

# Teaching Positive Psychology To Undergraduates With a Focus on Application

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# Positive Psychology Teaching History

- Kansas State University
- University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
  - Special Topics Seminar Course
  - Psychology Elective Course

# Rationale for Applied Activities

- Especially useful in positive psych. courses
  - Content can be applied to all, no matter whether they are languishing or flourishing
  - Content is useful regardless of future career goals
- Wide variety of applied activities used
- Freedom to adjust/tweak assignments to better fit diverse lives of students

# Sample Student Comments

“Virtually all of our activities in positive psychology were greatly applicable to my life these days and I felt so good getting to work through them. Especially the relationship things. They made a big difference for me and my relationship. Such a wonderful field of psychology! ”

# Sample Student Comments

“Overall, I am very grateful for all that I have learned this semester. In all four years of my college education, I don’t think there was any other class that had as much direct, real-life application as this one, and I know that I will continue to use what I learned in positive psychology even after graduation.”

# Sample Student Comments

“I can honestly say that this positive psychology class is the only course over my last four years of college where I feel like I have been able to easily apply what I’ve learned in the classroom in my everyday life. And that, right there makes me feel good inside!”

# Sample Student Comments

“I do not know what is down the road for my family as a result of my uncle’s cancer diagnosis. As the tears pour from my eyes, I am really trying to put some of our positive psychology exercises into action. I have been savoring the time that I spend with those that I love and thanking God for every person in my life. I am thankful that my cousins were able to grow up in a very supportive and loving home with both parents present. I am thankful that my uncle has had the opportunity to meet some amazing doctors and nurses who are devoting their lives to help him hopefully recover, but keep him comfortable in the meantime. I am thankful that my uncle has lived to see the birth of his first grandchild just 2 weeks after his diagnosis. I am also very thankful for my health and my life as a whole. It is not perfect, and I do not expect perfection, but I have accomplished a lot in my 24 years. I just wanted to give my most recent real-world example of putting our classroom information to good use.”

# Individual Applied Activities

- Positive Introductions
- Gratitude Letters
- Gratitude Journals
- Forgiveness Letters/Finding Happy Endings
- Letting Go of Grudges
- One Door Closes, Another Door Opens
- Top 10 Flow Experiences
- Using Signature Strengths More/In a New Way
- ABCDE Disputation
- Savoring a Beautiful Day

(Most of these activities were developed by Seligman, 2002 and can be found in Peterson, 2006 and Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005.)

# Sample Student Comments

“Writing and personally delivering my gratitude letter was one of the most rewarding things I’ve done in a long time, not just for me, but also for the teacher I said thank you to. I think it made her feel good to hear that all the ways she’s helped me in the past were really worth it and showed that her existence in life was of HUGE importance, especially to me. I have been in a good mood all week. I’m glad that I delivered this letter early in the week because it had a lasting effect all week long, and hopefully it rubbed off on other people too. I told a lot of people about this wonderful experience.”

# Individual Applied Activities

- Hope Letters
- Gainful Employment Activity
- Recrafting Work/College Experiences
- Strengths Assessment of Significant Others/Family
- Active-Constructive Responding Week

# Sample Student Comments

“I wanted to send you this e-mail to let you know that I got my hope letter that you had me write to myself last year in positive psychology class. When I read my letter, I realized that I was not following through with my own goals in life, rather, I was letting myself get sidetracked with unimportant and even unhealthy activities. I just wanted you to know that because of this letter I am back in school and back on track. I didn't think much of the assignment at the time, but now I see exactly why you asked us to write these. Thank you so much!”

# Sample Student Comments

“Thank you for making me learn more about my husband and his strengths. One of his top strengths is justice and fairness. I realize that this is why he gives his employees first dibs at days off over the holidays before he puts in for his own vacation time. It used to irritate me because I never knew how to plan for the holidays. Now that I see he is simply utilizing one of his strengths, I actually find his behavior to be very attractive.”

# Sample Student Comments

“I taught my boyfriend a lesson in Positive Psychology last weekend. On Friday night, my friend who's getting married this weekend (whose wedding I'm in!!) called and we were talking all about the wedding for a good 45 minutes on the phone. When I got off, I was so excited for this next weekend and my boyfriend was just like, What? Okay. He said he didn't understand why girls got so excited for weddings. Sooo, I explained to him first off kill-joy (and he used it the next day in a sentence) and secondly active-constructive responding. It didn't really hit him until the next morning on the way to work and he wrote me a very apologetic email saying he won't kill my joy any more. There is positive psychology everywhere! Thank you for teaching me how to have a successful relationship. He understands me better and we grow closer because of it. I only wish there was Positive Psychology II.”

# Group Applied Activities

- Putting Positive Psychology Into Action Group Projects
  - Groups of Five
  - Choose a positive psychology construct or theory and develop a plan to bring these to life outside the classroom over the course of the semester.
  - 15-20 minute group presentations
  - 8-15 page group report of the project

# Sample Positive Psychology In Action Group Projects

- Hershey Kisses and Thank You Notes to All Program Assistants on Campus
- Cookies and Gratitude Cards to All Custodians on Campus
- Teaching Kindergartners About their Strengths; Reading Them Strength Stories
- Be Good to Your Neighbor Day (on UWSP Campus)
- Little Things Make a Difference (door holding, complimenting)
- Have a Little Fine Chocolate While You Wait
- Gratitude Comparisons Between Children at Head Start and Elderly Adults in A Nursing Home
- Teaching Children About Gratitude in a Daycare Center
- Three Blessings with Family and Friends
- Pass It On (like Pay it Forward)
- Holding Doors and Watching Altruistic Reactions (on crutches/dropping papers)
- Positive Psychology booth at the Student Center with Positive Psychology Take-Home Activities (and requesting reaction replies via e-mail)

# Service-Learning Activities

- Habitat for Humanity
- Salvation Army Hope Center
- Group Fundraising Project
- Minimum of 10 hours of participation



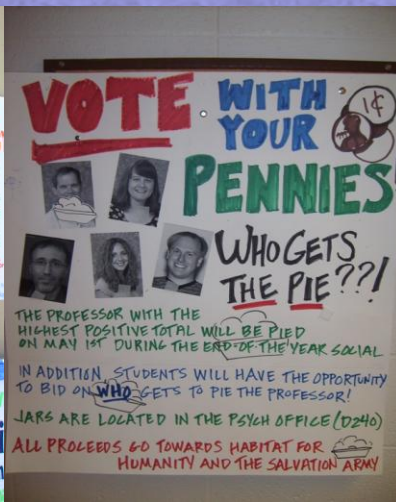
# Service-Learning Activities

- Reaction Journals and Self-Report Measures
  - Just before and just after service-learning participation
  - Anytime they were reflecting on or discussing these activities
- Application Paper



# Service-Learning Outcomes

- Total Number of Students Involved: 35
- Total Hours Worked On-Site: 425
- Total Hrs. Worked for 5 Fundraisers: 75+
- Total Hours Worked for Ribbon-Cutting: 10
- Number of Organizational Sponsorships: 9
- Total Money Raised = \$2,800.00



# Sample Student Comments

“There are many ways to make yourself happier, with volunteering being one of them; people really can make the world a better place. If it wasn’t for this service-learning project, I don’t think I would have really understood the concepts of broaden-and-build and the feel-good-do-good phenomenon. I understood the concepts from what I learned in class, but it takes on a completely different meaning when it can be applied to your own life. This project helped me take positive psychology to heart and I look forward to using it throughout the rest of my life.”

# Sample Student Comments

“The implementation of service-learning in this class made a big impact on my life. I was able to see how positive psychology is all around me, not just when I do service-learning work. Now that I know what it is I can see it in many different aspects of my life, such as home, school, work, and recreational activities. All in all, the service-learning project was definitely worth while. I feel very grateful and that is one of the best feelings there is.”

# Sample Student Comment

“I really liked this service-learning project and think it should be mandatory that every college student take this class before they leave college. This is a class that makes you a better person without you even realizing it. This positive psychology course brings out the best in you by allowing you to find your strengths and capitalize on them. I am very thankful for this class and the service-learning project because it touched my heart the way no other college course has. Because of this class, I have never been happier in my life. For this, I am very grateful.”

# Sample Student Comments

“I think that I underestimated the power of doing good for someone besides myself prior to this class. I would not have realized this and may never have volunteered for this organization and found out how great it is had I not taken Positive Psychology. I feel that of all my psychology classes, this class was the best as it concerned real life applications. I am glad to have had the opportunity to consider myself and others in ways that I had not thought of before, to have discovered strengths in myself that I did not know I had, and all the while have been doing good for others in the process.”

# Sample Student Comments

“I just wanted to share that I recently applied with VW Corporate and one question they asked me on this assessment they had dealt with volunteering/leadership in the community and I shared my service-learning experiences in our Positive Psychology class with them. They responded and said those are exactly the qualities they look for in potential employees. So, there is another benefit of taking your class...it goes way beyond the lecture.”

# Conclusions

- Applied Activities, Assignments, Examples, and Videos
- Affords students the opportunity to do more than what they expect when they initially enter the classroom.
- In the process of learning to think critically about a growing area of psychology, they are able to experience self-discovery, personal growth, and civic engagement, lessons that students are not likely to forget.