Reforming Citizenship Education for Empathy: A Pedagogical Framework for Designing Optimal Learning Experiences

Eunyoung Kim

School of Knowledge Science, Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology

1-1, Asahidai, Nomi city, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan, 923-1211

kim@jaist.ac.jp

Abstract. *Our global society requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to continually adapt to a shifting socio-technical landscape. In citizenship education, there is an urgent need to reform traditional pedagogical models to actively foster crucial soft skills like empathy and global competency. This paper proposes an integrated learning framework that blends a six-step procedural course design methodology with a learning objectives model of interactions between the instructor and learners cognitive modes. By mapping specific emotional and cognitive skills into structured individual and collective learning phases, this approach guides educators to systematically build "wow," "hmm," and "aha" learning moments. The resulting blended curriculum design focuses on moving learners from instructor-centered knowledge acquisition to learner-centered collaborative creation. This framework provides global educational designers with a theory-driven blueprint for cultivating empathetic next-generation leaders.*

Keywords**:** *Pedagogical Framework; Learning Experience Design; Citizenship Education for Empathy; Optimal Learning Experience*

1. Introduction

Global society faces increasingly complex geopolitical, social, and technical shifts, creating an essential demand for empathetic leadership. As higher education institutions (HEIs) transition through massive socio-technical changes, traditional curriculums must undergo structural reforms to prepare students to cope with uncertain challenges they are going to face. This shift requires educators to address distinct gaps between the instructional approaches of the teaching generation and the changing learning behaviors of new type of generation including the generation Z, alpha and beta (Gacusan, Dangis, & Afalla, 2023; Höfrová, Balidemaj, & Small, 2024; Krajčovič & Jurišová, 2025).

To build a sustainable global community, citizenship education must be fundamentally redesigned to break free from the constraints of obsolete, purely academic knowledge transmission. Instead, it needs to focus on nurturing core soft skills—specifically interpersonal competencies, ethical responsibility, and emotional intelligence. However, existing educational research frequently lacks actionable, systematic pedagogical models to help educational designers build content that deepens internal emotional experiences like empathy.

This study addresses this gap by presenting a comprehensive educational design framework focused on empathy which plays a crucial role for conflict resolution (Klimecki, 2019). By connecting systemic course structure with internal cognitive processing, this model offers scalable global best practices in citizenship education.

The primary objective of this study is to establish a systematic, procedural framework for designing learning experiences to enhance soft skills including empathy in global higher education institutes with a collaborative approach for educational designers to co-create pedagogical methods. Subsidiary objectives are:

- To integrate structured learning content design with both individual inner cognitive processing and group interactive processes.
- To provide an empirical and matrix-based methodology for evaluating whether designed educational activities achieve meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences.

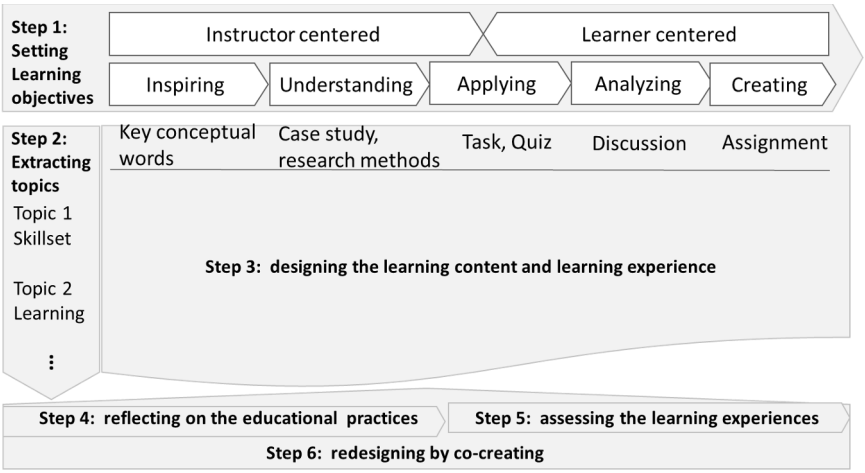
2. Reasearch Methods

This study proposes an open, continuous pedagogical model that combines a 6-Step Learning Content Design Framework with the Instructor – Learners Interactive learning model (Kim, 2024a). The procedural workflow operates across six discrete phases: 1) setting the objectives of learning; 2) extracting the topics to learn; 3) designing the learning content and learning experience; 4) reflecting on educational practices; 5) assessing the learning experiences; and 6) redesigning by co-creating, as shown in Fig. 2.

© The Author(s) 2026

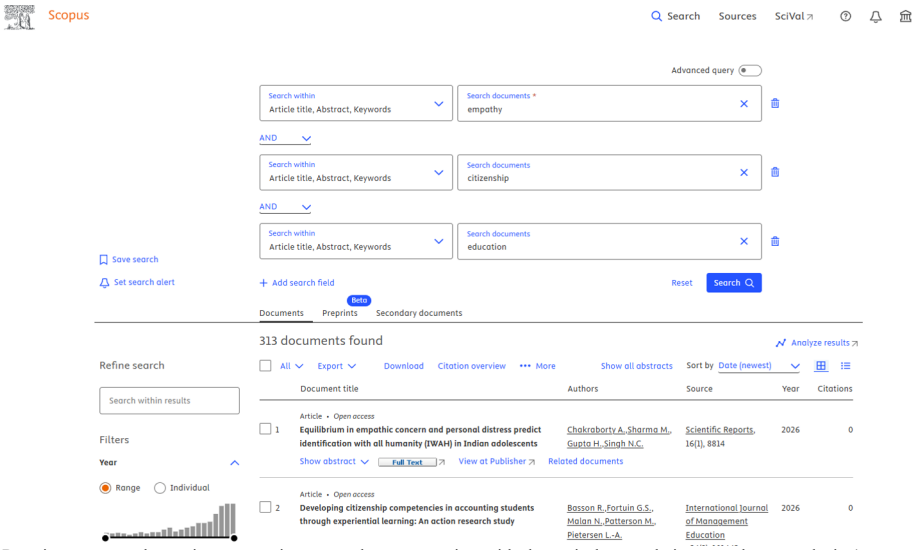
S. Untari et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Citizenship Education and Democratic Issues (ICCEDI 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1039,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-626-0_4

Fig 2. A proposed framework for developing learning content and experience



After setting the learning objectives of the course as the first step of the course design, educators need to identify the topics themes to train future leaders through extracting the keywords using the academic databases. A text query search was executed in the SCOPUS database using the targeted Boolean intersection string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("empathy" AND "citizenship" AND "education"). As illustrated in Fig. 3, this query yielded 313 documents.

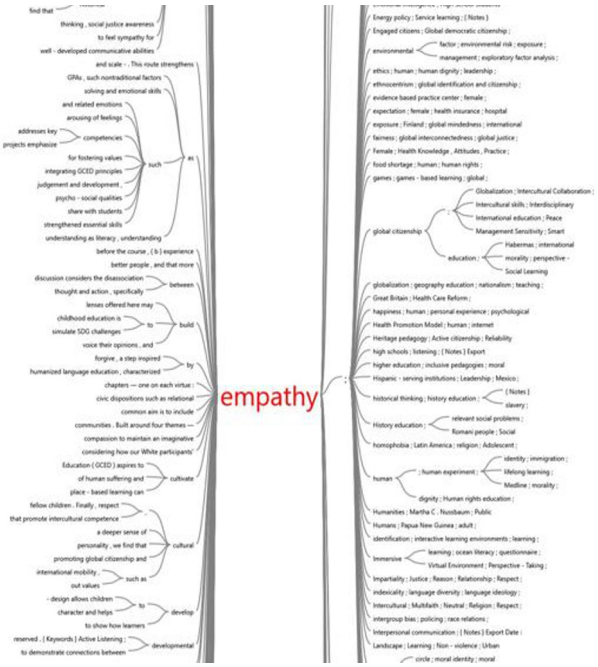
Fig. 3. Screenshot of the search result of the keywords in Scopus database (retrieved on 9. July. 2026)



Running text search queries to examine terms that co-occuring with the main keywords in a word-tree analysis (see Fig.4), we are able to explore key conceptual trends and identify highlighted skill sets for extracting the specific keywords to

design the learning content for each mental process of the learning objectives focusing on the keywords to be emphasized to the learners.

Fig. 4. Result of the word-tree analysis co-occuring with the main keyword of "empathy"



Because the word-tree analysis initially outputs raw co-occurring words in strict alphabetical order (truncated in Fig. 4 due to length limitations), the nodes must be systematically elaborated to select viable topics. This phase requires the qualitative review of professional educational designers to cluster the co-occurring words, structure the relationships among related phrases, and link them directly to the learning content design.

Using the semantic clusters derived from Step 2, educational experience designers construct the specific curriculum blocks. Table 1 demonstrates a tentative empathy-centered learning content design mapped across individual and collective cognitive phases.

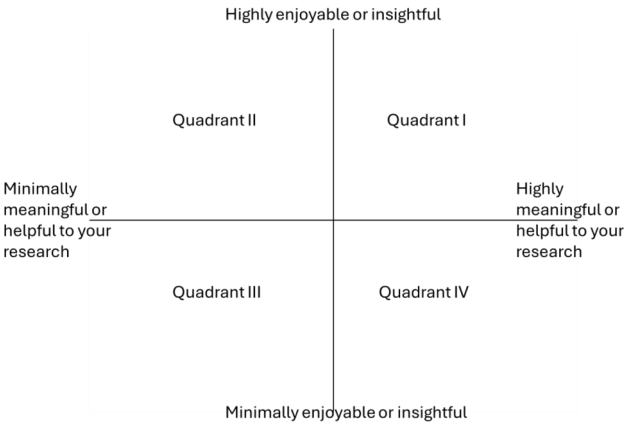
Table 1. Tentative learning content example

	Topic 1: Cognitive Perspective-Taking	Topic 2: Active Listening & Behavioral Interventions
Inspiring	Presenting core concepts like "intellectual toughness," emotional resilience, and ethical responsibility	Posing fundamental questions regarding structural cognitive biases and cultural empathy
Illuminating / Understanding	Reviewing global best practices in reconciliation and evaluating historical conflict resolution frameworks	Examining systemic literature on how communication failures drive community polarization
Applying	Navigating a highly structured roleplay crisis simulation on regional or community disputes	Participating in a mediated group exercise focused on unlearning defensive communication habits
Interacting/ Analyzing	Asymmetric Crisis Simulation: Force an operational shift from instinctive personal biases to a systemic, empathetic understanding of an opposing stakeholder's socio-technical constraints.	Mediated Defensiveness Unlearning Exercise: facilitate discussion to systematically recognize and deconstruct involuntary psychological defenses during interpersonal friction, paving the way for constructive conflict resolution.
Creating	Designing a standardized peer-feedback rubric focused on constructive dialogue	Synthezing The results of discussion to map interpersonal breakthroughs in 2x2 matrix.

Following the operational implementation of the designed curriculum within active educational practices, the pedagogical framework systematically transitions into feedback acquisition (Step 4) and empirical assessment (Step 5), both of which are executed through structured reflection on the delivered learning content and the overarching learning objectives. During this specific phase of the evaluation process, student cohorts are required to perform a comprehensive retrospective review of all instructional materials, active tasks, and theoretical frameworks they have encountered since the inception of the academic term. This rigorous, holistic review directly integrates the learners as active co-creators within the formative feedback loop and the institutional assessment mechanism.

Learners are prompted to indicate the extent to which the learning objectives were achieved by the learning content presented and explained by the instructor. To measure the impact of these exercises, students will complete reflection surveys evaluating both the technical helpfulness (or meaningfulness for developing their own research) and the emotional value (such as joyfulness or insightfulness that can create Aha! and Wow! experiences) of the curriculum using 5-point likert scale on each learning content. Learning designers can analyze the assessment data using a 2x2 classification matrix as below (see Fig.5):

Fig. 5. Assessing the learning experiences



- Quadrant I (Optimal Learning Experience): Tasks evaluated as both highly enjoyable and highly meaningful, achieving "wow" and "aha" moments.

- Quadrant II (Enjoyable Experience): High enjoyment but lower perceived educational meaning, indicating a need to strengthen theoretical links.

- Quadrant III (Redundant Zone): Low immediate enjoyment and low perceived helpfulness. This content fails to stimulate the learner emotionally or cognitively and should be heavily revised or eliminated

- Quadrant IV (Meaningful Experience): Low immediate enjoyment but highly meaningful (e.g., deep unlearning and self-reflection exercises), representing vital "hmm" incubation phases.

The results derived from this matrix-based assessment offer vital lessons and conceptual frameworks for redesigning active learning content via open collaboration. To establish a functional open innovation ecosystem, it is essential to engage industry, government stakeholders, and civil society in a direct, collaborative dialogue with learners and faculty. We anticipate that future course structures, fundamentally informed by the empirical insights generated through this framework, will optimize the strategic aims of educational experience designers. Consequently, this development phase leverages collaborative stakeholder workshops as a primary vehicle for deep systemic evaluation and co-creation. Rather than operating as a finite, closed workflow, the proposed six-step framework functions as a perpetual, open evolutionary cycle committed to the continuous improvement of global citizenship education.

3. Result and Discussion

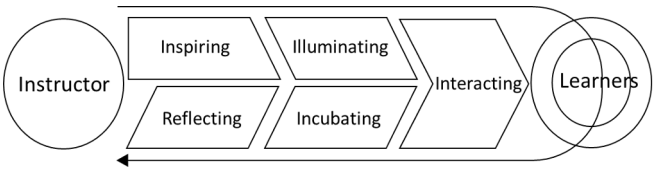
3.1 Pedagogical Approaches in Course Design

Confronting multifaceted socio-technical global challenges has forced higher education to transcend traditional instructional paradigms, driving the development of diverse, student-centered learning strategies that include inquiry-based, problem-driven, topical, and discursive frameworks (Sadler, 2004). While several HEIs have been developed and implemented in various educational programs to foster soft skills. However, relatively sparse critical inquiry has been directed toward designing institutionalized frameworks that structurally align active learning models with comprehensive support mechanisms aimed at upgrading faculty proficiency. Without these systematic frameworks, efforts to optimize educator skill sets and fundamentally reinforce educational quality remain largely fragmented. (Kim, 2016; Kim & Beuran, 2018).

Historically, Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1971) has served as the baseline framework for categorizing educational goals in a hierarchical pyramid of remembering – understanding – applying – analyzing – evaluating – creating. Morden adaptation have modified these tiers to better address the levels of processing and the specific domains of knowledge (Anderson et al., 2001; Dubas & Toledo, 2016). Concurrently, related research indicated the benefits of entrepreneurship education program into three core pillars: inspiration; learning; and incubating resource (Souitaris, Zerbinati, & Al-Laham, 2007).

This research synthesizes related theories to establish a new learning objectives model that maps the active interactions between the instructor and learners as shown in Fig.1. In this model, inspiring is defined as an instructor introduces key conceptual words and emotional stimuli to motivate learners to engage; Illuminating means the instructor explains key concepts using case studies, theoretical findings, related research design allowing learners to acquire knowledge and gain cognitive insight; Interacting means the instructor facilitates active classroom participation, dialogue, and collaborative exercises such as discussion; Incubating means learners take deliberate time to process, combine, and internally integrate the acquired knowledge; Reflecting means learners engage structured self-reflection regarding their personal growth and learning process (Kim, 2024b).

Fig. 1. Instructor – Learners Interactive learning model.



3.2 Creating Optimal Learning Experiences

In fact, one partisan stated that they were not concerned about being influenced by AI-generated content: Fink (2013) defined the significant learning experiences as those resulting in meaningful, lasting changes in the lives of learners, highlighting the importance of human interaction and motivation and dimensions such as foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimensions, caring, and learning how to learn.

This study focuses on fostering soft skills by triggering specific mental activities that yield optimal learning experiences which allow us to have aha experience of insight moment (Shen, Yuan, Liu, & Luo, 2016; Weisberg, 2019), optimal experience of flow moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), peak experience (Maslow, 1971; Raettig & Weger, 2018), wow experience (Gordon, 2021), hmm experience of incubation (Ellwood, Pallier, Snyder, & Gallate, 2009) and thorough reflection (Sogunro, 2004). Because these optimal experiences result directly from internal mental processing during the learning journey, this study suggests actionable pedagogical methods to intentionally engage students in these states.

Fostering soft skills like empathy requires an existential understanding of educational goals and human interaction. Traditional frameworks, such as Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, categorize cognitive goals in a hierarchical structure from remembering up to creating. Modern adaptations modify these tiers to better address processing levels and specific knowledge domains. Concurrently, research into specialized programs indicates that the benefits of target education can be split into three core pillars: inspiration, learning, and incubating resources.

To create deep changes in how learners view conflict, educators must focus on generating "optimal learning experiences". This requires designing environments where students interact meaningfully, integrate ideas, and connect with the human dimensions of their coursework. This study synthesizes the cognitive process learning for creating optimal learning experiences, and reinterpret each mental process in the optimal learning experiences as (Kim, 2024b) :

Inspiration (to create wow! experience): Instructors need to utilize inspiration stimuli that influence “hearts and minds” of learners to motivate active engagement, apart from learning the curriculum itself (Souitaris et al., 2007). This requires high emotional intelligence from educational designers to leverage diverse resources—such as fundamental existential questions, emotional narratives, motivational case studies, and novel research designs (Lambie, Tabet, & Stickl Haugen, 2022). The level of inspiration is assessed via student self-reports.

Incubation (to create hmm… experience). Characterized as a period of preconscious, fringe-conscious, or unconscious mental activity (Davis, 2004). Instructors intentionally design intervals of cognitive distraction—shifting topics, providing breaks, introducing light activities (games, puzzles, short walks), or meditation—to allow ideas to mature. Due to its internal nature, this stage is evaluated indirectly (Liu et al., 2026).

Illumination (to create aha! experience). Educational designers are empowered to engineer targeted pedagogical environments and structured classroom interventions that deliberately catalyze moments of cognitive illumination—frequently operationalized in psychological literature as sudden, transformative conceptual insights that trigger the classic "aha!" experience. (Kizilirmak, Galvao Gomes da Silva, Imamoglu, & Richardson-Klavehn, 2016). These experiences are mostly engaged in problem solving process (Harris et al., 2012). Illuminating the learners can be promoted by designing appropriate classroom activities such as quizzes, simple and complex tasks, group activities, assignments.

Reflection (to create hmm… experience). Reflection helps learner to develop abstract concepts from concrete experiences (Kolb, 2014). It allows students to engage in debriefings, reframing, seeking feedback, drawing lessons, discussing, etc. (Roskos, Vukelich, & Risko, 2001). Instructors need to facilitate learners’ reflection and their meta-cognitive skills by designing a series of assignments that structurally interconnect with each other.

4. Conclusions & Suggestions

This paper presents a conceptual, theory-driven, structurally integrated pedagogical model for empathy education. The primary limitation is the lack of long-term empirical data validating these specific exercises within citizenship and conflict-resolution classrooms.

To address this limitations, Future research will focus on gathering empirical qualitative and quantitative data across diverse international student cohorts to evaluate how varioud classroom exercises map onto the optimal learning matrix. Furthermore, we need to implement this model within a broader Quad Helix framework (Kimatu, 2016) that collaborating directly with universities, industries, governments, and civil societies, because the citizenship education for empathy cannot occur in a vacuum isolated from real-world geopolitical and community. When universities partner directly with localized industries, civic organizations, and government bodies to execute co-creation workshops, the educational content undergoes continuous, empirical testing. For example, a student-designed community empathy framework can be directly evaluated by civil society stakeholders, transforming the university into a live engine for regional conflict resolution. This open evolutionary loop ensures that the curriculum adapts dynamically to macro-level socio-technical disruptions, providing a scalable model for modern global universities striving to cultivate next-generation leaders capable of navigating an increasingly volatile global landscape. By building collaborative international pedagogical network, educational designers can continuously co-create, test, and scale adaptable practices for global empathy education.

In addition, the arrival of new generation of Z, Alpha, and Beta into the university and graduate school landscape demands a fundamental re-evaluation of instructional architecture. Traditional, monologue-based lectures inherently fail to bridge these intergenerational gaps, often resulting in disengagement or superficial compliance. By operationalizing targeted inspiration stimuli (the "Wow!" phase) and structured reflection tasks (the "Hmm..." phase), the proposed model actively counters digital attention fragmentation. By explicitly emphasizing emotional, ethical, and reflective skills, we establish the baseline components needed to build empathy-centered curriculums. These elements trigger targeted cognitive states during the learning process, including the "aha!" moment of sudden insight, the focused absorption of "flow," and the deep introspection of mental incubation.

To successfully disseminate this learning design framework, the role of the educators must be intentionally reframed from a repository of domain knowledge to an experience designer and meta-cognitive facilitator. This transition requires significant pedagogical bravery and emotional intelligence on the part of the faculty. Traditional academic systems reward rigid control and the continuous transmission of quantifiable data. In contrast, intentionally structuring an "Incubation" phase (the "Hmm..." moment) requires the instructor to step back and allow for silent, non-visible cognitive processing.

References

Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R., Airasian, P. W., Cruikshank, K. A., Mayer, R. E., Pintrich, P. R., . . . Wittrock, M. C. (2001). A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, abridged edition. *White Plains, NY: Longman*.

Bloom, B. S., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1971). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Volume 2 Affective Domain*: David McKay Company Incorporated.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*.

Davis, G. A. (2004). *Creativity is forever*: Kendall/Hunt Pub.

Dubas, J. M., & Toledo, S. A. (2016). Taking higher order thinking seriously: Using Marzano's taxonomy in the economics classroom. *International Review of Economics Education, 21*, 12-20. doi:10.1016/j.iree.2015.10.005

Ellwood, S., Pallier, G., Snyder, A., & Gallate, J. (2009). The incubation effect: Hatching a solution? *Creativity Research Journal, 21*(1), 6-14.

Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*: John Wiley & Sons.

Gacusan, J. C., Dangis, S. J., & Afalla, B. T. (2023). Tailoring education for alpha learners: Harnessing learning styles for maximum learning outcomes. *Nurture, 17*(3), 302-313. doi:10.55951/NURTURE.V17I3.335

Gordon, J. (2021). The Wow Factors: The Assessment of Practical Media and Creative Arts Subjects. In *Perspectives on Learning Assessment in the Arts in Higher Education* (pp. 169-183): Routledge.

Harris, K. R., Graham, S. E., Urdan, T. E., Bus, A. G., Major, S. E., & Swanson, H. (2012). *APA educational psychology handbook, Vol 3: Application to learning and teaching*: American Psychological Association.

Höfrová, A., Balidemaj, V., & Small, M. A. (2024). A systematic literature review of education for Generation Alpha. *Discover Education, 3*(1). doi:10.1007/s44217-024-00218-3

Kim, E. (2016). Japanese Policy and Programs for the Fostering of Global Entrepreneurs. *STI Policy Review, 7*(1), 40-65.

Kim, E. (2024a). *Designing Learning Content and Experiences for Innovative Higher Education to Foster Soft Skills.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of The International Conference on Modern Research in Education, Teaching and Learning.

Kim, E. (2024b). *Developing a Pedagogical Approach to Enhance Learning Experiences for Fostering Soft Skills.* Paper presented at the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction.

Kim, E., & Beuran, R. (2018). *On designing a cybersecurity educational program for higher education.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Education Technology and Computers.

Kimatu, J. N. (2016). Evolution of strategic interactions from the triple to quad helix innovation models for sustainable development in the era of globalization. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 5*(1), 1-7.

Kizilirmak, J. M., Galvao Gomes da Silva, J., Imamoglu, F., & Richardson-Klavehn, A. (2016). Generation and the subjective feeling of "aha!" are independently related to learning from insight. *Psychological Research, 80*, 1059-1074.

Klimecki, O. M. (2019). The role of empathy and compassion in conflict resolution. *Emotion Review, 11*(4), 310-325.

Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*: Pearson Education.

Krajčovič, P., & Jurišová, V. (2025). *Educational Paradigm Shifts Among Generation Z University Students.* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Education Research, ICER 2025.

Lambie, G. W., Tabet, S. M., & Stickl Haugen, J. (2022). Measuring inspiration in educators: the Educator Inspire Scale (EIS). *Teacher Development, 26*(3), 373-396.

Liu, C., Li, G., Gong, S., Tu, S., Shi, Z., & Guan, J. (2026). Exploration of impact of incubation on creativity: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 20*(3), 693.

Maslow, A. H. (1971). Peak experiences in education and art. *Theory into Practice, 10*(3), 149-153.

Raettig, T., & Weger, U. (2018). Learning as a shared peak experience: Interactive flow in higher education. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology, 2*, 39-60.

Roskos, K., Vukelich, C., & Risko, V. (2001). Reflection and learning to teach reading: A critical review of literacy and general teacher education studies. *Journal of Literacy Research, 33*(4), 595-635.

Sadler, T. D. (2004). Informal reasoning regarding socioscientific issues: A critical review of research. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching: The Official Journal of the National Association for Research in Science Teaching, 41*(5), 513-536.

Shen, W., Yuan, Y., Liu, C., & Luo, J. (2016). In search of the 'Aha!'experience: Elucidating the emotionality of insight problem-solving. *British Journal of Psychology, 107*(2), 281-298.

Sogunro, O. A. (2004). Efficacy of role-playing pedagogy in training leaders: some reflections. *J Manage Dev, 23*. doi:10.1108/02621710410529802

Souitaris, V., Zerbinati, S., & Al-Laham, A. (2007). Do entrepreneurship programmes raise entrepreneurial intention of science and engineering students? The effect of learning, inspiration and resources. *Journal of Business Venturing, 22*(4), 566-591.

Weisberg, R. W. (2019). Toward an integrated theory of insight in problem solving. In *Insight and Creativity in Problem Solving* (pp. 5-39): Routledge.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.