

# **Living Your Existential Question: Creating Space for (Eco) Subjectification in Higher Education**

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## **Introduction**

Higher Education, and education in general, for that matter, is looking for ways to respond to the urgent and accelerating global sustainability crises. In the discourse on sustainability in higher education, much emphasis is placed on qualification: the capabilities, competences and qualities people need to acquire or develop to act or behave more sustainably in their personal and professional lives and on socialization: creating norms and ‘new normals’ that invite such behavior (Brundiers et al., 2020). While qualification and socialization are important, there is a third domain of education that is often neglected: subjectification (Biesta, 2020). Subjectification is about ‘being and becoming in the world, finding your relation to freedom in relation to the world. Subjectification touches on the existential domain of education and directions and pathways to possible futures.

An emerging responsibility within education is to not only engage young people meaningfully in what we know, as education typically does, but also in what we do not know. One way to do this is by articulating and sharing our concerns and hopes for the future and their underpinning existential questions. When looking at education from an existential perspective, these three domains of education are strongly interrelated, and they should be (Biesta, 2020). For instance, within qualification, subjectification arises when students are stimulated to create a genuine relation to the educational content. According to Gadamer (2013) there is no other way to come to understanding, than by asking and understanding the questions that precede new knowledge. For sustainability-oriented education, neglecting subjectification would deprive students from engagement with deeper socio-ecological questions that affect students’ own becoming.

In this research, we explore the concept of ‘living your question’ as a means to develop education in relation to existential questions about being and becoming in a dysfunctional world that is overstepping ecological (e.g. runaway climate change, mass extinction) and ethical boundaries (e.g. social and environmental injustice, wealth inequality). In his book *Designing Regenerative Cultures* Daniel Wahl talks about ‘Living your question’ as a means of increasing consciousness and becoming aware of not only our assumptions, but also our worldview in which these assumptions have been grounded (2016). ‘Living your question’ refers to a self-reflexive inquiry-based process around matters of concern and/or hope that is indeterminate in that definitive answers likely won’t be found, but new perspectives and pathways for exploration, emerge as one discovers who he or she is in relation to others and/or the other. This connects to the existential view on socialization, which can also be called an individuation process (Fromm, 1952), in which students also live their question by letting go of old bonds and try to create new ones related to their search for meaning. It follows that,

'living your question' is also a way of transformative learning. The concept of 'living your question' has been barely brought into practice within higher education, which tends to pay little attention to socio-emotional learning, existential matters of hope and concern and processes of being and becoming. In this research, we investigate the concept of 'living your question' by conducting interviews with experts with different disciplinary background who share an interest in student development in relation to a worldly development.

To be able to get more grip on the concept of living your question in light of emerging existential sustainability crises, we investigate the question: what are key features of education that seeks to enable students to live their existential questions? This question will be followed up in a subsequent study, which asks: what does it take for a university to create a culture and curricular spaces which fosters education for subjectification?

### **Methodology or Methods/ Research Instruments or Sources Used**

This research is conducted from a phenomenological perspective (Smedslund, 2009) and also subconscious processes are taken into account (Lertzman, 2015). As a first step in answering the question expert interviews preceded a literature review, because there were too few starting points within the literature to be able to do a hermeneutic literature review. The expert interviews were not only helpful in identifying concepts and themes that helped inform a review of literature, they also helped elicit assumptions in relation to 'living your question' and the state of existential issues in education that the researcher brought to the interviews.

Fourteen interviews were conducted, with academics and two experts working outside of a university, most having different disciplinary backgrounds but all having some affinity with the subjectification task of education, or more explicitly with existential forms of education. Besides these criteria, we also looked for experts with interest in education in relation to sustainability and other worldly challenges. Three of the interviewees were 3 women and 11 were men. Disciplinary backgrounds included; education, human resource management, geoscience, psychiatry, philosophy, organizational consulting and training.

To prepare for the interviews, a basic theoretical framework was made which served as a conversation starter. This framework, represented by a circle, described a leerecologie (in English, learning ecology) within higher education. This circle contained 3 concepts, het leven van je (leer)vraag (living your question), eigenaarschap (agency or ownership) and reflexiviteit (reflexivity), in a triangle, connected with lines. In the middle of the triangle were the words teacher and student, connected by a lemniscate. For the structure of the interview, I prepared 4 questions as a common thread and asked further if necessary. These questions were:

1. What does this picture evoke in you?
2. In terms of your own theoretical background, what connection would you make with each of these concepts?
3. What literature suggestions do you have?
4. What would you do if you were in our shoes and were conducting this research?

During the interview the researcher wrote citations of the interview on post-its and put them on the talking paper.

In the analysis we made summaries of the transcribed audio files, while simultaneously reflecting

systematically upon our assumptions. As a next step in the analyses of the data we were searching for similarities and differences between the interviews. To test these similarities and differences we read and analyzed the literature that was recommended.

### **Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings**

The most obvious outcome was the critique of the autonomous position of the student, that was invoked by the words *eigenaarschap* (agency or ownership) and *reflexiviteit* (reflexivity) on the basic theoretical framework. Living your question is a relational concept, that is problematic to explain from a mere self-directed point of view. After all, our relation to the outer world is always a part of existential questions. Even in very personal questions like: “How do I deal with my procrastination?” Procrastination is also ‘not acting’, and consequently not connecting to the outside world. You can’t solve existential questions on your own, even though you will have to take the initiative. But you cannot speak of the ownership or agency of the question in this case either. In the words an expert:

I would say the opposite, the question has me! That is a characteristic of slow questions. (...) in my opinion that process is not well described by the concept of ownership or agency. There is an image of autonomy behind that, in my view. And that image will shift and become problematic when you work with complexity, relationality, personal questions, swampiness, slow questions (...). The encounters with others form the small places of firm ground in the swampiness of slow questions. (E11)

This confirms that living our questions might well be a key in transformation to a more regenerative culture (Wahl, 2016). In asking an existential question, students put themselves at stake (Biesta, 2015) by reconnecting themselves to the world, and this is good exercise for the transition from ego-, to eco-centric ways of being (Bainbridge & Del Negro, 2020; Oosterling, 2020). Having the opportunity to practice within higher education with existential questions and associated feelings (Ratcliffe, 2008) helps students to embrace the chaos in life (Lertzman, 2015; Rotmans, 2021).

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