

Understanding Purpose through Interviews

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The goal of this activity is to bring to life the concept of purpose by illustrating the role that purpose plays in students' own lives. Students are asked to interview each other and then work together to draw a mind map—a diagram that shows the interrelations between the interviewee's values, goals, and actions. The process of creating a mind map illustrates to students an important way of conceptualizing purpose, and also provides a foundation for integrating one's purpose into other goals and activities.

Concept: Purpose during youth is associated with major indicators of thriving during youth and beyond (Bundick et al., 2010). Therefore, it is a worthwhile goal to make course content on purpose directly relevant to students. Adolescents and young adults often do not have a strong sense of purpose, and thus have a difficult time truly grasping the concept of purpose. The activity is meant to ground students' intellectual understanding of purpose by tying it to their own experiences, and to the experiences of their peers. It does so by encouraging each student to elucidate their own nascent purposes and to help another student to better understand his/her purpose. It also seeks to help students conceptualize purpose as a set of values, goals, and actions that can interact to create a sustained life purpose (Moran, 2009).

Materials Needed: The Brief Purpose Interview (Appendix A), Mind Map example (Appendix B), and interview technique examples (Appendix C).

Instructions: This activity centers on an interview in which each student elicits from a partner personal life goals, as well as future desired selves, ideas about one's desired future which may not be engaged as goals. Because purpose is highly individualized, pair interviews are used in the

activity. Any activity which focuses on how someone understands their own life and behavior without making comparisons to others – such as a written reflection (see below) – could be appropriate. Interviews are preferred, however, as having an outside observer asking follow-up questions allows the interviewee to elaborate on their goals and aspirations in ways that they might be able to do on their own. The interviews and discussion take at least thirty minutes. If less time is available, a single interview per pair, rather than paired interviews, in which each student interviews the other, should be used. Using the interview serves a number of goals, including increasing students' awareness of the variety of methodologies used in psychological research, as interview research is rare. The interview can also help students to be aware of the highly subjective nature of purpose, both in terms of their own experiences and in terms of their identification of other's purposes.

Prior to the activity, it is ideal to have broached the idea of purpose with the class. Purpose is an important aspect of development, giving motivation and direction. It is, however, a difficult concept for many students to grasp. Many young adults do not yet have a fully developed sense of purpose, or, because purpose can manifest in an array of forms, they may have a purpose yet not be consciously aware of it (see Bronk, 2006; Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon 2008, for examples). The term *purpose* is used in different ways in research than it is in everyday language. Even within research there are a variety of definitions of purpose each with different emphases (e.g., Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Reker & Wong, 1988; Ryff 1989). For scientific and educational uses, purpose may be defined in the following manner (see Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003):

A purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. A purpose can

function as a transcendent goal or “ultimate concern” in life, and thus can organize many other life decisions and actions. A purpose is internalized, or ‘owned’ by the individual, rather than externally driven, and therefore is central to the person’s identity.

Purpose is a multidimensional phenomenon; intention, action, plans, and reasons all interact with each other to create a general sense of purpose. Students often find it easier to focus on these more concrete operationalizations—goals, actions, and plans—than on the more abstract concepts of reason or purpose, and so by identifying goals, actions, and plans, they can indirectly carve a path towards the more abstract question of “why.”

Have students form pairs to interview each other, and tell them to switch places after about 10 minutes. In each pair, the interviewer’s role is to elicit the interviewee’s values and goals and to support the interviewee in elaborating on those goals (see Appendix A). Reasons and means for pursuing those goals should be discussed as fully as possible in the time available, as these are the concepts with which students are likely to struggle the most. It is especially important during the discussion to focus on the interviewee’s perspective and experience, not just on the actions that they describe. For instance, an interviewee may say that they are trying to graduate college, an engagement which likely has a particular meaning for them which should be elicited, even if the interviewer thinks they understand that meaning. The interviewer should focus on helping the interviewee to discuss their values, goals, and actions in a way that others can understand, asking for clarification as often as necessary and avoiding judgment.

Interviewees should also be told that they should only answer questions to the extent that they are comfortable, given the privacy concerns and personal nature of the interview.

Aside from taking notes throughout the interview, the interviewer should also create a Mind Map of their partner on a separate page. This map is intended to show the interrelations

between the interviewee's values, goals, and actions. The connections between these dimensions should be elicited from the interviewee and labeled with reasons, particularly the reasons tying goals and actions to values. Asking 'why?' often is encouraged. Checking the mind map with the interviewee and eliciting their feedback on it may also be helpful, though interviewers must be careful not to color the interviewee's narrative with their own interpretations; they can and should ask for clarification and elaboration, but they should *not* contribute their own ideas to the discussion or ask leading questions. For example, "Did you feel pressured to go to college by your friends and family?" would be a leading question; a more appropriate question would be "Did your friends and family play a role in your decision to go to college?" -In order to facilitate the organization of responses given by the interviewee, the interviewer should keep each response separate at first, focusing as much possible on obtaining an accurate and unbiased record of the interviewee's responses. As patterns emerge, the interviewer can begin to cluster together those responses that relate to similar values, denoting them with a common symbol such as an asterisk, or listing them together on different parts of the paper. Finally, the interviewer can use this material to begin drawing the mind map.

During the interviews, your role as an instructor is to support students in focusing the interviews on their partners' intentions and to be available to clarify the task, as it is complex. A few clarifications, beyond those included in the instructions above, are most important: it is appropriate to talk about religion, culture, political, or other sensitive issues if they are relevant, and interviewees are encouraged to talk about all values and goals which are or are not purposeful. In a class of over 30 students grouping students in larger groups may be necessary. If this is the case, one student should interview and take notes to guide the interview, another

should build the mind map, one should be interviewed, and any additional students should also create Mind Maps of the interviewee.

Following interviews, have the interviewee write down what they think their purposes are and have the interviewer write what they think the interviewee's purposes are. In addition, have students compare and contrast their answers with each other. This will serve as the foundation for further discussion, as these interviews often lead individuals to speak about themselves in ways they do not typically consider speaking to others. For instance, they may discuss wanting to build more sustainable communities, without having clear answers for how they could do so or being able to verbalize their reason for that desire. Over the course of these discussions, students sometimes come up with more concrete ways to pursue what might have previously seemed to them an amorphous, unattainable goal; they may even discover that other students share the same goal and similarly had not previously verbalized it.

Discussion: Following the interview, using the interviews and any other examples students produce, ask students to consider purpose in a number of ways, beginning with the definition of purpose given above. For instance, discuss with students the role of a purposeful goal as part of a cluster of goals, in which trying to build community coexists with health goals, such as exercise goals, and achievement goals, like graduation. The focus of this discussion is on how a sense of purpose – derived from one's *existing* goals and activities – can be used to find *new* purposeful goals and activities. As an example, many college students want to give back to the world. This can help to organize educational goals, career goals, and relationship goals, even those which are not part of pursuing the purpose directly, for instance leading to the selection of a career which allows the kind of purposeful family life they desire. Following this discussion, you might address the engagement of purpose at different points in an individual's life. This should

emphasize the different concerns which may exist at different ages and in different settings. For instance, while youth are more likely to be involved in purposeful volunteer activities, they may also be involved in activities preparing for future engagement with a purpose (e.g., through education). For adults, engagement with current family and work related purposes may be more common. Other dimensions of purpose to discuss include the importance of reasons and meaning in understanding goal pursuit (see Carver & Baird, 1998); for instance, how different it is to do community service to help others as opposed to doing community service to build a resume? Similarly, it is worthwhile to explore how and why individuals' purposes are unique, and how purpose can support thinking about one's future and about one's place in the world (e.g., how pursuing a purpose may lead an individual to make different life decisions).

Writing Component: If a writing component is desired, it is recommended that you ask students to write about a time in their lives when they felt particularly purposeful in their pursuit of a goal. Ideally this would take place prior to the interview activity, helping them to reflect on any purposes they might have. The time in students' lives should be extended over months or a year, rather than focusing on a single experience. If they have not had such an experience, ask them to write about an individual who they are aware of who pursues a goal purposefully. Providing students the opportunity to share these responses may be valuable as well through an online forum or wiki, allowing discussion to continue after the activity.

As a potential follow-up or alternative to the interview activity, planning a new way of enacting a purpose can be a useful writing assignment. Ask students to plan how they would spend an hour pursuing a purpose in a way they have not yet experienced and to write a reflection on their purpose and how that experience might inform them about their goals. The instructions for the reflection are as follows: "Write a one page reflection on your purpose and

anticipated experience. Pay particular attention to what you are attempting to accomplish, how you measure success, how you prepared for the experience, and the likelihood that you would continue pursuing the purpose in this new way.” This could be used to help create or extend a mind map.

References

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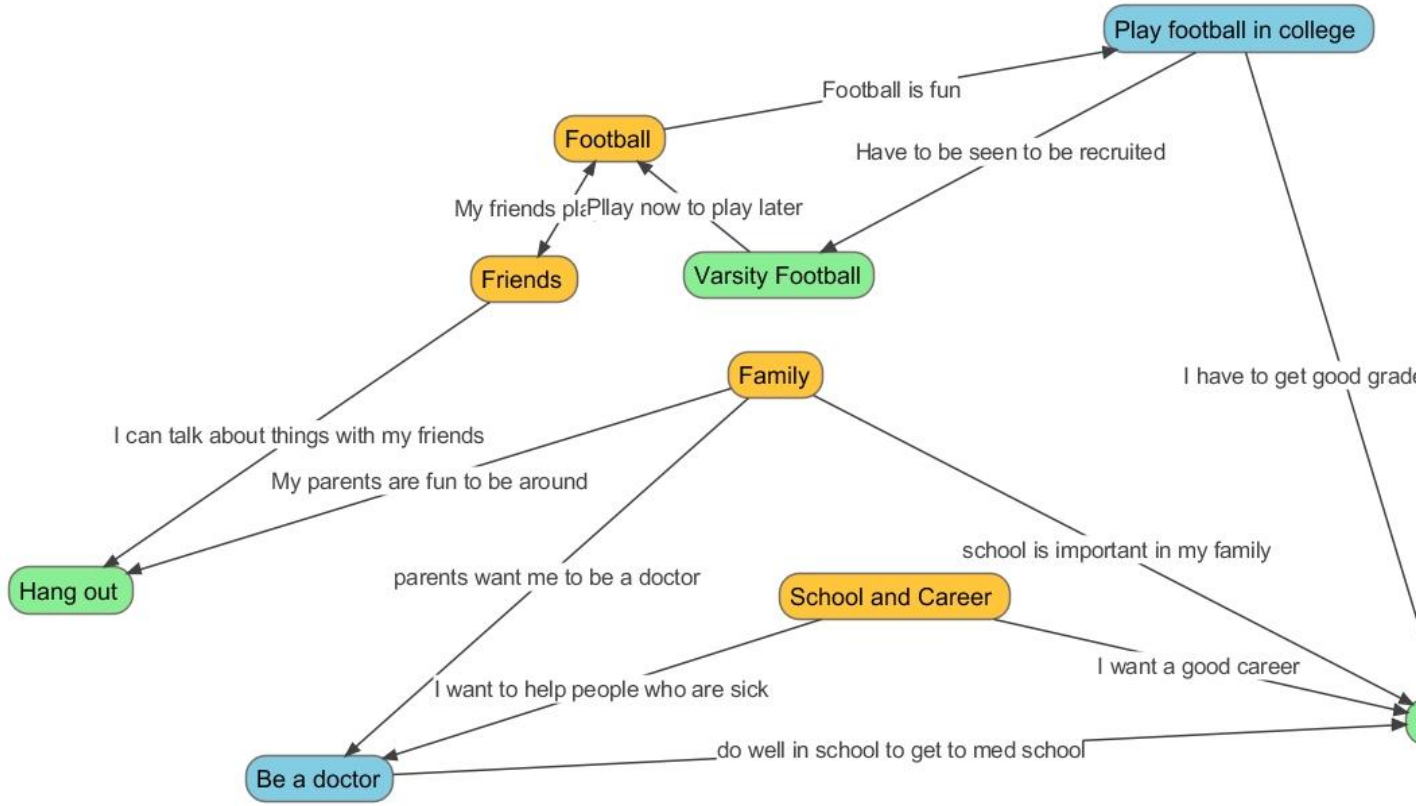
Note. An asterisk denotes readings that instructors and students should read to better grasp the material.

APPENDIX A

Brief Purpose Interview

- What is important to you? What do you care about? What matters to you?
- How do you spend your time?
- What do you want to be different about the world?
- What could you do to make the world like that?
- Can you rank the different important things you have talked about?

APPENDIX B



Sample Mind Map

Appendix C

1. Make probes for elaboration as empty of content as possible. Good probe questions are things like: “Tell me more about that.” “Why is that important to you?” “Could you give me an example?” “What did you actually do when you were involved in that?”

How long has your family been important to you?

Forever

Can you tell me more about that?

Well, even when I was young, my parents always supported me and I have an older sister who I get along with really well.

2. Be alert for apparent misinterpretations of the questions by interviewees. It is ok to explain or paraphrase a question if the interviewee doesn't seem to understand what you are asking but be sure not to change the meaning of the question in the process or suggest by your paraphrase a particular kind of answer.

How do you spend your time? Well, right now I'm doing this interview

Okay, but in general, can you describe a normal weekday for me? What about a weekend?

3. Focusing on the interviewees understanding, not social norms:

What do you want to be different about the world?

A lot of people really care about the environment.

Do you care about the environment too? Is there a specific environmental cause you are interested in?

When you put it that way, no, I am more interested in helping people than the environment.

4. During the course of the interview, refrain from making evaluative judgments about what the interviewees are saying (such as, “that's great,” “that sounds very cool,” and so on). Save your enthusiasm for the end of the interview, when you will be thanking the interviewee for interesting and valuable insights.

Interview Technique Examples