

# Contextualizing Lonergan's Generalized Empirical Method to Uganda's Curriculum Ideals

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## Abstract

In his theory of cognition, Bernard Lonergan developed a method of knowing. He claims that knowing starts from the subject's intentionality to the elaboration of the cognitional structure, which is explained in his Generalized Empirical Method (GEM). The method of knowing provides a deeper way of understanding oneself and values systems that can be integrated into any education system to enhance our ability to live authentic lives. It is transcendental or metaphysical in nature as it distinguishes the practical application of intentionality and relates them to unrestricted horizon of human inquiries. The method demands that we inquire the foundation of knowledge in order to avoid dogmatism in judgments. In other words, it is the method which emphasizes that learning fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and continuity of human inquiries to shape the educational policy. Thus, the transcendental method is an approach to learning which provides not only the everyday common sense knowing, but also the specialized methods of learning, which are needed to advance the various academic disciplines.

Keywords: Transcendental Method, Generalized Empirical Method (GEM), Curriculum Ideals.

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## 1.

### Introduction:

In his theory of cognition, Bernard Lonergan developed a method of knowing which claims that knowing starts from the subject's intentionality to the elaboration of the cognitional structure. He explains this in his Generalized Empirical Method (GEM), which describes how we come to know things; how one learns, thinks, and makes decision. The method of knowing provides a deeper way of understanding oneself and values systems that can be integrated into any education system to enhance our ability to live authentic lives. The method is transcendental in nature as it distinguishes the practical application of intentionality and relates them to unrestricted horizon of human inquiries. It is an approach that guarantees the avoidance of dogmatic preconceptions, which is always 'problematic'<sup>1</sup> in the learning process. The method demands that we inquire the foundation of knowledge in order to avoid dogmatism in judgments. In other words, it is the method which emphasizes that learning fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and continuity of human inquiries to shape the educational policy. It encourages that a child learns better when he or she fully participates in the designed learning activities. Thus, the transcendental method is an approach to learning which provides not only the

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<sup>1</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 20.

everyday common sense knowing, but also the specialized methods of learning, which are needed to advance the various academic disciplines.

### 1.1. The Transcendental Method in the context of education curriculum ideals

The fundamental challenge that has confronted philosophers and thinkers, throughout the ages, is the relevance of their theoretical speculations to the practical needs of their society. For example, Karl Marx, the social philosopher and economist, advocates that; “Philosophers should change the way they interpret the world today.”<sup>2</sup> In that case Lonergan’s transcendental method explores the essence of learning, built around the themes such as self-appropriation, self-discovery, and self-learning. His approach to education prompts the knower to actively interact with his or her learning environment or with the cognitive processes to get deeper understanding and assume responsible behaviour. This plays a vital role in the educational curricula, which can transform the learning process since education serves as a mediator between cultures and different worldviews.

As a dynamic framework of knowing, the transcendental method aims at authenticating existence, functions cooperatively and comprises of interconnected actions that enhance comprehension. It is the fundamental desire of human understanding, through which we come to know. In other words, “Learning is a self-correcting process of discovery through which we can attain an elevated self-awareness, culminates self-knowledge, self-appropriation, and self-affirmation.”<sup>3</sup> To achieve this, the educational curricula must focus on the holistic growth; the cognitive, the moral and the religious aspects of a child. Any learning theory or curriculum should prioritize instructing individuals on how to pose essential questions for self-reflection. This commensurate with the educational directive which says; “to comprehensively understand the essence of one’s being, it is not only to comprehend the overarching principles of education, but to establish a stable foundation, or a consistent framework that facilitates further cognitive advancement.”<sup>4</sup> The transcendental approach prioritizes the cultivation of a framework that focuses on the understanding of realities, rather than on mere content or the object of learning.

The transcendental method fosters learning without restricting it to any specific discipline or topic. It adopts an open-ended perspective that focuses on what the subject might fundamentally aim to achieve. While other approaches concentrate on addressing immediate demands and possibilities within particular domains, the transcendental method turns instead to the needs and potential inherent in human consciousness itself. It reflects a “concern that is both fundamental and broadly applicable.”<sup>5</sup> Its goal is to transform the unknown into the known. In other words, the method serves as a heuristic purpose: “It employs existing knowledge as a guide toward deeper understanding. Moreover, it supports a more complete and authentic way of living, as it is a structured process that brings to life the values individuals genuinely uphold.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, someone who follows this method does not merely respond to cognitive impulses but also grasps their nature, assesses them, and makes them explicit.

The method integrates the educational ideals into real life since “Education ought to be a lifelong process of coming-to-know the truth of who we are.”<sup>7</sup> It is an appeal for a responsible form of self-awareness and

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 38. The ideas Lonergan presents here is not very different from what Paul Freire said about education, that is, education consists in acts of cognition, not transfer of information. (Cf: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1993), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard, Lonergan, *Philosophy of God and Theology*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Lonergan, “*Natural Right and Historical Mindedness*” in F., Crowe, (Ed.), *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard, Lonergan*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 170.

<sup>6</sup> Lonergan, “*Natural Right and Historical Mindedness*,” 179.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques, Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, (London, Clinton: Yale University Press, 1943),

insight, brought about through critical reflection and capable of transforming the human condition. For that matter, Lonergan thinks that, “Enlightenment is a matter of knowing oneself.”<sup>8</sup> This appeal centers on the transformative potential to fundamentally shift how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us. The aim of transcendental philosophy—both in knowing and acting—is to foster self-understanding and a commitment to taking responsibility for one’s choices and behavior. This resembles what Jacques Maritain noted by saying that;

“The primary aim of education is to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person armed with knowledge, strength of judgment and moral virtues. This evolution, at the same time, must convey to him the spiritual heritage of the nations and the civilization in which he is involved, to preserve the achievements of generations.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the method ensures that there is a holistic conversion of the human person as it focuses in transforming and ensuring that he or she achieves the ultimate meaning of life.

Lonergan’s approach to education offers a potential starting point for the subject’s conscious activities. It often refers to the invariant and unrevisable nature of knowledge, to indicate that humans are similar in their modes of knowing, but differ in the content of their knowledge and their actions. While all individuals possess a fundamentally similar way of understanding, the knowledge we develop tends to become specialized based on our particular circumstances. For instance, everyday experiences—often shaped by common sense—are deeply rooted in practicality, that is, they focus on how to get what, when, and how. There is little or has no inclination to develop important theories for truthfulness. Knowing becomes dependent on the affections, feelings, and wants. However, the transcendental method doesn’t consider knowledge to be independent of the subject. The subject’s experience of data is relative to his or her orientation or focus of attention, from where insights and formulations are derived. In fact the “Horizon determines the scope of our knowledge, and the range of our interests because they can modify or even transform our understanding.”<sup>10</sup>

This normative comprehension of the human subject can transcend relativity to objectivity, serving as a foundation for humanity’s genuine existence. Despite the significant divergence of views on education, during his time, Lonergan’s transcendental philosophy provides as a crucial mediator among diverse cultures and worldviews. He explains that knowing is “essentially based on and systematically supported by a cohesive human awareness.”<sup>11</sup> This arguably forms the foundation of learning, an optimal framework for comprehensive transformation, which enhances self-awareness, a more integral relationships, and a deeper understanding of the ultimate purpose of being. However, this process of understanding is neither simple nor automatic. It encompasses several arduous tasks or conflicts, biases, prejudices, and ulterior motivations of thought and intellect, directed by transcendental principles: attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the method delineates the boundaries, the frontiers, and the scope of our existence.

The transcendental method, as a means of broadening one’s perspectives, is a consistent set of values, facts, and assumptions about the world. It directs the subject towards the perspective of objectivity, as a basis for one’s horizon. This perspective influences what one knows and values, yet it can also create challenges in mutual understanding, since each horizon sets limits to what can be seen—limits that others may not share. For instance, something perceived as reasonable, beneficial, or true within one frame of reference might

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<sup>8</sup> Terry, J. Tekippe, *What is Lonergan up to in the Insight: A Primer*, (Zacchaeus Studies: Liturgical Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey, Centeno, *Learning-to-be: Reflections on Bernard Lonergan’s Transcendental Philosophy of Education Towards and Integral Human Existence*, In William Grassie (Ed.), *Metanexus*, (New York: Online Publication), Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Development*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 36.

appear unreasonable, harmful, or false from another. Lonergan thinks “The subject needs genuine interaction with his or her environment to extend their operational scope of comprehension.”<sup>13</sup> The method that emphasizes progression from experiential awareness to comprehension and ultimately to evaluative judgment, expands one’s perspectives and avenues of meaning. Julius Nyerere agrees with this method as he posits that “Education serves as a mechanism for emancipation from threats such as sickness, unhappiness, and poverty, among others, through this vertical dimension.”<sup>14</sup>

Lonergan’s transcendental method perceives meaning in life as a cohesive cognitive effort that transcends the realm of immediacy, or the realm of the ‘already existing’<sup>15</sup> to an authentic state of being. It originates as individual interpretation, produced by the dynamic cognitive process and conveyed inter-subjectively through artistic symbols and verbal structures, which ultimately evolves into shared meaning. In this progression, the transcendental method serves as an intermediary between individual’s interpretation and the external environment. He asserts that “Education and social interactions are the main sources of the prevalent meanings because it helps the subject to operate effectively, by providing information, and encompassing and inspiring the domain of human activity.”<sup>16</sup> This cognitional process directs our existential framework towards our interiority as a domain of significance, thereby distinguishing us from a materialistic interpretation of existence.

The transcendental method assigns to education “The capacity to align one’s impulses with genuine direction of our actions.”<sup>17</sup> Lonergan contends that learning resonate with a desire when it mirrors the type of individual we aspire to become or what we value. It is the most effective means of actualizing our passions for genuine aspirations in life. Holistic education is the wholehearted execution of certain acts, whereby the individual subject aligns his or her cognitive activities with the genuine aspirations and demonstrates full commitment to them. In other words, learning must be a drive that leads to the understanding of what true life is about. He thinks that;

“An authentic life does not dismiss inquiries, suppress uncertainties, or evade issues by distraction, trivial conversation, passive amusement, slumber, or substances. It rather addresses topics, examines them, analyzes their numerous facets, evaluates their diverse meanings, and reflects on their tangible effects in one’s life and the lives of others. This doesn’t imply that a flawed practice won’t be perpetuated in life, but that the vulnerabilities to stumble or falter and shortcomings we face during the process of inquiry, only open ways for clarity.”<sup>18</sup>

In this context, he associates authenticity of the knowledge of being, which compels the learner to objectivity, even in the absence of awareness of our true interests.

In his transcendental approach to education, Lonergan acknowledges that the issue of inauthenticity of being may arise due to the polymorphic nature of human awareness. The diverse experiential patterns intersect and amalgamate the obscure potentials of the cognitive framework and articulates them as authentic existence or authenticity.<sup>19</sup> Also from the psychological perspective, the inauthentic life stem from neglecting the

<sup>13</sup> Lonergan, *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*, 238.

<sup>14</sup> Robert, M. Doran, *Essays in Systematic Theology 20: Imitating the Divine Relations: A Theological Contribution to Mimetic Theory*, in Patrick Byrne (Ed.), *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, (Boston: BC. EDU Links, 2005), 32:2, 149-86.

<sup>15</sup> Michael, Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 125.

<sup>16</sup> Frankfurt, G. Harry, *The Importance of What We Care About*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 162.

<sup>17</sup> Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard, Lonergan, *Critical Realism and the Integration of the Sciences*, (Toronto: Regis College, 1961), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick, E. Crowe, *The Lonergan Enterprise*, pp. 60-62; and Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, F. J. Ryan and B. J. Tyrell (Eds.), (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 213-215.

fundamental yearning for knowledge. In that case, he suggests a method of GEM as a means for the self-appropriation of knowledge to safeguard real existence from the interference of competing wants or life's challenges. To achieve this, the intellectual disposition of the cognizant subject must function objectively, irrespective of the individual's particular knowledge level. He thinks that education makes this possible because the process of self-appropriation begins with the finding of the structure of knowing and grounds it into knowledge. It offers us pragmatic standards for differentiating truth from falsehood within our human existence, which must be assimilated.

Lonergan's transcendental method is relevant in examining instances from other disciplines like mathematics, physics, and common sense, to uncover tangible perspective of practical and scientific knowledge. In his theory of intentionality and self-transcendence, he contends that "The intentionality of human cognition transcends the confinement inside and positions critical thought as a pivotal element in every judgment."<sup>20</sup> This guarantees that one must not perceive knowledge as a static entity, confined to sentences, but a continuous process, that requires experience, comprehension, and critical reflection for genuine understanding. A clear understanding of knowledge leads to rational decisions in both ethics and politics. The constrained self-transcendence evolves and broadens when we endeavor to comprehend our perceptions and subsequently evaluate their veracity.<sup>21</sup> In other words, his approach constitutes a form of 'know-how' essential for concrete self-appropriation, since it delineates the norms necessary for cognitional processes.

Another implication of the transcendental approach to educational curriculum ideals pertains to deliberation, evaluation, and decision. It is a method, which constitutes "the most fundamental, the most decisive, the highest levels of consciousness, and the moral certitude to determine the subject's personality."<sup>22</sup> The method prioritizes consciousness, of the subject, as a practical and existential means of awareness: practical in relation to concrete actions and existential in terms of control, including self-control, and taking responsibility. Lonergan thinks that "There are two fundamental movements in consciousness, that is, below-up; from experience to understanding to judgment to recognition of value and from above-down; from affectivity, including love, valuing, and belief to a richer experiencing, which must be grasped and critically judged according to transcendental method."<sup>23</sup> But since "The unconscious self perpetually manifests itself across all dimensions of life, guiding us towards evocative imagery, education is required to radiate love, to elevate us beyond the finite universe."<sup>24</sup> Learning creates an impetus for self-awareness that uplifts one from a propensity for religious openness, to the capacity for moral certitude.

Through his transcendental method, Lonergan promotes the advancement of a novel, more analytical human science. He posits that "By observing our own cognition as functional, we advance our self-understanding and differentiate between freedom and prejudice, advancement and regression, as well as the morality and immorality of societal and political structures."<sup>25</sup> These developments seem possible only if we are able to recognize their fundamental importance in the mechanistic view of science and society. Nonetheless, to construct a more effective human science demands a significant transformation in understanding, which comes through learning. In that regard, the method explains the cohesive process of understanding that demonstrates how the transcendental precepts furnish a solid foundation for establishing procedures or modes

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<sup>20</sup> Eric O'Connor, (Ed.), *Curiosity at the Center of One's Life*, (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1987), 371-372.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard, Lonergan, "Faith and Beliefs," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, (Newton: Mass October, 1969), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Cathleen, Going, (Ed.), *Dialogues in Celebration* (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Press, 1980), 310.

<sup>23</sup> Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Vol.3*, 260-261.

<sup>24</sup> David A. Nordquest, *Lonergan's Cognitional Theory: Toward a Critical Human Science*, in Ruth Abbey (Ed.), *The Review of Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Vol. 56, No. 1, 71-99.

<sup>25</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 332.

of conscious operations.<sup>26</sup>

The analysis of the transcendental method offers a valuable heuristic function that may foster unification across many fields of study. The approach facilitates the subject's discovery and realization of inherent spontaneity and inevitability that define the essence of knowledge. It is a means to an active and pragmatic involvement of the individual in the process of knowing.<sup>27</sup> For example, the method reveals that there will always be an intellectual conversion in the subject who follows the transcendental precepts of an active learner. The subject is able to execute particular actions, within a defined framework. Although his structure of knowing considers experience as conscious intentionality, rather than as an operation, it should be noted that it is not a contradictory approach to knowing. The explicit distinction between conscious processes and intentionality, without the involvement of the individual performing the action, is regarded as a means for value assessment and decision-making.<sup>28</sup> The operator is not just the individual subject, but subjects acting upon one another in their personal relations.

### Conclusion

To contextualize Lonergan's transcendental method and its potential for education curriculum and learning progress in Uganda relies on the need to establish the foundation for human knowing that leads to genuine existence. The individual who follows an objectified and firm methodology of learning, fulfils the requirements of authentic existence. Nonetheless, inauthenticity persists in our modern society due to factors like; lack of participation in the learning activities, unstable education curriculum, and a reluctance to the procedural foundation of knowing that he proposes, among others. The analysis revealed that the integration of the transcendental method into the perspective of Uganda's educational curriculum is necessary for the objectivity of its education system.

Using Lonergan's approach doesn't require teachers to completely overhaul their teaching methods. It simply calls for a thoughtful reconsideration of the core issues behind those methods. A major challenge to maintaining objectivity in educational programs lies in their abstract nature—unlike scientific research, which is grounded in observable data, most learning initiatives deal with conceptual rather than tangible content. What the transcendental method recommends is that the educational research must deal with practical skilled training that commensurate the various theories in education. The curriculum must deal with perceptions and competence, of the learners, in order to approach the material and teach them appropriately. It is noticed that when students discover for themselves, they achieve better in their learning. This approach not only resolves the conflict between learner-centered and teacher-driven instruction but also supports the effective incorporation of competence-based curricula into education. As a result, it creates opportunities for meaningful self-discovery, introducing a renewed sense of depth and value to the learning experience.

| Nomenclature                                                                                                                                       |
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| <p>A: Generalized Empirical Method is transcendental in nature because it lifts up the knower to a greater height.</p> <p>B: Curriculum ideals</p> |

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard, Lonergan, "The Origins of Christian Realism," in *A Second Collection*, ed. W. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 243.

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**C further nomenclature continues down the page inside the text box**

### 1.1. Structure

#### 1.1. Introduction

#### 1.2. The Transcendental Method in the context of education curriculum ideals

#### 1.3. Conclusion

### 1.2. Construction of references

Cathleen, Going, (Ed.) *Dialogues in Celebration*. Montreal: Thomas More Institute Press, 1980.

Centeno Jeffrey. "Learning-to-be: Reflections on Bernard Lonergan's Transcendental Philosophy of Education Towards and Integral Human Existence." In William Grassie (Ed.), *Metanexus*. New York: Online Publication. Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2026.

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### 1.3. Section headings

Section headings should be left justified, with the first letter capitalized and numbered consecutively, starting with the Introduction. Sub-section headings should be in capital and lower-case italic letters, numbered 1.1, 1.2, etc, and left justified, with second and subsequent lines indented. You may need to insert a page break to keep a heading with its text.

### 1.4. General guidelines for the preparation of your text

Avoid hyphenation at the end of a line. Symbols denoting vectors and matrices should be indicated in bold type. Scalar variable names should normally be expressed using italics. Weights and measures should be expressed in SI units. Please title your files in this order conferenceacronym\_authorslastname.pdf

1.5. Footnotes

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