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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Activating Agency through Life Design

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education must support students in their learning for personal and professional development. Given this mission, colleges and universities work to deliver and evaluate the best educational models to students. This paper shares a case study about the potential of Life Design that incorporates the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals prototyped at a liberal arts institution in the United States of America. The case study outlines preliminary findings from a pre/post-test survey that measures perceived creativity, bias toward action, curiosity, problem reframing, and changemaking – key aspects of Life Design programming. Educators may develop their own programs and evaluation strategies based on this critical reflection.

Keywords: Higher education; Life design; Evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, the challenges facing humanity – ranging from climate change to socio-economic and health disparities – demand innovative approaches to education that empower the next generation of leaders (Landberg & Wolf, 2022; Waller et al., 2019; Wells & Bassi, 2020). As highlighted by Guichard (2016), integrating life design principles with education on global challenges offers a transformative pathway for college students that equips them with tools useful for navigating their personal and professional lives and contributing meaningfully to the world.

This research may support educators in developing curricular and co-curricular programming that embraces the need to prepare students to engage in critical problem-solving efforts around global challenges (Guichard, 2016; Savickas et al., 2009). Research has consistently demonstrated the value of Life Design as a holistic approach which allows for both personal and professional development. This approach is grounded in exercises like the ones developed by Stanford professors Burnett and Evans (2016: 2020) which emphasize personal reflection, peer feedback, and research. This research topic is important for the following reasons:

- Students need to be exposed to global challenges and strategies for making a positive change to address those challenges.
- Students need guidance and support in developing skills that promote personal and professional growth.
- Educators need support in developing and evaluating curricular and co-curricular modules.

Research on Life Design is growing, with much of the research focused on the experience of the educator or counsellor (e.g., Di Fabio, 2016; Guichard, 2016) and some that highlight the outcomes of Life Design interventions (e.g., Maree & Twigge, 2016).

This case study tests one hypothesis and explores two research questions:

- H: Participation in Life Design exercises scaffolded within the Design Thinking process will have a positive effect on participants' designer mindsets, specifically a) creative confidence, b) bias toward action, c) curiosity, d) problem reframing, and e) desire to make a difference.
- RQ1: How will the implementation of Life Design exercises influence students' acquisition of content knowledge focused on global challenges?
- RQ2: How will the implementation of Life Design exercises influence students' perceptions of the importance of global challenges?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Guichard (2015) suggests three categories of Life Design interventions: information, guidance, and dialogue. Guichard argues that informational interventions focus on exploring questions including, "What are the employment prospects in this career domain?" (p. 18) while programs that focus on guidance emphasize self-reflection and developing competencies

transferable to the world of work. Guichard (2016) notes that reflection is key to life design because it sets a foundation for the meaning making process essential for constructing a sense of self. Finally, dialogue-based interventions are designed to support individuals in "reflecting on the perspectives that make their lives meaningful" requiring "that people embark on dialogues with themselves and others" (p. 18). Several scholars including Pouyaud (2015) and Waston and McMahon (2015) expand a focus on reflexivity to highlight the necessary connection between dialogue and action for supporting people in developing skills to address ever changing dynamics of life.

Educators like Burnett and Evans (2016: 2020) created exercises to teach Life Design principles grounded in the values of information seeking, self-reflection, and dialogue aligned with Guichard and Savickas' articulation but are distinct in their adoption of the five-part Design Thinking process as the foundation of their Life Design work rather than narrative psychology. These include gathering empathy, defining a problem, ideating possible solutions to the problem, prototyping, and testing those solutions (see Plattner, Meinel, & Leifer, 2012 for an overview of Design Thinking research). A central part of Burnett and Evans' conceptualization of Life Design is what they describe as designer mindsets, which include creative confidence, a bias to action, and comfort with ambiguity. Dosi, Rosati, and Vignoli (2018) describe the development and validation of measures exploring Design Thinking mindsets associated with self-awareness, a key aspect of Life Design intended to prepare future leaders to manage and lead in an uncertain world.

METHOD AND DATA

Because of the focus on the value of Life Design for motivating students to explore and address global challenges, the authors developed a workshop that could be integrated into an existing course or could be offered outside of class time. The workshop was designed to introduce undergraduate students to the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.) and AshokaU's levels of impact (n.d.). The UNSDGs were described as a framework for understanding the world's most pressing challenges and AshokaU's levels of impact (i.e., direct service, scaled direct service, systems change, and framework change) were used to help students embrace the idea that changemaking can happen at different levels over the course of a person's life. With this foundation, the authors adapted exercises from Burnett and Evans (2016: 2020), emphasizing the Design Thinking process and designer mindsets (IDEO.org), including Burnett and Evans' Life Design Assessment which provides a useful tool for reflection aligned with the first step in the design thinking process – empathy. The authors also adapted mind mapping exercises useful for ideation and making connections between concepts that asked participants to use the UNSDGs as a source of inspiration around which they might connect a sense of purpose. Finally, Burnett and Evans' Odyssey Plan exercise allowed students to pull together the material on designer mindsets and UNSDGs to develop a series of plans for life and career that could be prototyped. The exercises encouraged participants to reflect on what matters to them, potential connections between what matters to them and the UNSDGs, and ways to include the things that matter to them in their future plans for both life and career (see Stone and Nelson, 2021, for additional details).

Pre- (N = 96) and post-test (N = 66) questionnaires were administered through Qualtrics to measure the effects of the workshops on their knowledge of global challenges, specifically the framework offered by United Nations Sustainable Goals (UNSDGs, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.), and their perceived importance of these goals. The survey also included five Design Thinking mindset constructs, creative confidence, bias toward action, curiosity, problem reframing, and desire to make a difference (Dosi, Rosati, & Vignoli, 2018). Each construct was measured with three to four items on a 5-point Likert scale.

RESULTS

Independent sample t-test were conducted to test each of the five hypotheses (H_{a-e}). Students' self-reported evaluations of the design thinking mindset constructs were higher in the post-test questionnaire for all five variables. However, only three of the five mean differences were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Results of the T-Test are in Table 1, with the three statistically significant variables in bold). This might be attributed to the comparatively small sample size of this pilot study. Future data collections will increase statistical power, which increases the test's sensitivity to detecting true differences.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations as well as results for independent sample t-tests for pre- and post-test design thinking mindset constructs.

Construct	Pre		Post		M-Diff	*p*
	M	SD	M	SD		
Creativity	***4.55***	***0.46***	***4.72***	***0.43***	**0.17**	**0.016**
Bias to Action	***4.23***	***0.56***	***4.49***	***0.51***	**0.26**	**0.003**
Curiosity	***4.27***	***0.54***	***4.53***	***0.64***	**0.26**	**0.005**
Reframing	*4.33*	*0.52*	*4.49*	*0.59*	0.16	0.06
Change-making	*4.4*	*0.61*	*4.49*	*0.65*	*0.09*	*0.36*

The results also showed a 26.9% increase in correct answers to the content question about the global goal timeline, and a 5% increase for the number of agreed upon goals, and therefore supporting the claim that design thinking can be incorporated into an existing curriculum, without sacrificing content acquisition.

More importantly, the perception that the sustainable development goals are currently the most pressing issues we need to address, went from 62.5% to 80.3%. This suggests that prompting students to draw connections between their own goals and the global issues addressed through the SDGs, successfully increased their awareness of the importance of sustainable development.

Table 2. Comparison of pre- and post-test responses (in percent) to knowledge and perception questions.

Total of 17 global goals	True	False	Not Sure
Pre-test	*77.1%*	*7.3%*	*15.6%*
Post-test	*82.1%*	*1.5%*	*16.4%*
Goals achieved by 2030			
Pre-test	*55.2%*	*8.3%*	*36.5%*
Post-test	*82.1%*	*3.0%*	*14.9%*
Global goals are most pressing problems			
Pre-test	*62.5%*	*6.3%*	*31.3%*
Post-test	*80.3%*	*4.5%*	*15.2%*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Life Design research has been well established in the context of counselling and career development with an emphasis on deep, introspective reflections with professional guidance (e.g., Savickas, 1997; Savickas et al., 2011). Other research shows promising evidence to support incorporating the design thinking process into life design through various strategies including curricular and co-curricular workshops for college and university students (e.g., Cagarman, 2022; Kernbach & Eppler, 2022). A potential intersection of these bodies of research is in the exploration of mentors or facilitators in guiding the reflective exercises. As argued elsewhere, Design Thinking pedagogy has great potential for supporting and assessing student learning in higher education institutions (Peck & DeSawal, 2021). Given that the design thinking process is commonly used across different organizational contexts, (Liedtka, Salzaman, & Azer, 2017), educators are further incentivized to incorporate this material into their curricular and co-curricular programming.

This case study provides empirical support for the benefits of design thinking programming in an interdisciplinary higher education context. A pre-test/post-test quantitative research design is useful to exploring the efficacy of life design programs for college students, a population navigating various life transitions and considering different career paths. The significant yet minimal change in mean differences can be attributed in part to a ceiling effect, as participant scores for the designer mindset measures were already very high for the pre-test questionnaire. This is not surprising, given most participants had been exposed to courses in a liberal arts curriculum that intentionally fosters creativity, experiential learning, and problem framing and reframing through transdisciplinary learning. In other words, despite the modules presenting exercises intentionally addressing designer mindsets, other opportuinties exist for this student population to develop these competencies.

Future research should therefore consider different student populations and their previous exposure to design thinking. Additionally, longitudinal studies with multiple interventions and points of measurement will provide a clear indication of short- and long-term impact. Future assessment plans include more demographic questions, a range of different interventions, and a control group, to assess how individual differences interact with various types of interventions across groups.

The literature on life design interventions underscores their value in fostering personal development and adaptability. By helping individuals construct meaningful life narratives, these interventions enhance reflexivity, self-determination, and the ability to navigate life transitions. Future research should continue to explore and refine these methods to support individuals in an increasingly complex world.

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