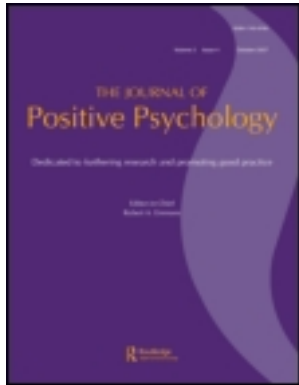


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'Learning from success': A close look at a popular positive psychology course

Pninit Russo-Netzer^a & Tal Ben-Shahar^b

^a Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel

^b Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya 46150, Israel

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‘Learning from success’: A close look at a popular positive psychology course

Pninit Russo-Netzer^{a*} and Tal Ben-Shahar^b

^aDepartment of Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel;

^bInterdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya 46150, Israel

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This article is a case study of an undergraduate course in positive psychology taught by Dr Tal Ben-Shahar. The course has been taught three times between 2004 and 2008 in the Department of Psychology at the Harvard University. It is currently being taught at the School of Psychology, ‘Interdisciplinary Center’, Herzliya (one of Israel’s leading colleges), in both English and Hebrew. The course’s main emphasis is on transformation rather than information, while exploring the main question: ‘How can we help ourselves and others – individuals, communities, and society – to become happier?’ The course was innovative in its content as well as in its teaching methods. When taught, it was the most popular course at Harvard with the largest attendance in the history of the psychology department – with enrollment reaching over 855 students (about one out of every seven undergraduate students). Understanding the uniqueness of this course could contribute to the development of teaching the popular and broad field of positive psychology at the undergraduate level and to varied populations.

Keywords: higher education; teaching positive psychology; positive psychology; education

Teaching positive psychology – The message and the messenger

The growing interest in positive psychology in academia has been demonstrated by the increasing number of courses and programs offered in leading universities and colleges worldwide at the undergraduate and graduate levels (e.g., Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). A large part of this phenomenon is rooted in the field’s unique emphasis on the science of happiness, flourishing life, and well-being rather than on stress, trauma, and dysfunction (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). This science, which promotes ‘that which makes life worthwhile’, has the potential of building bridges, specifically between the ‘Ivory Tower’ and Main Street, i.e., practitioners, organizations, and the general public.

The objective of the course discussed in this case report emphasizes the importance of this potential to bridge the empirical foundation of academic research and the accessibility of the ‘self-help’ movement. Combining action and reflection, theory and practice, is especially important in an applied field such as positive psychology, aiming to implement principles and tools of positive human functioning and flourishing into practice in various

professional domains – for individuals, groups, organizations, and society. Understanding the material is not enough. The message should be personally relevant to the life of the teacher as well as to that of his or her students. Furthermore, it has to motivate the students to actively practice the principles learned in their lives.

In order to achieve these goals, the course was constructed based on a cross-disciplinary selection of topics that are central and important psychological aspects of a fulfilling and flourishing life. This interdisciplinary and integrated approach is manifested in the incorporation of topics that are at the core of the positive psychology field (e.g., Carr, 2003), such as happiness, gratitude, flow, relationships, strengths, humor, mindfulness, and optimism, together with various topics that touch on other areas in the science of psychology but are relevant to the human pursuit for a life of meaning, fulfillment, and happiness (such as self-esteem, creativity, perfectionism, goal setting, and the mind–body connection). The integration of topics covered under the holistic umbrella of mind, body, and social environment and physical environment (Baylis, 2004) has the potential of contributing to a broader and enriched understanding of well-being and a thriving life.

*Corresponding author. Email: pninit.russonetzer@gmail.com

We recommend that while constructing a positive psychology course, the instructor should take some time to reflect and engage in a personal process, applying the methodology of appreciative inquiry (AI; e.g., Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) into personal values, vision, and mission. The AI method is based on the fact that questions tend to focus attention and therefore exploring and learning from past success and present potential ('what works'), both personal and others. This in turn enables inspiration and positive energy that may contribute to gaining more clarity on possible course goals and guiding principles that both the instructor and the students can benefit from. It is suggested that the process would include questions that cover aspects of content and method, such as:

What are the things I've learned or done that had made me happy and contributed to my well-being?
 What have I learned from other teachers and courses I have taken? What was most meaningful for me?
 What did I want to learn as a student? What motivates me to teach this kind of course? What important messages do I want my students to remember from this class? If I could put together the class that I would have loved to have taken as a student, what would it look like and how can I construct it?

This guideline in constructing the course itself as a whole is congruent with the statement of Carl Rogers, 'What is most personal is most general', and Maslow's 'Knowledge of one's own deep nature is also simultaneously knowledge of human nature in general'. The passion derived from selecting the topics that are most relevant to the teacher, the kind of issues that he or she would have liked to study as a student, is contagious and attracts students. If the material relates to the teacher personally, it is more likely that other people, i.e., students, will also benefit from this, especially if the material presented is based upon personal experiences.

The importance of designing and exploring the contents covered in the course (the 'What') highlights the prominence of the teacher, the facilitator and the messenger of the message (the 'How'). How can the teacher be an effective messenger of that message? This article addresses the domain of positive psychology teaching methods in general, considering the course's 'building blocks' in particular. The objective of the teacher in this course is not merely to inform students about research in the field, but additionally to transform the way the students see the world. As Shakespeare said, 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'. Happiness is very much about how we perceive the world.

We shall first present the pedagogical principles upon which the course is based. Next, we shall discuss the teacher's role as the facilitator of the materials in positive psychology, especially in view of their personal and sometimes intimate nature. Lastly, we shall

propose some useful methods that were identified as effective teaching instruments and used in the course both in the United States and in Israel.

Pedagogical principles

The course's curriculum is mainly based upon a fundamental principle, namely the combination of *action and reflection*. The class is taught on two interconnected and yet distinct levels. The first level is similar to any other psychology class. Students read seminal academic papers and studies available in the field. They write papers that must be based upon academic research and they are tested in exams. However, there is also a second level that aims at encouraging application to their personal lives. The constant integration of these two levels emphasizes that a good theory is something that works in practice. As Alfred North Whitehead notes, 'The careful shielding of a university from the activities of the world around us is the best way to chill interest and to defeat progress. Celibacy does not suit a university. It must mate itself with action'.

Application is where *theory and practice* create a positive reinforcing spiral. For healthy growth, action must intertwine with reflection, acting upon our reflections and reflecting on our actions. Reflection as a self-analysis and meaning-making skill is considered to be a key component in learning (e.g., McKillop, 2005). Reflection is important, especially in a class such as positive psychology, where personal growth is a central concern both as part of the content studied in class and also for students' self-development, based on experience and implementation.

Works of Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) and King (2001) emphasize the importance of writing, specifically for increasing positive emotion. Based on the suggestions from King (2001) and others (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006), students are encouraged to keep an ongoing journal throughout the course, documenting personal experiences, aspirations, and goals, as well as issues that were added by the instructor, such as meaningful insights, personal failures, or challenges. Other than improving the students' well-being and personal development, reflection has the potential of improving retention. Active reflection is important to increase learning from experience (e.g., Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002). Hence, it can make a significant difference both pedagogically and personally for the students.

In addition to the journals, students are required to complete experiential exercises, namely written response papers, every week throughout the course with the goal being to apply the material to their lives. The response papers are graded pass/fail, and students pass if they hand them in. The objective of these papers

is to enable students to meaningfully experience the material first-hand and deepen their understanding and internalization. Integrating exercises that include intense reflection about ideas discussed in class and direct experience with key concepts as part of course requirements has the potential to enliven teaching and enrich learning. Reflection activities enable students to gain 'a sense of agency' (Eyler, 2002) and develop meta-cognitive skills. These promote active learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2002) and empower the students to take responsibility for their own learning experience (A.Y. Kolb & D.A. Kolb, 2005). The method of structured reflection, aiming to foster connections between the material and practice, is one of the important dimensions constructing the response papers used in the course. Each response paper usually includes three parts: a personal reflection, an action component, and an open introspection in reference to the weekly reading list. The first part includes guided questions, instructions, or sentence completion, with the intention of providing the students with the opportunity to reflect on the subject or issue they have learned during the last week in class. The reflection is followed by exercises to put the ideas into practice in the students' lives, i.e., to explore different dimensions or aspects of the subject discussed in action and to report them – what they did and how it impacted them. The final part usually instructs the students to identify one 'pearl' from the weekly reading, i.e., an interesting idea, a useful tool, or an insightful comment/quote, and to write a couple of sentences about it at the end of the response paper.

The students indicated that they were intrinsically motivated to complete the assignments since they challenged them to address essential and relevant concerns in their personal lives and explore issues they care about. In some cases, it was the first time they were asked explicit questions concerning issues of self-development and growth, such as, what is really important for them or what they really would like to do with their lives. The opportunity to examine and explore values, experiences, beliefs, and worldviews regarding major life concerns, such as happiness, relationships, and success, can serve as a critical component of identity exploration, especially during emerging adulthood developmental stage (e.g., Arnett, 2000).

The final project integrates these processes based on the course's objective of bridging the Ivory Tower with Main Street. The students are required to prepare a 20–30 min PowerPoint presentation on any topic within the field of positive psychology. As modeled in the lectures throughout the course, the students' presentation should synthesize research-grounded information (based on empirical readings covered in class and additional resources) with accessibility and actionable messages (using stories, film excerpts,

exercises of their choice, etc.). The students are instructed that with research as the foundation, they can use their ideas and experiences creatively to illustrate their claims and make their presentation more effective and interesting. Each student is required to present his/her project to a group of at least four people they choose (friends, colleagues, students, employees, community members, etc.) before the project is due, who in turn complete a peer evaluation form for feedback following the presentation. The final project includes submission of the following components: a written text – the presentation script (10–15 pages), including references and one-page handout that was given to audience members concerning key points and suggestions for application; printed slides that were used in the presentation; and four completed evaluation forms and a one-page summary explaining how the student integrated the feedback received and lessons learned from the experience into the final project (which includes a broad description of the project's chosen topic, objectives, thesis, recommendations, etc.).

This assignment serves as a way of passing on the messages of positive psychology as well as a method of learning through teaching others (see e.g., Falchikov, 2001). The many diverse and innovative examples of ideas and presentations conducted by students reflected creativity and deep engagement in the process, indicating that the students were living the philosophy as they taught it. Also, many of the students chose to share their presentation, as well as ideas and insights, with broader circles beyond formal requirements.

The teacher

This section presents a two-part principle which can be seen as carrying complementary facets concerning the importance of the teacher to the learning process.

'Know thyself': Effective teaching is based upon knowing one's strengths and preferences, upon authenticity and integrity. As Palmer (1998) notes, 'Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher'. The emphasis implemented in the past few years on classroom technique, including the use of a board or PowerPoint, is important but not sufficient. Ultimately, the major issue is that the teacher must identify his/her strengths and his/her teaching style and preferences, both on the macro (e.g., seminar vs. lecture class) and micro levels (e.g., structured lesson vs. improvisation). The teacher must ask himself/herself what are his/her strengths as a teacher? Is it being systematic point by point? Is it humor? Is it a one-on-one connection with students, as often happens in seminars? Buckingham and Clifton (2001) note,

'The real tragedy of life is not that each of us doesn't have enough strengths, it's that we fail to use the ones that we have'. In view of the unique and personal nature of the material taught in positive psychology courses, it is *important* that the teacher expresses his/her strengths, both for himself/herself and for the students' benefit.

Therefore, effective teaching emerges when there is passion, when it is most personal, when the teacher practices what he/she preaches, and when personal strengths are at play. Authenticity in teaching has been recognized as a significant concept with respect to learning and development in both teachers and students and has been found to be associated with encouraging a genuine dialog and reflections on ideas that matter, especially at the higher education level (Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007). Another meaningful side of authenticity in teaching is the importance of exposing oneself, of sometimes climbing out of one's 'comfort zone' in front of a class. The more the teacher can bring of himself/herself to the classroom, the more effective the material transmitted will be.

'Modeling the way': In order to be an effective and influential teacher, he/she must serve as a role model, to show the way. Benjamin Franklin noted that 'Well done is better than well said', and Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked that 'What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say'. The integration of the message with the messenger cannot be over-emphasized. A teacher makes an impact when he/she is authentic and not trying to live up to an image. This theme is especially evident in research on emotional and behavioral contagion (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, it has been found that mood contagion is one of the psychological mechanisms by which charismatic leaders influence followers (Bono & Ilies, 2006). A leader's mood can influence a group's mood, its affective tone and group processes (Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). The leader, or the teacher, creates the climate in a classroom, and therefore, if one wants to create motivation and passion, one must be motivated and passionate.

There is a story about Mahatma Gandhi that is told in class which exemplifies this theme. A woman in India came to Mahatma Gandhi and asked for his help with her child, who was eating too much sugar. The Mahatma asked the mother to come back with her child after a month. When they returned Gandhi said to the child 'Stop eating too much sugar!' to which the child agreed. The mother, curious and frankly baffled, asked Gandhi why he had asked them to return after a month, why could not he have just said that when they first came. Gandhi responded: 'A month ago I was eating too much sugar'. In other words, he first

had to undergo the change in himself that he wanted to see in the child – to stop eating too much sugar, to set an example. Gandhi's saying 'Be the change you want to see in the world' reflects the essence of this story. A teacher who wants to influence and effect a change in the classroom and among students must begin with himself/herself by cultivating those characteristics he/she wants to see in the classroom and in the students. Research by McNeese-Smith (1997) shows that if leaders want to be effective, they must exemplify the behavior they want to see. If they want excellence, they must exemplify it. If they want an ethical organization, they must first be ethical themselves. Throughout the course, the instructor demonstrates the different ideas presented in class. For example, modeling the idea of enjoying the learning process rather than merely the final goal or emphasizing that as his students, he also experiences failures that are a natural part of being human, enabling students to identify with him and learn from his personal stories about their own lives.

This theme concurs with the importance of teaching and learning as an active process, using first-hand experiences and in-class activities, aiming to encourage students to connect with the material through application. In conclusion, leading by example, being a role model for students and an effective messenger for the material requires authenticity, knowing oneself, and exemplifying the behavior one wants to see in others. It must become personal to be effective, both for the teacher and for the students.

Methods used in the course

The following section explores the methods used in the course which were identified as effective teaching instruments both at Harvard and in Israel.

Use of media

The message, the material, is presented through the use of diverse and eclectic media to cater to multiple levels of intelligence and to different learning methods. Building on Gardner's (1983) work, it is important to address multiple intelligence levels of students as it allows them to both use their own strengths and enhance their ability to learn, thereby finding personal meaning in their studies, especially at the higher education level (e.g., Barrington, 2004). *Music* is a critical component of the course's format. Every class has a theme song (For instance, 'I am what I am' by Gloria Gaynor or 'I did it my way' by Frank Sinatra for a class on self-esteem; 'I hope you dance' by Lee Ann Womack or 'Make your own music' by the Mamas & Papas for a class on self-concordant goals; 'When you're smiling' by Louis Armstrong for a

class on emotional contagion; ‘Man in the mirror’ by Michael Jackson for a class on change). There are a few reasons why it is beneficial to include music as part of the course, and why a class should start with a piece of music. Firstly, although not all kinds of music induce positive emotions (see Bushman & Huesmann, 2006 for review), our experience showed that selecting specific types of music played at adequate contexts throughout the course arouses positive emotions (Lenton & Martin, 1991) which, based on the ‘broaden-and-build’ theory (Fredrickson, 2001), can lead to creativity and more openness to the material. It can create a positive atmosphere in the classroom and improve the students’ mood, making them ready to absorb information and knowledge. Secondly, in accordance with the work on priming effect (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996), beginning a class with the use of certain words in a song about relationships, for instance, words about love or about togetherness, might arouse interest and generate certain emotions which can be associated with the topic of the material being taught in that specific class. Indeed, music and lyrics were found to have the potential of influencing human behavior (e.g., North & Hargreaves, 2008). For example, an exposure to prosocial songs was found to be associated with a significant increase in tipping behavior (Jacob, Guéguen, & Boulbry, 2010). Furthermore, single young women exposed to romantic songs complied with a dating solicitation more readily than women exposed to neutral songs (Guéguen, Jacob, & Lamy, 2010). The third reason for using music has to do with retention. It was evident, from numerous students’ accounts following the course, that songs played in the class served as an auditory trigger for them, which made them think back to optimism, to flow, to change, so that the class and its contents stayed with them for much longer.

Another effective tool which engages the students through the induction of positive emotions and results in better retention is *humor*. Humor helps to relieve tension, allows sensitive topics to be discussed, and reduces social distance (Smith & Powell, 1988). Also, the use of humor with medium diversity throughout the course makes it possible to deal with the short attention span of the ‘click generation’ and keeps students alert and involved. It is important to note that the use of humor does not necessarily mean that a teacher who has trouble getting the students to laugh has to learn to use this powerful tool himself/herself. Humor can also be ‘imported’ using technology. For example, funny videos excerpts (from TV, movies, commercials, etc.) can thus be shown in class. As a rule of thumb, the course uses one or two humorous videos in every class.

Stories, quotes, and metaphors

To vividly exemplify the material taught, the course uses various forms of excerpts and stories extensively. People naturally think and define themselves through *stories* as a way to grasp the world and make sense of it (e.g., McAdams, 2001). The effectiveness of stories is rooted in the powerful way they represent and convey complex, multi-dimensional ideas, making the message better understood and remembered. As a collective art, stories make it possible to broaden understanding in meaningful and relevant ways and therefore can be used as a highly efficient instructional tool (Kaye & Jacobson, 1999). Furthermore, they are more convincing than statistics (e.g., Martin & Powers, 1983) and bear the potential of moving people much more than theories because they engage emotions (e.g., Denning, 2002), which in turn can lead to movement and an impetus to act.

Stories form an important part of every class when teaching positive psychology topics, regardless of whether they are personal stories or stories about other people. Each of the topics discussed in the course includes presenting a story as an introduction to research on the topic, followed by an application. In other words, the story ‘sets the stage’ for a study or a theory, which in turn leads to action – the implications of the ideas presented and how they can be implemented in ‘real-life’. It is important to tell stories that will inspire the students, move them and enable them to better remember the material. Stories can also bring research to life. There are some experiments that are interesting stories by themselves – for example, the experiment of Pygmalion in the classroom (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) that can be used to exemplify the importance of beliefs as self-fulfilling prophecies.

Personal stories or biographies bring out emotions because they humanize a subject, make something feel real rather than remain abstract. Marva Collins’ story, for example, can illustrate the importance of role models, agency, and expectations for positive development, whereas Roger Bannister’s four-minute-mile story may inspire a discussion on positive priming and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). It is easier to grasp and relate to a story about a person rather than to statistics and large numbers. As the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who put this to bad use, said, ‘One is a tragedy and millions are a statistic’. Stories make theories and numbers come alive. Another important form of communicating messages vividly is the use of *metaphors and quotes*. The power of metaphors and analogies has long been recognized by philosophers and poets (Weick, 2003). Historically, metaphors have been used in clinical psychology in order to help clients access intuitive and unconscious material (e.g., Jung, 1961), and are increasingly considered to be an important factor in promoting changes in a

patient during psychotherapy (Martin, Cummings, & Hallberg, 1992). Research, especially in the field of leadership, shows that the most effective leaders, in politics or business, use rhetorical imagery such as metaphors (e.g., Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Milward, 2007). Metaphors appeal to the listener's diverse senses, engage emotions, imagination, creative thinking, and values, all of which act to maintain the vividness of the experience (Conger, 1989).

Throughout the course, quotes are repeated extensively as metaphors. For example, when the importance of resilience in face of adversity or failures is studied, Edison is quoted saying, 'I failed my way to success'. The same method is used when teaching the idea of the 'hedonic treadmill' which suggests that people adapt rapidly to positive changes in their surroundings and soon return to their baseline levels of happiness (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Kahneman, 1999). To highlight this idea that good and bad events temporarily affect happiness (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006), the message that is repeated over and over again is that 'Happiness depends more on our state of mind rather than on our status or the state of our bank account'. By the end of the semester students remember this message.

Making it personal

As stated above, the course deals first and foremost with issues that relate personally to the students' lives. Alongside with introspection, reflections, response papers, and application on the students' part, the personal nature of the material is also reflected onto the teacher. By sharing personal examples, telling personal stories, the teacher can create a deeper connection between himself/herself and students. Another important aspect of personalizing the material is the use of experiential demonstrations of the material throughout the course. This method is powerful because it allows the students to experience first-hand the benefits of the tool or practice that is being taught. For example, at the beginning of a class on mindfulness, the students are led through a few minutes of meditation. Subsequently, they are exposed to research on the benefits of meditation. At a class concerning the permission to be human, the students are instructed to visualize an experience from their past in which they gave themselves the permission to be human, and to reflect on their feelings following the experience. Afterwards, students are asked to imagine how they can bring more of these qualities and insights to their lives today.

The class, while drawing on personal anecdotes, using music, and other 'fun' means, is still rigorous and

based on scientific evidence. It is important to keep in mind that most people have their personal views and opinions about happiness and are reluctant to let go of these even when they encounter conflicting empirical evidence. The class, therefore, whether through lectures, sections, and readings, emphasizes that what distinguishes positive psychology from the field of self-help is precisely the reliance on science. In other words, personal views and opinions can provide a starting point, the beginning of the inquiry process, however the gate keeper protecting the field must be rigorous research and evaluation.

Rituals

Lastly, since the course aims to bring about positive change, a transformation in the students' lives, it is important to be aware of a phenomenon known as 'the honeymoon effect' (e.g., Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). This occurs after the students have been inspired by a lecture; they become excited and want to make a difference, to make a change in their personal lives and environment. Very soon after the 'honeymoon effect' wears off, they go back to their base level of excitement. The issue is how to teach students to make a significant difference in their lives, a difference that can yield a lasting change that reaches beyond the 'honeymoon phase'. Here again, the key is combining both action and reflection. According to Locke and Latham (1984) and Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (1998), the key to lasting change lies in distancing the students from the need for self-discipline or control, which is a limited resource, and instead create rituals. Students learn to set precise goals and ritualize activities in order to arrive at a routine. John Dryden, a British poet said, 'We first make our habits, and then our habits make us'. The key is to create positive rituals in the students' lives through their own choices and goals, whether it is a ritual of keeping a gratitude journal, a ritual of meditation, a ritual of exercising at particular times every week, or a ritual of spending time with family and friends.

Unique challenges and summary

This article has addressed various concerns regarding the construction and formation of a positive psychology course in higher education, using a popular course as a case study. The course under discussion consists of a combination of research, which looks at a phenomenon indirectly by studying people, and a search which looks at a phenomenon directly through introspection. Many of the students' evaluations remarked that the course had changed their lives for the better. In an attempt to unlock the course's 'success code', it can perhaps be suggested that several factors combined

together to explain its popularity. The material's relevance and importance to the students' lives and well-being, facilitated by accessible and practical tools along with a supportive and holding environment, are of special importance considering the variety of stressors students face during college life, including academic pressure and multiple demands (e.g., Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Striving for a happier and balanced life, not as one of the many goals to be obtained in the future, but as a legitimate and meaningful state to be in the present, may present a unique challenge, especially at a demanding and high-achieving university like Harvard. Recent growing concerns regarding mental health problems among university students, such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007), may clarify this urgent need to address issues, such as personal well-being and self-fulfillment.

By using the methods described above, the teacher was able to meet the challenges of teaching intimate issues in large, crowded classes. As mentioned previously, an important part of the course was based on writing a journal, as proposed by Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) and King (2001); this assignment facilitates the absorption of the materials in the students' lives, especially when there is a large crowd of students. Hence, regardless of class size, personally engaging students in the material through exercises and journal writing seems to contribute to their experience, growth, retention, and depth of understanding.

Another important method used was that of dividing the class into sections where groups of 20 students met with a teaching assistant (graduate students and professional group moderators) for one weekly hour to discuss the material taught in the course. These group sections formed an integral part of the class, enabling students to discuss and better understand ideas from lectures and readings as well as sharing experiences from the response papers. The sections also included exercises and activities in order to get the students to practice and apply key concepts from the course. The activities were chosen from varied lecture topics based on the criteria that they could be easily done by students over a week, appropriate for a class setting. These activities stretched the students to take some risks outside of their 'comfort zones' but were not too emotionally challenging or risky. Some activities took place outside the classroom setting, according to the topic's characteristics. For example, in a section concerning mindfulness, to give the students a more comprehensive experience of the concept taught, they were encouraged to go outside and find private reminders or signs for personal well-being by association and to share them with the group. The message was that lessons are all around us, hidden in a flower, person, etc., likewise a sign 'Park Here' can be used as a reminder to relax,

to be present; a stop sign, to slow down; a flower, to experience the beauty in the smallest things.

The use of dyadic interactions or working in small groups is an important tool in a large classroom, especially when personal and intimate issues are concerned. The joint work, both in group sections and in lectures, allowed sharing ideas, insights, and feelings with one another regarding the relevance of the material to their lives. For example, during a class on gratitude and learning to focus on the positive (being a 'benefit finder' rather than a 'fault finder'), each student turned to a classmate to share something that he/she was grateful for, as well as share different situations from their own lives using the 'benefit finder' point of view. Conversational learning enables integration of thinking and feeling, talking and listening, and recognizing individuality and relatedness (A.Y. Kolb & D.A. Kolb, 2005). From students' accounts and feedback, it seems evident that working in small-group sections, along with online communications (through emails and the course website) enabled them not only the opportunity for intensive application, but also to foster relationships building and positive social connection that may serve as a valuable support system and a contributor to their well-being, especially as undergraduate students during their first years of higher education.

It is important to note that the exact same course was taught both at Harvard and in Israel, with the same success, both in terms of the numerous students enrolled (relatively to the department's size) and in students' responses and evaluations. In Israel, the course is taught using the same syllabus, slides, and exercises, both in English (for a foreign students program) and in Hebrew (for Israeli students). Its vast impact was manifested in the different programs the students in Israel independently initiated based on the course, aiming for contribution to their community. A few examples of these projects are programs for at-risk population in different cities, an intervention program in Sdereot for children living under the fear of attacks, and a program for sick children in hospitals.

Furthermore, the same ideas were also taught in Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe with very few modifications. The essential ideas, principles, and methods were the same across different cultures and countries. As stated, the material taught included issues that are relevant to people's lives in different cultures, emphasizing the study and exploration of the self, both theoretically based on research and experientially through exercises and application.

In other words, while cultural differences are important to understand and are certainly very real and relevant to the study of happiness in terms of emotion expressions (e.g., Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008), orientations (individualism/

collectivism), or motivations (e.g., Oishi & Diener, 2001), similarities, regardless of whether they are superficial or profound, are more pronounced than differences. The 'big developmental theories' (such as those of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, etc.) are based upon their basic premise regarding universal human nature (e.g., Rutter & Rutter, 1992). Likewise, whereas different cultures can highlight different values or have different elements that they find meaningful, pleasurable, and engaging as major components defining one's happiness (Seligman, 2002), the essence is the same – people inherently want to be happy and strive to live a flourishing life. Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama (2004) note that although happiness and well-being were found to be 'significantly grounded in socio-cultural modes and contexts, it certainly does not deny universal underpinnings of happiness and well-being' (p. 235). For example, Australians or Americans may experience more flow when engaging in individualistic activities, while in Kenya or in China, for instance, people may find more flow engaging in group or communal activities. Nevertheless, attaining happiness, in its different and broad manifestations, represents a core human, universal, goal that is not necessarily restricted to specific circumstances or events.

In sum, the topics contained in the field of positive psychology which address a person's pursuit of fulfillment and happiness, concerns that are inherent to human nature, have potential for personal growth as well as scholarly development. It is possible to bridge theory and practice and action and reflection by exploring the self as well as the material. The course discussed in this article puts a prominent emphasis on the personal-experiential aspect of learning, enabling transformation along with information, based on a premise that to study psychology and to forgo studying the self, is to forgo the most important source of truth available to us. It is, to our understanding, the key to learning not only positive psychology – but human psychology in general. Accordingly, it can be stated that in order to teach materials as unique as positive psychology effectively at the higher education level, one must address both the message and the messenger. It is our hope that the principles and methods presented in this article and acquired from the experience of the course will contribute to broadening the resources available for teaching in the developing field of positive psychology at the undergraduate level and beyond.

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