

Meaning Making and Reflections

Concept

Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) posits that the primary motivation for life is to derive meaning from experience. Individuals use their prior experience and knowledge to engage with an event or topic—meaning is then created by the individual’s reaction to the event or topic and any reflections they internalize as a part of their experience. People’s ability to engage in meaning making and reflection change over time.

Contextual Background

Russian scholar Vygotsky’s early 20th century research focused on meaning making as a part of children’s learning experiences. Vygotsky ties children’s learning of language to their ability to make meaning of their experiences (Mahn, 2012). Kegan’s theory of meaning-making builds upon constructivist development theory and suggests that “human beings make meaning of themselves, of others, and of their experiences throughout [their] life span” (Ignelzi, 2000).

Reflection is essential to meaning making; Taylor & Marienau (2016) suggest it functions as a bridge between metaphorical associations and reason, and allows the brain to recognize patterns to create new awareness.

CURRENT UNDERSTANDING

Previously held beliefs or understanding of a topic is grounded in prior experiences with learning combined with reactions and internalized experience with that material.

INTRODUCTION OF
NEW TOPIC

MEANING MAKING PROCESS

Individuals engage in reflection of past experiences to use as a frame of reference to understand the new topic. Reactions to the topic and the learning process itself inform meaning.

MEANING MADE

A new view of a topic, of self, and of the system individuals engage in emerges after reflection. Individuals “make sense” of a topic. Meaning is tied to individual perspectives and is unique from another’s.

NEW MEANING ALLOWS REFLECTION OF PRIOR UNDERSTANDING

Applications

Meaning making and reflection are useful tools in nearly all aspects of life. These processes are often used to address psychological issues in adults. Without reflection, individuals—particularly adults—can hold onto previously held notions (Taylor & Marienau, 2016). Meaning making can also help individuals adjust to stress in life. If one can make sense of an event on previous experience, adjustments can be smooth; otherwise, they present opportunities for growth (Crystal, 2010).

In spaces of learning, meaning making and reflection can easily be incorporated with other teaching and learning strategies; furthermore, to engage in learning is in and of itself making meaning of something (Zittoun & Brinkmann, 2012).

Examples

Can you recall a moment where your math classes allowed you to succeed in a “real life” task? You just reflected and made meaning!

Da Silva (2021) shows that students build new meanings about scientific concepts by remembering prior knowledge and utilizing imagination.

Wong et al. (2016) highlights language learning: students to make meaning by interacting with their living spaces which increased learned vocabulary.

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