



Positive Psychology Teaching Tools: Supplemental Readings to Core Texts

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### Positive Psychology Teaching Tools: Supplemental Readings to Core Texts

Since its founding in 1998 by the past president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Martin E. P. Seligman and colleagues, positive psychology has developed rapidly (Seligman, 2010). Indicative of the field's success are the appearance of a field-specific journal, the *Journal of Positive Psychology*; research funding and professional conferences earmarked for positive psychology; numerous handbooks (e.g., Lopez & Snyder, 2009) and encyclopedias (e.g., Lopez, 2009) on the topic; and numerous popular books aimed at the general reader on related subjects (e.g., Weiner, 2008). Early instructors of the topic typically had to assemble courses from special issues or sections of journals focused on the topic (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001) or selected journal articles. However, in 2004 the first positive psychology classroom textbooks were published (Bolt, 2004; Carr, 2004).

As of 2012, six positive psychology textbooks are available, two of which have supplements such as instructor PowerPoint® presentations and test banks (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). These textbooks range widely in length, difficulty, and coverage (see Rich, 2011, for a full analysis and comparison tables). Several of the textbooks are probably too brief for use as a sole text for students with sufficient preparation levels (Bolt, 2004; Compton, 2005). Two others, running under 400 pages (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009; Peterson, 2006), still run shorter than many introductory psychology textbooks.

In addition, the six textbooks vary widely in the topics they cover. For instance, while all six textbooks have chapters on happiness, positive emotions/traits, and relationships, and five of the six textbooks have a chapter on hope/optimism, only 50% of the textbooks have chapters on character strengths/virtues and wisdom, and only one in six textbooks have chapters on resilience, culture, and goals. Though in an emerging field such as positive psychology there

may yet to be consensus on what constitutes non-negotiable core areas, the existing textbook coverage selected by textbook authors offers some indication of how the discipline has been developing. Virtually all of the texts could provide more coverage about positive institutions (such as families, schools, work, and religion), about cognitive strengths (such as creativity and curiosity), and especially about cultural and international factors (Rich, 2011). The purpose of this article is to suggest supplemental readings (not journal articles) that can enhance the teaching of a positive psychology seminar. In addition, given the multidisciplinary nature of positive psychology and the interest of a number of faculty and universities in offering interdisciplinary seminars (such as co-teaching with a historian or philosopher or offering a cross-listed course in a multidisciplinary social sciences or human services department), this resource describes appropriate readings from related fields that may be of interest for such courses.

### **Commonly Used Supplements to Core Texts**

The current crop of dedicated positive psychology textbooks has much to offer. However, some professors may find that they would like to supplement their primary textbook with additional readings, perhaps on a specialized topic, for instance, for professors with students with majors outside psychology (such as business, humanities, or allied health). Fortunately, such supplements are plentiful.

Relatively early in the positive psychology movement, a number of edited volumes on the subject began to appear. *The Science of Optimism and Hope* (Gillham, 2000), *A Psychology of Human Strengths* (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003), and *Flourishing* (Keyes & Haidt, 2003) are affordable and may still make excellent supplements. In particular, the Gillham volume includes essays by many luminaries, including Worthington, Schwartz, Csikszentmihalyi, Peterson,

Myers, Snyder, and Seligman. Such a volume may be helpful to professors who desire their students to read original scholarship by leading psychologists, not simply synopses by secondary authors such as is typically found in textbooks. Many of these edited volumes include the type of survey or review articles that undergraduates find accessible and helpful, especially for students without substantial backgrounds in methods and statistics.

Since the publication of these general positive psychology readers, a steady stream of edited volumes has been published. *A Life Worth Living* (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) contains contributions by Peterson, Emmons, Frederickson, Salovey, Kasser, Sheldon, Seligman, and others. Perhaps the most recent contribution is *Designing Positive Psychology* (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). This book offers a survey of many of the major topics in positive psychology--sections focus on the following perspectives: introductory, biological, emotional, social-cognitive, personality, relationships, clinical, organizational, societal, and summary. Chapter authors include many of the expected senior scholars and emerging younger scholars. This book could serve admirably as an affordable supplement to a core positive psychology textbook. Appropriately subtitled "Taking Stock and Moving Forward," the volume serves as an important reminder that what was an emerging field has now had a decade to mature in the time between its positive psychology's founding in the late 1990s and the book's publication in 2011. Several chapters review and critique the history and future of positive psychology, noting potential pitfalls and offering constructive suggestions for the future. Another recent volume also appears promising: *Applied Positive Psychology: Improving Everyday Life, Schools, Work, Health, and Society* (2011) edited by Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, and Nakamura.

### **Special Topics in Positive Psychology**

### *Work*

Other supplemental texts are appropriate for professors who seek to add depth to a specific special topic within a positive psychology seminar. For instance, a psychologist teaching business majors, may find the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2010) to be an excellent choice. Twenty-six chapters by authors based in both business schools and psychology departments focus on topics including the changing world of work, positive organizational leadership, positive work environments, models of positive organizations, and enabling a positive working life. Standout chapters include those on character strengths at work by Peterson, Seligman, and colleagues, young workers by Gardner and Barendsen, and coaching by Grant and Spence.

### *Religion*

Two areas that form important components of positive psychology, but which to date have received scant attention in the available core positive psychology textbooks are religion and creativity. Pargament's *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (1997) predates the formal launch of positive psychology but remains relevant today. *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* by Emmons (2003) may also be an appropriate choice. At 636 pages, almost certainly too long for a supplemental classroom text, *The Psychology of Religion* (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009) can serve well as a class resource, for instance, for students investigating term paper topics. For instructors seeking a supplement from a non-Judeo-Christian point of view, Levine's (2009) recently revised *The Positive Psychology of Buddhism and Yoga* offers a well-written alternative.

### *Creativity*

Faculty seeking to add a book on creativity may find *Explaining Creativity* (Sawyer, 2006) to be a readable, well-rounded introduction to the range of theories and research. Sawyer

reviews both individualist (e.g., personality, cognitive, biological, and computational theories) and contextualist approaches (e.g., more sociological, cultural, and historical theories) and has chapters on both artistic (visual arts, writing, music, and acting) and nonartistic (science, business, and personal) creativity. Chapters end with self-assessments in the form of thought experiments, applied activities that are in the spirit of many positive psychology seminars.

Simonton provides central discussions of creativity, and his book *Greatness: Who Makes History and Why* (1994) is an excellent choice. Other examples include the edited volumes on creativity such as Kaufman and Sternberg (2010) and Sternberg, Grigorenko, and Singer (2004). These two compilations may be more suitable for more advanced undergraduates or graduate students.

#### *Personality and Character Strength*

Some professors may also wish to supplement their core positive psychology text with readings that focus more closely and in-depth on a personality trait, character strength, or other component of positive psychology. For instance, instructors seeking to stimulate student interest may find that Kashdan's book *Curious?* (2009) works well to engage participation. Aside from offering an astute analysis of the current state of research on curiosity, Kashdan extends the definition of curiosity, applying it to many areas of student interest, from relationships, obsessions and sensational thrills, to sex, death, gossip, and meaning in life. The book is replete with humorous stories and numerous exercises that will add significantly to many positive psychology seminars.

In similar fashion, a book such as Emmons's *Thanks!* (2007) would be an appropriate choice for professors seeking contemporary research on gratitude. Likewise, although all of the core positive psychology textbooks devote considerable coverage to happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being, professors who desire their students to read original sources or to

delve more deeply into the topic may wish to adopt one of the many books by Diener (see Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2008, for an accessible treatment of this research program) or *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, a high quality recent festschrift in his honor, suitable for advanced undergraduates and graduate students (Eid & Larsen, 2008). This edited volume includes chapters on the pursuit of happiness in history; measuring subjective well-being; the role played by religion, material wealth, and social comparison in subjective well-being; interpersonal factors impacting subjective well-being; and interventions for promoting positive affect.

### *Health*

Some core positive psychology textbooks review research related to improving health, especially in sections on optimism and hope; however, those faculty seeking to strengthen their positive psychology courses in terms of coverage of health topics, have several options. Taylor, whose earlier work on positive illusions and health predated positive psychology, has examined *The Tending Instinct* (2002), focusing upon positive psychology from a neuroscientific and biological point of view. Her accessible approach will make the hard science approachable to many students otherwise intimidated by the topic. Langer (2009) explores the limits of mindful health in her book *Counterclockwise*. Students will be intrigued by the possibilities suggested by Langer's descriptions of her work, such as her study which asked elderly men to live for a week as though it was 1959. Many of the men demonstrated improvements in hearing, memory, and well-being. Led by Langer's engaging writing style, students may find themselves, asking questions about research design, the need for replication, issues regarding techniques to reduce experimenter bias, and the possible trade-off between experimental control and ecological validity.

Another approach may be to utilize an inspiring biography of a health care provider. Kidder's book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2004) about Dr. Paul Farmer, a Harvard physician who worked in Haiti and several other nations, is an exciting case study of a man who exemplifies a number of the strengths described by positive psychologists. The book's detail of his formative child and student experiences can stimulate discussions on such topics as: What personality traits or experiences shape a child into an adult who accomplishes great things? What might positive psychology learn from a single case study? How can positive psychology be applied to improve personal and social well-being both at home and abroad? Student assignments may include applying positive psychological research and theory to interpretation of this rich case study. Alternatively, students may first read and discuss this book in seminar and then select an inspiring biography of their choice. Then, students may share their findings with their classmates in the context of how positive psychology principles may fit (or not fit) the case.

### *Development*

Developmental psychologists may wish to supplement their positive psychology seminar with a book such as *Approaches to Positive Youth Development* (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). The editors of the collection have assembled a number of key researchers in the field, including Benson, Eisenberg, Spencer, Eccles, and Larson. Chapters focus on issues including developmental assets, youth civic engagement, empathy-related responding, adolescent social support, adolescent spirituality, adolescent political activism, teamwork in youth programs, and positive approaches to preventing substance misuse and to resolving conflict among diverse youth.

### *Relevant Handbooks*

A discussion of supplemental texts would not be complete without mentioning several significant volumes edited by Lopez (2008, 2009, Lopez & Snyder, 2009). These three volumes are too expensive and extensive to assign as classroom texts but would serve as excellent resources in college and university libraries where they will assist students with developing research term paper topics and reading lists, and with seeking accessible points of entry into a plethora of positive psychology topics. The *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Lopez & Snyder, 2009) is the least expensive of these publications, at about one hundred dollars and about 750 pages. *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* (Lopez, 2009) runs over 1,000 pages and over four hundred dollars. The four volumes of *Positive Psychology: Exploring the Best in People* (Lopez, 2008) retails for four hundred dollars and runs to 888 pages. Finally, for faculty wishing to utilize films, Wedding and Niemiec (2008) have written an extremely helpful guide, *Positive psychology at the movies: Using films to build virtues and character strengths*, which not only lists, ranks, and describes relevant films, but contextualizes them for students and faculty alike, including a number of thought-provoking questions.

### **Supplemental Readings from Related Fields**

#### *Anthropology*

Some psychology instructors may wish to co-teach a seminar with faculty from related fields. Other professors may wish to enhance the potentially multidisciplinary nature of positive psychology. One method to achieve such goals is to assign texts written by nonpsychologists. A number of texts may fit the bill quite well. For instance, professors interested in strengthening the cross-cultural component of a positive psychology seminar may wish to utilize the recent edited volume *Pursuits of Happiness: Well-Being in Anthropological Perspective* (Mathews &

Izquierdo, 2009). This book, which is based upon a panel on well-being at the American Anthropological Association, is edited by two anthropologists. Geographic regions examined include the Peruvian Amazon, rural New South Wales, Australia, India, Japan, a rural Indonesian village, a Chinese city, and more. Many of the chapters emphasize the importance of defining well-being, and how such states and traits may vary from place to place and between persons, communities, and societies. Students may benefit not only from the cross-cultural content, which extends the work of positive psychologists conducted with mainly U.S. samples, but from the diversity of methods utilized by the anthropologists. Using this text, along with a core positive psychology text, for example, could lead to potentially interesting discussions about the value and appropriateness of the experimental and quantitative methods often used by psychologists and the qualitative methods, fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews often more closely associated with anthropologists. Several chapters in the book offer more theoretical treatments of the significance and relevance of the study of well-being to anthropologists.

### *Social Work*

Professors seeking to partner with human services or social work faculty, or who wish a more applied approach (including courses with service learning or civic engagement components) may wish to utilize social worker Saleeby's helpful edited volume, *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (2008). This book includes both chapters on specific populations and issues, and more general theoretical chapters. Sample chapter topics include the following: chronic illness and transience; exploring the true nature of resilience; key dimensions of the strengths perspective in case management, clinical, and community practice;

the strengths model with older adults; and, influencing social workers' beliefs about individual and family resilience in an effort to enhance well-being and success.

Again, as is the case with anthropological texts, students who read the social work text, will benefit not only from the content, but also from exploring questions related to methods. The social work volume includes work from a variety of disciplines, both quantitative and qualitative, but certainly more case studies and clinical vignettes than typical of most psychology texts. As an example of how the social work approach differs from the psychological approach, consider a chapter section from the Saleeby text entitled "Assessment as Political Activity" (p. 110), a title unlikely in psychological assessment texts, which often aim for a neutral, apolitical approach. Overall, the book seems to have a humanistic, activist tone in keeping with the following words from the foreword by University of Vermont social work professor Stanley Witkin: "This book invites us to imagine a world in which all people are treated with respect and dignity. A world where even the most downtrodden and debilitated can harbor and pursue a dream of a better life. Where no limits are placed on the individual potential."

### *Business*

Other related fields also have much to offer psychologists wishing to teach with a multidisciplinary approach. From the field of business, a veritable plethora of options exist. Faculty teaching advanced undergraduates or graduate students may find an edited volume such as the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2010) to be appropriate. Sections focus on positive organizational leadership, positive work environments, models for positive organizations, enabling a positive working life, and more. Csikszentmihalyi wrote *Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning* (2003), a helpful book which applies and extends his seminal research on flow to the business context.

Buckingham, who spent many years with the Gallup Organization, published several best-selling books on strengths (Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) that offer a contrast to the standard assessments and approaches employed by positive psychologists. Psychology professors who teach from the Buckingham oeuvre may find comparing and contrasting the Buckingham approach to common psychological assessments can be an instructive teaching tool. Graham's *Happiness Around the World* (2009) offers an economist's point of view on the current debate over utilizing measures of psychological well-being in addition to, or in lieu of, economic measures of well-being in assessing overall national progress and societal development. Her work is especially focused on cross-national comparisons of correlates of well-being, including data from Latin America, Russia, and Africa, and in investigating what she terms "*The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires*" in her book's subtitle.

#### *Journalism/Literary Critics*

Other potentially relevant work hails from journalists and English professors. In *The Progress Paradox* (2003), Easterbrook, an editor at both *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, offered his interpretation of a central question posed by positive psychologists: Why do many people in the current generation feel less happy than those of previous, less affluent generations? This book may stimulate the interest of otherwise apathetic undergraduates and motivate further engagement with original research sources.

Other books challenge positive psychology. Best-selling journalist Ehrenreich (2009) takes aim at positive thinking, from the nineteenth century to present day positive psychology. Her wit, strident tone, and sometimes breezy dismissals of research may irk some psychology professors, but her book may lead to engaging discussions about possible limitations of

strengths-based approaches, about the role of public intellectuals, and about what it means to think like a psychologist and reliance on what the data say. Another book critical of positive thinking, positive psychology, and happiness is *Against Happiness* (2008) by English professor Wilson, who also argues that melancholia is necessary, especially for such noble pursuits as creative innovations such as those in painting (e.g., Goya) and politics (e.g., Abraham Lincoln).

### *Philosophy/History*

The study of the good life, happiness, well-being, and related topics has long been examined in philosophy and history. A full review of relevant texts from these fields is well beyond the scope of this article. However, many psychologists may desire to teach or co-teach first year or senior seminars on *The Good Life* from a multidisciplinary point of view. One excellent reader on philosophical approaches to the topic is *Happiness* (2008) edited by philosophers Cahn and Vitano. The editors have selected historical excerpts from such sources as Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus through Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Sartre. The editors also include readings by contemporary theorists such as Kraut, Nozick, and Annas. Faculty seeking a contemporary single-authored philosophical approach accessible to undergraduates would be well-advised to peruse *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science* (2010) by Harvard's Bok. An erudite yet readable book, Bok weaves together notions of happiness from the Greek philosophers to contemporary Buddhists, economists, neuroscientists, and positive psychologists. Bok's book will engender critical thinking about what research questions psychologists should and can be examining, and what applied and practical lessons may be learned about the good life and how it may be pursued. Finally, historian McMahon (2006) offers a history of happiness from ancient Greece through Locke, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Jefferson, and beyond. One could envision the book, named a

*New York Times* notable book of the year, utilized in a seminar co-taught by a psychologist and a historian. In addition to its content, a reading of the book will likely stimulate discussion concerning the importance of operational definitions in research, how historical context and cohort differences may impact research results, and how the structure of professional disciplines may facilitate or hinder the quest for knowledge.

### Conclusion

In sum, in the decade since the founding of positive psychology, a half dozen classroom textbooks have become available. While these core textbooks have a number of strengths, many faculty may discover that the resources described in this article help provide a comprehensive approach to teaching positive psychology seminars and related courses. A number of psychology professors may wish to teach positive psychology, or related courses (such as *The Good Life*) from a multidisciplinary point of view. Perhaps the professor is asked to teach positive psychology to students in a business program or wishes to co-teach a seminar with a colleague based in a different discipline. Psychology professors now have available a range of quality readings from a variety of related fields, making the dream of a successful multidisciplinary positive psychology seminar all the more possible. Faculty and students who reach beyond the core textbooks to read more specialized work from psychology and related fields, will find their thinking expanded and enriched.

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