

Self-Actualization Through Personality Psychology and Goal Setting

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Abstract

Higher education is a mechanism through which academic success, worldly knowledge, and career preparation are prioritized. However, there is a significant void in the area of personal discovery and fulfillment, or, self-actualization. It could be argued that the primary purpose of a college or university should be to help students realize their unique capabilities. In this paper, a course titled Self-Actualization Through Personality Psychology and Goal Setting will be introduced. This seminar course, intended for upperclassmen with advanced English language proficiency, has been taught with favorable results at Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka, Japan. Students of the course learn the content through the medium of English discussions, lectures, group activities, and journal writing. Notable benefits of learning about self-actualization include the ability to fulfill one's potential, become self-confident, authentic, autonomous, compassionate, appreciative, and capable of forming meaningful relationships. In addition, studying personality psychology aids in the appreciation for the uniqueness of individuals, and participating in goal setting can provide students with a precise path toward reaching their chosen objectives. Additionally, this paper will reveal student survey results that highlight the positive outcomes of the course and areas that may need improvement. In sum, students effectively learn language through meaningful communication. Furthermore, students should also be empowered humans who are equipped to become the well-rounded people they truly want to be.

Keywords: Self-Actualization, Personality Psychology, Goal Setting, Purpose, Meaning, Self-Efficacy, English-Language Learners, Higher Education

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Introduction

Universities generally do not focus on the development of authentic well-rounded humans. Instead of concentrating exclusively on academics, scholarly research, assessments with objective measurements, and job preparation, perhaps greater emphasis should be placed on the cultivation of the individual, holistic well-being, and self-actualization. In the spring and fall semesters of 2023 at Kansai Gaidai University in Hirakata, Osaka, Japan, six separate classes of a seminar course titled Self-Actualization through Personality Psychology and Goal Setting were held. Over 100 Upperclassman students chose and completed this elective course. Although the medium of learning was in the students' second language of English, the majority had a high level of English language proficiency and experience studying abroad; therefore, the course remained content-focused rather than language-focused. Course activities included lectures, student presentations, reflective journals, creative writing, and consistent meaningful discussions. Students provided voluntary detailed qualitative survey responses based on their experience of the course. One student reflected, "There are not many opportunities to learn about self-understanding, but I think there are many people who need it." Comments like this illustrate the lack of personal development classes on one hand, and the desire to have them more available on the other.

Self-Actualization

The primary goal of the Self-Actualization course was to give students the awareness of and building blocks toward becoming self-actualized. Abraham Maslow's (1965) definition of self-actualization is to become what one is capable of becoming, become what one is, or reach one's potential. This course's explanation of the concept is to be the best version of one's unique self. The characteristics of self-actualized people include honesty, responsibility, and selflessness. In addition, these individuals tend to choose growth, be intrinsically motivated, listen to their own voices, experience life vividly, and have a precious life mission (Maslow, 1965).

Personality Psychology

The first of 3 main units of the course covered self-discovery. An accessible way for students to understand who they are and how they are different from others is through learning about personality psychology. Students were introduced to MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), a personality questionnaire resulting in one of 16 possible 4-letter results indicating a particular personality type. Students were able to learn about their strengths and weaknesses, increase emotional intelligence, develop empathy, create more cohesive relationships, and understand suitable career paths. One student remarked, "MBTI helped me to understand myself and others and now it's kind of my favorite topic in my life... studying MBTI helped me to live more freely."

Within the broad self-discovery topic, the next content studied was the Enneagram. This is another type of personality indicator with 9 possible test results. The Enneagram reveals aspects of a person's fears, desires, and motivations in contrast with MBTI's description of a person's behavior, perception, and decision-making. One student noted, "I made up my mind to follow the Enneagram personal growth recommendation. I decided to remind myself to not expect others to change immediately. What is obvious to you may not be as obvious to them." Personality psychology is not only a tool for self-understanding, but also for having more empathy for those who are different.

These Personality psychology frameworks allowed students to more readily understand and express their unique selves and empathize with the individuality of others, become more creative, and freely choose a more enriching and exciting life (Rogers, 1995). This self-awareness set the foundational stage for the remainder of the course.

Meaning and Purpose

The second unit of the course explored aspects of existentialism. The famous Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl lays out varying avenues for individuals to recognize and create profound meaning. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1985) discusses finding meaning in 3 primary forms: a unique life task, selfless love, and courageous suffering. Ultimately, the book argues that individuals have powerful agency in almost any situation. Individuals have the responsibility to give their own unique meanings to their lives.

In addition to a Western perspective of existentialism, the Eastern concept of Japanese Ikigai was reviewed next. Ikigai roughly translates to a reason for being. The Westernized version of this concept provides a framework of combining an individual's passion, mission, vocation, and profession. In other words, one's Ikigai could be revealed by answering what you love, what the world needs, what you can be paid for, and what you are good at (García & Miralles, 2020).

By synthesizing multiple existential philosophies, students were exposed to various methods to discover and live a purposeful life. The culminating activity for the unit was having students create their own personal motto with inspiration from personality psychology, Viktor Frankl, and Ikigai.

Goal Setting

The third and final unit of the course centered around practical strategies for students to achieve their desired outcomes. For long-term goals, the S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely) framework provides a step-by-step structure of important aspects to consider for personal, academic, and career-related goals. By looking at goals with clarity, marking progress, analyzing realistically, questioning motivation, and choosing an optimal deadline, students could experience a thorough process of establishing well-planned objectives.

In contrast to long-term goals, James Clear's book, *Atomic Habits*, detailed frequent, short-term, practical strategies that make a significant impact over time. According to Clear (2018), individuals can make habits obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying in order to increase the likelihood of sustainable behavior change. Furthermore, students also learned how to reduce or eliminate bad habits.

Through contemplating both goals in the distant future and the smaller actions individuals take each day, students were exposed to a comprehensive approach to how one's habits and decisions of today impact the outcome of one's tomorrow in a very real way. Therefore, students were further empowered to take intentional actions to actually do what they want to do, and be the person they want to be.

Limitations and Future

Despite the initial success of the course, there are several limitations and future considerations. First, minimal data has been collected from the course - only qualitative survey responses from two semesters. Therefore, more detailed and objective data is necessary to form more substantial conclusions. In addition, more research on current higher education required courses as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of similar self-actualization courses will be useful for a comprehensive future literature review. Furthermore, present in this paper is a clear bias supporting the importance of self-actualization. Therefore, more balanced and objective data with scientific analysis rather than a one-sided examination would increase validity. Finally, there is the question of course replication in different settings. Factors such as appropriacy, relevance in different cultures, and types of universities need to be considered if this course content could be successful within different contexts.

Conclusion

Students in this course learned about personality psychology through MBTI and the Enneagram, meaning and purpose through *Man's Search for Meaning* and Ikigai, and goal setting through S.M.A.R.T. goals and *Atomic Habits* as a way to pursue self-actualization. One student reflected, "I love this course because every lecture was like a therapy session. This class gave me a chance to look back on myself so that I think I could understand myself more than before." Many students gained a deeper and more nuanced self-understanding which is a fundamental aspect of self-actualization and what should be a priority in higher education. Although the topic of personal growth is abstract and irregular, especially for students in Japan using English as a foreign language, the course was embraced. To conclude, university students should be empowered with the knowledge and tools to have agency and autonomy over their lives in pursuit of greater self-efficacy. To that end, higher education should be a place for personal inquiry, holistic development, and an introduction to self-actualization.

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