that when students are coming from an inner and outer place of sufficiency, the scope of one's world expands. As this happens, new and richer possibilities for education, life, and work are also revealed. Importantly, these more expansive possibilities involve genuinely connecting with and contributing to an ever-expanding world. Indeed, the earlier declarations of "I need to take a job to get by right now" and "I want to plan a career to achieve my personal and professional goals" point to an "I" independent of connecting with the world. In contrast, the reflective inquires that are oriented towards inner listening tap into a deeper dimension to ask how this authentic self might serve the world. Such an inquiry is grounded in interdependence, intuition, and a contextual logic that necessitates attention, seeing, and listening in a different voice. Referring to this more authentic self in terms of soul, Parker Palmer (2000) elaborates in his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, stating that:

The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions. The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out.

But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek. (p.7-8)

Like the traditions of indigenous vision quests that support walking quietly into the woods to catch a glimpse of one's precious wildness, listening in this different voice can open people to a homecoming of profound belonging. This was certainly the case for Jane Goodall (1999) whose research with chimpanzees in the jungles of West Africa came from listening to a quiet inner voice that intuitively guided her actions. Responding to and outwardly materializing the intuitive impulses that emerge through this type of pilgrimage are inherently life-affirming. Management scholar Otto Scharmer (2008) describes this sojourning process using a U shape to facilitate questions, such as "Who is the self? What is my work?" Importantly, these inquires come after a "letting-go" process and prior to a "letting-come" process.

Viewed through this life-affirming lens, the 20th century curricular practices that prematurely push students into "I" oriented jobs and careers omit an important dimension. Like Palmer's (2000) thesis that prevailing education models prematurely close off alternatives from truly letting our authentic selves speak, Dania Quirola, a sustainability practitioner in Ecuador, critiques prevailing education models that "… prepare us for a diploma, but not for a life-affirming future. By 'life-affirming,' I mean that our learning and interactions should really contribute to better knowing ourselves, to cooperating in creating alternatives that benefit society, and to living in balance within ourselves and with our environment" (n.d.).

A framework to deepen our understanding about how people orient to education, life, and work is offered by management scholar Amy Wrieznewski (1997), who, along with her colleagues, identify three different orientations to work: (1) jobs, (2) careers, and (3) vocations. These orientations range from the externally-held directive of the more left-brained socialized self to the internally-rooted nature of a more right-brained authentic self. Problematically, prevailing education models, which were initially effective to mold the socialized self into meeting the industrial needs of the 19th century, overwhelmingly support the job and career orientations at the expense of vocational callings. Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (2008) succinctly states that "… (w)e are turning out, as if through a mold, a type of human being whose chief interest is to find security, to become somebody important, or to have a good time with as little thought as possible" (p. 9). Beyond the concrete interest of security (i.e. survive drive of job orientations) and the subtle pursuit of becoming important (i.e. strive drive of career orientations) is the curricula for meaningful work. These curricula support the thrive drive of vocational callings.

When it comes to curricular practices that inform, influence, and inspire meaningful work, we are wise to access, include, and then integrate a different voice into education, life, and work. This missing voice operates on a contextual logic that includes emotion, body, and relationships. This intuitive voice is attentive, sees new perspectives, and firstly listens to the more authentic self. This means noticing our noticing, seeing what is and is not seen, tapping into unconscious influences, and listening for the voice of vocation. This means slowing down, caring for all of humanity, and gently and patiently attuning to allow what wants to emerge to emerge. This relational, open, and receptive voice clearly reflects a more feminine voice.

To learn more about this different voice, I briefly turn to psychologist Carol Gilligan (1993, 2011), who in her book, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, addressed a problem in psychology: studies in human development were based on boys and men. In doing so, she contrasts the feminine logic of care with the masculine logic that operates on justice, principles, and rules. Gilligan notes that because the voices of girls and women were omitted, the very measure of humanity was equated with masculinity. A consequence was that the lives of males, like jobs and careers, appeared interesting, while the lives of females, like vocational callings, were subordinate, uninteresting, and different.

In closing this article, I suggest that it is time that we as students, parents, educators, and administrators in K-12 schools, colleges, and universities give voice to this different voice. Curricula for meaningful work does not mean diminishing the masculine voice of job and career orientations, but instead this means including and integrating an important and missing voice: the voice of vocation. Indeed, it is this voice from which the very word, vocation, originates. It is also this voice that forms best-selling author Steven Covey's (2005) 8th habit—finding your voice and inspiring others to find their voices. Let us all come together to facilitate students to listen in a different voice—that is, to listen for vocational callings!

About the Author

Devon Almond has worked with various rural and remote-serving colleges and universities across North America, spanning from the Yukon Territory to Hawaii Island. His guiding purpose—to evoke a sense of purpose in education, a sense of place in life, and a sense of meaning in work—is shaped by his professional and academic background in conventional and alternative higher education. He lives with his wife and daughter in the woods near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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