

A Pedagogy of Constructivism

Deep-Meaning Learning

In this chapter, we briefly develop an overall rationale for deep-meaning learning in working with students at all levels and in all venues of higher education. We explain how the search for meaning is most likely to be successful on college campuses whenever educators can help students see the deep connections between subject matter, marketable skills, their personal values, and their interests in contributing to the common good—whether by performing community service to others, dedicating themselves to a social cause that results in self-transcendence, or creating something artistic. We frame all of this in what we call a “pedagogy of constructivism.” In subsequent chapters in this part of the book, we offer concrete examples of how a pedagogy of constructivism can be an excellent delivery system for guiding students in their efforts to make meaning.

One important reason we are writing this book is to help faculty, administrators, and student service leaders throughout the campus to create a series of formal and informal educational experiences grounded in an approach that we call “deep-meaning learning.” Deep-meaning learning is the essential precondition for responding to all the meaning questions students commonly ask. Deep-meaning learning gets beneath the surface of taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes a good education, which in today’s terms usually means preparing students for careers or professional graduate training.

Deep-meaning learning responds to students' quests to learn who they are in relation to the world around them. Deep-meaning learning goes beyond simple knowledge retention and the cultivation of specific skill sets. Deep-meaning learning is interdisciplinary. It is integrative. It is heart-, head-, and hand-based. It encourages honest self-examination and a continual reexamination of what is important and what is not in the ongoing search for meaning. Deep-meaning learning is both emotional and cognitive, speculative and practical, spiritual and material, religious and secular, theoretical and experiential.

Deep-meaning learning requires both service to the self and service to others—in equal proportion. Deep-meaning learning entails a series of interdisciplinary offerings, featuring the common theme of meaning-making, that cut across several of the humanities—including psychology, philosophy, religious studies, history, literature, art, music, and theatre, as well as the social sciences and natural sciences. In short, the great Socratic dictum “Know thyself” is the necessary fulcrum for deep-meaning learning.

Rachel's Deep-Meaning Learning

Rachel, a student in one of Robert's recent philosophy classes, made the following comments in a final reflective paper about her meaning-making experience throughout the semester (the words that follow are inspired by Michelle Demers, MFA, a gifted writing instructor and former student of Robert's). Rachel's insights represent a vintage example of deep-meaning learning. Here is what she said about her learning as a result of reading, writing, and talking with others during the semester. It is important for the reader to realize that Rachel did much of her meaning-making outside the classroom and even beyond the campus. Robert's course gave her the opportunity to expand her “classroom” into a number of different communities.

I am at my best when I am able to *bypass the logic* in my thinking about deeper things. I was taken by the comment that you attributed to St. Anselm: “God does not save the world by logic alone.” I now realize that while logic is an important tool for me to use in preparing to be a health care professional, as important for me is to learn how to lead from my heart as well as from my head. I'm not sure I've found the perfect formula to do this, but I'm more conscious of it. What I am relying on more and more in my studies and internships, however, is to trust my intuitions and my feelings. This past semester, for example, I've done so many things in the community outside the university that I've wanted to do ever since I came here. I went with my gut. I decided not to be so logical and calculating. I tried out for a role in the community theatre. I got involved with a project downtown at the peace-and-justice center. I visited an ashram every two weeks.

I am also learning to *go within for answers* to my deepest questions. The answers, I've found, lie more inside than outside of myself. I still love to read, study, and analyze, and I do hang out in the lab at times, but I now realize that I'm doing all of this through my own integrating filters, or what you call my “constructivist lens.” Why should I continue to spit back information in my classes that I've dredged up on Wikipedia or in a Google search? This isn't real education. Meaning lives within me, not on the Internet, and I can often find out what's really important to me if I'm comfortable being with my own silence. I've even started to do some serious meditation. This always makes my parents chuckle because they think of me as an “activity junkie.” Meditation now fills the spaces between my frenetic activities, and what's happening is that I find I don't need the distractions of all the noise I use to make in my life. All of that seemed so peripheral when I started to really get into meditation. I still have fun, but now I'm much more centered and less driven. I am the one having the fun; the fun doesn't have me.

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The most exciting discovery for me is to learn how much I *love the arts*. Literature, music, and the performing and visual arts now form the core of my life. These are gifts to me from the universe with no strings attached. The essence of life can be gleaned through the arts. I now do pottery, a little acting, even some painting. Most of all, I'm writing poetry. I'm a pretty damned good poet, I believe, and I don't need the endorsement from some English professor that I've passed tests on how to analyze poems. Instead, I actually do poetry for me. It's become my special way to record my meaning-making journey. Poetry is my process of self-discovery. I have to admit, though, it was a hoot to get one of my poems published in the campus newspaper.

You have talked about deep-meaning learning in this class, Robert. Here's what the process has produced for me. I have learned how to *develop my own consciousness*. As Stephen R. Covey says, we all need to "sharpen the saw." In order for me to be effective for others, I must first nourish myself. If I don't, I will soon burn out. It happens all the time in nursing. I am learning how to sharpen my own saw by going inside myself in order to put my everyday stresses into some kind of perspective.

I honestly believe that it is not the *words* of my instructors that make the deepest impact on me. It is the *consciousness* of my instructors. I can now spot a healthy consciousness a mile away. I suppose, Robert, that you would say some instructors have a clearer sense of what gives their lives meaning than others. Some instructors live in a narrative that is positive, loving, hopeful, and trusting, and this narrative of consciousness speaks volumes to students even before they open their mouths. I guess this is what I mean by developing my own consciousness. Thank you for all your help this semester, and, if I may say so, I hope you continue to find a way to keep developing your own consciousness.

A Constructivist Approach to Educating for Meaning

Rachel, in the preceding narrative, took full advantage of the constructivist model of teaching and learning that she experienced in her semester-long seminar of philosophy of meaning-making. We believe that educating for meaning entails a genuine *constructivist* approach to education. *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Keeling, 2004) notes that "the degree of [classroom/personal development/societal disconnection on college campuses today] is profound and has serious implications for both teaching processes and the structures institutions use to help students learn. Today's growing emphasis on integrated learning structures, such as cluster courses and living-learning communities, may in some cases be an acknowledgment of the need to restore the missing holism" (p. 8).

A constructivist approach to teaching, advising, and leading throughout the college campus is one significant way to repair decades of damage that has resulted from part-whole, inside-outside, thinking-doing, teaching-learning disconnections and dichotomies in higher education. Rachel found ways to reconcile many of the dichotomies of the academy for the sake of her own best learning.

One of the advantages of engaging students, professors, and administrators in cross-campus meaning-making activities is to restore means-ends continuity to the educational process. The fact is that, in addition to living our lives in campus community settings such as classrooms, residence halls, faculty offices, and in a variety of cocurricular campus sites, each of us, like Rachel, also lives in our own evolving stories of personal meaning. Each of us must, at various times during our life cycles, remake ourselves and our relationships. Educating for meaning, both inside and outside the conventional academic structures, will effectively teach all of us how to integrate site, selves, and subject matter into a complete learning experience.

Noddings (1995) points out that constructivist ideas started with Jean Piaget, who in turn was influenced by Immanuel Kant, an eighteenth-century philosopher. Both thinkers believed that we can never know the world in and of itself, because our minds and external environments are always in constant interaction with one another. The “epistemological subject”—the individual learner—ends up actively constructing, rather than passively receiving, the outside world. John Dewey (1933) took the concept of constructivist learning one step further. He advocated that educators lecture less and engage students more. He urged them to think of education as reflection *and* action, intellectual inquiry *and* dialectical process, whose ultimate purpose is to enable learners to create meaning through direct experiential activity.

Most important, however, Dewey, and later Jerome Bruner (1990), set the stage for a generation of educators to understand that students bring a wealth of prior knowledge and experience to their learning. Education, therefore, is as much about helping students to make meaning of those prior experiences as it is about filling empty buckets or writing on blank slates. Rachel went from being the “epistemological object” in her scientifically based studies to becoming the “epistemological subject” in all the rest of her life. She gave herself permission to dig deeply into her own evolving consciousness, and this in turn influenced the type of health care professional she wished to become. In the next section, we spell out more concretely some core constructivist teaching-learning strategies for helping students to make meaning. We believe that approaches like the ones that follow liberated Rachel to get the most out of her studies, particularly during her final year.

Creating Constructivist Settings for Deep-Meaning Learning

Here are several recommendations for establishing a climate for deep-meaning learning that have worked for us. We are grateful especially to Brooks and Brooks, 1993, for their work with public

school teachers on behalf of constructivist teaching and learning. We are also in the debt of Kessler, 2000; Kronman, 2007; Phillips, 2001; Rhode, 2006; and Tompkins, 1996, for informing some of the following propositions:

Encourage students to take the primary initiative for their own deep-meaning learnings.

Allow us to introduce “Denise,” a student who took her education very seriously. A speech-pathology major, Denise was meticulous about her studies. Young as she was, she recognized the gravity of the potential effect that her training would have on her future clients. She wanted to ensure that she was in the best position possible to give them the care they deserved. In addition to her student leadership roles, Denise was a student assistant in Michele’s office; like other students, she worked to help ease the burden of tuition at a private university. Unlike many of her peers, Denise was more “adult” and less “late-stage-adolescent” in her cares, concerns, and composure.

Interested in the origins of Denise’s maturity and sense of self-responsibility, Michele asked her about the secrets to her academic and personal success. Without missing a beat, Denise asserted that although she observed so many of her peers waiting for instructions from others, she believed that she, and she alone, had to be “in the driver’s seat” of her education and her life. Denise experienced her own self-determination—her own agency—and she knew it.

Not every student is like Denise. To encourage students to be the primary initiators of their own deep learning means that we need to recognize and respect the existential autonomy of each and every learner who comes into our learning spaces. In some cases the invitation to learn deeply and for meaning will be a student’s first awakening to self—not as a passive receptor of information supplied by another but as the primary agent in the learning process.

Suddenly the educational process becomes dynamic, with lasting effects.

A much beloved chemist, Dr. Jennifer Sorensen of Seattle University, begins the first day of her classes by announcing to her students, “Welcome. I am your captain on this journey, your guide. You are not tourists; you are the crew, and you will do the heavy lifting.” The students in Dr. Sorensen’s class know from day one what to expect. They will not be passive bystanders waiting for their professor to hand down knowledge from on high. Instead, they will be active participants in the lessons they construct per their teacher’s instructions. Dr. Sorensen’s classes are dynamic, indeed, and her students are the better for it.

Karabell (1997) observes that “as the power balance shifts away from professors and toward students, the emphasis on process-learning is becoming more pronounced” (p. 18). Process teaching, as opposed to content-teaching, puts the student’s questions and concerns at the center of the teaching-learning experience, because it is calculated to engage students in more active, personal ways. Power is more equally distributed in a process seminar, as is the case in a give-and-take, problem-solving session between students and administrators. No longer is there any justification that makes sense to students for the traditional tug-of-war between them and so-called “educational authorities.”

Students resist buying into the traditional, often elitist divisions in the academy between the expert and the novice. They are becoming a formidable force in higher education, because they fully understand that they possess the power of the consumer. More and more, they express their refusal to do business as usual by walking away from authoritarian educators. They insist that their point of view regarding what is important in their own lives be considered valuable and that, at the very least, they deserve to be heard and respected, before they are challenged or dismissed outright. Whenever learning is geared toward meaning-making, students will remind us over and over again that they, and they alone, are the

ultimate experts in creating purpose, point, and rationale in their own lives.

The trick for us as educators is to frame our work with students in such a way that the content and professional experience we have to offer them can actually inform the real-life choices that our students make both within and beyond the campus. Asking students the hard questions is an important function of educators—but more and more students are wondering, *to what functional end?* A vast amount of current research shows that when students are directly involved with their own learning; when they are given the freedom to design activities that complement what they are learning in the classroom; when they have educators in their lives who are willing to make personal connections with them, and who express a genuine interest in their developing efforts to make meaning; and when they see the connections between subject matter, personal development, and career choices—then and only then does education matter (see Light, 2001, for extensive documentation for the claims we make here).

Throughout the first half of this book, we laid the foundation for meaning making, and in the second half we offer many suggestions for drawing students personally into the learning experience. None of these techniques will work, however, unless educators are willing to get to know their students firsthand on a personal level. Our students have rich personal histories, and they are struggling with existential issues that go way beyond their designated roles as test-takers, knowledge absorbers, and anonymous course attendees whose names just happen to appear on our class lists.

**Remember always that there are many valid
ways to teach and learn.**

In fact, it can be said that the now-confirmed scientific theory of multiple intelligences requires a corresponding theory of multiple pedagogical techniques, strategies, and interdisciplinary content.

The sad fact is that the majority of faculty and administrators have little or no knowledge (or understanding) of multiple intelligences. There are many reasons for this, of course, but most can be reduced to one explanation: the academy rewards, and selects for, those who possess one particular type of intelligence over all the others—what Gardner (2006b) calls “linguistic and logical-mathematical” intelligence.

This is the type of intelligence that reaps the most benefits in the academy, as our reward systems are grounded in this particular type of intelligence. If faculty and staff can present evidence that they are skilled speakers, writers, logical thinkers, grant writers, and problem-solvers, then they are duly rewarded with promotions, salary increases, and, in the case of faculty, tenure, and released time from teaching in order to do research. Increasingly, however, many students today come to our campuses manifesting other types of intelligences. Higher education needs to know how to educate a multiply-intelligent student body. This requires, of course, that the academy be far more willing to employ and support professional educators who themselves manifest multiple intelligences.

Certainly linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence is important in today’s high-tech, results-driven, problem-plagued world. But there are other intelligences that confer survival benefits on all of us as well. These other intelligences are particularly suited for effective meaning-making. These alternative intelligences, according to Gardner, are musical, spatial, kinesthetic, naturalistic, inter- and intrapersonal, and Gardner’s most recently described intelligence, existential. We contend that meaning-making requires, at the very least, an acknowledgment by educators that students learn in different ways, and that one type of intelligence is not necessarily superior or inferior to another. The implication for all of us in higher education is that we need to look for ways to link more effectively *what* we do to *how* students learn.

In the realm of meaning-making, it is obvious to us that inter- and intrapersonal, as well as existential, intelligences are key.

Meaning-making educators who are skilled interpersonally in working with people, who can communicate well across differences, and who have mastered the arts of evocation, inspiration, and clarification, are naturals for working in meaning-making settings with students. So, too, educators who are adept intrapersonally, who are enthusiastic about the inner life, who are empathic and intuitive, and who are not put off by the outward expression of personal feelings work well in a variety of meaning-making venues on college campuses (Gardner, 2006b).

It should be obvious by now that existential intelligence is especially important to deep-meaning educators. Logotherapists, narrative therapists, philosophical counselors, positive psychologists (see our *Resources* section at the end of the book), and constructivist educators are the professionals who demonstrate perhaps the greatest propensity for the existential approach to meaning-making. Some of these people have a well-developed spiritual sense. All, however, have, in Gardner’s words “a human capacity to pose and ponder the biggest questions . . . all of which have to do with the broader issues of existence, identity, faith, and spirit” (p. 41).

One implication of the multiple-intelligences approach for future research is the extent to which the following proposition holds: the most effective deep-meaning educator needs to be someone whose dominant learning style is inter- and intrapersonal and existential. Likewise, another proposition holds that a meaning-making pedagogy is more likely to have an effect on learners whose multiple intelligences are predominantly inter- and intrapersonal and existential. The results of such research hold important implications for teaching for meaning. One of these is the question of whether educators should be concerned about matching teachers with learners who reflect their own dominant intelligences.

**Realize that students are interpreting, as well as observing,
the “outside world” they are attempting
to analyze, explain, and change.**

All of us, educator and learner alike, *perceive* as well as *receive*. There is no such thing as an immaculate perception (or reception) when it comes to learning about and making meaning. We have written in previous chapters about the epistemological subject, the constructivist consciousness, and postmodern epistemology. Thus, when it comes to making deep meaning, we come down primarily (but not exclusively) on the side of constructivist interpretation rather than the objectivist observation. Obviously, one cannot construct what one cannot observe, and so *inside* and *outside* are inextricably linked in some ways. The dilemma for deep-meaning educators, however, is to help students to differentiate between what is given to their consciousness and the role that their interpretive narratives play in making sense of what is given. This dilemma is a shorthand way of explaining meaning-making. What is out there makes sense only insofar as we impose a narrative of meaning on it.

Obviously, there is no final word regarding which side of the interpretation-observation equation possesses the whole truth. We can only say what we have said before in so many words—*it all depends*. At minimum, deep-meaning educators need to understand that students have the ability to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct everything that they see, hear, and feel. The extent to which students do the interpretive work is directly proportional to the extent to which they will make meaning of the material before them. Interpretation of some kind, to some degree, is simply unavoidable. This is the way that the human mind functions both biologically and psychologically (Gazzaniga, 2008; Edelman, 2006). For those of us who are interested in doing deep-meaning work with students, the implications appear to be obvious: we need to honor the right—indeed, the necessity—of students to create their own narratives of meaning in their own unique ways.

We also need to help them discover whatever deep connections there may be between what exists inside of them and what exists outside.

There are two poignant proof-texts that Robert has sometimes used in his teaching to elicit responses from students about the inside-outside, constructivist-objectivist dilemma of meaning-making. The first is written by Don Cupitt (2005), the famous “atheist priest”: “We don’t need any absolutes, or any external support; a world in which everything is relative can hang together surprisingly well, just as liberal democracy, although often believed to be ‘soft,’ turns out in fact to be a much stronger form of society than absolute monarchy” (p. 76).

For Cupitt, the epistemological constructivist, *inside* almost always precedes *outside* in the sense that we see what we believe, as in the popular song some years ago “every little breeze seems to whisper Louise.” *Who* we love shapes *how* and *what* we experience in the world. “Absolutes,” for Cupitt, have nothing to do with the world of values, faith, and morals, because there are no scientific certainties in these realms of knowing. They all require a “leap” of intuitive trust—compatible with some people’s temperaments, but incompatible with others’. Of course, in politics, Cupitt is talking about “democracy” in the ideal. Realistically, he would wholeheartedly agree with the countercontention that for many countries and peoples, democracy is contraindicated as an absolute good—for a variety of critical contextual reasons.

The second proof-text is written by Norman L. Geisler (1984): “Few of us can ever live a life totally devoid of all absolutes . . . without an absolute center we would lack an integrating point for our lives . . . it is easy to say there are no absolutes, but it is much more difficult to really live as if there are none . . . one can only move the earth [make constructive social changes] if one has a firm place for a fulcrum . . . without such a fulcrum we are living on the shadow of a shadow . . . claiming absolutely that there are no absolutes” (pp. 146, 147, 148, 149).

For Geisler, the epistemological objectivist, *outside* almost always precedes *inside* because without absolute moral and faith pivots, everything would wobble. The center would not hold. Even when we deny the existence of absolutes in the faith-values realm, few of us actually live our lives as if we believe this statement. If the axiological or ontological center is only a matter of cultural conditioning, taste, and perspective, then on what grounds can we actually change anything? What ground(s) do we stand on, and on what authority? Geisler, by implication, asks constructivists a compelling political question: if you say that democracy is the best sociopolitical arrangement in the sense that it confers the greatest amount of autonomy on its citizens, why should your principle of autonomy count for everything, or even anything? Your moral ground is too shaky to support this absolute assertion.

Any kind of teaching, but especially teaching for meaning, demands that the student receive continual encouragement to be an active participant in the entire learning experience—both inside and outside the classroom, both on campus and beyond.

The core of a meaning-centered pedagogy, whatever its emphasis and wherever its location, is the student's right and responsibility to construct a meaning that is unique to the learner. At best, meaning-making educators are mediators of content and practice as these occur in the learner's lived experiences. We are talking here about the irrefutable fact that there is as much learning going on for students *outside* the classroom as there is *inside*. Deep-meaning educators never miss an opportunity to get students actively involved outside the classroom walls. Moreover, they are always on the alert to help students process their extramural learning experiences—whether this processing takes place in an office, classroom, conference room, cafe, residence hall, or downtown restaurant. Deep-meaning learning has the potential of occurring anywhere and everywhere. It is bounded only by the limits of our imaginations.

Anne Colby and her coauthors Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) make a strong case that when educating students

for “lives of moral and civic responsibility,” getting them outside the classroom is the key. They summarize well the research that demonstrates the effectiveness of “cross-fertilizing,” “extracurricular activities.” These activities start with lively, meaning-relevant “cross-campus conversations” (see also Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008). Deep-meaning educators must learn how to foster these types of conversations in smaller units such as residential life complexes. They will need to encourage students to participate in community service programs, as well as get directly involved in political clubs and in a variety of other civic organizations. The latter include, of course, religio-spiritual and secular-humanist groups (Colby et al., 2003, pp. 218–257).

Educators will need to know how to assist students in connecting theory and practice, analysis and action. If an education for meaning is all action, then it quickly degenerates into what Robert calls “action stupefaction.” On the other hand, if it is all analysis, then it becomes “analysis paralysis.” Either way, the result is a tragic loss of genuine, deep-meaning making. Having encouraged a generous dose of experiential, out-of-classroom activities, therefore, we are acutely mindful of the following axiom: if it is true that experience teaches best, then it is equally if not more true that reflective experience teaches the best of all.

In this respect, we appreciate the findings of the National Survey of Student Engagement, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). The Survey provides an excellent index for helping students reflect on their experiences. Here are its recommendations:

- Encourage students to ask questions at all times about the possible connections between in-class learnings of subject matter and out-of-class activities.
- Allow students to work with classmates in small groups outside as well as inside of class to achieve a productive, mutual sharing of extracurricular learning activities.

- Build into the syllabus the requirement of a community-based project, and specify that ongoing, reflective, written analyses of the student's participation in the project are a necessary adjunct of the activity.
- Make yourself available as often as possible outside of class to help students make connections between their experiential learning and their reading, writing, and content-learning.
- Give prompt feedback to students, about not only their academic performance but also their ability to make the connections between theory and practice.

Finally, we advocate strongly that all of us on college campuses encourage students to write their theory-practice reflections in the *first-person singular* voice. *I* speaks far more forcefully, and personally, than *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they* (see Nash, 2004; see also the section in the next chapter on encouraging students to write personal narratives).

Constructivist educators understand that meaning-making is all about the student; we are there mainly to evoke, respond, inform, and clarify.

Students take center stage on the meaning-making college campus. At best, we educators are located somewhere backstage or in the orchestra pit. Only secondarily, if at all, are we there to direct or choreograph. Neither is our classroom function primarily to provoke, expound, propound, and complexify. These latter pedagogical functions—the conventional practices of most higher educators—can only blunt and defeat students' pursuit of meaning-making. This contention of ours raises the issue of just how qualified most higher education faculty—as well as administrators—are to be constructivist educators.

Critiques of professors who dislike teaching and would rather spend most of their time researching, writing grants, and producing

original scholarship are rampant in the higher education literature, as well as in the popular media (Getman, 1992; Smith, 1990). But like most sweeping caricatures, this one just is not true. Proportionally speaking, very few professors actually engage in serious research and scholarship, and of those who do, the majority teach in perhaps one hundred of the most elite colleges and universities in the country. Furthermore, of this privileged group, a large percentage stops doing original research and creative scholarship upon getting tenure. (See the *Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index* for full documentation and analysis at <http://chronicle.com/stats/productivity/page.php?primary=10&bycat=Go&secondary=91>). Therefore, most professors in the majority of the 3,500 institutions of higher education in the United States get paid primarily to teach, advise, and do committee work. Certainly this holds true for those who work in the nation's hundreds of community colleges and proprietary schools. Our point is that the academic culture in more than 90 percent of higher education is built on the teaching function of its workers (see Getman, 1992, and Chace, 2006 for two different types of critiques regarding the conflicts between faculty publishing and teaching).

In many of these so-called teaching institutions, however, faculty are still driven by the myth of tenure-track terror, fueled by the unrealistic desire of second- and third-tier institutions to enter the first-tier ranks. Even though this rarely if ever happens (why this goal is important in the first place is a question we ought to be asking throughout higher education), the publish-or-perish imperative in these institutions keeps junior faculty constantly on edge. It reduces the time and effort they can put into their teaching. This is a shame, because one of the major functions of higher education faculty everywhere is to teach.

Although it may be true that grants and scholarly publications put some institutions on the prestige map, it is effective, responsive, and passionate teaching that attracts and retains students—without whom there would be no colleges and universities. Moreover, teaching for meaning opens up all kinds of creative research opportunities for those faculty who are indeed rewarded more for publishing and

grantsmanship than anything else they do. Teaching for meaning-making is a promising field for new scholarship on pedagogy, interdisciplinary studies, and applied research.

Having made the preceding points, we believe that the realistic, everyday question for most of us in the academy ought to be how to make our teaching better. How can we get our students actively and passionately involved in their own learning? What excites them besides cell-phone texting, surfing the Internet, and Facebooking? How can we convey to them that, when push comes to shove, we want to teach *students* first and *subject matter* second? Better still, how can we find that special pedagogical flow in our classrooms that does not even promote such a dichotomy; a flow that makes process and content, and teaching and research inseparable? Whether one publishes a hundred articles or none, these questions ought to be central to the academic experience.

For our particular purposes in this chapter, the central question is, what does it take to be an effective constructivist educator, particularly when it comes to teaching about meaning and meaning-making? How can we put the student at the vital center of the teaching-learning transaction? We urge meaning-making educators to become familiar with research that reinforces over and over again the value of constructivist teaching (for example, Bain, 2004). This research points the way to what students will need in order to be fully engaged in their own learning.

Richard Light's (2001) findings confirm that when educating for meaning is working well, the following learning patterns are evident both inside and outside college classrooms:

- Students engage actively in their learning, with a vibrant sense of expectancy and excitement.
- Open-ended, evocative, problem-based questions in lively conversation are far more prominent than close-ended, test-based answers.

- Learning is interdisciplinary, unbounded, and wide-ranging.
- Teaching and learning are frequently story-based, personally vulnerable, and honest.
- A variety of pedagogical techniques fill the learning space, including lectures, genuine small and large group conversations, colloquia sessions, service learning, and a number of internet chat rooms, discussion groups, and blogs, among others.

Rachel, introduced earlier in this chapter, is proof positive that all of these teaching-learning patterns can help a student immensely in the personal quest for meaning.

So, too, the latest research on brain-based learning by neuroscientists such as Gerald Edelman (2006) and Michael Gazzaniga (2005, 2008) demonstrates that students learn best when they are given the opportunity to personalize their learning by looking for its practical implications in their everyday lives. Rachel, in her written reflection, noted that she began to thrive in her studies at the same time she was developing her own consciousness. She deliberately sought out courses and teachers that avoided the all-too-common disconnects among self, content, and persons.

When students can see the organic connections between subject matter and their interests in performing service to others, or dedicating themselves to a social cause that results in self-transcendence, or creating something artistic, then their learning becomes intense, focused, integrated, and full of passion. Dichotomies disappear. During this time, students' neurons are at optimal firing capacity, and their cognitive patternings are rich and complex. Also, according to this brain-based research, although students highly appreciate some type of evaluative feedback from educators, nearly always the imposition of grades acts as a serious deterrent to their relaxed alertness and complex cognitive processing.

Constructivist education is predicated on an approach to knowledge that views teaching, leading, and learning as experiential, conversational, narrativistic, conditional, developmental, socially and culturally created—as much heart- and hand-based as it is head-based—and always profoundly personal in nature (see Nash, 2008). Rachel had mastered head- and hand-learning throughout her formal schooling. She got the most out of the conventional “chalk and talk” lecture approach to teaching. What was missing in her undergraduate, preprofessional education, however, was heart-learning. In those years she had the *precision* but not the *passion*. By the time she graduated, she was both precise *and* passionate, competent *and* compassionate—an unbeatable combination for her vocation as a health-care professional.

Finally, according to the research of noted constructivist learning theorists Brooks and Martin (1999), the best teachers and leaders are full of enthusiasm about their work and the potential of their students to learn how to shape productive philosophies of life. They are also the ones who know how to tell, and to draw out, engaging, meaning-relevant stories (see the section on storytelling in the next chapter). They have outstanding evocative skills. And they are unusually adept at involving students in genuine, nonhierarchical, mutually vulnerable, give-and-take conversations about making meaning and constructing purpose-driven lives (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008).

**Conversation is the key element in all types
of meaning-making.**

In fact, there can be no genuine constructivist pedagogy, or deep-meaning learning, without continual conversation between and among educators, learners, and others within the ever-expanding circles of students’ relationships. We are not necessarily talking about Socratic dialogue—which, to at least one observer (Rhode, 2006), too often “becomes a shell game in which the teacher first

invites the student to ‘guess what I’m thinking,’ and then finds the response inevitably lacking. The result is a climate in which ‘never is heard an encouraging word, and thoughts remain cloudy all day’” (p. 79).

In contrast, we are convinced that the best conversation—from the Latin word *conversare*, to live together (in order to learn about oneself and others)—happens when students and educators spend much of their time in learning spaces connecting with one another on deeper levels. This means drawing one another out and educating through honest give-and-take inquiry about what is really important in the search for meaning in the lessons and events of the day, both inside and outside the classroom and lecture hall. This is not “shell-game discourse”; rather, it is “mutual-vulnerability conversation.”

In the real world, each of us lives in conversation with others because we enjoy it. Our students enjoy it, even if they limit conversation to elliptical text-messaging and hastily written emails. We caress each other with the words we choose. We also hurt each other with the words we use. We can open spaces, or we can restrict them, in our conversations both in and out of the classroom, the residence hall, and the office. We can make our learning spaces safe and comfortable, or we can make them threatening and coercive. We can spend all our time pontificating and telling, or we can spend much of our time in our learning spaces connecting with one another, drawing each other out, and educating through honest give-and-take conversation about what’s really important in the search for meaning in the lessons and events of the day.

We have found, in our own interactions with students throughout the campus, that our work sparkles most during those times when we are really conversing with one another. There is an honest, deeply respectful interchange about the things we agree and disagree on. In this sense, when conversation is working well, we are all teachers for one another. We talk together. We learn from each other. We make meaning together. It never gets tired or old. We exist in solidarity with one another, both in the classroom and

in the workplace. No matter how high-pressured or technical our work, conversation is possible, even necessary. We have had neighbors who work in diverse fields—high school teachers, emergency room doctors, firefighters on the job, even busy kitchen chefs—tell us that conversation with their colleagues and clients, even when truncated, is the best way to get something done or to make sense of their lives.

Here are a few brief recommendations for engaging students in deep conversation about meaning:

- Create a welcoming conversational space with students, one that features maximum psychological safety and invites maximum participation.
- Encourage conversation at all times by asking probing, open-ended questions.
- Spend time one-on-one with students whenever possible—hanging out is the favorite activity of quarterlife students, and it is the best way to initiate candid moral conversation about meaning, because it underplays status and power differentials.
- When talking with students about issues of meaning and purpose, attribute the best motive and assume the best intentions.
- Show some humility and open-mindedness by first looking for the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse.

Finally, we should never forget the principle that asking good questions of one another about the meaning of meaning, and the meaning of our own meaning-making, is the *sine qua non* for open-ended conversations with one another. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke asks us to “love the questions . . . I want to beg you, as much as I can,

to be patient toward all that is unsolved. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (quoted in Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991, p. 163).

There is as much learning about meaning taking place in the silent spaces of the student’s life as there is in formal and informal educational settings.

What is there about silence, both in and out of the classroom space, that scares educators and students (see the section on silence in the next chapter)? Why do we think that verbal noise is the only sign of learning? Do our students always have to be actively doing and saying something in order to be learning? Some research shows that a wait time of at least five to ten seconds after each question elicits a far more thoughtful response from students than an immediate reaction (Jensen, 1998).

Zen Buddhists know well that the most significant meaning-making moments in our lives take place in our silent spaces—in the stillness of our hearts, heads, and souls. Mindfulness is all about attending to what is outside of us, by being fully present in the moment, and by being *quiet*. Ask our students where they do their deepest thinking; it is usually when they are alone, away from televisions, radios, cell phones, and electronic games. Ask them where they do their deepest feeling, and it is usually with others, especially with people they trust. Push the question a bit further, and students will say that it is always during the quiet times when they are best able to understand *why* they feel the way they do.

We make deep meaning in our silent spaces. Robert sometimes asks students these questions: What is your favorite physical space for just being alone with yourself? Do you make a distinction between being alone and being lonely? Do you have a special place

you consider a sanctuary? If I were to ask the entire class to sit in silence for the first (or the last) fifteen minutes of every class, how would you feel? When and where have you most recently felt most calm, most at peace, most in flow? Is it easy or hard for you to build in some time during your day to just be by yourself, to quiet the “chattering monkeys” in your head, and to reflect on what truly matters to you at the present time in your life? Where do you seek rest and renewal?

Many students in Robert’s classes have never been asked to think about such questions. But when they do, they generally tend to be very grateful. A graduate student in a counseling program once said,

I realize, after thinking about your questions, that I can’t stand silence. I tend to rush people into saying something, even my clients. I take sleep medication all the time, because I seem to have thousands of your “chattering monkeys” going off every second of my life, especially when I’m trying to fall asleep. I’m not doing very well in my counseling practicum because I’m blabbing all the time, particularly when I feel incompetent, which is most of the time. I know now that I need to create the silent spaces in my life that will provide me with the opportunities to reflect on why I want to be a counselor in the first place. Isn’t this question a meaning question?

Yes, it is a meaning question. And one book that we would strongly recommend to this counselor-in-training, as well as to every single educator in the academy, is a book written for public school teachers and students—Rachael Kessler’s *The Soul of Education* (2000). What Kessler calls the “soul,” we are calling “meaning.” Kessler posits “Seven Gateways to the Soul in Education” and we maintain that these gateways are applicable to students at *all* levels of education.

Six of Kessler’s seven gateways are the yearning for deep connection, the search for meaning and purpose, the hunger for joy and delight, the creative drive, the urge for transcendence, and the need for initiation. We are concerned here mainly with the seventh gateway: the longing for silence and solitude. She says, “[T]his is an ambivalent domain, and is fraught with both fear and urgent need. As a respite from the tyranny of ‘busyness’ and noise, silence may be a realm of reflection, of calm or fertile chaos, an avenue of stillness and rest for some, prayer or contemplation for others” (p. 17).

Here are a few tips that Kessler offers to educators for “opening the gates” to our silent spaces:

- Allow some quiet time in all our personal interactions with students.
- Remember that many students who tend to be feelers can use the quiet spaces to restore an equilibrium between their emotions and their thoughts.
- Build in a series of reflective time-outs during a teaching-learning experience.
- At times, ask students to free-write what went on for them during the reflective time-outs.
- Before a faculty or an administrative meeting, take the time to sit in silence with colleagues before the meeting begins (this will probably bring about the most resistance of all our tips).
- Get students to journal in silence for at least five to ten minutes a day—in their favorite, quiet hangout spaces.

Kessler recommends journaling in response to these questions (and dozens of others in her book) about silence and stillness:

- “What, of all I feel and believe, is truly my own?”
- “How can I change feeling lonely?”
- “How does one learn to trust oneself, to believe in oneself?”
- “Who or what do I really want to connect to?”
- “What is it that I did really well today?”
- “What is it I wish I had done differently?”
- “How do I find balance between the demands of the world and my inner needs for rest, rejuvenation, and simply being?”
- “How can I create a peace within me that will radiate outward to others?”
- “How can I slow down when everyone around me is speeding?”

All these strategies are calculated to help students go inward before they go outward and upward—the inevitable directions where meaning-making takes all of us. Without the silence, however, we run the risk of only going *backward*. Without the time for quiet reflection, it is unlikely that meaning-makers would ever reach their ultimate destinations.

Deep connections to others can supplement the work of meaning-making that is very difficult to achieve in formal educational settings.

Some religions believe that the way to the self is through others. Some believe that the way to others is through the self. What most religions have in common, however, is the pivotal role that caring relationships play in making meaning. In fact, most religio-spiritualities are predicated on the importance of making deep connections with others—God, family, friends, lovers, even strangers. One psychotherapist (Yalom, 2002) has even gone so far as to say that the most effective therapeutic relationship is one based on mutual engagement, reciprocal openness, vulnerability,

and egalitarianism. His basic premise is that all of us are “fellow-travelers,” in that none of us is ever absolved from the responsibility we have to make the most of our freedom to create meaning.

Like the great religious teachers—and like Yalom—we too believe that building different types of relationships between and among educators and students is the necessary (but not sufficient) condition for successful meaning-making. A growing body of research supports this assertion. We believe that Light’s findings stemming from his decades-long research (2001) on the Harvard Assessment Project can be extended universally to all teaching-learning locations. Through the years, hundreds of his student-interviewees reiterated the point that their best classes—the ones that were most memorable, useful, and intellectually challenging—involved being able to make connections with others.

Students mentioned getting involved outside of class with the arts, special-interest clubs and groups, and a variety of content-linked, experiential activities. While the hands-on experiences were important to them, even more important were the interactions they had with others in order to achieve a common goal. Through these interactions, not only did students get things accomplished, but, equally important, they learned how to work, converse, and play together. Thus they learned the invaluable human skills of how to initiate, sustain, and deepen relationships.

In the classroom, students especially appreciated small classes. In this setting students were best able to get to know the professor, both in and out of the classroom. Students also enjoyed classes that emphasized writing assignments. They particularly appreciated classes with a lot of writing, because over 90 percent of them felt that being able to write clearly and creatively was the most important single skill they hoped to develop during their undergraduate years. Moreover, it was through their writing that students were able to get the professor’s attention in order to develop an out-of-class relationship based on personal mentoring. Also, students learned best about how to write when they were able to share their writing

with small groups and, in the process, receive valuable feedback from their peers.

The warning flag that predicted future academic frustration and failure, however, was when a student felt a sense of isolation from others. Light's research showed that initial feelings of being isolated only served to intensify the state of isolation, because the student, motivated by feelings of embarrassment and loneliness, tended to dig in, withdraw even more, and work alone. Isolation led to increasing feelings of desolation. But when faculty and staff reached out to put students in touch with like-minded others, as well as with counselors, their grades and attitudes drastically improved. Another finding of Light's is that when the residence halls include a great deal of ethnic, racial, social class, and religious diversity, particularly during the first year, friendships multiply almost exponentially during the next three years on campus. Often, it takes awhile for friendships to develop in first-year living arrangements, and the road can get bumpy along the way. But it is essential to keep in mind that friendships emerging from those initial living groups "can and do shape all future social interactions, especially inter-ethnic social interactions" (p. 44).

Most qualitative and quantitative researchers who study the best ways to educate students just do not talk much about fostering "deep connections" in the teaching-learning experience. These relationships are very difficult to measure, and there is not a lot of precedent in higher education for how to create and deliver this type of pedagogy. Regardless, John Henry Newman's (1854/1990) comments about the university in the mid-nineteenth century still retain a cogency for us today: "The personal influence of the teacher is able in some sort to dispense with an academic system, but that system cannot in any sort dispense with personal influence. With influence there is life, without it there is none. If influence is deprived of its due position, it will not by those means be got rid of it; it will only break out irregularly, dangerously. An academic system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils is an arctic winter; it

will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron university and nothing else" (p. 311).

We hold that without these "deep connections"—and this includes the "personal influence" of the educator—students are unlikely to take the meaning-making project seriously. They will be reluctant to take the personal risks necessary to make significant changes in their lives. Deep connections with others, both in and out of classes, enable learners to avoid the anguish of loneliness and isolation. To touch and be touched by other persons is life-affirming. In our experiences with college students, they frequently talk about making deep connections, not just with students and educators, but also with nature, animals, and a transcendent power, as well as with a variety of nurturing communities. It is the close, trusting connections with other people, however, that students cherish most of all.

We are not talking about sexual intimacy or lifelong partner commitments. Rather, we are talking about forming connections with communities where a deep sense of belonging is present. In our own teaching, whenever students feel that our classrooms are experienced as communities of belonging, where genuine communion between educators and students is possible, then the activity of meaning-making gets pushed to deeper levels of intensity. Students take the process more seriously because they feel safe, supported, and respected. And when this happens, as Tompkins (1996) has written, the classroom becomes a "hallowed space."

Tompkins notes that the way students are taught to talk with one another in and out of the classroom on their campuses is the way they will interact with people throughout their lives. They will perform, compete, and strive to win in the outside world, if inside the academic space they are rewarded based exclusively on their ability to give educators what they want. According to Tompkins, what educators want most of all is for students to be individualistic, competitive, efficient information processors, followers of rules, and excellent test-takers, who know how to defer to those in authority.

Tompkins calls for a radical transformation of higher education. She wants academic preparation to include “qualities besides critical thinking.” She advocates developing virtues for the academy, among them “generosity, steadfastness, determination, practical competence, humor, ingenuity, and information” (p. 219). But more important, she also wants an academy that prizes “mercy and compassion . . . [and encourages] quiet reflection, self-observation, and meditative awareness” (p. 220). Above all, Tompkins wants higher education to have both “a center and a soul.” It is with these words that we end this section on the need for educators to forge “deep connections” among themselves, students, subject matter, the outside world, and significant communities of belonging. In the next section, we offer some concrete suggestions about how to create deeply connected communities of learning through the art and craft of story-telling.

Effective educators understand that helping students to make meaning is directly related to the ability to tell their own personal stories of meaning-making.

Even better, good educators are not afraid to evoke such personal stories from their students (Nash, 2008). Tell a story of personal meaning, and you have captured your students’ attention. Draw out your students’ personal stories of meaning, and you have won them over for life. Here are the words of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) on stories:

Teaching is storytelling. It is the place where lives can meet. . . . Stories create intimate conversations across boundaries. Stories disturb and challenge. . . . They are able to incite humor or passion or even irrationality. . . . I use stories to create deeper connections with my students, to reveal the universal human themes that we share, and to bridge the realms of thinking and

feeling. . . . In those moments of personal revelation students experience my vulnerability, my trust, and my respect. . . . As their teacher, I offer them my “dreams,” and I ask them to “tread softly.” (pp. 111, 112)

Stories actually confer survival benefits on all of us. (The Latin root of *narrative* means “to know, to tell, to construct new knowledge.”) Stories make us human. They give our lives focus. They get us up in the morning and off to work. They help us to solve problems and to survive with dignity, style, and grace. In our stories, we live what we narrate to be the “real world.” For some of us, our story of life is a win-lose athletic contest. For others, life is a love affair, or a cosmic or spiritual quest, or a business venture, or one long, unmitigated catastrophe. For many of us, the stories we live in are religious, or political, or philosophical, or occupational, or recreational. And these stories color how we see and experience the world we live and work in. However they differ from each other, each of us inhabits a particular narrative at all times. And this narrative understanding affects others, just as their narratives affect us.

All of us on college campuses create the stories that we live in, but we also live in the stories that we create. This is the central pedagogical meaning of constructivism: students make meaning in so far as they introduce, digest, and incorporate what they learn into their own stories. Therefore, as an educational philosophy, constructivism confers power on each of us. The stories we—educators and students alike—love, and the stories we hate, provide deep insight into what we value and what we do not; into who we are striving to become both personally and professionally, and who we are not.

The lesson here for all of us who teach and administer in higher education is that we are more than disembodied, unstoried, meaning-deficient experts in the work we do with students. We are not invincible, bionic professionals who are without feelings or histories or philosophies of life. We have personal stories

to tell about the multifaceted human beings that we are. Likewise, our students have their own personal stories to tell. We need to learn how to tell our stories in such a way as to make an impact on our students. This is when students really start to listen. It is even more important, however, that we take the time to draw out our students' stories, whenever we think this might be appropriate to the lessons we are trying to convey to them. Evoking and invoking stories should always be done with nonexploitative sensitivity and generosity.

With this in mind, we try very hard to listen to students' stories. How, for example, can we truly understand how a student will respond to a challenging reading or writing assignment, a piece of difficult advice, or a well-intentioned criticism or recommendation, without first understanding the story that a student might be living in at any given time? Although it is safe to say that every student wants competent educators who are knowledgeable, respectful, and personally accessible, they also want something more. They want to be understood as real human beings. They want to know that their stories matter to us. They want us to understand how they make sense of the chaos in their lives. They want us to respect them as meaning-makers.

Here are a few tangible suggestions for evoking students' stories:

- Talk about your own life as a series of stories. These are what students remember the most, because storytelling humanizes us—in addition to enchanting others.
- Help students to frame their experiences as stories of *survival* whenever possible. This helps them to realize that rather than being passive victims of one external force or another, they are indeed resilient, active creators of meaning.
- Evoke deeper stories of meaning from students whenever possible. This includes encouraging them to

develop further those personal stories that are religious, political, social, cultural, and educational. Doing this enables students to see that they are actually complex meaning makers with multiple identities.

- Point out commonalities and universal themes in students' stories wherever these might emerge. These commonalities will connect students to one another in powerful ways.
- Share your dreams, and ask students to share theirs. As Lawrence-Lightfoot reminds us, we should tread softly, because it is in the dreams that meaning begins.
- Teach students how to evoke stories of meaning from one another whenever the occasion arises. They, like you, can be story evokers.

Deep-meaning educators encourage students to do a great deal of personal narrative writing in order to convey their stories of meaning. Making meaning is largely a function of being able to “me-search” subjectively as well as to research objectively.

The denial of the value of the self's stories in an academic setting is born in the command all of us have heard in school at some time: never use the “I” in formal writing. The “I,” we have been told, is incapable of discovering and dispensing wisdom without the support of the “them,” the certified experts. Messages like these leach the fascinating, storied self out of the budding writer, leaving only the clichéd, and often pinched, stories of experts to recirculate over and over again. Robert's first order of business in encouraging personal narrative writing is to let his students know that the search for meaning is very difficult unless they can write personally about their quests. We need to let our students know that their personal stories count.

Vivian Gornick (2001) says, “A serious life, by definition, is a life one reflects on, a life one tries to make sense of and bear witness to. The age is characterized by a need to testify. Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to write their personal stories out of the now commonly held belief that one’s own life signifies” (p. 91). For Gornick, personal narrative writing starts with the *writer’s* life rather than with the lives, thoughts, and activities of others. Robert Nash (Nash, 2004) calls this genre of self-creation “scholarly personal narrative” (SPN) writing. This type of SPN writing encourages students to make sense of the raw material of meaning-making first from the inside out before going from the outside in. What matters most in personal narrative writing is the conviction that the writer’s own life actually testifies. It matters. In the end, what truly matters is the sense of meaning that the writer is able to create, and then to convey, both to self and to others.

Many students in our classes are confident that they can write a term paper, a research paper, or a literature review with, as some say, their “eyes closed.” They know the templates for these conventional types of manuscripts by heart, because they have done so many of them throughout their years in formal education. They know from practice that it is mostly just a matter of understanding how to fit some new pieces of the knowledge puzzle into the old research templates. But telling a personal story in a classroom setting, with the professor present, is hard for most students. Writing one’s personal story in a creative way is even more difficult.

To prepare his students for personal narrative writing about meaning, Robert challenges them to dare to stand for something in their writing. He asks them to try to take a position on something with strong conviction and by displaying palpable affect in their language. He gives them permission to allow their authorial voices to be clear, distinct, and strong, and, above all, personal. He tells them to resist the conventional academic temptation to be “objective”: stoical, qualified, subdued, abstract, and distant. He acknowledges that at times it is okay, even desirable, to try to be detached or

dispassionate, and at other times to be scientific and objective. But it is also okay, particularly when writing about meaning, to be fully engaged and excitable, to be transparent and vulnerable.

An undergraduate student we’ll call “Sarah” came to Robert’s office one day to report the following:

You know, all this stuff about postmodernism and existentialism that you’ve been talking about lately. Well, I tried a little bit of it with my own writing. I was getting stuck in writing my honors thesis for another professor, and I couldn’t understand why—that is until I listened to you talk about personal narrative writing and its rightful place in the scholarship of higher education.

My original intention was to write a kind of literary reflection for my thesis by telling a powerful story of loss and survival, with my extended Jewish family as the central protagonists. I wanted this reflection to focus especially on my grandparents who were prisoners at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, and who I consider to be courageous, noble survivors. Moreover, I wanted to write this kind of reflection in order to understand why I identify so readily with being a “cultural” Jew but balk at being called a “religious” Jew. In the most important sense, then, I wanted the study of my grandparents to really be a study of myself.

In contrast, my honors thesis advisor wanted me to conduct formal interviews with my grandparents, leave myself out of the study as much as I could, and then test for validity by doing proof checks of inconsistencies when I analyzed the data coming out of the interviews. I could only react, “huh”? This all seemed so bloodless and contrived to me. After all, I love my grandparents, and I have listened to their stories for years. I also know what I need from these interviews, and what I would like others to learn from them about their own ethnic heritages. Whether or not my grandparents’ stories are inconsistent, or even exaggerated, is irrelevant to me. I only know that they have suffered beyond my worst nightmares.

(Continued)

So, I decided to write my thesis as a scholarly personal narrative manuscript, and I placed myself at the center of my writing. I started with something that my grandfather once said to me and I've never forgotten: "If there is a God, then he is a butcher. He is the Gestapo officer who burned my brothers and sisters. He is the camp commander who spit on my mother's grave. This cowardly God stood idly by, as the smoke from the ovens, baking all those innocent children and adults, curled to his damned heavens. I lost my faith in God once and for all in those death camps, but I found something better there: a more enduring faith in the people I love, like you, Sarah. When I saw how fragile life is, and how it can be so easily destroyed by a handful of monsters, I realized that cherishing one another is all there is. There is nothing more than this, and it's up to each one of us to love intensely and compassionately. Everything else is a pathetic fairytale."

I decided to write about how my grandfather's account of his terrible death-camp experiences really frames everything that I believe today about life's purpose and meaning. His account has helped me to create a meaning in my life that gets me through my own periodic bouts with depression, hopelessness, and angst. Like him, I believe that there is nothing more to be achieved in life than living genuinely, loving passionately, connecting frequently with others, and doing my best at all times to make my world a more humane and caring place. In my thesis, I tell lots of stories about my relatives, and I pull no punches. And, guess what? My advisor loved my stories. In fact, she told me that she, herself, was a Jew, and the relative of two concentration camp victims, but she never got to know them because they died at Auschwitz. She and I would have never known this about one another if I hadn't taken the risk to write personally from my heart and soul.

Oh, and just one more thing: like Eli Weisel after writing *Night*, I reclaimed my own religious faith after writing about my grandfather's loss of his faith. I realized that, in my case, I need a God, especially during those times that are bleakest and most horrible for me. Although I've never been in a death camp, I have "died" lots of small deaths,

particularly when I lost my dearest friend who committed suicide two years ago. Without a God to believe in during those worst of times, my life would be totally without meaning. Thank you for inspiring me to write so personally, and, along the way, to discover what's really important to me.

Life, as every writer knows, is incongruous, complex, and paradoxical. It can bore us, soothe us, upset us, confound us, sadden us, inspire us, and anger us, sometimes all at once. Therefore, Robert's writing instruction to students like Sarah is to try always to be honest. He asks them to say what they mean and believe what they say. He reminds them to leave room in their meaning-making writing for the ellipsis dots that, in theory, can always end every sentence they write, and every story they tell, and every truth they proclaim. Why? Because personal narrative writing never ends; it only stops, for the time being. There will always be something else to add. All meaning evolves—given the passage of time, the changing of life's conditions, and the natural growth of each and every meaning-maker. What gives our lives meaning in the here-and-now will inevitably change in the who-knows-where-and-when.

Here are some guidelines that Robert gives his students as they begin the adventure of writing about their quests for meaning in a personal narrative style:

- Start with the "I" before you proceed outward to the "you" and the "they."
- Make your voice distinct, candid, and uniquely your own.
- Make sure that you convey a clear sense of the meaning-theme running throughout your writing. Playwrights call this a "through-line."
- Don't forget to tell some good personal stories.

- Remember, at all times, that *me*-search writing about meaning is the indispensable source of *re*-search writing; when done well, it can even lead to *we*-search writing as others read and respond to it.
- It is okay to cite other authors' works and ideas, as long as these citations come from your heart and soul rather than as ritual padding from your head. In other words, be passionate about, and cite, the ideas of others only insofar as they fuel your own drive to make meaning.
- Take some risks; depart from the usual research writing formulas, rubrics, and templates.
- Keep telling yourself that you have a personal story worth telling and a point about meaning-making worth sharing.
- Remind yourself over and over again that scholarly writing can be fun, engaging, and pleasing to write . . . not only for the writer but also for your readers.
- Strive for an academic *rigor* in your personal narrative writing that is closer to academic *vigor* than it is to academic rigor *mortis*.

Rethink conventional assessment strategies and homework assignments. Educating for meaning requires bold, creative, risk-taking evaluation initiatives.

The key is to remember that the most important part of the word *evaluation* is *value*. The best way to evaluate the outcomes of meaning-making learning is to ask students themselves what the *value* of their experience has been. According to Bain's (2004) research on effective teaching, the best evaluation stresses learning rather than performance. Performance means living up to others'

expectations and requirements. Learning means that students take full responsibility for their own intellectual, emotional, kinesthetic, and personal development. Performance is mainly about acquisition, storing information, and taking tests. Learning is developmental and an end in itself. Meaning-making educators are as interested in knowing *who* the student is as *what* the student knows.

A meaning-making approach to learning teaches to the *person* rather than to the *test*. It recognizes that any kind of assessment process is flawed at best, because in some sense it always represents the personal judgment, and intellectual biases, of the assessor. Furthermore, as most of us know intuitively, no evaluative judgment ever originates from a completely "objective" sense of what represents failure or success. Robert sometimes says to his students: "Tell me how *you* were judged in school, and I'll tell you how you will judge *others*. Better still, tell me how you *felt* about being judged throughout your education, and I'll tell you what you purposely *include*, and *exclude*, in your assessment of others."

Some of Bain's best teachers asked their students to evaluate themselves, while still requiring them to provide various types of hands-on evidence that learning did, indeed, occur. Often, these students presented this evidence in face-to-face conversation with their teachers, in addition to writing extensive narrative self-evaluations, complete with such "evidence" as learning portfolios, time logs, daily or weekly written reports, and a variety of independently designed work projects. The upshot for the successful assessment of learning in meaning-making is to encourage students to set their own goals and to take full responsibility for determining whether or not they were able to meet those goals.

Responsible Construction

A constructivist approach to deep-meaning learning engages students beyond their intellects. Deep-meaning learning connects head to heart to hand, underscoring that what students think

about influences how they act and feel and who they become. The reverse holds true, too. Who students are (and who they are becoming) shapes what they think about. A pedagogy of constructivism respects this symbiotic relationship between subject (learner) and object (lesson) and leverages students' head-heart collateral to bring the lesson to life. What each student contributes from his or her interpretation and experiences adds to the education of all, including the teacher.

Make no mistake, we are not advocating free-wheeling curricula with no content parameters. On the contrary, we are recommending that educators think anew about the learning arena. For students, that arena stretches far beyond the classroom, the residence hall, and even the campus. With some advance preparation, educators inside and outside the classroom can put this expanded learning arena to work, and they can use it to guide students to dive more deeply into what they could just as easily skim across.

To help educators envision how this deep-meaning learning might work, the next chapter offers several practical tips for incorporating constructivist pedagogy. In the pages that immediately follow, we discuss easy-to-use methods for connecting heart and hand to what the head is already doing.