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EDUCATORS' GUIDE

Experiments in Reflection

Climb the Ladder of Meaning

When you get stuck trying to solve a problem, you are most likely trying to solve the wrong problem. By moving between the concrete and the abstract, you can discover which problems are a better fit for where you are and what you want to achieve—otherwise you may discover you were moving down a narrow path that wouldn't take you where you want to go.

The Ladder of Meaning is a tool that will get you to explore the deeper, implicit motivations behind your goals—in other words, your whys—so that you can explore the problem in all directions and expand the realm of possibilities. At the same time, you'll also move toward concrete solutions and actions—the hows—by pausing to think about how else you could achieve something. Throughout the whole process, you'll uncover what really matters to you.

This activity from *Experiments in Reflection* by Leticia Britos Cavagnaro is an invitation to test the hypothesis that exploring multiple levels of abstraction helps you discover what really matters and better ways to get there. It activates two types of thinking that will expand your abilities to make sense of the world: imagination and divergent thinking. It has been adapted for use in high school and higher education classrooms.

Activity: The Ladder of Meaning

LEARNING GOAL

To help learners develop their ability to move from concrete to abstract.

WHERE TO USE THIS ACTIVITY

Classrooms | Virtual learning sessions (Zoom, etc.) | Workshops

MATERIALS

Paper | Writing instrument

FORMAT

Individual work, with opportunity for individual or paired reflection. Suggested sequence and times:

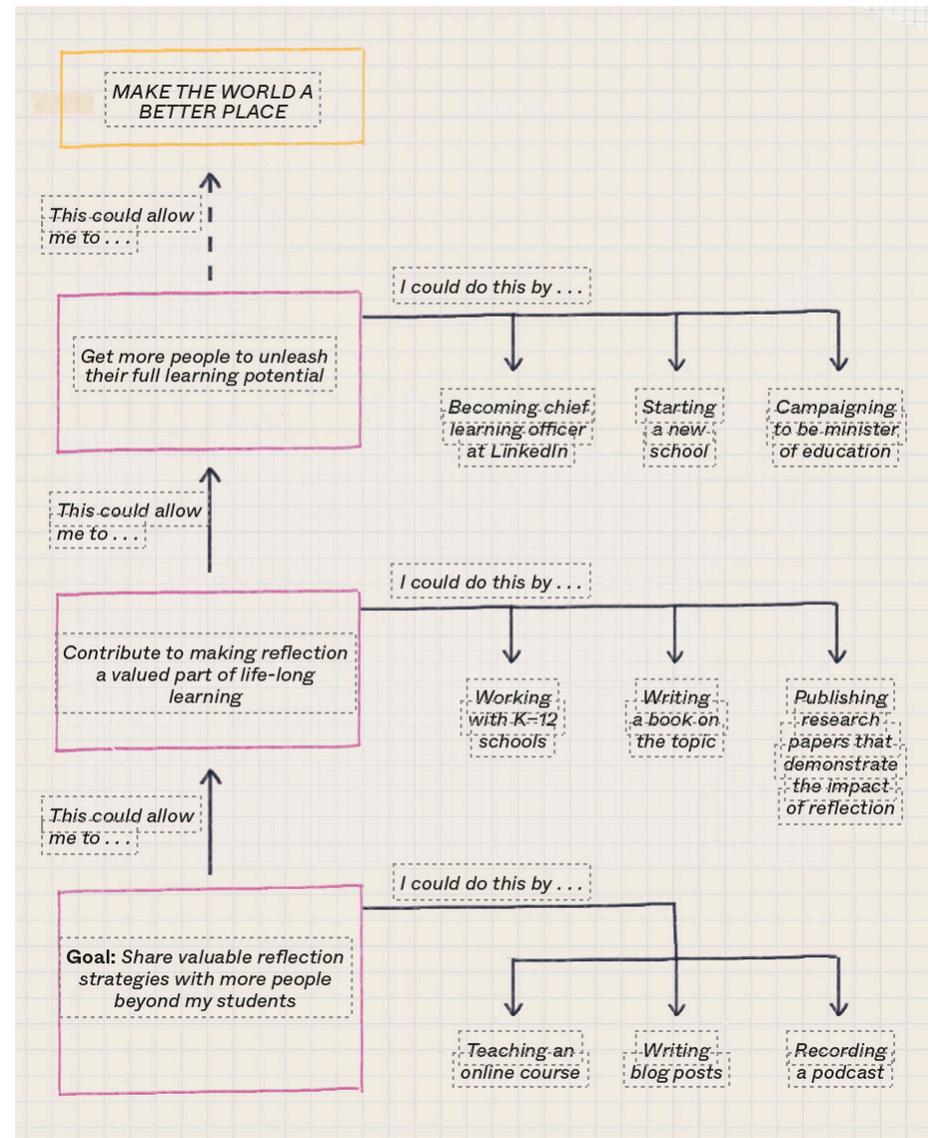
- 1. Individual work (15 min):** Give students this worksheet and ask them to complete their ladder in a separate sheet of paper. You may want to ask them in advance to think about a few goals that they have for their future (those goals could be related to school or not)
- 2. Pair and share (10 min):** Ask students to share their ladder with another student and discuss what they noticed. Students can also help one another complete their ladder with additional ideas.
- 3. Group discussion (10 min)**

INSTRUCTIONS

Read through the instructions, then check out the sample diagram before you start working.

1. Starting at the bottom of a blank page, jot down a current goal you have.
2. Draw an arrow going up from that goal and complete the prompt, “This could allow me to ...”
3. Continue to answer the same prompt for each new statement you write, moving up the page. When you get to a statement that feels too abstract, it’s time to stop (see the example for an illustration of this).
4. Now draw an arrow from the side of your initial goal and complete the prompt, “I could do this by...” Come up with at least three different possibilities.
5. Repeat step 4 for the other goals in your ladder. Always come up with at least three alternatives for each goal.

6. Evaluate the whole set of goals and possible solutions you drafted. Do you see a goal that may be a better fit than the one you started with? A solution that you hadn't considered before? Write down any ideas and insights that come up for you.
7. Reflect. Ask yourself: As you move up and down the ladder you created, what goal feels more promising and accessible to you?



WE'D LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK!



This educators' guide is a prototype (hooray!). We're hoping to understand what types of materials are useful to educators and learners in K12 and higher education classrooms. If you used this, please share your feedback with us in this four-question survey.

WANT TO READ MORE?

Check out *Experiments in Reflection!* The book offers even more ways to reflect on the past, present and future.

Learn about all of our d.school books at dschool.stanford.edu/books.

To request a complimentary examination copy to review for use in your classroom, contact Penguin Random House Education at k12education@penguinrandomhouse.com for PreK–12 Education or highereducation@penguinrandomhouse.com for Higher Education.