# The Meaning of Meaningful Work:

# Subject-Object Meaningfulness in Knowledge Work

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## Prelude

Writing this thesis has been a meaningful endeavor in its own right, and I am deeply grateful to the very important people who made it possible. I cannot overestimate the power of your valuable contributions. To *Kim*, for wise advising, incredible generosity of spirit, and constant encouragement; to *Adam* for countless opportunities and an endless repository of knowledge; to *22 insightful teachers* for sharing your inspirational stories and fueling my excitement about being in the classroom this fall; to *Sarah* for wading your way through my rescue; to *Jane* for entrusting me with my introduction to qualitative research; to *Danielle, Victoria, Amy, Kathryn, and Heather* for well-timed conversations; to *Justin and Melissa* for commiserating and understanding and knowing; to *Impact Lab past and present* for many evenings of stimulating discussions; to *Rick and the Organizational Studies staff* for flexibility, structure, and financial assistance; to *Nanci* for connections and tireless enthusiasm; to *my family* for impressing me with the importance of education both in and outside the classroom, unconditionally supporting my dreams, and loving me; to *a bear* for being there; my dear friends and colleagues who comforted, rejoiced, consoled, or reenergized as necessary.

## Abstract

Despite the existence of a substantial empirical literature on the positive consequences of meaningful work and a substantial theoretical literature exploring possible meanings of work, little research has focused specifically on discovering the components of meaningful work—what meaningfulness actually means, or what it is that actually makes work meaningful. This qualitative study, drawing on interview data collected from 22 knowledge workers, develops a framework for understanding the meaningfulness in knowledge work. Findings suggest that meaningful work has both a subject-domain—a conceptual categorization of what makes work meaningful (progress, relationships, giving of self, and having a place)—and an object-focus—a description of who involved in the experience of meaningful work (the self, a specific other, or a general other). This framework contributes to the current understanding of meaningfulness by presenting a novel, two-part approach to the primary elements in meaningful work experiences.

*"I can't imagine anything sadder than being in a job where you don't find meaning... I think that would be tragic." – high school French teacher*

*"If [people] did, if they felt their lives had purpose and meaning, they would enjoy this cup of coffee, they would enjoy this conversation... they would enjoy these things, but some people find so little beauty in this, because they don't have meaning in their lives. Finding meaning in your life is the most important thing we can do as people." – middle school English teacher*

Whether it's constructing irrigation systems, developing coronary stents, fighting the educational achievement gap, or something on a smaller—but no less valuable—scale, like raising a loving family, writing a memoir, or preparing a five-course meal, we want what we do to be worthwhile. Our definitions and decisions may be universally compelling or completely idiosyncratic, but either way, they are generally enacted for a reason, particularly when we enter into an activity that occupies the majority of our waking hours, such as work. We want to believe that our energy is being invested for some good end, and not just for the sake of triviality. The meaningfulness in our lives gives us our reason for being.

Despite our desire to find our lives and our work meaningful, the idea of meaningfulness is maddeningly difficult to define. Extant literature not only confounds meaning, meaningfulness, and other related terms, but also does not paint a very complete portrait of this complex phenomenon. Some scholars have linked meaningfulness to a host of desirable outcomes, from reduced stress and hopelessness to increased commitment and happiness, and have isolated several conditions antecedent to experiencing meaningful work, such as task significance and visionary leadership. Others have even proposed reasons for seeking meaning and examined the process of meaning-making. Most, however, have avoided an empirical investigation of the component elements of an experience of meaningful work.

The majority of current theories assume that work experiences can be seen on a continuum, ranging from meaningful to meaningless (see Ali, Falcone & Azim, 1995; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Isaken, 2000; Maddi, 1967). Through a qualitative interview study with knowledge workers engaged in teaching, however, I have developed a two-part framework to describe what makes work meaningful. An experience of meaningful work can be categorized by the interaction between two dimensions: it belongs to a particular domain, and it has a particular focus. In other words, a subject, or *what* is meaningful about the work, and an object, or *who* is affected by the work, together create a sense of meaningfulness: a *why* of work. This model identifies the elements of meaningful work to illustrate what meaningfulness actually means, providing scholars, practitioners, and individuals alike with a foundation on which to construct further understandings of meaningfulness.

*"We as humans seek meaning; children are built to find meaning." – Reading Recovery specialist*

Although no one has been able to offer a definitive, uncontested explanation of why humans seek meaning, many scholars and thinkers concur that we do. Existential psychology, in fact, is an entire field devoted to questioning human existence, understanding its purpose, and handling any reactions that may arise. Terror management theory suggests that people live and operate under the burden of mortality, and that this "juxtaposition of a biologically rooted desire for life with the awareness of the inevitability of death" drives our thoughts and actions (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2004). Whatever the reason, we generally agree that "people need to feel that life is meaningful, and that they have a sense of purpose, and they have made a useful contribution to the world" (Wade-Benzoni, 2005). And, because work is often a vital part of a person's life, due to the amount of time spent there and the importance of a

job in defining identity to others, that which makes life meaningful and that which makes work meaningful are likely to be intimately related.

That, however, is about where the agreement ends. Literature on meaning, meaningfulness, and their relationship to work uses many different lenses to describe the phenomena being discussed. Typically, meaning and meaningfulness have been treated as a uniform concept, and they are often ill-defined or used interchangeably; much of the relevant literature uses these words, along with *purpose, goal, objective, significance*, and others, as synonyms (for additional terms, see Vough, 2006). When citing others I follow terminology used in the original research, but for my own work, I use *meaning* as a definition, or a "what" or work. The meaning of work is revealed in how people perceive their work in relation to the rest of their lives. *Meaningfulness*, on the other hand, denotes a significance. Meaningfulness is the "why" of work and a property of the work itself, unrelated to non-work tasks.

Ruiz-Quintanilla & England (1996), for example, investigate the meaning of work and summarize the findings of an extensive multinational study that asks people what they think of when they hear "work" as: 1) a constraint on time or space, 2) a burden or form of control, 3) a display of responsibility and exchange, 4) a way of contributing to and adding value to society. Similarly, research on the functions of work indicates that people work for four main purposes: 1) to have a means of economic subsistence, 2) to have the opportunity for social interaction, 3) to gain status and prestige, and/or 4) to meet intrinsic goals of identity or self-esteem (Super & Sverko, 1995). These two definitions of the meaning of work fit Calkins' (1927) analysis of meaning as "cognitional signification," where the word "meaning" is a synonym of "signifies;" in other words, Ruiz-Quintanilla & England and Super & Sverko have developed "meanings of work" that verbalize what work represents to people.

Other scholars, however, discuss the meaning of work in a manner much more akin to Whiton's concept of a "unique, elemental experience" or an "unanalyzable experiencing of objects" (1927). This "mystical relationship between the knower and the known" (Ogden & Richards, 1923, as quoted in Calkins, 1927) characterizes several other ideas of meaning. One of the most eloquent scholars of meaning, and certainly one of the most diligently cited, Victor Frankl (1959) treats meaning as a pull instead of a drive—instead of being propelled towards an action by some inner force, people are attracted by the possibilities of being creative, of accomplishing goals and giving to others, of experiencing, of taking insights away from what happens in their lives.

Baumeister and Vohs (2002) see meaning as "an imposition of a stable conception onto a changing biological process… one of humanity's tools for imposing stability on life," while Epps (2003) believes that meaning can be seen as phases in a journey, beginning with idealism and a noble macro-meaning, progressing to frustration or resignation, and culminating with appreciation and gratitude, but some people never complete the journey, and there are variations even within the stages. Dehler and Welsh (2002) claim that the search for meaning is essentially emotion—"internalized and personal *feelings* [sic] of meaning, purpose, knowing, and being"—that energizes action. Other typologies focus on distinguishing between cognitive, motivational, affective, relational, or personal meaning (Wong, 1998), or between altruistic, dedicated, creative, hedonistic, or self-actualizing meaning (Yalom, 1980).

*Meaning-Making*

A related body of literature describes meaning or meaningfulness as something that is created by the individuals who experience it. In their meaning maintenance model, Heine,

Proulx, & Vohs (2006) follow those they call the "Western existentialist" philosophers in claiming that humans have a need for meaning that drives us to "make connections, find signals in noise, identify patterns, and establish associations." Similarly, Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) discuss how people deal with loss by distinguishing between "meaning-as-significance," or finding benefits in life, and "meaning-as-comprehension," or making sense of life. Wrezsniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997) frame meaning in terms of relationships with the work—whether it is seen as a job, to earn money, a career, with potential for advancement and enrichment, or a calling, which is an integral and fulfilling part of life.

Likewise, both Blatt & Ashford (2006) and Isaken (2000) see meaning as something that is constructed in response to an individual's interaction with the work environment. Blatt & Ashford suggest that it is derived from 1) work arrangements, 2) occupations, 3) developing and growing the self, and 4) making an impact on others; Isaken suggests that meaning is not so much purpose, as commonly interpreted, as "purposefulness that makes life more comprehensible." He further divides meaning in to three realms: 1) the meaning of working, generally and abstractly; 2) the meaning of a particular profession; and 3) the meaning of the particular job. These models assist us in understanding how meaning is made but only roughly address the results of the process by which individuals come to experience meaningful work. What happens once individuals understand their work and perceive it as having intrinsic value?

*Positive Associations of Meaningfulness*

Blatt & Ashford (2006) claim that successful meaning-making contributes to "competent goal-directed activity by injecting positive emotions and restoring focus," Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann (2006) link it to a well-shaped identity, and Pratt (2000) ties it to the fulfillment of

dreams. Meaning and meaningfulness, as construed by various researchers, have been linked to engagement, which has in turn been linked to resilience, good health, employee performance, customer loyalty, flow, and other factors (Britt, Adler & Bartone, 2001; Britt, Castro & Adler, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Kahn, 1990; Salanova & Agut, 2005).

In addition, meaning and meaningfulness have been closely tied to positive outcomes such as reduced stress and depression, clarity of self-concept, and problem-focused coping (Treadgold, 1999), intrinsic motivation (Treadgold, 1999; Wrezsniewski et al., 1997), increased job tenure, effort, commitment, and contribution to the job (Harpaz & Fu, 2002), increased performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Fried & Ferris, 1987), reduced social loafing (Karau & Williams, 1993; Williams & Karau, 1991), reduced boredom and consequently reduced dissatisfaction, reduced hopelessness (Isaken, 2000), reduced absenteeism (Isaken, 2000; Wrezsniewski et al., 1997), reduced cynicism (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006), empowerment (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997), fulfillment (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), happiness (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006), and increased life and work satisfaction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Chalofsky, 2003; Spreitzer, et al., 1997; Wrezsniewski et al., 1997).

Even the precursors to meaningful work experiences have been studied more than the comprising elements; a few scholars describe meaningfulness as being driven by autonomy, skill variety, task significance, growth satisfaction, and internal work motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987), and appearing when work allows employees to reach their full potential and be associated with an ethical organization, and when work is interesting (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Others believe that experiences of meaningful work can be fostered by such practices as job redesign, path-goal leadership, visionary or charismatic leadership, building communities, involving employees, among others (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Despite all the lovely benefits associated with meaningful work and hypotheses of the conditions necessary to achieve it, empirical research rarely examines the components of having a sense of significance or purpose at work: what actually makes work meaningful. The majority of current studies simply ask participants whether they consider their work meaningful and then compare the close-ended answer to other constructs or phenomena. While this approach allows us to determine which constructs are related to meaningfulness, it accomplishes little in the way of parsing apart the elements that together constitute this vague, broad idea of meaningfulness. Noting that I am on vacation, and that the scenery is pleasant and I feel a sense of relief, does not tell us what a vacation is, or why it has the effects that it appears to. Why should meaningfulness, then, a concept more difficult to grasp than vacations, be any different? In this study, I identify the essence of meaningfulness—what makes a vacation a vacation—by analyzing and integrating the collected perspectives of both scholars and employees.

*The Academic Perspective on Meaningful Work*

Those who have tried to disentangle the meaning of meaningful work vary greatly in their perspectives. In Chalofsky's (2003) view, meaningfulness is an extension of a satisfaction that is more profound than intrinsic or extrinsic satisfaction; it is an "inclusive state of being in which our daily activities give purpose to our lives," and in which we experience a sense of connection between our sense of self—including the traditional intrinsic motivators of actualization and realizing our potential—and our work, including the traditional extrinsic motivators of obligation and external worth, and alignment between the two. Vough (2006) adds: "meaningfulness occurs when an employee seeks a connection between their [sic] sense of self and work target and perceives that the working context provides the conditions to allow for this connection."

Pratt & Ashforth (2003) envision meaningful work as that which is "at minimum, purposeful and significant," and see the construction of meaning as a sense-making process in which people attribute "significance to some target or stimulus by placing it into an existing or emerging cognitive framework." Little (1998) believes it can be measured based on the extent to which it is important, is congruent with employee values, provides an outlet for self-expression, is absorbing, and is enjoyable. Other scholars believe that meaningful work is work which, beyond serving a purpose and being intensely satisfying or richly connected, enables the expression and development of personal identity, spirituality, and relationships.

*Meaningfulness and Identity*

A common lens on meaningfulness takes the self as the starting point. Identity theorists assume that newcomers to organizations seek to establish their identities (Ashforth, 2001), in part because identification helps them to create meaning (Pratt, 1998). Similarly, the most meaningful aspect of being in an organization stems from opportunities to operate in a desirable role (Kahn, 1990), pursue personal projects (Little, 1998), or pursue a calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), all of which are unique pieces of individual identities. Furthermore, identity can only be developed by taking something deep within the self, such as "deeply personal and individual values" (Hoffman, 2002), and connecting it to something external to the self, such as a community: "Committing one's self to becoming a 'good' carpenter, craftsman, doctor, scientist, or artist anchors the self within a community practicing carpentry, medicine, or art" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). This merging of the self with something greater enables a sense of transcendence that is existentially meaningful (Grouzet, et al., 2005; Hoffman, 2002; Pratt, 1998).

*Meaningfulness and Spirituality*

Transcendence is important for the spiritual meaning theorists as well, who believe that the quest for purpose cannot be met by science alone (Hill & Smith, 2002). Meaningfulness, for them, is inherently connected to spirituality, framed in a way that sounds very similar to the principles of the identity theorists. Spirituality, after all, extends beyond the obvious religious connotations to indicate that the "search for meaning and purpose is primary and the goal of living in harmony with others is fundamental;" thus, that which is meaningful includes "accomplishing personal transformation, rediscovering self, beginning a personal journey, having utopian visions, and experiencing renewal" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). According to Ashforth and Pratt (2002), spirituality is embodied by 1) the transcendence of self, which generates a connection to something greater, 2) holism and harmony, which lead to a coherent integration of the various aspects of self, and 3) growth and self-development, which engender a feeling of completeness through the realization of aspirations and potential.

*Meaningfulness and Relationships*

The quality of a person's social relationships has been discovered to be a strong determinant of his/her meaningfulness in life (Allport, 1961), and meaningfulness from this perspective has been thought of as comprising two themes: 1) personal responsibility, of which the four most resonant sub-items in one sample of workers are appreciation, developing relationships, growth, and self-expression, and 2) social responsibility, which includes contributing to society, helping others, and having a positive impact on an organization (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2001). This suggestion is borne out in literature that notes that social relationships are integral to a positive sense of self and meaningful life (Allport, 1961), and that

people's sense of control is strengthened by social support (Hill & Smith, 2002). Grant (1996) notes that simple understanding can become meaningful only when shared with others, Kahn (1990) adds that meaningful connections at work may occur when personal and professional boundaries are loosened, and Little (1998) observes that highly meaningful personal projects are likely to embody a theme of intimacy and connectedness.

*Recapitulation: Towards an Understanding of Meaningful Work*

Bowie (1998) discusses the firm's moral obligation to provide meaningful work, citing both moral and practical reasons that meaningful work contributes to work quality and productivity. In his view, meaningful work is freely entered into, autonomous, supports moral development, provides a sufficient wage, enables the development of rational capacity, and does not interfere with the worker's ideal of happiness. Similarly, Michaelson (2005) reviews the moral obligations of institutions to provide working conditions that are honest, fair, respectful, challenging, democratic and non-paternalist, among others; when an organization can claim such conditions that match the values of their employees, work is meaningful and motivating. Likewise, Mele (2003) writes that humanistic managers take into account the needs and motivations of their employees, including the desire for self-actualization. Several other scholars suggest, however, that meaningfulness is subjective and different for every individual (Davis et al., 1998; Isaken, 2000; Wrezsniewski et al., 1997).

Despite the underlying sentiment shared by meaning scholars that it is important to understand meaningfulness, compelling evidence surrounding the positive outcomes that may stem from meaningful work, and an abundance of theories on what meaningfulness may be related to, we lack a persuasive argument that spells out the meaning of meaningful work. As

academics continue to explore the relationship between people and their work, how people interact with their environments, and why it is that people act as they do, the distinction between work's meaning simply as definition and its meaningfulness as significance becomes increasingly important. As scholars are better able to define the target of their research on the positive consequences of meaningful work, awareness of what makes work meaningful will enrich further analysis into both research on the experience of work in the fields of management and organizational behavior and research on the importance and definition of meaningfulness in psychology. If practitioners hope to encourage employee commitment for example, by facilitating the experience of meaningful work, or if employees seek to reflect on the significance of their work, they must first understand what makes work meaningful for individuals.

*Composing the study*

Based on the theories discussed above, it would appear that meaningfulness has a component of self, a component of connection to others, a component of transformation, and a component of transcendence, among others. Even this, however, does not tell us what creates meaningfulness. Are some conditions more likely to lead to the experience of meaningful work? Are particular concepts more frequently associated with meaningfulness? In order to enhance our understanding of meaningfulness, I sought to elaborate the concept of meaningful work by asking individuals to discuss the ways in which their jobs are meaningful.

Since I intended to build theory rather than confirm existing theory, I avoided the imposition of any pre-existing assumptions as to what makes work meaningful in designing my study, and focused on identifying the component pieces of experienced meaningfulness. From my findings, I developed a two-part framework indicating that work is experienced as

meaningful when the experience consists of a subject, or domain of interest, and an object—a person or persons on whom the experienced is focused. In the next few sections of this paper, I will discuss the data sample and methods of the study, present a framework for understanding meaningful work, and address limitations and directions for future research.

## Methods

*Knowledge workers as the population of interest*

Much of the limited empirical meaningfulness research has targeted workers in a given geographical region (Colby et al., 2001) or age group (Markus, Ryff, Conner, Pudberry, & Barnett, 2001) regardless of occupation, people who perform service tasks (Grant, Campbell, Chen, Cottone, Lapedis, & Lee, 2007), or people in the manufacturing industry (Harpaz & Meshoulam, 2004; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). A few authors have explored related constructs in a knowledge context, such as studying human resource executives and spirituality (Mitroff & Denton, 1999), technology workers and their orientations towards work (Harpaz & Meshoulam, 2004), or independent creative workers and meaning-making (Blatt & Ashford, 2006). Nonetheless, little research exists specifically on the components of meaningfulness in knowledge work.

Knowledge work is an increasingly important subject in organizational scholarship as people seek to understand its boundaries and experience, and it is sometimes considered the employment of the future as manufacturing and even service industries are starting to move overseas. As classically conceptualized by Peter Drucker, knowledge work requires formal education and "the ability to acquire and to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge" (Drucker, 1994). As opposed to pure service work or industrial work, knowledge work involves

project-based tasks, problem-defining and problem-solving, high levels of collaboration, and the use of information technology (Dehler & Walsh, 2002). Knowledge work tends to involve well-educated employees who monitor, reflect upon, and seek some measure of control over their work experiences in part by molding work characteristics to fit their personalities and needs (Parker, Wall & Cordery, 2001).

This rapidly expanding sector already includes a significant proportion of the work force—some estimates classify more than a quarter of all jobs in the United States as belonging to a knowledge work profession (Blatt & Ashford, 2006; Janz, Colquitt & Nol, 1997; Parker et al., 2001). Even more traditional production perspectives are beginning to recognize the critical nature of knowledge as a source of value in organizations, which are seen as only as successful as their workers' ability to create, transfer, integrate, and capitalize on knowledge, through knowledge management (Grant, 1996). Since knowledge work is fundamentally different from more traditional forms of work in its design, execution, and the clarity with which results can be measured, previous research cannot easily be generalized to include knowledge workers, and scholars and practitioners alike are becoming increasingly attentive to their experiences.

Within the realm of knowledge work, I focused on participants who considered the communicating of knowledge to other people—or teaching—to be an integral part of their jobs. Those who teach are not only engaged in knowledge work themselves but are also responsible for educating other knowledge workers. Perhaps because of this duty, teaching is considered by many to be an intrinsically meaningful profession—one to which people are called (Ashton & Webb, 1986). In addition, teaching can be seen as meaningful because it allows people to make a positive difference in others' lives (Grant et al., 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1996), and because it gives them the chance to have an enduring impact

that extends beyond the present; in other words, the act of teaching "has implications for other people in the future" (Wade-Benzoni, 2005).

In accordance with the aforementioned theories, teaching is a profession that allows a fair amount of autonomy within the confines of curriculums and expectations, requires skill and task variety as well as education, and has high task significance. It also, unlike some other knowledge work professions, demands interaction with other people, is often taken for granted as existing within a community, and is generally entered into by people who have some interest in learning. Since autonomy, skill and task variety, task significance, contact with beneficiaries, belonging to a community, and growth have all been related in some way to meaningful work experiences, teachers are likely to find their work meaningful (see Ashmons & Duchon, 2000; Bellah et al., 1985; Colby et al., 2001; Fried & Ferris, 1987; Grant, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Hill & Smith, 2002; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Sandelands & Bouden, 2002).

Many teachers, however, struggle with the demanding nature of the job and its high potential for burnout, as well as the combination of low pay and relatively low prestige for traditional classroom teachers (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Of all the teachers who enter the profession, approximately 15% leave after one year and another 15% leave after the second; in some districts, fully 40% of teachers resign within the first five years (Weiss, 1999). Even though pre-service teachers are primarily motivated by altruistic, service-oriented goals, the stark contrast of poor pay and benefits, unsupportive administrations, and general lack of satisfaction quickly lead to frustration and burnout (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Weiss, 1999). Furthermore, teachers often engage in intensive emotional labor, moderating their emotional expressions while handling issues that may be sensitive or draining (Hochschild, 1983). As a result, teachers, like any individuals

engaged in low-prestige, challenging, or otherwise undesirable work, are likely to need some sense of constructed or experienced meaningfulness in order to counteract these difficult conditions and stay in their jobs (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

*Participants*

I interviewed 22 participants who defined themselves as knowledge workers. The sample consisted of 12 traditional teachers—ranging from Montessori to University, including public and private institutions in low-income and upper-middle class areas—who are in a classroom for 8-9 months out of every year, and10 non-traditional teachers whose official titles included librarian, consultant, human development professional, relationship manager, technology assistant, and mediation director. I spoke to nine males and 13 females, ranging in age from 22 to over 70. Seven (32%) had less than five years experience in their present positions, six (27%) had between five and fifteen years experience, and nine (41%) had more than fifteen years experience in the same or similar position. Three talked about spending many years out of the workforce for family reasons and at least nine had found teaching as their second, third, or fourth career. For a more detailed description of the participants, see Table 1 in the appendix.

The individuals in my sample vary substantially in terms of the financial rewards and prestige associated with their jobs, the education and training that they received in order to perform their jobs, the practical application of the material they are teaching, and the scope of students that they influence. For example, a first-year third-grade teacher in my sample may make approximately $33,000 a year with a bachelor's degree in education from a four-year university. She works with approximately 25 children for 183 days a year on subjects such as spelling multisyllabic words, counting money, butterfly life cycles, and cardinal directions. An

independent contractor who gives executive education seminars, on the other hand, may make nearly $500,000 a year and has received both academic training (a PhD) and on-the-job training in the form of 50+ years of classroom, clinical, and practical experience. He works with groups of 50-100 adults at a time, in seminars lasting 1-3 days, and teaches them principles of management and leadership development.

Participants in this sample are also likely to have entered their respective professions with different motives and ideas regarding the significance of their jobs, and they operate in organizations with different values and cultures. The majority of my participants work in an academic setting, but five of them work in a corporate setting and nine of them teach a different group of students every time they are in the classroom. Such differences may contribute to varying understandings of why it is meaningful to communicate knowledge to students—in other words, to teach. For example, job characteristics are hypothesized to affect meaningfulness (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Fried & Ferris, 1987): since surgery routinely saves lives and how to tie one's shoe does not, a medical instructor may find his work meaningful in a different way than a daycare instructor, who may prioritize nurturing children rather than saving lives. Likewise, perceived impact is also purported to affect meaningfulness (Grant, 2007; Grant et al., 2007): a paraprofessional who works intensely with one student for 6 hours a day, 180 days a year, has a limited scope of impact compared to a traveling preacher who addresses large congregations, so she may emphasize individual growth rather than the importance of making ideologies accessible to any interested.

*Interview Questions*

I identified and contacted participants through a convenience sample of personal contacts and email invitations. Of the 27 people contacted, only one did not respond, and all who did responded favorably, suggesting that meaningfulness in work may be an interesting and provocative conversation for many people. Alternatively, since teachers are by definition concerned with knowledge and familiar with metacognitive exercises, they may be accustomed to discussing and reflecting on cognitive processes, and are presumably comfortable articulating their thoughts and understandings. Due to time and location constraints, I interviewed 22 people; semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person or via telephone depending on the participant's location, and were recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews typically lasted approximately one hour, with a range of twenty minutes to two hours.

The primary research questions were geared at understanding the components of meaningful work: in short, what contributes to a participant's perception that his or her work is meaningful? The interviews consisted of open-ended questions concerning the nature of the participants' work and their work history, the rewards and challenges they encountered, the ways in which they saw their work as meaningful, the reasons for which they found their work meaningful, the development of their sense of meaningfulness, challenges they'd faced to their sense of meaningfulness, their perceptions of other ideas of meaningfulness within their profession, whether or not they would find other professions equally meaningful, and what they hope to accomplish in their profession, among others. As promising theoretical insights emerged, the interview guide was adapted to include questions that would elaborate on the components of meaningful work and replace less generative alternatives (Eisenhardt, 1989).

*Data Analysis*

Interview transcripts were qualitatively analyzed based on grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). I began by reading the transcripts and grouping passages by emergent general themes that were repeated or common among participants, in order to inductively develop a set of codes that distinguished between the subject of an excerpt and its domain. The resultant framework is presented in Figure 1, the distribution of stories in Table 2, and the distribution across participants in Table 4 (see appendix for tables). A second coder independently read the 239 excerpted stories and labeled each story with exactly one of the twelve categories. We fully agreed on an excerpted story's subject-domain 88% of the time and on its object-focus 85% of the time. Overall agreement was 94%, taking into account both positive identification matches and negative non-identification matches. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the adjusted categories were used for final analysis. Detailed coding results are presented in Table 3.

## Findings

Preliminary analyses led me to realize that stories of meaningfulness have two components. Like a properly constructed sentence, experiences of meaningful work have both a subject—an expression of *what* is meaningful—and an object—a person or persons serving as the subject's target. This awareness of *who* is affected by their work is indispensable to knowledge workers' conceptualizations of meaningfulness and enables them to take an abstract sense of a particular domain or interest being important and frame it in a concrete, tangible manner: considering it meaningful. When at least one of these subject-domains is addressed with respect to a particular object-focus, participants experience their work as meaningful.

Four general subjects emerged as being meaningful to participants: 1) seeing or enacting some form of *progress*, 2) building *relationships*, 3) *giving of self*, and 4) *having a place*. Within each subject, three possible objects appeared on which participants focused their conceptualizations of meaningfulness: 1) *self-focus*, 2) *focus on a specific other*, or 3) *focus on a general other*. The interaction between these subjects and objects created twelve primary categories. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the interaction between subject-domains and object-foci, illustrating the twelve consequent categories. Tables 2 and 4 show the number of stories in each category and the proportion of respondents who mentioned each subject, each object, and each category, respectively.

**Figure 1** Subject-object meaningfulness in knowledge work

| Subject-domains | Object-focus: Self-focus | Object-focus: Focus on specific others | Object-focus: Focus on general others |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Progress** | Experiencing personal awareness and growth | Enabling others to learn knowledge and grow non-academically | Doing something which will have implications for the future, meeting needs |
| **Relationships** | Developing personal relationships and connections with other people | Contributing to the successful relationships of others | Understanding relationships from an abstract perspective |
| **Giving of Self** | Sharing personal expertise, values, and making a unique contribution | Being a role model for others | Leaving a legacy through name or ideas |
| **Having a Place** | Understanding personal values, identity, reason for being in the grand scheme of things | Feeling as though having a positive influence on others is an integral part of existence | Making the world a better place |

## Subjects of meaningfulness

When asked in what ways their work was meaningful, participants tended to discuss four general themes. Engaging in these activities and experiencing success in each of these areas contributed to a participant's sense of having meaningful work. By defining meaningfulness in one of these four broad domains, participants are able to label their abstract conceptualizations of what is meaningful to them with a concrete theme of interest; they can then reflect on and converse about how they experience their work as meaningful with terms that are generally understandable to others, instead of simply maintaining vague idiosyncratic ideas. The ability to direct cognitive attention in this way also enables participants to remind themselves of what is important to them instead of feeling lost among all the worthwhile themes and principles clamoring for their limited energy. These four domains represent the subjects most commonly reported as meaningful by the participants in this study.

### *Progress*

All participants found progress to be meaningful. In this study, progress is defined as a sense of forward motion where important accomplishments or achievements happen as time passes. Examples of progress may be found in mentoring others or continual learning (Colby et al., 2001). Stories relevant to progress touched on personal growth, creating growth and academic learning in others, conveying life lessons, and meeting the needs of others.

> "That plays right into the role of an educator in general, effecting change in people, and I think for me that's very important. I wouldn't be able to imagine just doing the same thing every day and not really growing as an individual or learning as an individual, so that affects why I enjoy teaching so much, because I know that people are changing and growing, even if it's just a matter of learning how to use DreamWeaver, that people are changing and growing, acquiring new skills, becoming better people, and I think that's important." – instructional technology librarian

Progress may be meaningful because it permits the realization of aspirations and potential and leads to a sense of completeness or transformation (Ashforth & Pratt, 2002; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), or because it produces a tangible and concrete correlation between effort and results, fulfilling what Deci & Ryan (2000) consider a need for perceived competence.

*Relationships*

Some scholars believe that the quest for meaningful work stems from the desire to be connected to others, as opposed to the desire for personal growth (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000); this framework proposes that connections to others, or relationships, are a domain in which people find meaningfulness in addition to, not exclusive of, the domain of progress. "Part of being alive is living in connection to other human beings," according to Ashmos & Duchon (2000). Humans have a compelling, fundamental desire for belongingness, which Baumeister and Leary (1995) describe as a "pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships." This sentiment is more important to people than pay or security (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

> "No, I mean when I think of that word [meaningfulness]… to me it often is connected with personal relationships, I mean relationships at work… relationships with other people." – Organizational Development consultant, engineering and construction company

Centrally important in the way we think and behave, relationships are "more than a need for mere affiliation," and the failure to satisfy this desire produces ill effects beyond temporary distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As one participant said:

> "Look at a person like Jeffery Dahmer, Charles Manson, Ted Kaczynski: they didn't connect with people, their souls were not touched by other souls and they don't have empathy and they become killers, mass murderers, terrorists. Just for the survival of our species I think it's important that we make connections

> because the people that feel like they haven't made any connections are the ones who drastically, and with angst, try to disrupt the lives of others… the purpose of connecting with people is to try and better the world. I mean really, I think that it makes the world a better place." – middle school English teacher

Communicating knowledge, whether in a classroom year-round or through discontinuous but frequent seminars, lends itself to the development of relationships, which then enable people to feel as though they are a part of a greater society and intimately associated with others.

*Giving of Self*

Beyond simply being connected to others, however, people want to give of themselves to others. In this study, *giving of self* is defined as sharing some aspect of the self with others, such as knowledge, time, or caring, devoting energy and resources to other people, and/or passing on personal ideas and efforts. In contrast to job-mandated giving of time or resources, such as a required number of hours in the classroom or the basic presentation of information, *giving of self* emphasizes supplementary effort on the behalf of another person or persons; nothing is asked in return because the giving is in and of itself meaningful.

Allport (1961) considers this extension of self to others via relationships to be the "earmark of maturity." He also writes that "true participation gives direction to life," perhaps because it "connects the self to those who teach, exemplify, and judge [our] skills. It ties us to still others whom they serve" (Bellah et al., 1985). People find it meaningful to express compassion or to pass a work ethic on to their children (Colby et al., 2001), and some research has demonstrated that having a positive impact on others can be highly motivating (Grant et al., 2007). Participants in this study mentioned giving of themselves by being a positive influence, by being a role model to students or to less-experienced colleagues, by sharing their expertise in staff meetings, by fulfilling others' needs, and by leaving their ideas for future generations.

> "It's the creativity of pulling many ideas and then having some time to mesh them together in a way that I hope its going to make sense for people and then hearing people say "thanks that was helpful" and knowing that there are people doing something slightly differently because of what I taught." – director, mediation services

> "I felt that as a high school teacher, that I'm kind of a role model for some of these students... unfortunately, I would say about 90% of my students [who] were male, they didn't have a positive male role model in their lives. And that was meaningful to me in that position." – instructional technology librarian (former high school teacher)

Since death is inevitable, many people may find it meaningful to leave a legacy in a way that can be appreciated by future generations; in this sense, they live on beyond their biological lifespan. As generativity scholars would claim, giving may be an imperative for reasons of reproductive concern, transcendence, symbolic immortality, societal demands for productivity, or biological drive—the desire to give stems from a commitment to the belief that giving is meaningful (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Older participants, in particular, tended to talk about their children or grandchildren and the type of world they hoped to create for them, and intergenerational altruism has been cited as being meaningful to people because it gives them a sense of purpose and lets them feel as though they "have made a useful contribution to the world" (Wade-Benzoni, 2005).

> "Instead of you just leave the last day and take [your ideas] all with you, you have a chance to influence somebody else who can maybe influence somebody else, and it's almost like establishing your immortality through a chain of ideas." – middle school English teacher

Stories in the domain of *giving of self* are not concerned with what participants are getting from their work, but rather what they are giving to their work; appreciation of efforts is nice, but not necessary (Kahn, 1990). This is consistent with Vough's (2006) conception of meaningful work when employees share a purpose with their organization.

*Having a Place*

Another domain of meaningfulness describes a strong compulsion that work is meaningful because it is what individuals feel like they are supposed to be doing, for whatever reason. It may encompass a sense of moral obligation, a sense of identification with the profession, receiving feedback that a particular occupation or action is right, an alignment of action with personal values, and a sense of calling. Unlike obligation, however, *having a place* is not imposed by another person or set of rules, but rather an internal understanding of what one ought to be doing. *Having a place* is essentially the awareness that by doing their work, participants have found where they belong in the metaphysical greater scheme of things:

> "You see your place in the larger picture. Maybe that's the whole crux of it; it's as if you're looking at an Impressionist painting. Not only do you see the big picture, but up close it doesn't make sense, but as you pull back you see how it fits." – Reading Recovery specialist

In the interviews, participants often had a very difficult time expressing why these items were meaningful, just that they were, and that their causes were deeply rooted in emotion, spirituality, and being. Stories in this domain frequently struck an interesting balance between volition and predetermination:

> "Why is it meaningful for me? Well I guess it's because how my brain is wired. It must trigger some endorphins or some good feelings for me. Which is why I think everybody feels differently about what meaningful is." – middle school science teacher

> "I think there are other jobs that are equally meaningful for the people who are doing them but I don't know that I would have either the physical or intellectual or emotional capacity to do those jobs. I look at a job like nursing, I would have to think that nursing physicians would find their job extremely meaningful but not everybody can take care of people who are ill. That's a different type of caring, not everybody has either the physical or the emotional ability to handle that." – high school French teacher

Individuals may feel obligated to pursue a certain profession because that is the best fit for their personalities (Holland, 1996), because it matches their skills and interests, because they are called to do so by a higher power, or because that is where their passions lie:

> "I guess for me the right thing really has to do with my personal moral values and ethical values; it's treating people the right way, it is the concept of being honest, being fair, being respectful, caring about people and their feelings. It doesn't mean that we don't make hard decisions because we have to, but knowing that they're made with thought and concern… with caring, kindness, compassion, fairness, and those kinds of things, so I really get what I morally and ethically believe is right. So it's tied back to the way I was raised, so it's really very core values." – director of Leadership Development, financial services company

> "Sometimes I really feel that one experiences a calling. And I think the reason I said yes [to becoming a teacher] is at some level, it was the right thing to do." – adjunct executive education professor

The four subject-domains of experienced meaningfulness, *progress*, *relationships*, *giving of self*, and *having a place* overlap considerably with the theories in the literature exploring and explaining why certain concepts are considered meaningful. They represent the four themes that emerged as being most important to participants, but participants would not have been able to fully express their significance without the addition of target objects.

**Objects of meaningfulness**

In addition to having a subject, participants' descriptions of what makes their work meaningful also centered around one of three foci: themselves, a specific other, or a general other. Without a referent, or a specific focus on a person or persons who benefit from their work, meaningful work cannot exist for teachers. Having direct objects on which to concentrate their attention allows participants to construct meaningfulness that is tangibly important to a person or persons, instead of wrestling with an abstract sense of significance. This enables them to frame their contributions in a way that permits them to gauge the consequences of their energies.

*Self-focus*

A focus on the self emphasizes the personal, internal aspects of an individual's personality, introspection, life experiences, mentality, and attitudes. Colby et al. (2001) listed several examples of enacting responsibility to the self: satisfaction or appreciation, developing personal relationships with others, growth, self-expression, education, and enjoyment. The participants who discussed meaningfulness with a self-focus echoed some of these themes, but also spoke of excitement, variety, fulfilling a personal mission, value alignment, a sense of identity, and others:

> "It is rewarding, it is fantastic, I like it a lot, but it is difficult, and you will be tried, and how you bounce back is going to be a total reflection of you, and you are not going to recognize yourself in two years because you are going to grow so much and get so much strength and just find out so much about yourself personally, professionally, and socially. It's going to be fantastic." – high school science teacher

> "I've discovered that if I'm aligned with my purpose and values, then I'm happy as a clam, but when I'm in a situation where I don't believe in what's happening in the philosophy of the people in charge, it's very, very difficult." – information technology relationship manager

Baumeister & Vohs (2002) claim that in some ways, the self has become a value in and of itself, responding to a perceived gap between what is good and what exists in the modern world; meaningful work enables people to serve themselves in part by building a sense of self-worth as they feel their contributions and efforts are being directed in a constructive manner. Value alignment is a common indicator of meaningful work, because of the existential purpose that work serves when it brings the employee closer to a set of personal or professional values and principles that transcend the self (Grouzet et al., 2005; Hoffman, 2002).

Work often also serves to create an identity, and self-focused accounts of meaningfulness often center on this sense of identity. Professionals are usually defined by what they do, as

opposed to what groups they belong to (Pratt et al., 2006), and workers who communicate knowledge focus on teaching as being an integral part of their identities:

> "I always loved it, I always enjoyed it, I always had fun doing it, and even when I was in private practice as a psychologist, that also is teaching... I realized with that movie [that] I had always been a teacher. I was a teacher in public schools, I was teaching when I was teaching at college, I was a teacher when I was in private practice, I was a teacher in terms of consulting, in terms of teaching in terms of management development, that's always been the central core." – adjunct executive education professor

As a result of experiencing fulfillment in his chosen career, this individual has incorporated teaching into his definition of who he is, and it has become inseparable from his self, and therefore meaningful. Participants focusing on the self as the tangible object find their work is meaningful because of the way it personally affects them.

*Focus on a specific other*

Markus et al. (2001) note that college-educated people are much more likely to be self-focused than are those with only a high school education. In this study, however, 95% of participants (all but one) focused on specific other people when they talked about the meaningfulness of their work, which is not surprising because teaching is, after all, a profession that "naturally call[s] forth a concern for contributing to others' welfare" (Colby et al., 2001). A focus on a specific other occurs when an experience of meaningfulness is addressed from the viewpoint of one non-self person or a small group with explicit boundaries. Their work is meaningful because of what it signifies for specific others.

For example, someone might speak of growth in a student, from the perspective of the student, or of helping people develop relationships with each other—as opposed to developing a relationship between the self and someone else:

> "Watching students go help kids that don't do well. So we have a pyramid of strategies here that we put kids through. You know, they go in the ARK or they go to after school study center and watching kids go through the process, watching people want to help them and then eventually the result, hoping all goes well that they succeed and they come through it and they've learned something from it." – high school English teacher

The subject-focus of a specific other also includes clearly defined groups such as "my students," when referring to those in a particular class or year, or "the people to whom I taught DreamWeaver" or "those who benefited from my ideas:"

> "[It's meaningful] to have [former students] come back and say if it weren't for having you in middle school, I don't know if I would be as successful as I am right now, or I don't know if I would have restored my relationship with my father if it wouldn't have been [for] some advice you had given me." – middle school English teacher

> "One of the things I'm starting to think about is employee engagement and how do we have all our employees feel connected, and how do you do that? … How do we make employees feel connected so on Sunday night they say "I can't wait to go to work tomorrow," and when they're here, they feel commitment, loyalty, and it's not just about when am I going to get my next raise, not that anyone would turn down a raise if it were offered them, but that that's not the only reason they're here." – director of Leadership Development, financial services company

*Focus on a general other*

Over time, dreams may evolve to include helping other people, larger groups of people, and more abstract, difficult goals such as saving the world (Pratt, 2000). These goals may encompass social responsibility themes, such as contributing to society or the community, demonstrating compassion, and having a positive impact on a more broad scale (Colby et al., 2001). Focusing on a general other as the object of a meaningful experience moves beyond focusing on a specific other, addressing the domain from the point of view of a group that cannot be clearly delineated, such as "all people" or "these children" or "my students."

As an object, the general other differs from the self or a specific other because it serves as a broad group that will mostly likely never know that they were integral to the participant's sense of meaningfulness:

> "There's a good retirement plan and stuff like that... but none of that compares to being able to help the kids and really feel like you saved their soul or you gave them more purpose in life or more direction or more enthusiasm or more motivation—there's nothing that beats that. And after all, that's our future and we have to make sure it's in good hands." – middle school English teacher

> "I appreciate that I'm contributing to education and it feels like that's contributing to the future and to the ongoing advancement of our society, our world hopefully in some way. Kind of bettering things in some way by helping people to understand information, access information, and then build on that information to learn something new." – librarian

People often feel indirectly connected to the future through others, and, by linking themselves to those that are still young and learning, they become a part of "a social entity that will presumably outlive themselves, and thus they gain a bit of symbolic immortality" (Wade-Benzoni, 2005). A focus on a general other permits this relationship with the future, and consequently is frequently referred to in context of an eventual impact that may not be fully realized until after the participant-other relationship is over.

**Categories of Meaningfulness**

The interplay between the subjects and objects of meaningfulness results in a series of specific categories in which participants' conceptualizations of meaningfulness can be considered. The meaningfulness of each category can be distinguished both by its domains and by the person or persons on whom the experience is focused; by representing meaningfulness as consisting of two dimensions, and demonstrating that the dimensions are mutually dependent in work that is experienced as meaningful, this framework adds complexity to existing theories by

proposing component parts to meaningfulness rather than a single continuum or grouping of unrelated themes.

*Self-focused Progress: Personal awareness and growth*

Self-focused progress centers on personal awareness and growth, or, in more spiritual terms, "accomplishing personal transformation, rediscovering self, beginning a personal journey… and experiencing renewal" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). As recorded in Tables 2 and 4, 19 passages (about 8% of 239 total passages) from 11 participants (50% of 22 total participants) expressed self-focused progress in statements such as:

> "There are some great quotes that I use a lot in my own thinking, and one them is Komer, James Komer, who says, "I'm always in the process of becoming." And one of the things I try to explain to the teachers is that you have become in title a teacher, you are a teacher, but you're not done. You are in no way, shape or form finished… you'll learn more by doing it, so be open to the idea that you're not finished." – Reading Recovery specialist
>
> "I'm the kind of person who dips my hand in just about everything I can, and my intrinsic motivation for that is I want to change constantly, I always want to grow, I always want to learn something new, and that plays right into my role here. " – instructional technology librarian
>
> "Teaching allows me to better understand myself. All the writing assignments I give my students, I try to complete them. And writing often is a process of self discovery and I learned a lot about my own beliefs through teaching. My own beliefs, my own desires or what I wish to see in the world politically, spiritually— I discover a lot about my own thoughts through that and that's meaningful to me." – middle school English teacher

*Self-focused Relationships: Personal connections*

This theme includes stories in which the participants develop relationships and connections between themselves and other people, which is presumably meaningful because such relationships create social ties and imply the presence of social support, and provide

opportunities for sharing and intimacy (Allport, 1961; Hill & Smith, 2002; Kahn, 1990; Little, 1998). Twenty-two (9%) passages offered by 13 participants (59%) embodied this theme:

> "When I read students' journals, their essays, their writing, I get such a feel for who they are and their voice and their experiences. That's rewarding. I feel like I'm building a relationship with them by how they're communicating with me." – high school English teacher

> "I have someone in my team who has really had a difficult time the last year, in the sense that she's had some personal issues, she's struggled with conflict with other team members… Working with her to help her be a better teammate and to communicate better and things like that, with her I definitely work much more hands on, so [seeing that] in her is what's really meaningful in the job." – Organizational Development consultant, engineering and construction company

*Self-focused Giving: Personal expertise and values*

When participants talked about giving of themselves with a self-focus, they talked about sharing their personal expertise and values and being able to make a unique contribution; the meaningfulness of such actions are supported by literature in generativity, impact motivation, and intergenerational altruism (Grant, 2007; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Wade-Benzoni, 2005). Eight passages (3%) from seven participants (32%) referenced this idea:

> "I feel good about what I'm doing, that I'm sharing something that other people don't know; it's a kind of expertise that it's not common, not everyone has it, so I'm able to fulfill this role that I have something students can gain from my knowledge, my experience, so I feel good about that." – university lecturer

> "And there is a part of sharing. Teaching is sharing. Teaching is in many ways is the giving of yourself, giving of not just of knowledge… I think a true teacher, someone who really likes teaching, gives of themselves and really shares not just their knowledge, but their person [sic]." – adjunct executive education professor

*Self-focused Place: Personal reason for being*

Many workers in today's society feel a "moral obligation and an entitlement to seek self-knowledge, to cultivate their talents and fulfill their potentialities, and to do what is best for their personal growth and happiness" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) in order to feel as though they belong and serve a purpose in some context. Research on obligations surmises that the psychological contract formed by employees is more important to job-related attitudes and behaviors than formal and explicit agreements, in that it solidifies a set of mutual obligations between an employee and an organization (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003), and that finding one's place in an organization is a moral duty (Bunderson & Thompson, 2007). Fifteen participants (68%) mentioned this sense of *having a place*, with respect to values, identity, mission, or their reason for being, in 34 passages (14%):

> "I just love to be involved in transformations of people. I guess I was sort of put on earth to connect people and to see if I could help them discover a way to transform themselves." – information technology relationship manager

> "That's important to me, that I feel connected, that there's something more than just making money. I know that that's important, I understand that, and I won't deny that it is important, but I do believe that the way I've been able to do my job allows me to do things that are right, maybe sort of touch my moral and ethical fiber in a way that makes me comfortable. It makes me very proud of what I do and proud of the organization that I work for." – director of Leadership Development, financial services company

> "I guess it just fits with my values, like what I think would be important in life is not about how much money you earn or impressing other people but somehow helping another person in some way to achieve a goal or to do something. So I think it's meaningful because it fits with what I think is important in life." – university lecturer

*Specific other-focused Progress: Enabling growth*

Unsurprisingly, teachers are invested in the people to whom they communicate knowledge, and a full 77% of participants (n=17) mentioned the progress of a specific other, whether it be a student or a colleague, as meaningful; it enabled them to see learning, which they valued, and the realization of potential (Ashforth & Pratt, 2002; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992). Forty-six passages (19%) were present in this category, making it the most popular.

> "It's spending 70, 80, 90 hours a week trying to engage and invest your students in why learning about the cell, or learning how to read this paragraph, or writing this plot is more important than going out and getting high, or going and getting initiated into a gang, or going and working at a minimum wage job." – high school science teacher

> "Things like gaining self-knowledge, understanding yourself better, being able to work with other people, those are the kinds of things I work with our future leaders on doing better...there's a lot of opportunity to help them get better in the more human and people side of things, and so that is definitely the most meaningful." – Organizational Development consultant, engineering and construction company

Participants were particularly interested in seeing non-academic learning, although mastery of knowledge was also important:

> "I think it's meaningful because I see the growth in my students. I have freshmen predominantly so I see—they come to me, and maybe they can't write an effective narrative with all this show versus telling which by the time they leave, they know what that is and they can apply it. So I think with teaching you do see some growth... it's meaningful because you see growth, you see change." – high school English teacher

*Specific other-focused Relationships: Fostering connections*

Participants found relationships meaningful not only when they were part of a dyadic connection, but also when they were able to contribute to the creation of a relationship between a

beneficiary and a third party. Four participants (18%) were able to help establish relationships outside of themselves in seven incidents (3%):

> "We did a writing assignment in class, a creative writing assignment, and this girl wrote about her grandfather who had just died and she started crying as she was writing it. And the class was silent because we were all writing but a bunch of people went over to hug her and comfort her and to see—she might not have ever said anything if it weren't for writing to bring that out of her. To see that kind of love being shared amongst community members, these kids hugging each other and fighting through tough times, and to know that maybe my assignment helped bring that out, that affection they showed towards one another, that made it meaningful. " – middle school English teacher

*Specific other-focused Giving: Being a role model*

In addition, participants found it meaningful to give of themselves to a specific other, or beneficiary. Having a positive impact can be motivating, as mentioned earlier, and increased proximity, depth, and breadth of contact with beneficiaries is purported to strengthen perceived impact (Grant, 2007), so it is likely that concentrating on a specific other can enhance an individual's feeling of making a difference by giving of himself or herself. Seven participants (32%) spoke of this type of giving, particularly by being a role model, in 13 passages (5%):

> "And you know the other thing that is a big bonus to me is that it happens to be a Christian school, and I'm able to share my faith with the children." – grades 1-3 Montessori teacher

> "I think to get them to just be more open to new things, be more accepting of new things, to try to problem-solve in maybe ways that they haven't before, I think that is so powerful of a gift to give somebody. I carry a pink gym bag around because it's a girl's color and it drives people nuts, they can't believe it. Or the boys, they mock me and laugh at me and I say, "Why? Says who? It's just a color." Just to be a model for them that we can do whatever we want and we don't have to think something is a girl's color just because people think that. That kind of stuff I think could be so enlightening for kids, I think a lot of kids have epiphanies and I want to help them find some of those small or large epiphanies in their lives, I'd like to be a part of that." – middle school English teacher

> "There's a lot of kids in today's world that don't really have role models, and I'm not saying that I am that to everybody or most of them, but if I make a difference in somebody's life and they have somebody to look up, to it makes me feel good. I've had many kids come up to me and talk to me about other stuff beyond school and it's nice to be there for them if they need that." – high school science teacher

*Specific other-focused Place: Being responsible for others*

Participants who told stories about *having a place* focused on a specific other felt strongly that their mission in life was to make a difference and change people's lives for the better. They believed that having a positive influence helped them be sure of where they belong and what they should be doing, and frequently used examples of receiving favorable feedback to express the meaningfulness in this type of situation. Twenty-one passages (9%) from 13 participants (59%) touched on this theme:

> "I just really thought it was important to be able to share that privilege with other people. I'm so thankful that my folks could afford my education; it's a blessing, it's fantastic and I don't take it for granted, and these kids don't have the financial stability that my family did, so I just want to go back and to help them out in any way that I can." – high school science teacher

> "We had a reference question come in from a homeless man in Florida who was using his public library services to use the computer there, and somehow found us to ask questions about getting housing grants. And I remember thinking to myself "ok, that's what we're here for, I'm really glad he was able to find us." It's hard to get away from something like that… it's good to help people find what they need, is the main thing, I think, whether it's to help them find housing or to help them write a paper." – social sciences librarian

*General other-focused Progress: Meeting needs for the future*

Progress and growth can also be viewed from a broader perspective, where work is meaningful because it contributes in a way that has implications for the future. Progress in general has been demonstrated as being important to participants, and focusing on a general

other takes the significance to a higher level. Perhaps the best exemplar of this theme described the idea of students as an army marching on towards high school:

> "You can't lose sight of the big picture... I call it the seventh grade army. The seventh grade army marches on, by gosh they're the eighth grade army, the ninth grade army, then they'll all go out that door and most of them will go off to college... most will be great." – middle school English teacher

Others mentioned that it was meaningful when their work had intergenerational effects, and/or consequences that would last a lifetime (see McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Wade-Benzoni, 2005). Overall, 15 participants (68%) shared 18 passages (8%) about progress in a general other:

> "Helping students and realizing that you're not just helping them for that one quiz or that one test, but they're coming back sometime ten years later, twenty years later—I just got a photograph and one of my students is doing a doctorate at OSU in French and her daughter is speaking French at home, and so it just keeps going on and on and I don't think you realize that when you start. I think until you've had a certain number of students come back to you, they get old enough, to see that this keeps going into another generation." – high school French teacher

> "To give children a lifelong love of learning... because I think that there's so much that they can learn on their own, and that they can discover, if they have a desire, and if they're motivated, and if they've had a good beginning, and a good fertile ground that's there, if they're interested in finding fulfillment. Fulfillment from learning. I think they'll all be able to discover their strengths and their passions, and find meaning for their life, and be able to serve others, because they'll be passionate about something." – grades 1-3 Montessori teacher

*General other-focused Relationships: Understanding in abstract*

Since relationships typically involve two or more people who are immediately and directly in contact with each other, they are more difficult to think about in a general sense. Four participants (18%), however, did bring up 6 passages (3%) touching on the meaningfulness in understanding and contributing to relationships from an abstract perspective such as that of "all humans" or "the entire world:"

> "I think [the most important thing is] each others' souls. What separates us from other animals and other species. So getting to make those connections with people and to help them make connections… I really believe that the most important thing we can do in the world is try to restore love and respect and there's such a lack of it… I don't see any kind of money that could be better than that; I don't see any type of reward in the world better than that—that kind of appreciation from one human being to another, a connection between two souls." – middle school English teacher

*General other-focused Giving: Leaving a legacy*

Giving of self to a general other, such as "all people" or "all children," enables individuals to leave behind a legacy, whether it be their name or their ideas, after they pass on. Many people refer to making a contribution to the world as a way to make their lives meaningful, and fill the drive for purpose by creating "something that will outlive themselves… being able to live on, even if only in impact and memory, is something that is very important to human beings" (Wade-Benzoni, 2005). As five participants (23%) described in 12 passages (5%), there is meaningfulness and satisfaction in acting on a "concern for and commitment to future generations," and in knowing that one's life made the world a better place (Hoffman, 2002):

> "An old French philosopher said there's three ways to establish your immortality: some people use religion, some people use their families, and some people use their accomplishments. And your accomplishment could be a place, or designing a warship, or something like we're talking about here… there's other little things that I've been able to pass on, and I know there are teachers in Europe and South America and Asia and the United States using my 38 rules, and I certainly take some satisfaction in that. People are saying this is useful." – middle school English teacher

> "And another would be to do whatever I can to leave whatever useful ideas I have out there somewhere where even after I retire people can find them and use them." – director, mediation services

*General other-focused Place: Improving the world*

The majority of participants felt strongly about making the world a better place and making a positive difference; although somewhat distributed throughout the framework because of the way they were expressed, examples of this idea fell predominantly into the domain of *having a place* with an emphasis on a general other. In a metaphysical sense, contributing to others reassured participants in some way that their existence was worthwhile, because it gave them a purpose and an idea of where they belong. Thirty-three passages (14%) surrounding this theme were passionately discussed by 15 participants (68%):

> "To really, honestly save a life. You can save a person's life in the role that I'm in… Because the world is so chaotic it seems kids growing up with things like 9/11 and war, they don't know who to trust… they often have emotional difficulties and to sometimes be able to help them cope with that, help them understand that, and help them maintain optimism or change their pessimism to optimism—that's so meaningful and it's such a beautiful thing." – high school science teacher

> "I think maybe that just as people, and maybe I'm generalizing and out of my realm here, but I think as people we want to make a difference, we want to make a mark in the world, it's almost like our mission to do something for others, to make the world a better place, in however small a way you can do it." – second grade teacher

> "If you think about the important people in our country it's the younger generation because they are our future. And so if you think about what could be the most important thing somebody could do, yeah doctors obviously are important and all these other fields are important, but man, educating. Today's youth are going to be the doctors of tomorrow taking care of us, they're going to be the engineers of tomorrow, the business people of tomorrow. So I guess one reason teaching is so meaningful is because it's so important for the future of our world and the future of our country… Knowing that I'm making a difference for our world for tomorrow puts the meaning into it." – high school math teacher

This theme recalls Block's (1993) portrayal of stewardship, where individuals become so guided and driven by a set of values that they choose service over self-interest, because they feel that it is their role in society to do so. The variety of themes mentioned by each individual, along

with the fact that all participants made self-focused statements, suggests that drawing a clear line between self-interest and other-interest is rather artificial and not necessarily relevant; the combination of narcissistic and altruistic motives in effecting positive change is, however, beginning to be explored by some scholars (Wade-Benzoni, 2005). Several participants mentioned the importance of balancing these two attitudes that appear to be diametrically opposed by referring to how they perceive their places in the world:

> "I want to use business to accomplish some things, like make it a better world… That may sound like a high-falutin' dream, I don't know, but you know, I don't care. If we're afraid to dream, if we can't dream, if we can't hope that what we do makes at least some difference, then I'm not sure what we're here for anyway [emphasis added]" – adjunct executive education professor

> "I feel like I'm able to do things that are—this is going to sound a little funny maybe—that are right for the world [emphasis added]. They're not just right for the company, they're not just right for me, they're the right thing to do from one human being to another, there's sort of that sense of a higher purpose… [it's] bigger than just making money, it's about doing what's right for the world." – director of Leadership Development, financial services company

*Revisiting the Framework*

Tables 2 and 4 show the number of stories and the percentage of participants in each theme, respectively. The stories were fairly evenly distributed between the three object-foci, although fewer excerpts focused on a general other, suggesting that this broad perspective may be more difficult to conceptualize. Only one participant, however, did not share stories from all three object-foci, and this participant tended to speak either of himself, or in generalities. Of the subject-domains, *progress* and *having a place* were more frequently discussed, but not by significantly more people, than *relationships* or *giving of self*. This indicates that progress is very important to the participants in this study, and that they also felt strongly about finding where they belong in society.

Specific other-focused progress was the most common theme, both in the number of times it appeared and in the proportion of participants who mentioned it; it is not surprising that those who communicate knowledge and disseminate information find it meaningful when their students grow, learn, and understand what they did not previously know. Other-focused relationships, both those focused on a specific other and those focused on a general other, were mentioned relatively rarely, because relationships are typically thought of as being a connection of the self to others and less commonly as a general principle. Given the small sample size, variation within the sample could not be statistically analyzed, but no significant variation was noted between genders or occupations or tenure, implying that conceptualizations of meaningfulness are independent of such demographic factors.

**Discussion**

I have explored the components of meaningful work and identified two dimensions: a subject-domain, or *what* is meaningful about the work, and an object-focus, or *who* is affected by the work. Together, the subject and object interact to create a sense of meaningfulness, or a *why* of work. Meaningfulness has traditionally been conceived of as occurring when an event or situation falls within a given topic—relationships are meaningful, growth is meaningful, or spirituality is meaningful—and both the necessary conditions for meaningful work, such as well-designed jobs or ethical organizations, and its potential benefits, such as motivation or fulfillment, are far better understood than its component parts. It turns out, however, that finding work meaningful is dependent on more than a simple thematic explanation.

This two-part model of meaningful work contributes to the existing literature by developing a more holistic, intricate understanding of what meaningfulness means and by

presenting the importance of having a focused object on which individuals can concentrate their efforts at work. Without this second component, experiences of meaningful work cannot be fully appreciated or articulated, and to scholars seeking to understand meaningfulness, it is just as important as the first, thematic component. Additionally, both practitioners hoping to facilitate meaningful work experiences for their employees and employees themselves seeking meaningfulness in their work lives can take these two dimensions into consideration when engaging in job-crafting to frame their work as a good fit for their personalities and values, or in coping with difficult work situations.

This study focuses on individuals in teaching professions, either in a traditional classroom setting or not, who are likely to have been both selected and socialized for certain characteristics that are an integral part of the job description, such as a value for helping other people. Teachers help people who are by definition less knowledgeable than themselves, and they do so by communicating knowledge and sharing their personal expertise with others. It is unsurprising, then, that most of the participants found creating learning, forming relationships, making a difference for the future, and giving of self to be meaningful.

Regardless, the role of socialization and justification must be taken into account; people in low prestige jobs or jobs with low financial compensation may be more likely to need a constructed meaningfulness to explain why they continue in their work, according to theories of insufficient justification which suggest that employees rationalize working in unfavorable conditions (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Grant, 2007; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) or divest themselves of an existing identity in order to develop a new one within organizational boundaries (Pratt et al., 2006). As one participant said, "Overall, I think teachers have to find what they do meaningful; otherwise they get out. There would be no reason to be here, to get

beat up by kids on occasion or administration, if you don't feel like what you're doing is worth something." Several participants, however, mentioned that they had never explicitly tried to articulate why their work was meaningful, and that they found this exercise insightful.

Similarly, money rarely came up in the interviews. Only a handful of participants stated that financial gain and security made their work meaningful, even though many participants mentioned it as a benefit that they would not surrender. Those who did touch on financial gain were quick to explain that the money itself was not meaningful to them, but rather what the money would allow them to accomplish: "I'm eventually starting a family; I want to live in a nice place for my kid, and family, and maybe money is a little bit important… I guess no, the money in itself isn't [meaningful]. The neighborhood, the school system, the ability to give a better life [are]." Much like religion, money is almost a taboo topic in general conversation, and many people are socialized not to believe—or at least not to admit—that the pursuit of money is meaningful. Nonetheless, it is more important than many people claim (Rynes, Gerhart & Minette, 2004), and can have an instrumental meaningfulness if it comes from a passion and is representative of pursuing that passion (Furnham, 2002), or if it is a means to something absolutely meaningful such as providing for family.

While some scholars have included financial support (Mitchell & Mickel, 1999; Super & Sverko, 1995) or sensemaking (Pratt & Ashforth, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) in their conceptualizations of meaning in work and/or meaningful work, this suggests that money and definition are instrumental, or ends that satisfy first-order needs such as subsistence and comprehension: there exists an achievable goal which employees pursue when they work, and work seems to be meaningful because it contributes to the achievement of that goal. Beyond this, however, exists a deeper meaningfulness of work that serves a higher-order,

more existential purpose. Work may enable people to *create and sustain progress*, which is fulfilling because it showcases the consequences of their efforts, or it may enable them to *feel intimately connected to other human beings*. It may also enable them to *give to others* and contribute to the world as opposed to simply taking up resources, or *find their place* in an often nonsensical universe. The meaningfulness of work in this sense is indefinite; the goals that it entails are generally abstract, not necessarily achievable, and progress is not necessarily measurable.

**Limitations and Caveats**

The application of this interview study has its limitations. The interview participants represent a small sample of all teachers, let alone all knowledge workers. While many of their experiences are likely to be shared by other people who communicate knowledge to students, this data is certainly not comprehensive or exhaustive. Despite variations in salary and prestige, the participants were all financially comfortable; people who find that teaching is detrimental to their economic well-being may find different meaningfulness in their work. Furthermore, the sample was restricted to 22 participants, so no statistically significant conclusions can be drawn about variations in sense of meaningfulness based on factors such as age, tenure, gender, pay, prestige, or profession. The study would have to be expanded in order to conduct appropriate analyses or to draw conclusions about correlations between the prevalence or frequency of occurrence of particular categories.

Since the goal of this study is to determine what teachers find meaningful in their work, it is important to remember that these themes are not exhaustive. Since the data are derived from open-ended interviews instead of closed choices, factors that create meaningfulness for

participants may not have been fully expressed; in other words, some themes that were not explicitly stated during the interviews may have nonetheless been present in a participant's sense of meaningfulness. As a result, counts of the frequency of particular themes should not be taken as definitive, and a theme being mentioned less often does not imply that it occurs less or is less important to participants.

For example, many researchers believe that spirituality and religion are key components to a person's sense of meaningfulness (see Gialacone & Jurkiewicz, 2002), but only four participants in this study mentioned either. Since many Americans, particularly those who work in public institutions such as schools, are trained not to speak about their faith, it is possible that the role of spirituality and religion is underestimated by this study. It is worthy of note that one of the four participants who did touch on this subject teaches in a Christian Montessori school, where sharing of faith is actively encouraged.

Many of the participants did note that their sense of meaningfulness has deepened, strengthened, or ultimately changed during the course of their careers. Specifically, they agreed that even though they had always felt their work was meaningful, they had not been able to fully grasp why or how it was meaningful until later in their lives. In accordance with this observation, transcripts of interviews with the younger participants appeared to yield fewer coded passages than transcripts of interviews with participants who were further along in their careers, although there were definitely exceptions; younger participants tended to simply state that their job was meaningful, and give general principles as explanation instead of examples and stories.

This raises important questions about the phenomenon of young researchers studying meaning; at this stage in our relatively undeveloped careers and lives, are we fully able to comprehend what others are saying about the meaningfulness in their work? Given that cognitive

complexity continues to develop throughout the life span, and people frequently reexamine their life purpose and direction at the midlife stage, can young researchers grasp the nuances and subtleties in the way their interview subjects frame meaningfulness? What implications does this have for thinking that our own work is meaningful, and what contributions can we make in a field dominated by older and presumably more mature scholars? More specifically, how much of our contributions should be attributed to youthful idealism as opposed to true wisdom?

Luckily, the wisdom literature reassures us that after a certain point in early adulthood, wisdom remains relatively stable throughout the developmental life span and does not continue to increase; instead, it is heavily influenced by such factors as personality, context, and experiences (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001). Sternberg's (1998) balance theory of wisdom also highlights the importance of tacit knowledge. Consequently, it is plausible to believe that meaning researchers are exposed to personal and professional experiences that enable and qualify them to comprehend, study, and build meaningful theory on meaningfulness, regardless of age. Finally, repeated reading, conversation, and discussion likely also contribute to the development of some amount of reliable expertise.

**Implications for Future Research**

Nevertheless, the relative age and development of meaning researchers would provide an interesting direction for further exploration. In addition, a few supplementary themes and ideas emerged from the interviews that would require writing an additional thesis to do them justice; seven participants, for example, stated that their work was meaningful because it was fun. Engaging in work tasks was pleasurable, and they enjoyed it. Since fun was always mentioned in combination with an element of meaningfulness found in my framework, further research could

explore whether "fun" is simply another way for participants to express that something is meaningful to them, or whether it is a separate domain worth investigating on its own.

A second direction for further research would involve the examination of meaningfulness as profession-specific. Of the 13 participants asked whether another profession would be as meaningful as their current one, 10 responded positively. This finding contradicts evidence that people feel called to a particular profession (Bellah et al., 1985; Bunderson & Thompson, 2007; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and suggests that meaningfulness in work is not dependent so much on the work itself as it is on personal attributes or the context and consequences of the work.

The alternative professions listed as being potentially as meaningful as teaching, such as counseling, social work, nursing, clinical psychology, and human resource work, all involve repeated and prolonged interactions with other human beings, which Grant (2007) posits is both meaningful and motivating. Each of these professions also provides plenty of opportunity for progress, relationships, giving of self, and having a place, just as teaching does, and can also be viewed from different foci. It would be interesting to investigate whether or not people in other knowledge work professions that perhaps do not demand as much interpersonal interaction, or involve the analysis and manipulation of knowledge as opposed to its transmission, would report similar conceptualizations of meaningfulness.

Participants in this study were also asked if their idea of meaningfulness had ever been challenged, and if so, how had they responded. Meaninglessness, aside from lacking the positive associations that meaningfulness has, brings with it boredom, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction (Isaken, 2000), susceptibility to influence and change (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), social alienation and fear (Ali et al., 1995), an impending sense of one's own mortality (Wade-Benzoni,

2005), and an existential neurosis that is associated with fatalism, cynicism, pessimism, anxiety, loneliness, disappointment, and emptiness (Maddi, 1967).

The majority of participants answered that yes, they had experienced challenges to their sense of meaningfulness and had doubted at points whether their work was meaningful at all. At the time of this study, however, nearly every participant had regained certainty that his/her work is indeed meaningful. The psychology and job literatures are full of research on coping with job transitions (Wrzesniewski, 2007), meaning-making as a form of coping (Park & Folkman, 1997), general coping with internal and external demands (see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004 for a review), resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002), and specifically resilience in organizations (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). This data from this study could provide interesting insights into meaningfulness restoration and whether people respond to stress by making meaning, turn to their sense of meaningfulness as a justification for staying in unpleasant situations, or employ other processes to create and maintain a sense of meaningfulness in their work.

**Conclusion**

This exploratory study contributes a framework by which scholars can begin to construe meaningfulness; instead of being a one-dimensional concept, meaningfulness must have both a subject-domain and an object-focus. The subject-domain, or topic, frames an individual's influence as contributing to a particular field or area. In this study, participants' understandings of meaningfulness were identified as belonging to four subject-domains: 1) *progress* refers to a learning or growth that moves a person forward; 2) *relationships* refers to the establishment of connections between people; 3) *giving of self* refers to sharing time and resources with other people; and 4) *having a place* refers to locating where an individual belongs within the greater

universe. The subject-domain distinguishes stories based on the influence that the meaningful work is having, whether it is creating progress or relationships or allowing individuals to give of themselves and feel as though they have a valued place in society.

In addition to having a thematic subject-domain, an experience of meaningfulness must also have a general target. An object-focus enables individuals to localize the direction of their energies and visualize the consequences of their actions. Experiences of meaningfulness inevitably have a person or group who are affected most by the experience, and this intermediate cognitive step of defining an object-focus links an individual to an outcome. Conceptualizations of meaningfulness may focus on the self, on a specific other person or small group of people, or on a general, non-definable other.

Scholars in many disciplines have long been fascinated with the idea of meaningfulness, and the fact that humans want desperately to believe that their lives and their actions are worthwhile. Organizational researchers have associated meaningful work with several positive consequences for both employees and organizations, some philosophers claim that it is an organization's moral imperative to provide meaningful work, and practitioners are interested in doing so for its tangible benefits. Research on meaningfulness, however, is scattered and largely theoretical in nature, and focuses on its outcomes rather than its antecedents. In developing this framework, this study fills a gap in the literature concerning what exactly meaningfulness entails, and compiles hypotheses proposed by various scholars in presenting a full and rich conceptualization of meaningfulness in knowledge work.

## Epilogue

Once upon a time, since all good stories begin with those four magic words, someone somewhere planted the idea of writing a senior honors thesis in my young and impressionable mind. I don't remember if this was before or after I contemplated pursuing my undergraduate education elsewhere, but I do know that staying was the right choice; I stayed because I was fascinated by the intellectual and experiential possibilities that Adam's Impact Lab introduced, and intrigued by the vibrant and welcoming research community here at the University of Michigan. It has been an unquestionably marvelous decision.

When it came time to propose a thesis, I spent months trying to determine what interested me most; I always felt particularly enlivened by readings and discussions on virtues, values, wisdom, thriving, idealism, and other related conversations that bordered on philosophy and touched on who we are as people—and who we are capable of becoming. Perhaps it has something to do with U2's vision that grace is "a name for a girl; it's also a thought that changed the world." I am also somewhat of an information addict; I adamantly believe in the power of knowledge and in learning for learning's sake, and consequently have always been passionate about incessant reading, reflective writing, and a multidisciplinary liberal arts education. And so I wrote a thesis on the meaningfulness of the work that teachers do, little anticipating when I began that I was about to become a teacher myself.

I again would like to most sincerely thank the brilliant people acknowledged earlier, for letting me into their lives and helping me realize my potential. Your very being has enhanced and enriched my life and my scholarship, and enabled the composition of a thesis that is profoundly important to me partly because of its implications for the field and my future, but mostly because of who I have become through the process and what I am about to do. Whether it is because of the progress I have made, the relationships I have cultivated, the sense that I am sharing myself, the certainty that I am finding my place in the greater scheme of things, or any number of other unarticulated reasons, writing this thesis has been the essence of meaningfulness, and I eagerly await all the more there is to come.

*"If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power,*
*but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible...*
*what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating, as possibility!" ~ Kierkegaard*

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## Appendix

**Table 1** Interview Participants

| Title | Organizational environment | Teaching | Experience in this position |
|---|---|---|---|
| Second grade teacher | public school | Full-time | 20+ |
| Third grade teacher | public school | Full-time | 1 |
| First-third grade teacher | Christian Montessori | Full-time | 6 |
| District-wide Reading Recovery specialist | public school | Full-time | 16 |
| Middle school English teacher | public school | Full-time | 23 |
| Middle school English teacher | public school | Full-time | 6 |
| Middle school science teacher | public school | Full-time | 9 |
| High school English teacher | public school | Full-time | 2 |
| High school English teacher | public school | Full-time | 4 |
| High School science teacher | public school | Full-time | 2 |
| High School math teacher | public school | Full-time | 9 |
| High School French teacher | public school | Full-time | 20 |
| Organizational Development consultant | Engineering and construction company | Workshops, training, coaching | 3 |
| Director of Leadership Development | Financial services company | Workshops, training | 15 |
| Adjunct executive education professor | Independent contractor | Seminars, courses | 30 |
| Management consultant | Independent contractor | Seminars, courses | 29 |
| Director, mediation services | Academic support staff | Workshops, seminars, training | 27 |
| University lecturer | Public university | Part-time | 8 |
| Information technology relationship manager | Academic department | Workshops, training | 40 |
| Information technology librarian | Research library | Workshops | 1 |
| Social sciences librarian | Research library | Workshops | 1 |
| General librarian | Research library | Workshops | 21 |

**Table 2** Number of stories coded

| Subjects of Meaningfulness | Self-focus | Focus on specific others | Focus on general others | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Objects of Meaningfulness** | | | |
| **Progress** | 19 | 46 | 18 | *83* |
| **Relationships** | 22 | 7 | 6 | *35* |
| **Giving of Self** | 8 | 13 | 12 | *22* |
| **Having a Place** | 34 | 21 | 33 | *88* |
| | *83* | *87* | *69* | *239* |

**Table 3** Percentage agreement

| Subject Agreement | Object Agreement | Theme Agreement |
|---|---|---|
| 88% | 85 | 94 |

**Table 4** Percentage of participants

| Subjects of Meaningfulness | Self-focus | Focus on specific others | Focus on general others | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Objects of Meaningfulness** | | | |
| **Progress** | 50% | 77 | 68 | *100* |
| **Relationships** | 59 | 18 | 18 | *68* |
| **Giving of Self** | 32 | 32 | 23 | *73* |
| **Having a Place** | 68 | 59 | 68 | *86* |
| | *10* | *95* | *100* | |