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Viktor Frankel’s Meaning Centeredness in Learning Practices

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Abstract
Pursuing meaning in life is such important that any failure in capturing the real sense of life makes people surrender to despair. In this regard, the present article has focused on Viktor Frankl’s contribution to psychology, called logotherapy, which still remains quite prominent in humanistic existential psychology. Through the use of Socratic questions and placing emphasis on three interrelated aspects of creative, experiential and attitudinal changes and efforts, individuals can be directed to the correct path of purposefulness in life. The applicability of Franklian concepts in educational settings from the three aspects of creativity, experiential, and attitudinal endeavors was also discussed. Creativity in learning involves the activation and development of the processes that are particularly effective in solving ill-defined problems. In fact, creativity helps learners establish their sense of expert identity. Experiential aspect of Frankl’s meaning centeredness attends to the fact that education should provide learners with ample opportunities to deal with new experiences holistically and in a meaningful way to be able to relearn their lived experiences. And finally, attitudinal changes point to the fact that resilience in harsh or disappointing situations is possible when learners understand that some problems are time-consuming and they have to learn to be patient in face of such complexities.

Key words: Frankl, meaning centeredness, creative, experiential, attitudinal

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1. Introduction

Nothing is more important than the awareness that we are not what our biological constraints and circumstantial situations determine. Rather, there are many aspects to our lives that are decided by our cognitive multidimensionality. Knowing that cognition deals with understanding or meaning making, we can rightfully regard ourselves as both the products and the producers of the dominant personalities with which we are characterized. The values, norms, and rules we set are then meaningful since they resolve real-life physical or conceptual problems. Thus, seeking meaning in every situation is such an important experiential endeavor that has required scholars and intellectuals to raise the dichotomies such as advantageous–disadvantageous, usefulness-futility, or safety-harm in almost any subject. In general, individuals’ efforts in meaning making indicate that any failure to capture the purpose of life experiences can make them surrender to despair. When it comes to the role of meaning in life, Viktor Frankel is one of the most prominent Viennian psychologists who expanded the meaning of meaning from a literal linguistic sense to a global practicum in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and cognition. From practice in suicide prevention centers to contribution to clinical psychology, he found that one’s well-being and meaningfulness are correlated (Smith, 2013). However, meaning should be parochially defined. That is, there are varied sources of meaning that must be discovered and invested in since individuals have unique abilities and talents. As Frankl maintains, “this uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work (1984, p.101).” The current analytical interpretive article, thus, tends to size up the applicability of Frankl’s meaning-centeredness in education from the three overriding perspectives of creative undertaking, experiential involvement, and attitudinal personal changes. In such doing, the author, first, provides a brief theoretical discussion of Frankl’s main concepts. Then, seeks to deduce the bridges that place Frankl’s meaning centeredness at the core of education, and especially learning practices.

2. A brief background on Franklian humanistic-existential psychology

Existentialism emphasizes authenticity or living as being free, unique, potential, and true-to-themselves. The development of existentialism is somewhat indebted to the works of the great philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Burnham, 2021). Thus, existential psychology tends to discover how individuals come to terms with their given existences in every walk of life and how they materialize their own subjective self-image through their experiences (Miller, 2020).

According to Madeson (2020), during 1930s, Frankl, as a reaction to the first wave of psychology – Freudian psychoanalysis, with his humanistic-existentialistic logotherapy placed a great emphasis on what was missing in the psychoanalytic school: whole person as instructed by humanistic psychology, spirituality as a tension reliever, and meaningfulness as a cure. Frankl, himself being a survivor of Nazi concentration camps, had found out that what under the most vicious circumstances counted was purposefulness and seeking meaning in life.

For Frankl, rather than unconscious, subconscious and conscious as three categorizations of one’s awareness, human being is a synthesis composed of soma (body), psyche (mind) and noös (spirit) (Costello, 2015). This shows that for a person to enjoy a holistic wellbeing each part must act congruently in the trichotomous system of individual’s being. He was also against the idea of pan-determinism that regards humans as mere slaves of their physiology, instincts, and external conditions (Devoe, 2012). Thus, apart from psychotic disorders, those who suffer from neurotic
problems are among those who fixate on their past and have indeed lost their sense of value, direction, and purpose in their life. This being said, the greatest responsibility of a counselor is to adopt a holistic approach in counseling— that is to say, looking at the whole life of clients— to raise awareness as to the role of every experience in individuals’ lives in giving them maturity and reason to grow and to be a better person (Wong, 2013).

Frankl’s therapy was called logotherapy. Britannica (2021) explains that logo is originally Greek referring to reason, purpose, plan and even the word of God. With this religious background, Frankl amalgamated purposefulness or logo as the central part of his therapeutic efforts.

The summary of the core concepts and tenets of his therapy (Frankl, 1985) are as follows: 

a) noetic quality of life—those aspects of life related to mental functions and intellectuality—is as important as physical quality, b) rather than before or after, the present moment as the most important temporal dimension should be minded, as instructed by existential psychology; that is to say, people should try their best to respond to the requirements of everyday life in a meaningful way, c) meaning centeredness is also future-oriented, that is, your present day must be fulfilled for you to be able to correct your future, d) there is no determinism, and we have freedom of will to act, choose, and pursue e) our search for meaning in life—called will to meaning—becomes the intrinsic source of motivation for us, f) our will to meaning should be cultivated; otherwise, we will not be any different from animals, and our basic motivations for survival can easily suppress our latent (potentials related) motivations, g) meaning should not be treated as something illusive, rather it is real and worthwhile shaping our every plan in life, h) there are two major types of meanings in our search for purposefulness in life: ultimate meaning which leads to an intrinsic unconscious desire for finding the truth of our creation and meaning in the moment which activates a kind of metacognitive consciousness to ensure that our every plan of action is the best chosen, and finally i) the best practice of a counselor is developing Socratic questions. By Socratic questions, Frankl referred to a successive series of challenging questions that focused on the clients’ faulty belief sets and practices so that they could experience moments of self-discovery and revelations. These questions could include a wide range of things from seeking for clarification, assumptions, evidences, perspectives to outcomes and consequences.

3. Franklian meaning Triangle in educational practice

According to Li (2020), Frankl’s idea of the trichotomous avenue of meaning achievement, called meaning triangle, merging positive psychology and his logotherapy, characterizes what is necessary for human endurance and resilience during hardships. The triangle consists of creative, experiential, and attitudinal aspects each leading to self-expression and further effort for living in harmony even with the imposed situations.
- **Creative endeavors**: Involvement in novel, creative practices takes many forms in educational settings from development of so-called *open higher-order thinking skills* in students to project-oriented education that is vital for social, economic, and personal well-being (Collard & Looney, 2014). By *open learning*, as opposed to *closed learning*, we refer to a situation where learners are supposed to deal with undefined problems. As you might know, problems are of two types in cognitive terms (Allaire & Marsiske, 2002; Schunn et al., 2005): *well-defined* and *ill-defined*. While well-defined problems are those that do not trigger any urge for creativity since they have already been solved and well-known, ill-defined problems encourage individuals to find solutions and examine many ways of tackling the problematic situations. Thus, the well-defined problems are routinely done and followed. For instance, rewriting a piece of text, assigned as a further practice, can be known as a well-defined problem. On the other hand, when learners are required to *develop their own ideas* on an unsolved issue, *comment, criticize, mentally assess* the problem in many other contexts, and *guesstimate the interactions of its variables* in each assumptive context, they are involved in an ill-defined challenging situation. Our life experiences are mostly of ill-defined nature, and it is ill-defined problems that create stress, anxiety, and sometimes frustration if we are not given any guidance or do not have resilience to react in sensible ways. Knowing this, it becomes one of the prime responsibilities of educators and curriculum developers to provide students with enough opportunities to be able to express their *expert identity* side in classrooms. According to Crane (2012), our expert identity is constructed while we team up with others mostly in interactive situations that impose problems of ill-defined essence. In other words, it is only in interpersonal exchanges that a person’s knowledge and expertise is revealed and recognized by others. A person living by himself and secluded from society is indeed living by the rules of survival. Thus, expert identity is a positive self-enhancement aspect of one’s personhood (Lin & Kádár, 2018).

- **Experiential aspect of meaningfulness**: According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), the emphasis on the experiential aspect of learning goes back to John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, and Carl Rogers and assumes 6 major premises: 1) learning is a process; hence, an educational opportunity should activate effective cognitive processes in learners and help them reconstruct their experiences in meaningful way, 2) learning should involve testing and revising the lived experiences or relearning. Naturally, our learned strategies are not always workable for ill-defined problems, which requires a great deal of
effort on our part in making new sense out of our experiences through reconstruction, re-
learning, and improving our acquired knowledge, 3) experiential aspect of learning leads to
creativity since new learning accompanies new strategies, new concepts, and definitions
rather than old transferred knowledge bases, 4) conflictual situations are also part of ill-
defined problems which should be carefully studied and considered if any solution is
supposed to be produced, 5) acquiring experiences is a multidimensional aspect in which
culture, society, person, environment, and the relations among these factors are quite
important. The multidimensionality of experiential learning, thus, creates a meaningful
synergy, a satisfactory result that cannot be atomized without paying attention to the whole
configuration, and 6) experiences cannot be detached from contexts, and learning is
meaningful only when it is contextualized and is acquired holistically.

- Attitudinal aspect: The last recommendation by Frankl, in fact, closes the door to despair.
  This attends to the fact that an intrinsically motivated individual, one who does not seek only
  attention and encouragement from others, may at times encounter some problems that are
  not solvable in short-run. There are many obstacles, discouragements, and ill-defined
  situations that can overtax people’s energy and hope. In such situations, the best strategy is
  changing their own attitudes. The term attitude refers to individuals’ particular perspective of
  something and a set of behaviors that accord the perspective. Thus, attitudinal changes are in
  no way equal to giving up and being filled with the sense of inefficacy. They are rather
  developing more tolerance and resilience when complexities and uncertainties could
  overtake. The value of attitudinal changes is especially clear in educational settings where
  most students readily believe that their goals should be easy to achieve and they are not
  supposed to face any problems. Learning requires enough time and patience, and still
  applying learning to real-life situations is more time-consuming and difficult. Therefore, one
  of the most important duties of educators is to prepare students to build their capacity for
  further tolerance and acceptance of ambiguities and difficulties.

Conclusion
The present analytical article dealt with the significance of Franklian psychology in education.
Viktor Frankl is known for his humanistic existential logotherapy placing a huge emphasis on
meaning and purpose in life. He has also mentioned three important avenues of gaining meaning
and purpose in life through experiences, attitudinal changes and involvement with creative
endeavors. Frankl’s theory though famous in psychological circles and communities has still
many capacities and potentials for research and application in work environments and
educational settings since individuals are more and more pressurized by unwanted external
factors and a type of culture that gives prominence to products rather than processes.

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