

Open Access Conference Paper

A Case Study for Inspiring Students to Respond to Their Existential Call

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Citation: Mandoki, M.J. (2025). A Case Study for Inspiring Students to Respond to Their Existential Call. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success.

Founding Editor-in-Chief: Masood Zangeneh, Ph.D.

Editors: Hamid R. Yazdi, Ph.D., Mona Nouroozifar, Ph.D.

Guest Editor: André Cormier, M.A.

Received: 09/30/2024
Accepted: 06/15/2023
Published: 06/29/2025

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Abstract: This case study explores the use of the existential challenge of death within a classroom in order to invite young people to rethink and reshape their lives before heading out to the world. The education system should offer opportunities for young people to clarify and focus on the existential challenges they will face in their lives. Before heading out to the world, they should be able to find their authentic selves and to figure out in what way they can meaningfully contribute to their own selves and to humanity. This aim should be part of the education system.

Keywords: Existentialism, Authenticity, Death, Teaching, Psychology.



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Introduction

Students need to come face to face with their existential situation—social, political and personal circumstances that have the power to transform their existence—which will affect their future, such as, for example, AI replacement of human workers (Kelly, 2024), future pandemics, climate change and volatile political conditions (Scranton, 2015). One way to face up to this existential situation is in the classroom where a teacher creates a course for adult learners to help simulate an existential challenge to encourage students to rethink and reshape their lives. This is the task I set out to do in my newly designed class, *Digging Up Death* (Psychology of Death) in 2023. It was more of a “classroom experiment” to see if the young people in the class can respond to their existential call and find their authentic selves.

Background Information

In recent decades, instrumental reasoning has overwhelmed the education system where education institutions prefer to focus on “narrower and more vocational curriculum” (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 177). It seems that people would like to get a return on their financial investments into post-secondary education once they leave school and join the workforce. However, this type of attitude toward education is not necessarily helpful. An illustration can easily help to understand it: Government officials decide that more police officers are needed to be hired. College officials oblige them by creating a greater policing program or open up more classes to accommodate the desire to have a greater police force. This is instrumental reasoning at its best where only a consideration of a means to an end exists with an exclusion for a consideration of the value of the end goal. Is it valuable for students to become police officers? Is it valuable for society to have more police officers on the streets? Thus, it seems that an education system that is reduced to instrumental reasoning does not do justice to either students or society at large.

What is needed is a broader sense of education. Part of the education system has to include students coming face-to-face with their existential situation. Philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) explained this situation as referring to our being in this world right here and right now where we actually care about what it means for us to exist in the world. Basically, it is important for students to find out what they want out of their existence in this volatile world. It takes more to educate people than shoving them into desired programs.

Methods

I designed my course, *Digging Up Death*, with this broader sense of education in mind where students are forced to come face-to-face with one type of existential situation: death. Naturally, talking about death brings up the importance of life and engages students with meaningful questions about their existence in the present time. For instance, I started my first

class with the following question: If you die now—drop dead right here and right now—can you say that you lived the life that you wanted to? Their stunned faces said it all. They started looking around, feeling uncomfortable, some even raising their eyebrows in disbelief. Finally, one person in the back said, “Are you for real?” It was obvious to them that this class was not going to be about skills, procedures or step-by-step practical advices.

We covered a wide range of topics. We talked about the dying brain, human attitude toward death, fear of death, and the relationship of death to art and to religion. We included less conventional topics, such as near-death experiences, after death communication, deathbed visions and miraculous healings. Finally, we analyzed the problem of suicide and the challenges with loss and grief. Even though this was a psychology course, I incorporated lessons from science, philosophy, anthropology, religion, cultural studies, medicine and thanatology. The course was a mix of traditional, unconventional and critical elements on the theme of death.

Class discussions focused on critical thinking about the topics. Some questions used were simply hypothetical. For example, if one half of your brain were to be implanted into another person’s empty skull, which body would you wake up in after the surgery? Would you survive as you in either body? Some questions used were more personal. For instance, if the Sun blows up and you have eight minutes to live, what would you do with your eight minutes? And some questions used were more practical. To offer an example, what kind of funeral would you like to have when the time comes? Every question was designed to force students to think about the importance and challenges of their existence and the inevitable end that will arrive on an unknown date.

Even the assignments were personalized and creative. For instance, they had a chance to either interview a person related to death (funeral director, mortician, clergy, suicide expert etc.) or simply visit a place related to death (cemetery, funeral home, suicide prevention group, alleged ghost sighting location etc.) in order to gain information, observe and reflect. Alternatively, they could stay at home and find a meditation or reflection technique on a website or watch a movie about death to gain information and reflect. I simply asked that they connect their adventures to the material studied in their analyses for the papers they handed in. With these personalized and creative approach, I forced these students to face the inevitable end to their lives to think about the meaning and value of their existence.

Results

Most people were pleased with the content of the course, even the unconventional material. They were stunned about some of the discussion questions. Naturally, if the question was more personal, participating in the discussion was completely voluntary. Still, even the more personal questions had plenty of participants. Some topics turned into debates where the more vocal students tried to work through the rational and emotional

aspects of the topic. For instance, some students argued that it is irresponsible to even try to implant half of a brain into an empty skull while others were curious about the potential scientific result.

The assignments were a huge success. People appreciated the more hands-on aspect to them. They happily went to visit a person or a place. The more introvert students were also pleased with the opportunity to stay at home in order to experiment with a meditational technique or to analyze a movie. They cheerfully wrote up their reports and reflected on their own experiences. It is true that some students did have difficulty connecting their own reflections to the class and reading material, but this probably happened because they did not have enough time to study all the class and reading material.

At the end, several students indicated that the course was highly beneficial (Institutional Research, January 16, 2024). To illustrate it, a young student stated that the student was ready to “graduate and do something meaningful” with their life (Personal Communication, November 20, 2023). Another student who was already interested in near-death experiences indicated in the last class that the student was ready to pursue the topic at an academic level as a goal for the future (Personal Communication, December 6, 2023). In general, students became more focused on their plans with regard to the future. All in all, the change in students’ demeanor could be seen by the end of the course.

Discussion

In general, it seems that students are hungry for existential challenges because they personally affect their future. These challenges provide the opportunity to reframe their own lives in terms of the current existential situation they are facing in the twenty-first century. They allow students to clarify and focus on their authentic selves while they are trying to figure out in what way they can meaningfully contribute to their own lives and to humanity. Of course, it is prudent to tread lightly because not everyone is ready to embrace the existential approach. For instance, one student in the Student Feedback Survey referred to the content of the course as “hippy crap” (Institutional Research, January 16, 2024). The student thought that it was too philosophical. Hence, it can be concluded that most but not all students are eager to embrace this existential approach.

Conclusion

This class experiment has demonstrated that students in general are eager to face up to their existential situation in this present day and age. Ultimately, it is important to move beyond instrumental reasoning to simulate an existential challenge to encourage students to rethink and reshape their lives. The classroom is a right place for it. Students need to clarify who and what they are and what is important for them to accomplish in the world before they head out into that world. Therefore, I invite my colleagues in education institutions to at least incorporate some existential questions into their material for adult learners. After all, education should be more meaningful than turning out good police officers for the streets.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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