



Humanistic Spirit, General Education, and Higher Education: Rethinking Approaches to Fostering Humanistic Spirit among University Students

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ABSTRACT: The development of general education has emerged, in part, from critical reflections on modern education, particularly the concern that contemporary education has produced too many “experts” who possess specialized knowledge but lack a broad understanding of multicultural societies and the complex problems confronting the contemporary world. Narrow and highly specialized professional education may therefore be insufficient to prepare students to adequately address the diverse and multifaceted challenges of contemporary and future societies. Accordingly, general education seeks to promote whole-person development by broadening students’ intellectual horizons, enhancing their humanistic awareness, and cultivating their capacity to understand themselves, others, society, and the world. Ultimately, the purpose of general education is not merely to broaden students’ knowledge but to cultivate individuals endowed with a deep humanistic spirit, enabling them to develop meaningful lives and respond to the challenges of contemporary society with prudence, rationality, and a sense of responsibility. In this sense, the humanistic spirit constitutes the value foundation of general education, while general education serves as an important pathway through which higher education realizes whole-person education and holistic human development. Accordingly, this article argues that the fundamental purpose of higher education should not be limited to cultivating professionally competent individuals. Rather, higher education should seek to cultivate whole persons endowed with a deep humanistic spirit and the capacity to pursue meaningful and fulfilling lives. Such an educational orientation requires universities to move beyond a narrow emphasis on professional competence and knowledge acquisition and to place greater emphasis on human development, ethical awareness, social engagement, and the pursuit of meaning and value in life.

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INTRODUCTION

Education has existed throughout the course of human history and has long played a fundamental role in the development of human civilization. Through education, human civilization has continually evolved and progressed. Accordingly, education is important not only for human survival but also for the development of human nature. At its essence, the true meaning of education lies in “teaching people to become fully human.” In other words, education is a process of cultivating learners, enabling them to transcend their condition as merely natural beings, develop their humanity, and become cultural beings endowed with a strong humanistic spirit. Yet, why does contemporary education continue to produce many students who lack a humanistic spirit and a genuine sense of humanity? A closer examination suggests that this problem is partly attributable to the growing dominance of Western science and technology as major forces shaping the development of modern civilization. Education has consequently become increasingly oriented toward intellectualism, often treating the transmission of knowledge as the primary, or even sole, purpose of schooling. As a result, students may have limited opportunities to explore the meaning and purpose of their own lives, leading to an impoverishment of the humanistic spirit. This condition may further contribute to inappropriate behaviors and unhealthy lifestyles, making it difficult for individuals to attain a fulfilling and happy life. Accordingly, contemporary university general education should place greater emphasis on cultivating students with a strong humanistic spirit and, ultimately, on nurturing the development of the whole person. It should enable students, throughout their long journeys in life, to encounter the light of life, move toward that light, and pursue a life of happiness, thereby discovering and realizing the meaning and value of their existence. Furthermore, given the profound transformations taking place in contemporary society, many of the problems confronting human life have increasingly transcended the scope of what can be addressed through a single traditional academic discipline. Instead, contemporary problems are often characterized by blurred boundaries, interdisciplinary dimensions, and complex interactions and interdependencies across different fields of knowledge. Against this backdrop, general education has received increasing attention in higher education in Taiwan in recent years. Numerous national policies and educational initiatives have emphasized the important role of general education in responding to the rapidly changing social environment and have highlighted the significance of implementing general education. In this context, general education emerged partly from concerns that modern education has produced too many “experts” who possess specialized knowledge but lack a broader understanding of multicultural societies and the complex challenges facing the contemporary world. Such narrowly specialized forms of education may be insufficient to prepare students for the multifaceted challenges of future society. General education therefore seeks to cultivate the whole person by broadening students’ intellectual horizons, strengthening their humanistic awareness, and fostering their capacity to understand themselves, others, society, and the world. Ultimately, the purpose of general education is not merely to broaden students’ knowledge but to cultivate human beings with a strong humanistic spirit, enabling them to develop meaningful lives and respond thoughtfully and responsibly to the challenges of contemporary society. In summary, the humanistic spirit constitutes the value foundation of general education, while general education serves as an important pathway through which higher education can realize holistic education and cultivate fully developed human beings (Agazzi, 1985; Chen & Shih, 2025; Chia, 2005; Huang, 2008; Ou, 2009; Shih, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Tien, 1995; Shih, 2018a, 2018b; Shih, Y, Hsu & Chang, 2025; Wang, 2000; Wu, 2009; Ye, Shih & Wang, 2022). Accordingly, this article emphasizes that the fundamental purpose of higher education is to cultivate human beings endowed with a strong humanistic spirit.

THE MEANING AND CONNOTATIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION

The term “general education” is multifaceted and encompasses a rich range of meanings. In Taiwan, it was historically associated with the notion of “generalist education” (tongcai jiaoyu). In English, general education conveys two closely related meanings: basic or foundational education and education of a general or universal nature. These meanings correspond closely to the Chinese concept of tongshi jiaoyu (通識教育), which emphasizes the acquisition of foundational knowledge and broad intellectual competencies (Chen, 2000). Accordingly, general education encompasses such notions as basic education, general education, common education,

and quality-oriented education. From the perspective of curriculum design, general education emphasizes the breadth, integration, and interconnectedness of knowledge across different fields, rather than narrow disciplinary specialization. The Chinese term *tongshi jiaoyu* therefore represents more than a linguistic designation; it embodies an important educational ideal—namely, the cultivation of humanistic understanding, intellectual breadth, cultural literacy, and the capacity to integrate knowledge across domains (Kuo, 2004; Wu, 2006). In this sense, the conceptual meaning of general education inherently encompasses the cultivation of the humanistic spirit. More fundamentally, the meaning of general education can be understood in terms of intellectual breadth, integrative understanding, and humanistic formation. Intellectual breadth enables students to move beyond the boundaries of specialized disciplines and develop a wider understanding of human beings, society, culture, and the world. Integrative understanding enables them to connect knowledge from different domains and recognize the complex relationships among diverse dimensions of human life. Humanistic formation, meanwhile, emphasizes the development of values, ethical awareness, cultural understanding, and concern for human dignity and well-being. These dimensions together constitute an important foundation for cultivating the humanistic spirit. Accordingly, general education should not be understood merely as the provision of broad-based knowledge or as an educational supplement to professional training. Rather, it represents a fundamental educational endeavor aimed at cultivating the humanistic spirit and fostering the development of the whole person. From this perspective, whole-person formation should not be regarded merely as an educational outcome of general education; it should also be understood as a fundamental educational purpose of higher education. General education therefore serves as an important bridge between knowledge acquisition and human formation, connecting intellectual development with moral awareness, cultural understanding, social responsibility, and the pursuit of meaning in life. Thus, the conceptual relationship may be summarized as follows: General Education → Intellectual Breadth, Integrative Understanding, and Humanistic Formation → Cultivation of the Humanistic Spirit → Whole-Person Formation →

The Fundamental Purpose of Higher Education. This formulation is particularly suitable for your overall argument because it establishes that general education is not simply “education outside the major.” Rather, it is an essential means through which higher education fulfills its broader responsibility to cultivate human beings as whole persons. The term “general education” is multifaceted and encompasses a rich range of meanings. In Taiwan, it was historically associated with the notion of “generalist education” (*tongcai jiaoyu*). In English, general education conveys two closely related meanings: basic or foundational education and education of a general or universal nature. These meanings correspond closely to the Chinese concept of *tongshi jiaoyu* (通識教育), which emphasizes the acquisition of foundational knowledge and broad intellectual competencies. Accordingly, general education encompasses notions such as basic education, general education, common education, and even quality-oriented education. From the perspective of curriculum design, general education emphasizes the breadth, integration, and interconnectedness of knowledge across different fields, rather than the narrow specialization of disciplinary education. The Chinese term *tongshi jiaoyu* is therefore not merely a linguistic designation but also captures an important underlying educational ideal—namely, the cultivation of humanistic understanding, intellectual breadth, cultural literacy, and the capacity to integrate knowledge across domains. In this sense, the conceptual meaning of general education inherently encompasses the cultivation of the humanistic spirit. The conceptual meaning of general education lies in intellectual breadth, integrative understanding, and humanistic formation. These qualities provide an essential foundation for cultivating the humanistic spirit, which in turn contributes to the formation of the whole person. From this perspective, whole-person formation should be regarded not merely as an outcome of general education but as a fundamental educational purpose of higher education. From this perspective, general education should not be understood merely as the provision of broad-based knowledge; rather, it represents a fundamental educational endeavor to cultivate the humanistic spirit and foster the development of the whole person (Chen, 2000; Kuo, 2004; Wang, & Shih, 2022; Wu, 2006).

THE CORE CONNOTATIONS OF THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

Since modern times, following German philosopher Karl Jaspers's advocacy of the idea of the "education of the human person," philosophical and educational thought has continued to deepen its reflection on the human person and the meaning of human existence. Accordingly, the fundamental concerns of education involve not only the transmission of knowledge and the development of skills but also such fundamental questions as "What is a human being?" "What kind of person should one become?" and "How can education facilitate the process of becoming fully human?" This concern with human existence and subjectivity can also be found in the thought of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre emphasizes human freedom, choice, and responsibility, arguing that human beings are not predetermined entities but gradually shape themselves through their choices and actions. Education, therefore, should not merely transmit existing knowledge but should also help individuals recognize their freedom and responsibility and develop their sense of selfhood through reflection and practice (Sartre, 1973). From another perspective, the modern intellectual tradition—from Karl Marx's critique of human alienation, through twentieth-century neo-Marxist reflections on social structures, human emancipation, and human subjectivity, to Jürgen Habermas's concepts of communicative action and intersubjectivity—demonstrates a sustained concern with human dignity, subjectivity, social relationships, and collective life. This intellectual trajectory has also exerted an important influence on the philosophy of education, encouraging education to move beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and skills toward greater attention to human subjectivity, freedom, dignity, social responsibility, and participation in public life. In other words, the essence of education lies not merely in cultivating knowledgeable individuals but also in nurturing whole persons who possess subjectivity, responsibility, and a humanistic concern for others. Within this context, the development of life education and ethical education has further redirected educational attention toward the human person. In particular, the ethics of care, with its emphasis on relationality, responsibility, and caring practices, has expanded moral education beyond the cognitive acquisition of moral rules and value judgments. Instead, it emphasizes how individuals understand the needs of others within concrete interpersonal and social contexts and respond to those needs through meaningful action (Shih, 2010; Ye, 2001). Accordingly, the purpose of education is not merely to enable learners to "know what is good," but also to guide them toward "practicing the good." Through living and interacting with others in society, individuals gradually develop humanistic qualities such as respect, care, empathy, and responsibility. These qualities constitute important dimensions of the humanistic spirit (Kuo, 1993). In summary, when the concept of the humanistic spirit is explored from the perspective of the idea of the human person, it becomes evident that the humanistic spirit does not simply refer to knowledge of the humanities or cultural literacy. Rather, it concerns how individuals understand themselves, others, society, and the world, as well as how they pursue the value of becoming fully human. Its core connotations can be summarized in six dimensions: (1) Development of Personal Virtue: Developing moral subjectivity and a sense of responsibility through moral reflection and practice. (2) Self-Awareness and Subjectivity: Recognizing one's existence, freedom, and responsibility and developing the capacity for autonomous thinking and self-determination. (3) An Ethical Disposition of Caring for Others: Moving beyond self-centeredness to understand, respect, and respond to the needs of others while developing meaningful interpersonal relationships. (4) A Broad Ethical Concern for Humanity and the World: Extending care beyond oneself and those close to oneself to society, the natural environment, and the world as a whole. (5) Cultural Literacy and a Public-Minded Perspective: Developing a broad and profound vision of life through understanding history, culture, the arts, ethics, and society. (6) The Pursuit of Meaning and Value in Life: Exploring the meaning, value, and purpose of existence through self-reflection and social practice (Kuo, 1993). Therefore, the essence of the humanistic spirit lies not merely in "knowing more about the humanities," but in "becoming more fully human." It involves a developmental process in which individuals move from self-understanding to moral awareness, from moral awareness to caring for others, and from caring for others to concern for society, nature, and the world. In this sense, the humanistic spirit represents an integrated form of human development encompassing self-awareness, moral practice, relational care, and social responsibility. From this perspective, the humanistic spirit is closely related to the purposes of general education and higher education. If higher education should not

merely prepare individuals with professional knowledge and technical competencies but should also cultivate whole persons who are capable of thinking, judging, caring, assuming responsibility, and pursuing meaning in life, then the humanistic spirit should not be regarded merely as an additional value of general education. Rather, it should constitute the value foundation of general education and a central dimension through which higher education realizes holistic education. Accordingly, this article argues: The humanistic spirit constitutes the value foundation of general education, while general education serves as an important pathway through which higher education fulfills its fundamental purpose of educating the whole person. Furthermore, The fundamental purpose of higher education is not merely to produce professionally competent individuals, but to cultivate whole persons endowed with a humanistic spirit, moral subjectivity, social responsibility, and the capacity to care for others and the world (Taylor, 1966).

GENERAL EDUCATION AS AN IMPORTANT PATHWAY FOR CULTIVATING THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Under the prevailing trends of professionalization, disciplinary specialization, and vocational orientation, modern higher education has indeed become increasingly effective in cultivating students' knowledge and technical competencies within specific professional fields. However, the enhancement of professional competence does not necessarily equate to the holistic development of the person. An individual may possess advanced knowledge and technical skills in a particular professional field without necessarily developing humanistic concern, moral judgment, social responsibility, empathy, critical thinking, civic awareness, or the capacity to reflect on the meaning and value of life. In other words, there remains a need to further connect the competencies cultivated through professional education with the broader educational goal of human formation. Accordingly, the significance of general education lies in its capacity to transcend the boundaries of professional education and broaden students' perspectives for understanding themselves, others, society, and the world. General education should not be regarded simply as additional knowledge outside students' specialized fields. Rather, it constitutes an important educational pathway through which students can situate and reinterpret their professional knowledge within broader humanistic, ethical, social, and cultural contexts. Through the study of philosophy, history, literature, the arts, ethics, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary issues, students can not only encounter diverse systems of knowledge and perspectives on values but also further reflect on the relationships between professional knowledge, human life, social development, and the public good (Chen, 2000; Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004; Wu, 2006).

THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION, GENERAL EDUCATION, AND THE HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

Higher education represents both the broader educational context and the overall purpose of education at the university level. Although universities are responsible for cultivating students' specialized knowledge and professional competencies, their educational mission should extend beyond professional preparation. Higher education should also cultivate individuals who possess intellectual judgment, moral awareness, cultural literacy, social responsibility, and the capacity to reflect on the meaning and value of life. In this sense, the ultimate purpose of higher education is not merely to produce professionally competent graduates but to cultivate whole persons capable of understanding themselves, engaging with others, participating responsibly in society, and pursuing meaningful lives (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 2004; Tien, 1995). General education constitutes an important pathway through which higher education can realize this broader educational purpose. By transcending the boundaries of disciplinary specialization, general education expands students' intellectual horizons and enables them to encounter diverse forms of knowledge, cultures, values, and perspectives. Through interdisciplinary learning, dialogue, critical reflection, and engagement with social, cultural, ethical, and existential issues, students can gradually develop an integrated understanding of themselves, others, society, and the world (Chen, 2000; Wang, 2000; Huang, 2008; Wu, 2009). Thus, general education should not be understood merely as a collection of courses outside students' specialized fields; rather, it should serve as an important educational pathway for whole-person

formation (Kuo, 2004; Wu, 2006). Third, the humanistic spirit constitutes the core value and ultimate orientation of higher education and general education. The humanistic spirit emphasizes respect for human dignity, human value, freedom, rationality, care, responsibility, and the meaning of life. It provides higher education with a normative basis for determining not only what students should know but also what kind of persons they should become (Kuo, 1993; Kuo, 2004; Ye, 2001). Similarly, it provides general education with a value orientation that prevents the broadening of knowledge from being reduced to the accumulation of information. The cultivation of knowledge and intellectual breadth should ultimately contribute to the development of individuals who are capable of reflection, ethical judgment, empathy, care, and responsible action (Jaspers, 1959; Sartre, 1973; Ye, 2001). From this perspective, the three concepts form a mutually constitutive rather than linear relationship. Higher education provides the broader educational context and overarching purpose; general education provides an important curricular and pedagogical pathway; and the humanistic spirit provides the value foundation and ultimate orientation. At the same time, the humanistic spirit provides a normative basis for reflecting on the purposes of higher education, while general education provides a concrete educational space in which humanistic values can be cultivated and practiced (Kuo, 1993, 2004; Wu, 2006; Ye, 2001). Accordingly, the relationship among higher education, general education, and the humanistic spirit can be conceptualized as a purpose–pathway–value relationship. Higher education provides the broader educational context and defines the overarching purpose of university education; general education serves as an important curricular and pedagogical pathway through which whole-person formation can be realized; and the humanistic spirit provides the value foundation and ultimate orientation of both higher education and general education. These three dimensions are not linearly related but mutually constitutive, with whole-person formation situated at their intersection.

RETHINKING APPROACHES TO CULTIVATING HUMANISTIC SPIRIT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

6.1 From “Knowledge Transmission” to “Human Formation”

First, it is important to further examine the influence of professionalization, technologization, and vocational orientation on higher education. One of the important functions of contemporary universities is, of course, to cultivate the specialized knowledge, technical competencies, and professional skills that students need to respond to the rapidly changing demands of society and the labor market. However, when higher education places excessive emphasis on disciplinary specialization, technical competence, and employability, the purpose of education may gradually shift from “cultivating persons” to “producing productive human resources.” Under such circumstances, students may become highly competent professionals without necessarily developing into whole persons who possess independent thinking, moral judgment, humanistic concern, social responsibility, and the capacity for reflection on life and its meaning (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 2004). This issue raises one of the most fundamental philosophical questions concerning higher education: What kind of person should the university seek to cultivate? If university education focuses primarily on the acquisition of specialized knowledge, the enhancement of technical skills, and the development of occupational competitiveness, education may become confined to a functional understanding of “preparation for work,” while neglecting the significance of education for holistic human development and personal growth. Jaspers (1959) argued that the university should not merely be a place for knowledge acquisition and professional training; it should also serve as an important context for self-formation, rational inquiry, and the development of the human spirit. From this perspective, the value of higher education cannot be assessed solely in terms of how much students “know” or what they are able to “do.” It should also be concerned with “what kind of persons they become” (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 2004). Accordingly, higher education needs to reconsider the relationship between “knowledge” and “the human person.” Knowledge is undoubtedly important, but its educational value lies not merely in increasing an individual's cognitive capital. Rather, knowledge should contribute to the development of the capacity to understand, judge, reflect, and act. Particularly in a contemporary society confronted with complex issues such as artificial intelligence, rapid technological development, globalization, cultural diversity, environmental crises, social inequality, and ethical conflicts, specialized knowledge alone is insufficient to prepare university students adequately for the future. Students also need the capacity for interdisciplinary

understanding and a broader concern for humanity, society, culture, nature, and the world. Such capacities enable them to reflect not only on their professional actions but also on the broader social consequences of those actions (Kuo, 1993, 2004; Wu, 2006). From this perspective, the core of education should not be limited to knowledge acquisition but should move toward human formation. The former focuses on how much knowledge students acquire, whereas the latter concerns how knowledge is transformed into personal understanding, judgment, values, and practice. In other words, education should move beyond “knowing what” toward “how to think,” “how to live with others,” and “how to become fully human” (Jaspers, 1959; Freire, 1970). Within this context, the humanistic spirit becomes a crucial link between knowledge education and human formation. Humanistic education does not require students to abandon specialized knowledge; rather, it enables professional knowledge to acquire deeper ethical, humanistic, and social significance. Professional competence without the guidance of a humanistic spirit may merely enhance an individual's ability to “do things.” The humanistic spirit, however, encourages individuals to ask “Why am I doing this? For whom am I doing it? And what consequences might my actions have for others and society?” Therefore, professional education and humanistic education should not be regarded as two opposing forms of education. Instead, they should complement and integrate with one another through general education. From this perspective, the role of general education is not merely to compensate for the limitations of specialized education by providing additional knowledge. Rather, it should help university students situate their specialized knowledge within broader humanistic, ethical, social, and existential contexts. Through the study of philosophy, history, literature, the arts, ethics, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary issues, students can gradually move beyond the perspective of a single discipline and develop a broader understanding of their relationships with themselves, others, society, and the world. In this way, general education can genuinely serve as an important educational pathway through which higher education moves from “knowledge transmission” toward “human formation” (Chen, 2000; Kuo, 1993, 2004; Wu, 2006). Therefore, this article argues that the fundamental purpose of higher education should not be limited to cultivating professionally competent individuals; rather, it should seek to cultivate whole persons who possess professional competence, a humanistic spirit, moral judgment, social responsibility, and the capacity for reflection on life and its meaning (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004). This perspective suggests that the central question of higher education should not simply be “What have students learned?” but should further ask: “Through education, what kind of persons do we hope students will become?” This shift from “knowledge transmission” to “whole-person formation” constitutes a critical foundation for rethinking approaches to cultivating the humanistic spirit among university students (Freire, 2000; Jaspers, 1959).

6.2 From “What Teachers Teach” to “How Students Become Human”

This shift also entails a transformation in the teaching paradigm of higher education. If the cultivation of the humanistic spirit continues to rely primarily on traditional instructional models characterized by teacher lectures, student memorization, and examination-based assessment, education may remain largely at the level of knowledge transmission and value inculcation. Even when students are able to understand philosophical concepts, ethical principles, or humanistic knowledge, they may not necessarily be able to transform such knowledge into their own value judgments, moral practices, and ways of living. Therefore, the cultivation of the humanistic spirit should not focus solely on “what teachers teach” but should further ask “how students gradually become a particular kind of person through education.” From this perspective, the focus of education should gradually shift from teaching what to becoming who. The former primarily concerns curriculum content and the transmission of knowledge, whereas the latter focuses on how students develop self-understanding, value judgment, moral subjectivity, and social responsibility through the learning process. In other words, genuine humanistic education should not merely enable students to “know the content of the humanistic spirit”; rather, it should enable them to understand, reflect upon, experience, and practice humanistic values through concrete educational experiences (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004; Ye, 2001). This transformation is closely related to Freire’s critical pedagogy. Freire (2000) criticized the “banking model of education,” in which teachers deposit knowledge into students, arguing that such an approach tends to position students as passive recipients and consequently undermines their agency and capacity

for critical thinking. In contrast, dialogical education emphasizes that both teachers and students are subjects in the learning process. Through dialogue, problem-posing, and collaborative inquiry, students are encouraged to engage in critical reflection on themselves, others, and the world in which they live. Education, therefore, is no longer merely a process of knowledge transmission but becomes a process that promotes conscientization and praxis (Freire, 1985, 2000). Accordingly, the role of the teacher in cultivating the humanistic spirit among university students also needs to be reconceptualized. Teachers should not function merely as transmitters of knowledge or inculcators of values; rather, they should serve as dialogue facilitators, learning partners, and reflective practitioners. Through open-ended questions, philosophical discussions, ethical dilemmas, case analyses, literary reading, inquiry into social issues, and experiential reflection, teachers can encourage students to consider questions such as: “How do I understand myself?” “How do I understand others?” “How should I respond to difference?” and “How might my choices affect others and society?” Such pedagogical approaches, centered on dialogue, reflection, and collaborative inquiry, can contribute to the development of students’ agency and critical thinking abilities (Freire, 2000; Habermas, 1984). For example, in general education courses, teachers need not merely lecture on concepts such as justice, freedom, responsibility, and care. Instead, they can design authentic and contextualized problems that invite students to engage in discussion and value judgment. Through encounters and dialogue among different perspectives, students are required not only to articulate and justify their own positions but also to understand the reasoning underlying others’ perspectives. Such learning processes can gradually transform abstract humanistic values into students’ own ways of thinking and making judgments rather than leaving them as concepts confined to textbooks (Habermas, 1984; Kuo, 2004). Furthermore, the cultivation of the humanistic spirit should extend beyond classroom discussion and connect with experiential learning and social practice. Service-learning, community engagement, volunteer service, intercultural exchange, environmental action, artistic practice, and projects addressing social issues can all provide students with opportunities to translate humanistic values into concrete action. Students do not merely “discuss care”; they learn how to care through authentic interpersonal and social contexts. They do not merely “understand social responsibility”; they experience responsibility through actual participation. Likewise, they do not merely “learn to respect differences”; they develop an understanding and appreciation of difference through interactions with people from diverse backgrounds (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; Kolb, 1984). Accordingly, the cultivation of the humanistic spirit can be conceptualized as an educational process that develops progressively through: Knowledge → Dialogue → Reflection → Experience → Praxis. That is, students move from understanding knowledge to engaging in dialogue, from dialogue to critical reflection, and from reflection to concrete action through authentic experiences. In this process, students are no longer merely recipients of curriculum content but gradually become educational subjects capable of thinking, judging, choosing, and assuming responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; Kolb, 1984). More importantly, this pedagogical shift also redefines the meaning of learning outcomes. If the purpose of humanistic education is human formation, educational assessment should not merely measure how much knowledge students have memorized. Rather, it should examine whether students are able to engage in reflection, understand different perspectives, exercise ethical judgment, engage in dialogue with others, and translate values into concrete action. In other words, the cultivation of the humanistic spirit needs to move progressively from “knowledge outcomes” toward “outcomes in life and practice” (Jaspers, 1959; Freire, 2000; Kuo, 1993). Therefore, it can be further argued that: Humanistic education should move from teaching students what to think toward enabling them to learn how to think, how to relate to others, how to make responsible choices, and ultimately how to become fully human (Freire, 2000; Jaspers, 1959). This also means that cultivating the humanistic spirit among university students cannot be accomplished simply by adding several humanities courses to the curriculum. Rather, it requires a fundamental reconsideration of curriculum, pedagogy, teacher–student relationships, and educational assessment. The central question is not whether teachers have successfully completed the transmission of humanistic knowledge, but whether students gradually develop, through the educational process, a whole-person disposition characterized by agency, reflective capacity, moral judgment, concern for others, and social responsibility (Kuo, 1993, 2004; Wu, 2006; Ye, 2001).

6.3 General Education as a Means of Cultivating Students' Reflection on the Fundamental Questions of Life

Kuo (1993) points out that one important dimension of the humanistic spirit is self-awareness, namely, the capacity to reflect upon one's own existence and fundamental questions of life. From this perspective, cultivating the humanistic spirit should not be confined to the acquisition or understanding of humanistic knowledge. Rather, it should further encourage students to engage with fundamental questions such as "What does it mean to be human?" "Why do we live?" and "How can one live a meaningful life?" Human existence, in particular, cannot be separated from the existential condition of life and death. As Chen (2001) and Shih (1990) suggest, the meaning of life does not reside merely in its beginning or its end but gradually unfolds throughout the process between birth and death. In other words, the value of life lies not simply in being alive, but in how individuals understand their existence, construct meaning, and live out a life of value within the finite span of their existence.

Human existence is also more than a natural or biological phenomenon; it possesses distinctive meaning and value. Zhu (2001) argues that human beings are capable of thought and reflection. Although human beings are part of the natural world, they possess the capacity to understand themselves, reflect upon their existence, and inquire into the meaning of life. Accordingly, the core of education should not be limited to the development of knowledge and competencies but should also attend to the spiritual and existential development of the person. Wu and Huang (2001) emphasize that spiritual development involves cultivating harmonious relationships with others and developing the capacity to enact love and care, while also encouraging individuals to explore the meaning of life and the enduring value of human existence. From this perspective, if general education is to genuinely promote whole-person development, it should provide students with opportunities to reflect upon the fundamental questions of life and to move beyond the acquisition of knowledge toward existential reflection. Accordingly, how general education teachers guide students in reflecting upon fundamental questions of life becomes an important issue in cultivating the humanistic spirit. Teachers can draw upon philosophical inquiry, life narratives, literary works, films, works of art, ethical dilemmas, and authentic life experiences to encourage students to consider existential questions such as "Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Who am I?" "Why do I live?" and "What kind of person do I hope to become?" These questions do not have a single or standardized answer. Their educational significance lies precisely in encouraging students to develop an understanding of and orientation toward their own lives through sustained thinking, dialogue, and reflection. Among these issues, the exploration of the meaning of life is particularly important. Li (2001) argues that the pursuit of meaning constitutes a fundamental goal of human life. Therefore, the purpose of life education is not simply to enable students to acquire knowledge about life or avoid difficulties and suffering. Rather, it should help them understand their own existence and explore the direction, meaning, and value of their lives. Remen (1999) likewise suggests that exploring the meaning of life can provide individuals with inner strength to confront difficulties and uncertainties in life. In other words, reflecting upon the meaning of life does not mean avoiding suffering or denying the limitations of human existence. Instead, it involves developing an understanding of one's existence and reconsidering questions such as "Who am I?" "What kind of person do I want to become?" and "How do I want to live my life?" From this perspective, life education within general education should not be understood merely as moral instruction or the transmission of knowledge about life. Rather, it should become a form of education for existential reflection. Through engagement with philosophy, literature, history, the arts, and lived experiences, students can gradually develop an understanding of the finitude, vulnerability, and possibilities of human life. Through dialogue with others and participation in social practice, they can further reconsider the meaning of their own existence. In this way, students can move from "knowing about life" to "understanding life" and ultimately from "understanding life" to "living a meaningful life."

More importantly, this educational orientation can transform the humanistic spirit from an abstract set of values into a lived practice. When students begin to reflect upon the meaning of their own lives, they are also encouraged to consider their relationships with others, their responsibilities to society, and the potential consequences of their choices for other people, society, and the world. The pursuit of meaning in life, therefore, should not be understood as an individualistic process of self-exploration. Rather, it can develop

into a broader ethical concern for others, society, and the world. In this sense, life education becomes closely connected with the cultivation of the humanistic spirit, moral development, and civic responsibility.

Therefore, if general education is to serve as an important pathway for cultivating the humanistic spirit, its purpose should not be limited to “increasing students’ humanistic knowledge.” More importantly, it should create an educational space in which students can pause to think, engage in dialogue with others, reflect upon their own existence, and explore the meaning and value of life. The ultimate purpose of education is not simply to enable students to “know more” or “perform better,” but to help them gradually understand who they are, why they live, how they should live with others, and what kind of person they aspire to become.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the relationship among humanistic spirit, general education, and higher education to reconsider approaches to cultivating the humanistic spirit among university students. It argues that the purpose of higher education should not be limited to the cultivation of professional knowledge, technical competencies, and employability, but should also address the fundamental educational-philosophical question of “What kind of person should the university cultivate?” Jaspers (1959) emphasizes that the university is not merely a place for knowledge acquisition and professional training, but also an important setting for self-formation, rational inquiry, and spiritual development. Accordingly, genuine education should not merely enable students to “know more” or “perform better”; more importantly, it should foster self-understanding, moral judgment, concern for others, social responsibility, and reflection on the meaning of life, thereby supporting students in becoming whole persons with a strong sense of subjectivity and humanistic concern (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004). The purpose of general education is the development of the human mind, to enhance humanistic qualities (Shih, 2019).

Within this context, the humanistic spirit constitutes an important value foundation of general education, while general education serves as an important pathway through which higher education realizes whole-person education. General education should not be regarded merely as supplementary knowledge outside specialized education. Rather, it should transcend disciplinary boundaries and help students situate professional knowledge within broader humanistic, ethical, social, cultural, and existential contexts (Chen, 2000; Kuo, 2004; Wu, 2006). In other words, general education should guide students beyond the question of “What can I do?” toward “What should I do?”, and ultimately encourage them to ask “Why do I do it?” and “What significance does such action have for human beings and society?” (Kuo, 1993, 2004).

Accordingly, cultivating the humanistic spirit among university students should involve a shift from “what teachers teach” to “how students become persons,” and from knowledge transmission toward dialogue, reflection, experience, and praxis. Freire’s (2000) critique of “banking education” reminds us that education should not simply involve the one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. Instead, through dialogue and collaborative inquiry, education should foster students’ subjectivity, critical consciousness, and capacity for praxis. Accordingly, teachers should not merely serve as transmitters of knowledge but should also become facilitators of dialogue and reflective practitioners, while students should gradually move from being recipients of knowledge to becoming educational subjects capable of thinking, judging, choosing, and assuming responsibility (Ye & Shih, 2021; Freire, 1970, 2000; Habermas, 1984).

Furthermore, general education should provide students with an educational space in which they can reflect upon the fundamental questions of life, including “Who am I?” “Why do I live?” “What kind of person do I hope to become?” and “How should I live with others?” The core of life education lies not simply in transmitting knowledge about life but in helping students understand their own existence, explore the meaning of life, and translate such understanding into meaningful ways of living and acting (Chen, 2000; Li, 2001; Wu & Huang, 2001). The exploration of the meaning of life should therefore be further connected with ethical responsibility, care for others, and social participation, enabling the humanistic spirit to move from an abstract ideal to a concrete

practice of living.

In conclusion, cultivating the humanistic spirit cannot be achieved simply by adding several humanities-oriented courses to the university curriculum. Rather, it is an ongoing educational process that develops through knowledge understanding, dialogue and reflection, exploration of life meaning, and praxis (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; Kolb, 1984). Only by connecting professional education, general education, and whole-person development can higher education genuinely move from “educating professional specialists” toward “educating holistic persons” and fulfill its fundamental educational mission of promoting human development, social responsibility, and meaningful lives. The cultivation of the holistic person has always been a topic of concern for general education. Hopefully students can have a more perfect human nature (Chen & Shih, 2025, 2026; Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004; Shih, Hsu & Ye, 2018; Wu, 2006).

In conclusion, the spirit of all human cultures is always humanistic, and cultivating the humanistic spirit cannot be achieved simply by adding several humanities-oriented courses to the university curriculum. Rather, it is an ongoing educational process that develops through the acquisition and understanding of knowledge, dialogue and reflection, exploration of the meaning of life, and praxis (Chen & Shih, 2026; Chün-i, 1974; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; Kolb, 1984). Only by integrating professional education, general education, and whole-person development can higher education genuinely move beyond “educating professional specialists” toward “educating holistic persons” and fulfill its fundamental educational mission of fostering human development, social responsibility, and meaningful lives. The cultivation of the holistic person has long been a central concern of general education, which seeks not merely to equip students with professional competencies but also to foster their intellectual, moral, emotional, and social development. In this sense, the ultimate aim of higher education is to support students in developing a more mature and well-rounded humanity, enabling them to understand themselves, engage meaningfully with others, and contribute responsibly to society (Jaspers, 1959; Kuo, 1993, 2004; Shih, Hsu, & Ye, 2018; Wu, 2006).

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