

“My Future Will Be More Positive”: Personal Impact of an Undergraduate Positive Psychology Course

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ABSTRACT Positive psychology has become a major subfield in psychology as demonstrated by the number of empirical journal articles being published on the topic and the number of positive psychology courses being taught at many universities. This paper describes one instructor’s approach to teaching positive psychology to senior undergraduate students which incorporated applied positive education activities. The impact of the course on levels of happiness and optimism, determined by using pre- and post-measures of the *Subjective Happiness Scale* and the *Life Orientation Test-Revised*, is discussed. Participants reported significantly higher levels of happiness on the post-test suggesting teaching and learning about positive psychology can be a means of enhancing happiness. Student feedback also supported the importance of incorporating applied learning activities in reinforcing the theory of positive psychology.

Keywords: positive psychology, higher education, undergraduate education, applied learning activities

Introduction

In his book, Seligman (2002) proposes a positive psychology, a new direction and a new orientation to psychology (Compton & Hoffman, 2013):

“I do not believe that you should devote overly-much effort to correcting weaknesses. Rather, I believe that the highest success in living and the deepest emotional satisfaction comes from building and using your signature strengths” (Seligman, p. 13).

Seligman suggests people can develop unprecedented levels of happiness by nurturing existing “signature” strengths including optimism, kindness, generosity, originality, and/or humour. When we focus on causes outside ourselves that benefit humankind and utilize our unique signature strengths, he maintains we transcend to higher and higher planes of authentic happiness. This has been illustrated in numerous studies. For example, Peterson et al. (2005) found that the pursuit of meaning and engagement are much more predictive of life satisfaction than the pursuit of pleasure. Gable et al. (2004) showed that communicating personal positive events with others helped increase daily positive affect, more than the impact of the positive event itself. Indeed, there is so much support for Seligman’s proposition that positive psychology has become a major subfield in psychology as demonstrated by the number of empirical journal articles being published on the topic and the number of positive psychology courses being taught at many universities (Bridges, Harnish & Sillman, 2012).

“Positive education is defined as education for both traditional skills and for happiness” (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293). Positive education focuses on developing personal strengths and competencies and promoting well-being; it provides opportunities for students to be fully engaged in activities and in active learning (Compton & Hoffman, 2013). The World Government Summit’s (2017) report *The State of Positive Education* calls for

“increased awareness at the policy level of how governments can support positive education; further research and funding on the impact and sustainability of positive educational interventions; more application from schools at all ages of informed and research-based approaches to positive education; collaboration from universities, institutions, governments and individuals towards finding out what works well in positive education policy, research, and implementation” (p. 6).

This study responds to this call by describing an undergraduate course on positive psychology taught by applying positive education. To reflect on the impact of the positive education activities, this study was designed to answer the research question “does learning about positive psychology using positive education approaches improve students’ levels of happiness and optimism?”

Method

Participants

The positive psychology course which was evaluated was a fourth year senior seminar course for undergraduate psychology majors. All of the students taking the course were women and all volunteered to participate in the study. There were 14 in total.

The Course

One three-hour class was offered once per week for 13 weeks. There were four learning objectives for the course: students participated in discussions and activities designed to provide them with opportunities to: i) understand key concepts in positive psychology including topics related to happiness and the positive aspects of human experience, ii) critically evaluate the teaching of positive psychology as a means of enhancing happiness, iii) explore how focusing on one’s strengths helps one achieve lasting happiness, and iv) examine some of the routes for obtaining enduring happiness.

Each week, a specific aspect of positive psychology was discussed. This included:

- Positive emotions (subtopics include happiness, the practice of happiness, defining and measuring happiness, joy)
- Positive engagement (subtopics include altruism, empathy, compassion, kindness)
- Positive reflections at Thanksgiving (subtopics include gratitude, thankfulness, optimism)
- Positive goals (subtopics include self-determinism, self-regulation, self-efficacy, agency, goal setting, motivation)
- Positive responses (subtopics include resilience, post-traumatic growth, forgiveness, humour)
- Positive meaning (subtopics include meaning making, hope, psychology of religion, spirituality, meditation, prayer)

- Positive psychotherapy (subtopics include positive psychology interventions, focus on human strength)
- Positive health (subtopics include nature and health, art and health, psychology of beauty, positive affect and health)
- Positive purpose (subtopics include meaning in life, the meaningful life, quality of life, self-actualization, life satisfaction)
- Positive education (subtopics include positive psychology and classroom interventions, positive university)

The course objectives were evaluated through three components: weekly reading responses, a workshop presentation on one of the subtopics (including an interactive applied activity), and an experiential positive education assignment. Students chose one experiential activity from a list of three: 1. Intentional acts of kindness (adapted from Friedman, 2012); 2. Gratitude letter and visit (adapted from Seligman as cited in Van Nuys, n.d.); 3. Savoring assignment (adapted from Rashid as cited in Magyar-Moe, 2009).

Pre- and Post-Measures

To answer the research question “does learning about positive psychology using positive education approaches improve students’ levels of happiness and optimism,” the results of two pre- and post-measures were utilized. These measures were part of the course curriculum and students completed the measures as part of their own self-reflection. After they completed the post-measure in class, the study was described by the instructor and the students were invited to participate. Students voluntarily provided the instructor with copies at the end of the semester. This procedure was approved by a research ethics board.

The *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is described as the first assessment that offers an overall subjective account of one’s happiness. Using their own happiness criteria, individuals can make an overall judgment about how happy (or unhappy) they are. It is a brief four-item questionnaire that uses a seven point Likert scale. The brevity the scale has not affected its psychometric status as it “meets, and exceeds the minimum psychometric criteria for measurement accuracy” (p. 140). Almost 3000 participants from 14 samples contributed to the research and the scale shows good internal validity and reliability.

The *Life Orientation Test Revised* (Scheier & Carver, 1985) is a 10-item unidimensional scale, 5 point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4 that was developed to assess individual differences in generalized optimism versus pessimism. It is considered to be the most common used instrument to measure optimism, both in psychological and medical research. Four of the 10 items are “fillers” and not used in the total score.

Results

Repeated measures *t*-tests were conducted on the pre-test total of each scale compared to the post-test total. Repeated measures *t*-tests were also conducted on the pre- and post-scores of individual items of each test. These were planned comparisons so no correction factor was used.

The total on the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) can range from 4-28—the higher the score, the happier one is. The mean for the pre-test total was 20.79 and the mean for the post-test total was 23.21. So, while students were relatively happy at the beginning of the course, they became significantly happier by the end, $t(13) = -4.97, p < .001, r^2 = .66, 95\% \text{ CI } [-3.48, -1.37]$.

Scores on two items of the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) increased significantly. Firstly, students scored significantly higher on item #2: “Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself: not a very happy person...more happy” as the mean increased from 4.86 to 5.86 (7 meaning strongly agree), $t(13) = -6.75, p < .001, r^2 = .78, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.32, -0.68]$. Secondly, students scored significantly higher on item #3: “Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this describe you? not at all...a great deal” as the mean increased from 4.93 to 5.79, $t(13) = -2.92, p = .012, r^2 = .40, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.49, -0.22]$.

The total on the *Life Orientation Test Revised* (Scheier & Carver, 1985) can range from 0-24—the higher the score, the more optimistic one is. The mean for the pre-test total was 15.14 and the mean for the post-test total was 17.71. The test notes that “on average, most people score 15—slightly optimistic.” Students in the class were slightly optimistic at the beginning of the course but became significantly more optimistic by the end, $t(13) = -2.73, p = .017, r^2 = .36, 95\% \text{ CI } [-4.61, -0.54]$.

Scores on two items of the *Life Orientation Test Revised* (Scheier & Carver, 1985) also changed significantly. Students scored significantly higher on item #1: “In uncertain times I usually expect the best” as the mean score increased from 1.93 to 2.57 (4 being the highest score), $t(13) = -2.22, p = .045, r^2 = .27, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.27, -0.02]$. Students scored significantly lower on item #7: “I hardly ever expect things to go my way” as the mean score decreased from 3.21 to 2.50 (0 being the lowest score), $t(13) = -2.69, p = .019, r^2 = .36, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.29, -0.14]$.

At the end of the pre-test (after the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and *Life Orientation Test Revised* (Scheier & Carver, 1985)) was the question “Three things I expect to learn in this course.” This was designed to help students be active learners and start thinking about the content of the course. However, 10 students left this section blank or incomplete. At the end of the post-test was the question “Three things I learned in this course.” All of the students provided three responses. These are a sample: “The importance of doing things that I enjoy,” “How to improve life satisfaction,” “The positive effects of gratitude,” “Ways to enhance happiness,” “Importance of being in the moment,” “How to relax,” “How to look at things in a positive way,” “That gratitude creates positivity for the giver and receiver,” “That everyone should learn about positive psych because it really is life changing,” “Not to dwell on the past,” “How to find the good even in a stressful time,” “It is important to make & create meaning & happiness,” “How to teach my kids to be more positive,” “My future will be more positive.” These responses suggest students learned ways to promote well-being.

Conclusion

Although a limitation of this study is the small number of participants, the results support implementing positive education at the undergraduate level. The results also support teaching and learning about positive psychology as a means of enhancing happiness and optimism. While students were relatively happy at the beginning of the course, they became significantly happier by the end. Likewise, students were slightly optimistic at the beginning of the course but became significantly more optimistic by the end.

There is a paucity of published research on incorporating active learning exercises into positive psychology courses (Bridges et al., 2012) and while the course described in this study did utilize applied learning activities (as part of their classes, and

the workshops presented by their peers), it is impossible to determine the exact role these activities played in increasing happiness and optimism separate from what the students were learning in more traditional lectures and in their readings and reading reflections. Some students expressed how meaningful it was to them and to others (particularly the receivers of the gratitude letter) to have engaged in these experiential activities but this was not the focus of the present study.

These results raise two questions: ‘Can well-being be taught in university?’ and ‘Should well-being be taught in university?’ In their review of the literature, Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams and Glazebrook (2013) concluded that depression is one of the most common health problems for university students, and that the average depression prevalence is 30.6%, a higher rate than the 9% found in the general population rates of the United States (US) (range 6–12%). While university campuses in the US and Canada provide counselling services to students, offering positive psychology courses is another way to provide education about well-being and can be a pro-active approach to wellness.

Positive education can be an approach to teaching any subject and course, not only utilized in teaching positive psychology. Therefore, positive education will look different from school to school. What can post-secondary instructors do to get involved? The International Positive Education Network (2017) supports and promotes changing education by providing learning opportunities, free resources, and promoting collaboration. It connects people to best practices in research, and to other people who support positive education.

Courses can teach the *elements* of positive psychology--gratitude, meaning, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, strengths--while teaching *about* positive psychology. Active learning exercises help students *live* positive psychology. And living positive psychology can help make everyone’s future be more positive.

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