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Teaching Happiness: Developing and Assessing a Happiness Course

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Introduction

Before beginning a discussion on teaching happiness, it would be insightful to discuss, what is happiness? Aristotle described happiness as “The best, noblest and most pleasant thing in the world” (Aristotle, 2009, Book 1, Section 9, ¶3), but goes on to question whether “happiness is to be acquired by learning or habituation of some other sort of training, or comes in virtue of some divine providence of again by chance” (Aristotle, 2009, Book 1, Section 8, ¶8). The Dalai Lama believes that “The very purpose of our life is to seek happiness” (Dalai Lamma, 2002, p. 13). The renowned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard describes happiness as “...a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind...and a way of interpreting the world” (Ricard, 2006, p. 19). He also asks if “happiness is a skill that, once acquired, endures through the ups and downs of life?” (p. 18). For the purpose of this study, Sonja Lyubomirsky’s description fits the best as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile” (2007, p. 32). These statements begs the question how can happiness be measured, since it is inherently subjective and can only be defined from the perspective of the individual?

Elyse Gorman’s article “The Happiness Class You Never Took In School” emphasized that schools and universities teach language, science, math, history, how to write and play sports, but few include classes on the key life lessons of happiness and self-growth that would help us navigate the world. She was advocating for happiness classes being taught in schools and universities (Gorman, 2015). Two notable contemporary courses, which focus on the concepts of positive psychology and happiness, are offered at Harvard and The University of California-Berkley. Harvard offers PSY 1504 Positive Psychology, and it is the most popular course on campus with over 800+ students (Ben-Shahar, 2007). The University of California-Berkley offers GG101x: The Science of Happiness as a massive open online course (MOOC), in which over 50,000 people from around the world have signed up (Anwar, 2015).

The growing popularity of “happiness” courses invites some form of assessment related to student learning outcomes. The research questions for this study were:

- Can learning outcomes (changes in student happiness scores) be assessed in a “happiness” course? The null hypothesis is, there would be no change in student happiness scores on the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire.
- Does the mode of course delivery (campus/in-person or distance/online course) affect the student learning outcomes (changes in student happiness

scores on the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire)? The null hypothesis would be that there is no difference between student learning scores and type of delivery mode.

The concept of happiness has grown as a popular social trend since Martin Seligman introduced positive psychology in his 1998 American Psychological Association's (APA) Presidential Address (Froh, 2004). Seligman operationalized the concepts of positive psychology and happiness in several publications including *Authentic Happiness* (2002) and *Flourish* (2011).

Based on current articles, books and studies focusing on positive psychology and happiness, the common thread is the belief stated by the Dalai Lama that “we can train in happiness in much the same way that we train in any other skill, directly cultivating it through effort and practice” (Dalai Lama, 2009, p. xix). However, based on research by Lyubomirsky (2007) there are limitations to an individual's happiness. Her findings indicate that only 40% of an individual's happiness can be increased through “Intentional Activities.”

- Intentional Activities are effortful activities that are controlled by what we do and how we think.
- Circumstances are incidental but stable facts about your life: age, gender, ethnicity, where you grew up, significant childhood, adolescence and adult events. Life circumstances include all life circumstances and situations people are in. Life circumstances and situations combined account for approximately 10 percent in an individual's happiness.
- Set Point is the genetically determined predisposition for happiness and accounts for 50 percent of the differences between an individual and anyone else.

Seligman (2002) points out that “we each have a fixed range of happiness” (Preface), but positive psychology teaches individuals how to live in the upper level of their set range.

Matthieu Ricard (2006) also supports the concept that happiness is a skill that can be taught when he stated that, “It requires sustained effort in training the mind and developing a set of human qualities, such as inner peace, mindfulness and altruistic love” (p. 8).

The agreement between many positive psychology, spirituality and happiness researchers (Seligman, 2002; Gilbert, 2006; Ricard, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007; and Dalai Lama, 2009) that happiness can be taught, was summed up by the Dalai Lama

(2009) when he stated, "...our moment to moment happiness is largely determined by our outlook" (p. 22).

After months of intensive research on the concepts of positive psychology and spiritual teachings related to happiness and well-being, a new course, was developed and approved, by the Northern Arizona University's Curriculum Committee. In the spring of 2015, the Park and Recreation Management (PRM) program introduced PRM 205 Happiness as an Aesthetic and Human Inquiry (AHI) Liberal Studies course and a required course in the PRM major.

Since learning outcomes are directly tied to course content, a multi-disciplinary approach was used. The course requirements included: students reading both the *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002) and the *Art of Happiness* (Dalai Lama, 2009) books, completing weekly discussion questions (in class or online), a test on each book, practicing meditation, watching videos, and submitting eight assignments. Course assignments included the following:

- Complete the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire (*Authentic Happiness*, Questionnaire Center, 2015) which measures current happiness (pre and post Assignments 1 & 8)
- Happy Reminiscence is recalling a happy memory - to transport oneself to a different time or place - can provide pleasure and solace when needed. Reminiscing on a regular basis has been shown to considerably increase happiness.
- Altruism/Random Act of Kindness is doing something helpful for a stranger, an individual, group or organization and preferably without any recognition for your kind deed. Individuals, who commit acts of kindness, from small simple helpful behaviors to larger efforts, experience a significant elevation in their happiness.
- Happiness APP has each student select a Happiness app for their smart phone from the apps listed in the course syllabus and submit a report including the purpose of the app, suggested length of time used, amount of time required, and did it affect your happiness?
- Happy Place & Happy Activity has each student identify a specific place that they go, that creates a happy feeling. They also identify a specific activity that they participate in that creates a happy feeling.
- UNPLUG Experience asks each student to select a day where they can "UNPLUG" all technology devices (cell/smart phones, laptops, tablets, Fitbits, music devices, etc.) for a minimum of three hours. During these

three hours, they agree, “not to use any tech devices.” After they completed the UNPLUG time, each student submits a 500 word (minimum) description of their UNPLUG experience. Each student is asked to identify their, thoughts, feelings and reactions to the experience.

- Gratitude asks each student to select one important person from their past that has made a major positive difference in their life and to whom they have never fully expressed their thanks. Each student then writes a testimonial, which is usually about one page. Then invite that person to their home or visits that person's home. It is important to do this face-to-face if possible. Do not tell the person the reason for the visit in advance. Bring your testimonial with you as a gift. If you cannot meet face-to-face with this person you can Skype or call them. When you are ready, read your testimonial out loud slowly, with expression, and with eye contact (in-person). Then let the other person respond unhurriedly. Reminisce together about the events that made this person so important. Prepare a brief summary of your meeting/communication with this person and include this summary with your Gratitude survey results.

The fall 2015 campus PRM 205 Happiness course met for one hour and fifteen minutes in class twice a week for eight weeks. The distance course was taught online in an asynchronous format over an eight-week period. Both the campus and distance courses had exactly the same course content and assignments.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were Northern Arizona University students enrolled in the PRM 205 Happiness courses (campus/in person and distance/online) for the 2015 fall semester. The campus course had a total of N=49 students and the distance course had a total of N=23 students. Participants enrolled in the course to satisfy an Aesthetic and Human Inquiry liberal study requirement or to satisfy a PRM major requirement or for personal interest.

Instrument

Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire

The Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire is a brief measure of current happiness which research supports that it is a valid measure of emotional well-being and global health. It has been shown to have good reliability with test-retest coefficients as high as 0.98 over a two-day period and between 0.62 to 0.68 over a four month

period (Magyar-Moe, 2009). Strong convergent validity has been established with positive correlations being found between the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire and a multitude of measures of happiness and well-being (Fordyce, 1988).

Procedure

This was a pre-experimental study using a pre-test and post-test design with a convenience sample. Northern Arizona University students enrolled in the PRM 205 Happiness courses (campus/in person (N=49) and distance/online (N=23)) for the 2015 fall semester completed the online Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire (Authentic Happiness, Questionnaire Center, 2015) in the first week of their respective course and again at the end of their eight week course.

Students were instructed to go to the University of Pennsylvania Authentic Happiness Test Center (Authentic Happiness, 2015), complete the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire and submit their results (see Table 1) to the course Instructor. A t-Test Paired Two Samples for Means was employed taking each students Pre-survey and Post-survey scores. A separate t-Test was applied to the scores for the campus/in person and distance/online courses to determine if any change in the students happiness scores had occurred between the beginning and the end of the course. The t-Test analysis reduces the chance that a confounding variable will influence the results.

A third t-Test: Two Sample Assuming Equal Variances was used comparing the differences in student Pre-survey and Post-survey scores between the campus/in person or distance/Internet delivery mode.

An alpha of 0.05 was used as the cutoff for significance. If the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis that there's no difference between the means and conclude that a significant difference does exist.

Table 1

Sample Results for the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire

Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire

Here are your scores on the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire.

Nov 10, 2015

Score Range: 0 to 10

Happiness: 9

Percent of the time you feel unhappy on average: 5

Percent of the time you feel neutral on average: 10

Happiness Score (You scored as high as or higher than...)

Label	% Score
Web Users	91 - Individual score is compared with scores from other Web Users.
Gender	88 - Individual score is compared with scores from same Gender.
Age Group	92 - Individual score is compared with scores from same age group.
Occupation Group	90 - Individual score is compared with scores from same Occupational Group.
Education Level	91 - Individual score is compared with scores from other in the same Educational Level..
Zip Code	88 - Individual score is compared with scores from other same Zip Code.

Average Happiness

Nov 10, 2015

Score Range: 1 to 100

Percent of the time you feel happy on average: 85

Percent of the time you feel unhappy on average: 5

Percent of the time you feel neutral on average: 10

Results

A convenience sample consisted of Northern Arizona University students enrolled in the PRM 205 Happiness campus/in-person course (N=49) and the PRM 205 Happiness distance/online course (N=23) for the 2015 fall semester.

Table 2 shows the campus course t-Test Paired Two Samples for Means. The results show the difference between Pre and Post scores was positive ($t = 5.2$, $df = 48$, $p = 3.96 \times 10^{-6}$). The course resulted in a significant increase in student happiness.

Table 3 shows the distance course t-Test Paired Two Samples for Means. The results show the difference between Pre and Post scores was positive ($t = 4.765$, $df = 22$, $p = 9.3 \times 10^{-5}$). The course resulted in a significant increase in student happiness.

Table 4 shows the Campus vs Distance Course Delivery t-Test: Two Sample Assuming Equal Variances. The results show $t = -1.313$, $df = 70$, $p = 0.193$ the null was accepted. This indicates there were no statistically significant differences increasing student happiness between the campus/in person and the distance/online delivery modes.

Table 2

Campus Course Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	61.5102	72.91837
Variance	449.2968	253.3265
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.692799	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	-5.2075	
P(T<=t) one-tail	1.98E-06	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224	
P(T<=t) two-tail	3.96E-06	
t Critical two-tail	2.010635	

Table 3**Distance Course Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means**

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	54.86957	71.52174
Variance	639.7549	457.9881
Observations	23	23
Pearson Correlation	0.754635	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	22	
t Stat	-4.76595	
P(T<=t) one-tail	4.65E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.717144	
P(T<=t) two-tail	9.3E-05	
t Critical two-tail	2.073873	

Table 4**Campus vs Distance Course Delivery t-Test: Two Sample Assuming Equal Variances**

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	11.40816327	16.65217391
Variance	235.1632653	280.7826087
Observations	49	23
Pooled Variance	249.5007732	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	70	
t Stat	-1.313479584	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.09665519	
t Critical one-tail	1.666914479	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.193310381	
t Critical two-tail	1.994437112	

Discussion

The results of this study conclude that happiness can be taught, as measured by the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire, and that the course can be delivered on campus/in person or distance/Internet with equal results. However, the unique combination of readings, practicing meditation, watching course videos, and completing the eight assignments does not provide any insight into the impact, if any, of each course component. But, synergistically, the course provides opportunities to help students increase their happiness.

Why is it important to teach happiness may be the more salient question. A variety of studies have found that happy people live longer, are creative, tolerant, constructive, generous, undefensive and playful. Happy people have higher job satisfaction, better health habits, lower blood pressure, endure pain better, have a stronger immune system, and are less likely to become disabled. They have more casual and close friends, are more likely to be married, and are more involved in group activities than unhappy people (Seligman, 2002).

In almost every nation, when asked, people put happiness at the top of their list of what they want (Lyubomirsky, 2007). One explanation for the growing interest in positive psychology and happiness may be from the increasing rates of depression in the United States. “Rates of depression are ten times higher today than they were in the 1960’s, and the average age for onset of depression is fourteen and a half compared to twenty-nine and a half in 1960” (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p. ix). In our high tech, hi-speed, consumer driven society individuals are reaching out to find purpose and meaning in their lives. Happiness is not just about moments of joy, flow, pleasure, contentment, hope, or ecstasy, which are fleeting and inconsistent emotions. The nature of happiness is that its pursuit is an ongoing process on an infinite continuum and not a final destination. But, we cannot arrive at that destination without acquiring a skill set of positive psychology techniques that will assist individuals in creating a purposeful and meaningful life.

The impetus for teaching “happiness” is best summed up by the Dalai Lama when he said “Cultivating greater happiness benefits not only oneself, but also one’s family, community and society” (p. xxiii).

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