

Targeting assessment for developing adult lifelong learners: assessing the ability to commit

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In this article, I propose that neither traditional assessment nor alternative, competence-based assessment is adequate to meet the challenges of uncertain change. Existentialist assessment that focuses on developing learners' commitment, rather than their competence, may be more decisive in empowering learners who are facing adversity. Existentialist assessment shifts the focus from impersonality, achievement, and universalism to the inclusion of the adult learner's commitment to making meaningful connections between learning and his or her existence (being). These committed meanings are willed and produced by the learner, not only to bring to an end a disturbing situation and uncertainty but also to develop a sense of significance and sustainability when facing uncertainty and processes of change. To ascertain a learner's ability to commit, self-assessment, with its first-person perspective, must be taken into account. Implications include the alignment of assessment with pedagogy that facilitates the adult learner's commitment to connecting his or her existence with the world.

Keywords: adult lifelong learning; assessment; commitment; existentialist; lifelong learning; lifelong learner

Introduction

A number of studies (Boud 2000, De La Harpe & Radloff 2000, Falchikov & Boud 2008; Kvale 2007) have recognised the crucial importance of developing adults' lifelong learning abilities or characteristics as a means of ensuring a competitive edge in response to current and future changes. They have highlighted this pressure and the need to develop forms of assessment for the learner's lifelong learning development. Conventional forms of assessment have focused on the target of cognitive learning and knowledge acquisition. However, the attempt to improve conventional, knowledge-based assessment practices has prompted criticism that conventional assessment paradoxically fails to account for the knowledge a learner must acquire to address the variations and complexities of the changing times. Therefore, the discussion of the target of assessment has shifted from focusing on the learner's knowledge acquisition to the learner's establishment of competence (Sitthisak, Gilbert, & Davis 2007). Competence-based assessment involves what one can do or perform rather than simply what one knows and the knowledge that one has accumulated. The development of competence, which highlights the learner's problem solving and completion of tasks in context, seems to be required to ensure effective adaptation to contextual changes in life (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow 1998, Kew 2006) and is therefore identified as the target of lifelong learning assessment (Sitthisak, Gilbert, & Davis 2007).

Compared with the conventional conception of assessment, competence-based assessment, which emphasises the performance, process, and dynamism that require greater agency in managing the world's disordered aspects, seems to be a more effective approach for assessing an adult's lifelong learning development in change. In this article, I propose that despite its value, the alternative, competence-based assessment discourse, remains inadequate to account for the 'lifelong' character of an adult learner. The assessment result of what one can do does not guarantee that one *will* learn on a continuous basis to sustain learning and improvement. This article supplements the current development of assessment through a new lens by suggesting that learners' commitment may be more decisive than their competence for empowering adult learners and sustaining their subjectivities when they face adversity through change and in the future. The existentialist

perspective is presented here to supplement pragmatist, competence-based assessment practices by noting the differences between the practices of competence and commitment.

This article begins by investigating the assessment paradigm from a knowledge-based assessment and moving to a pragmatist assessment. The existentialist position is then considered, and the difference between learning competence and developing commitment is highlighted to provide a more robust account of assessments that help learners who are not only competent in adapting to their environments but are also *committed* to living out and fulfilling their existences and subjectivities during periods of change. Then, based on the framework of developing commitment, self-assessment is proposed as the epistemological frame of reference for considering and developing assessment practices that ascertain a learner's ability to commit. Finally, the implications and challenges of aligning assessment and pedagogy to develop committed lifelong learners are discussed.

Conventional and alternative assessment

The epistemic foundations of conventional, knowledge-based assessment practice generally prioritise *episteme*, which is concerned with adults' cognitive learning and growth. To use Ryle's (1946, 1949) famous distinction, the conventional approach draws upon a person's mastery of knowing-that rather than knowing-how. It belongs to an 'epistemology of possession' (Cook & Brown 1999: 382) that suggests that a person can grasp the reality of the world through an understanding of facts, concepts, assertions, and propositions, as something static that can be stored in the mind of the learner. With the knowing-that position, assessment becomes a practice of targeting learners' abilities in the process of understanding and knowledge development. For the sake of measurability, the tacit, unobservable mentality of knowing-that may be evidenced by the adoption of quantitative, standardised measurements, converting the learner's mentality into test scores, numbers, marks, or grades. There has been criticism of conventional, knowledge-based assessment practices that narrowly define learners' learning abilities and reduce the assessment of lifelong learning to cognition without regard for the operations of the affective, motivational, and behavioural domains (McCombs & Marzano

1990, Garrison 1997) Several studies (e.g., Dochy 2001, Edwards 2000, Gipps 1994, Morrison & Tang Fun Hei 2002, Wiggins 1993) have noted that reliance on the testing and conversion system is inappropriate because this approach evaluates only the lower levels of cognition. Conventional assessment practices, which assume highly prescribed knowledge and develop convergent one-dimensional learning, fail to account for the complexity of learning and insufficiently demonstrate how lifelong learners can apply their agency to meet the challenges of uncertain, rapidly changing futures.

To prepare lifelong learners for their futures, alternative assessment must extend beyond knowledge-based paradigms. Simply assessing one's mastery of facts and propositions (*knowing-that*) is not sufficient to remain competitive in the complex and uncertain modern world. Instead of focusing on acquiring factual knowledge, a new trend in assessment focuses on the development of *knowing-how* (Ryle 1946, 1949), or so-called 'holistic competence' (Hyland 1997, Beckett 2008). For Ryle, *knowing-how*, which is different from *knowing-that*, is a capacity to perform or act in particular contexts. It is assessed not through anything the learner says or knows but through how the learner acts. *Knowing-how* presents the learner's competence 'exhibited by deeds, not by internal or external dicta' (Ryle 1946: 8). The theories behind the learning of competence may be based on pragmatist epistemology, which does not equate competence with technical know-how (Elliott 1991). Competence is not developed by applying prior theory or knowledge to action according to procedure but rather serves as a kind of knowing that is inherent in action (Schön 2002). It calls for an 'epistemology of practice' (Schön 2002) that focuses on learning *through doing* rather than learning for understanding. Learning as a process of cultivating competence is opposed to learning as an intellectual process that simply involves cognition. In a number of studies (e.g., Birenbaum 1996, Dochy & Moerkerke 1997, Segers 1999), competence is constituted by or exercised through the cognitive/meta-cognitive, social/behavioural, and affective/motivational domains. The multi-dimensional and non-reductive characteristics of learning are acknowledged in the pragmatist position, which stresses 'the agency of the learner' (Harris 2000: 4) Accordingly, the design of an alternative assessment based on the pragmatist view draws upon learners' active constructive and participative processes to approach new problems and

strategies for tasks (Driessens & Vleuten 2000, Luongo-Orlando 2003). In practice, what is examined is not learners' static possession of the decontextualised knowledge content but rather, for the intentions of problem-solving and task achievement, a dynamic of learners' higher-order thinking and acting processes, such as reasoning, analysing, integrating, communicating, and problem-solving skills (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans 1999, Segers, Dochy, & De Corte 1999, Dysthe 2008). The goal of assessment is to ascertain the learner's competences through the process of demonstrating cognition and action in complex ways, not to measure the learner's acquisition of facts or technical skills.

Although alternative pragmatist assessment practices are increasingly seen as more effective than conventional ones in terms of addressing changes, I propose that alternative assessment practices still fail to address the value and deeper significance of being a lifelong learner. In addition to assessing the learner's knowledge and competence, the importance of considering the expression of the learner's subjectivity and changes to the learner's identity over time is devalued in the development of conventional and pragmatist assessments. Both types of assessments often omit the understanding of the learner's personal and biographical development (Alheit 2009) from the assessment activity. The assessment of lifelong learning should not only measure the mastery of knowledge or the dynamic application of knowledge but also consider the development of authentic, and therefore meaningful, practices of learning and assessment for learners to 'be' with change. By considering the existentialist position, lifelong learning assessment becomes an assessment of *being a lifelong learner*, which is not simply couched in terms of being knowledgeable or competent but in terms of being committed to understanding the world and expressing the adult learner's potential authentic existences that can be created and expanded.

Assessment of *being a lifelong learner*

The argument here considers the existentialist notion of assessment by considering lifelong learning as a commitment rather than a competence. Commitment refers to the learner's dedication to learning and development based on his or her feeling of meaningfulness when facing the changing future. For a committed lifelong learner, the object

of learning is not merely ‘there’ to be understood and applied; the learner sees long term and meaningful connections between the object and his or her existence (being). The committed meanings are *willed* and produced by the learner, not only to bring a disturbing situation and uncertainty to an end but also to develop a sense of significance and sustainability when facing uncertainty and processes of change. A competent learner does not necessarily become a committed, continuous learner when the learner feels a loss of interconnectedness because what is learned loses significance for his or her existence and development.

The assessment of commitment has something in common with assessing one’s competence. Both target the assessment of non-reductive, multi-dimensional agency that, in a fuller sense, involves the affective, cognitive, and behavioural facets of the learner’s constructive learning process. Competence-based assessment analyses the presentation of cognitive competences, meta-cognitive competences, social competences, and affective dispositions (Birenbaum 1996, Dochy & Moerkerke 1997, Segers 1999), whereas the state of one’s commitment is defined through affective, cognitive, and conative components (Arriaga & Agnew 2001). Commitment, like competence, is not assessed through the understanding of theory and knowledge; rather, it is developed and revealed through experiences of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Both assessment processes assume the holism of agency and its situatedness. The competent agent considers a vague and uncertain situation and determines appropriate patterns of problem solving to recover the peace of the surrounding environment. The committed agent must bring his or her whole self (mind, body, heart, and soul) to engage with life situations that allow him or her to make authentic decisions concerning his or her development of the meaning of existence. In assessing the complex nature of learning as competence or commitment, the learner’s sensory experiences and feelings, cognition about the senses, and the processed actions of learning are never separate or isolated; they are embedded in situated practices (Wenger 1998). Dividing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of learner agency or the dismissal of one of these aspects in the assessment practice would constitute reductionism and would assume the division of the mind from the body and of the self from the context.

Despite their similarities of non-reductionism and multi-dimensionality in the components of learning and agency, the crucial point of difference between the assessment of competence and the assessment of commitment stems from their underlying epistemological languages: pragmatist and existentialist. In pragmatic language, the learner is expected to possess the ability to learn and relearn when problems emerge in situations as ‘a contextual whole’ (Dewey 1938: 66). The existentialist position, by contrast, considers the assessment of one’s commitment not as the assessment of how one adapts to ‘a contextual whole’ by solving problems but as the ability to express meanings to create possible selves in change. Being a committed learner is not merely a mobile, mental, and physical existence; rather, it is an intentional existence with purpose that develops learning and life projects. The pragmatist perspective, focusing on the learner’s problem-solving performance to adapt to environmental change, may de-centre subjectivity and attribute more reality to the situated environment than to the learner himself or herself. The learner’s performance is assessed in terms of the whole environment, which turns the learner into an object of the environment. Pragmatist epistemology, in line with conventional epistemology, seeks and gives the primacy of objectivity, truth, and balance in impersonal terms, whereas ‘[t]he framework of commitment leaves no scope for such an endeavour’ (Polanyi 1962: 303).

In this existentialist sense, existence, rather than knowledge or competence, is the starting point for directing one’s learning and becomes the target of assessment. Instead of the preoccupation with how one successfully fits and adapts to never-ending flows of change, existentialist assessment is concerned with the adult learner’s ability to respond to continuous inquiry into his or her identity by searching for who he or she could become, in order to settle down and move forward through life in the face of change over time. The goal of existentialist assessment is not merely, as the pragmatist position suggests, to prepare the learner to problem-solve and perform well during change; existentialist assessment is also concerned with the adult learner’s journey of self-commitment, in which ‘an external thing is given a meaning by being made to form an extension of ourselves’ (Polanyi 1962: 60). The commitment to the extension of oneself is more the extension of an authentic, biographical existence in which one feels

liberated to experience the possibilities of who one might learn to be in life than that of an adaptive, biological existence in which the learner's survival in a larger situation is the main concern. The 'biographical self' (Hewitt 1976) is characterised as the existence of the tangible, substantive individual learner, including all of his or her characteristics – mental, physical, and emotional – who is committed to the continuity of his or her life-span construct. The complex and extended consciousness and commitment provide an elaborate sense of self, that is, an identity that serves as 'a sense of sameness about oneself' (Milrod 2002: 17) and that is sustained even in the face of change.

The state of commitment essentially involves human emotion. As Archer (2000: 83) states, 'we would not say that someone was committed to anything unless they were also emotionally involved'. Affect or emotion is needed as 'the shoving-power to move us (contra-Kant) to devote *ourselves* to our concerns, which are not (contra-Hume) just blind impulses or feelings' (italics in original; Archer 2000: 83). From the existentialist position, the learner is assumed to be 'an experiencing being, self-actuated, rational as well as arational' (Dana & Leech 1974: 429). Whereas thought selects possible actions, affect drives the learner in one direction rather than another among possible actions, providing the learner's subjectivity 'with its singular content' (Deleuze 2001: 104). From this perspective, assessment of the learner's feelings about the learning process and meaning may be more decisive and have a greater impact, in terms of the intention to persist, than assessment of the learner's mastery and application of knowledge and skills. The pragmatist assessment, which focuses on the learner's abilities of thought, action, and affect for problem solving, does not necessarily stress attachment to the learner's feelings of being valuable and meaningful. With a focus on affective attachment, the development of existentialist assessment that stresses the capacity for continuous attached commitment during change contributes to lifelong learning as 'learning dispositions' (Carr & Claxton 2002) and as a 'habit of being' (Yorks & Kasl 2002). *Being a learner* is primarily involved with feeling and experiencing oneself as an active agent in shaping *who* one could become rather than simply pursuing a cognitive activity or the transient interaction between the learner and his or her environment based on *how* the learner performs. Assessing one's ability to commit includes the understanding of one's sense of belonging and a sense of willingness

to stay in a space that involves developing long-term relationships with others despite the prospect of change and uncertainty. Without affect, the learner stops being attached to his or her learning object, which becomes irrelevant or pointless when it is considered separately from the learner.

Self-assessment

How might an assessment for developing committed lifelong learners look? To ensure the effectiveness of one's learning throughout life and on one's own, several scholars have powerfully stated that if individuals become lifelong learners, these learners must concurrently become assessors of their learning (Boud 2000, 2004, Broadfoot & Black 2004, Jegede 2005, Boud & Falchikov 2006). Through self-assessment, learners are empowered to take ownership of their learning experiences and development. The assumption of the individual learner's responsibility for improvements in and judgment of his or her own learning ensures that the process of assessment develops not as a practice performed or imposed on learners but as a practice that ensures the primacy of the learner's perspective, allowing learners to 'take on the authority to assess themselves' (Brew 1999: 169).

The primacy of self-assessment reflects an acknowledgment of a non-absolutist form of assessment that changes from prioritising third-person perspectives to highlighting first-person perspectives through personal narratives, portfolios, or biographies. The primacy of the first-person perspective 'liberates learners to experience the possibilities of what they might be' instead of 'the enframement of the world proposed by the assessor' (Gibbs 2011: 23). The adult learner comes to the science course, for instance, and listens to the teacher's lecture. With the primacy of the first-person perspective, the learner is expected not to simply absorb the main points of the lecture and the scientific material provided but to induce feeling, thought, and possible action related to the lecture and material (the third-person perspective). What matters is how the learner develops his or her accounts of science and the learner's own reflection on how science learning can contribute to his or her possible existence and growth in change. If the learner considers or accommodates the third-person perspective and assessment, the existentialist learner does so not because he or she is subject to authority

but because, instead of dismissing the external perspectives as a nuisance, the learner perceives them as an opportunity. Any imposition of the third-person perspective potentially leads to inauthentic interpretations of the learner's learning and existence. Self-assessment with a focus on the first-person perspective not only represents the learner's role as a participant in assessment but also demonstrates the primacy of learners' perceptions, 'a reversal of the common assessment practices promoted by accrediting agencies' (Strawser 2009: 4).

Self-assessment that targets learners' commitment involves 'knowing, acting and being' (Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2007) and a process of the 'formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act' (Van Manen 2007: 13). To ascertain a learner's ability to commit, the focus of self-assessment is less of a self-monitoring process of one's academic, theoretical understanding or one's effective, practical performance and more of a self-reflective process of learning knowledge and actions that may shape the learner's 'own most distinctive possibility' (Heidegger 1978: 435). For the direct evaluation of a learner's commitment to shaping his or her 'own most distinctive possibility', the learner's self-assessment must not only consider immediate learning outcomes but also reflect on how the meanings of present outcomes can be grasped in the long-term, on-going project of developing the learner's being—the learner's own particular form of existence when facing change. In contrast to conventional assessment, which usually asks the learner 'to think about what has been done in the past' (Bailey 1978: 66), self-assessment draws upon the learner's thinking about the future and the unknown, considering the extent to which the learner engages with learning according to personal goals and values and integrates present learning outcomes to his or her long-term, future-oriented vision. Tan (2007) identifies teacher-driven, programme-driven, and future-driven self-assessment and states that only future-driven self-assessment establishes and sustains students' self-learning and self-assessing capacity independently of other significant individuals (e.g., instructors).

Instead of mainly asking learners 'to select or write the correct response' (Wiggins 1990: 1) and narrowing the practice of assessment to quantification and descriptivism, as conventional assessment may suggest, the practice of self-assessment asks learners to make sense of

their learning by considering the contributions their present studies can make to their life in change. Such an assessment is approached not as evidence of the acquisition of new facts, knowledge, or skills ‘reported in the form of quantitative scores which are used to rank learner performance’ (McDowell 1998: 335) but as a method of reflecting upon their learning experiences through a qualitative process of narratives and stories (Clandinin & Connelly 1998) in forms such as learning logs, stories, biographies, self-reports, and portfolios. First-person narrative accounts of learning experiences serve as rich resources that reveal the overall meaning of learning outcomes and processes, including self-visions and self-purposes. The self that is developed in self-assessment, accordingly, can be understood as what Archer (2000) terms ‘the sense of self’, which *senses* the authentic and appropriate associations of the self with the world at a non-linguistic, pre-conceptual level. This self may also be what Gallagher (2000) calls the ‘narrative self’, the self that can be ‘extended in time to include memories of the past and intentions toward the future’, which enables the continuity of personal identity across time. By bringing one’s whole self (mind, body, soul) (Rogers 1997) to learning and assessment, self-assessment practice is never merely a dynamic process or movement in response to change but becomes a dwelling, (auto-) biographical project in which the learner reflects on and interprets how his or her learning affects his or her decisions about finding deeper meaning, connection, and satisfaction and how it suggests a future. Self-assessment becomes a self-discovery process by reflecting upon how learning affects the learner ‘personally, touches his [or her] personal truth’ (Sollway & Brooks 2004: 51).

However, assessment practices with the primacy of feeling one’s ‘personal truth’ should not be considered completely introspective or subjective. It would be absurd to suppose that such self-reflections and choices in self-assessment could arise independently of social criteria or rubrics of assessment that have been pre-validated by external assessment standards. Distinctions between the personal and the social, the human and non-human, ‘are taken to be network effects’ (Fenwick & Edwards 2010: 3) as the personal and the social inherently associate with and require each other. The learner’s reflections influence and are influenced by social expectations and make one’s reflections possible rather than restricting one’s reflections. As Boud (2000: 169) notes, ‘[a] necessary part of taking responsibility for one’s own assessment

is that ability to identify what standards should appropriately apply'. Self-assessment involves embracing the feedback and appraisal of other significant individuals (e.g. instructors and peers) who serve as reference groups. The learner may find that the reference groups' judgment of his or her learning conflicts with his or her own reflections. An authentic lifelong learner acknowledges the contradicting elements rather than ignoring them and approaches them by understanding and being open to them in a spirit of integrity. The judgment and feedback from other significant individuals or pre-validated, accredited assessment agencies is acknowledged and is a necessary aspect of understanding. However, the authenticity and continuity of one's assessment of his or her own commitment to learning and developing meaning is irreducible to third-person accounts. It is not only a matter of what others consider appropriate in one's lifelong learning and meaning development, it is also a matter of what the learner cares about and his or her own reflections of how he or she, by engaging with learning, comes into meaningful connections with change for the future. The practice of self-assessment, which calls us to think about and value our form of existence in living with change, is a process of tacit self-knowledge (Polanyi 1962) that is inaccessible and incommunicable to observers and assessors. It can only be interpreted by the learner himself or herself with reference to his or her own motives, intentions, and purposes in directing his or her learning to find a 'place' in change. Efforts to enact authentic self-assessment require an insistence on rejecting self-assessment as the fulfilment of an obligation to achieve what is expected of learners by subjecting self-assessment to larger assessment systems that are bureaucratic and rule governed. Drawing solely on external feedback and judgment undermines the integrity of the learner's development.

Conclusion and implications

This article argues for the use of assessment methods that support the development of lifelong learners who live within the context of change. The human, existential version of assessment is more than simply an assessment of the development of knowledgeable or competent learners. The meaning of knowledge for adult learners' existence, not the knowledge itself or its application, constitutes and captures the being of a lifelong learner in a state of flux. The significance of lifelong

learning beyond the use of traditional testing practices or performance-focused practices has not been adequately highlighted in the relevant literature and policies, which reflects a reduced conception of being a lifelong learner. Nonetheless, because being a lifelong learner implies and enables the learner to have possibilities to 'be' and 'become' during future times of change, the development of assessment is inseparably linked to a sustainable and desirable version in which the focus moves from the assessment of competence toward the assessment of commitment to existence and meaning. In this perspective, assessment is not simply a matter of assessing how much knowledge one has or how proficient one is in solving problems; it is a matter of making meaning through one's continuous commitment to seeking and expanding one's possibility for existence, which is kept open in the future. The development of commitment results from one's cognition, feelings, and implemented actions rather than one's recall of facts or performance according to social constructs. When learning results are assessed, the learner's affective, behavioural, and cognitive processes, which produce interwoven results, should be routinely assessed and observed as well.

To make developing and assessing one's commitment the focus of assessment does not suggest the rejection of knowledge-based or competence-based assessment methodologies. Assessing commitment does not replace the need to assess abilities of knowledge production or competency building, both of which undeniably play a role in the development of lifelong learning. Whereas assessment in terms of grades or performance results is of some interest, it is also important to develop and examine lifelong learners' needs to transcend their interest in knowledge acquisition and competence building and to additionally assess their personal commitment to finding connections of meaning in an uncertain world to anchor one's sense of belonging and provide certainty on an on-going, sustainable basis. Pushkin (1999: 458) notes that, when teaching and assessing his students' writing of chemical formulas, 'I do not want my students to learn writing chemical formulas for the sake of it' but to think for themselves, reflecting on 'how science might be part of their future'. Du Plooy (2007) explores the value of adult learners' self-assessment and self-reflection reports at the University of South Africa and states the importance of providing students with opportunities to assess their personal knowledge, feelings, and experience.

The proposal for developing assessments for lifelong learners has implications for the alignment of learning, pedagogy, and assessment (Biggs 1996). One of the challenges for pedagogical development is the shift from developing the learner's cognition to the facilitation of the learner's self-directed cognition, affect, and action. Conventional pedagogical methods that stress cognitive development and alternative pedagogical methods that emphasise competent action will fail to foster lifelong learning development on a sustainable basis if the learner's affective involvement is not considered. To remain relevant and keep learners motivated, pedagogical practices must address and understand the affective needs of learners, which fosters self-direction and strong commitment. A shift in emphasis towards affect, thought, and action concurrently requires course or programme providers to nurture learners by offering interesting and challenging tasks that let them commit not merely to lecturing but to facilitating rather than guiding. To this end, assessment tasks require the development of learners' interest in connecting their learning with the future and with life-world contexts rather than simply with present courses or programmes. However, drawing attention to the need to design and implement pedagogy and assessment processes that encourage future-oriented and real-context learning while including discipline-based delivery is a challenge. The course or programme provider who is determined to develop lifelong learners and to target the learner's ability to commit cannot do so without undertaking a committed journey similar to that of the learners. The alignment with the future and life-world contexts to which the learner's affect, thought, and action are committed and applied should be made explicit (Boud 2007). In designing assessment tasks, this article suggests that the learner's opportunities for self-assessment must be considered. The learner's self-assessment and the third-person assessment are not in contrast or mutually exclusive. The learner's self-assessment, which serves to achieve a balanced and genuine picture of the learner's own learning development, must take into account the external perceptions or feedback of any other relevant and significant individuals. To develop committed lifelong learners, the outcome of assessment must be a complex blend of assessing adult learners' rational reasons, passions, and actions and adult learners' ultimate concerns to discover who they are in terms of their life meanings and development through change.

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