

DAVEY: RETHINKING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CASE STUDY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ON A UNIVERSITY HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING COURSE

Rethinking academic achievement: A reflective practice case study of teaching and learning on a university happiness and wellbeing course

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Gareth Davey
University of Cumbria

Abstract

This article is a reflective practice case study of my experiences teaching an innovative university-level course about happiness and wellbeing (positive education). I ponder questions such as: What is academic achievement? Can learning about happiness and wellbeing raise achievement? What does an education for the future look like? Drawing upon my own experiences of positive education, and upon a critique of the literature, I argue for a change of direction in the education system to focus on achievement and learning in terms of positive emotional and social development. This should include a shift from the obsession with standardised testing (grades, exam scores, and grade point average) to nurturing happiness and wellbeing in every aspect of students' lives. However, harmonizing this vision within an education system besotted with end-point attainment and league table performance is problematic and faces numerous challenges.

Keywords

Achievement, happiness, positive education, wellbeing.

'When educating the minds of our youth, we must not forget to educate their hearts'.
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

Introduction

The opening quote by the Dalai Lama encapsulates the premise of my argument in this article: that the acquisition of knowledge without nurturing positive emotions and social responsibility is a limited education. The quote is particularly relevant to my teaching practice on an innovative course titled 'Happiness and Wellbeing' at a public research university in the United Arab Emirates. The course was designed to nurture psychological wellbeing and positive emotions, and to enable students to excel in their academic and personal lives. It is an offshoot of positive education, a new pedagogy anchored on the positive psychology movement which emerged in the 1990s to rebalance psychology's traditional focus on negative emotions and mental illness (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive education is the combination of traditional pedagogy in education and the study of positive psychology to promote students' happiness and wellbeing. The course is unique because it sits within my university's General Education Programme rather than as a programme-specific advanced course such as in a psychology degree. Other innovative features of the course include its focus on practicing happiness boosting strategies (positive psychology interventions), and on encouraging social responsibility, alongside the ambit of general education which is to foster critical thought, intellectual curiosity, and self-reflection on the integration of knowledge and its application to the real world. This is exemplified in the following extracts from the course description and learning objectives: 'you will learn a number of scientifically validated strategies to boost your happiness and wellbeing across several contexts, such as your future workplace, home, academic, and community/social life ... Finally, you will engage in a positivity initiative right in your own community'.

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While most writings on positive education emphasise its benefits for mental health and wellbeing (Seligman *et al.* 2009; Seligman, 2011; Norrish *et al.* 2013), in this article I focus on its potential benefits for academic achievement. This is because achievement is the foundation of education including classroom practices and academic curricula. Students and teachers are under pressure to increase grades and league table performance, which links to education policy and 'raising standards' (Biesta, 2009). Can teaching university students about how to improve their happiness and wellbeing also raise their academic achievement? Some studies show that participation in positive education is associated with increases in scores and grades in standardised testing (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Nidich *et al.* 2011; Luthans, Luthans and Jensen, 2012; Vanno, Kaemkate and Wongwanich, 2014; Muro *et al.*, 2018; Adil, Ameer and Ghayas, 2020), thereby rejecting critics' concerns that resources for improving wellbeing detract attention from achievement (Bernard and Walton, 2011). However, contradictory or nonsignificant results and even declines in achievement have been reported in some studies (Schwinger and Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2012; Amholt *et al.*, 2020). Another issue concerns the way that achievement is defined and measured.

To contribute to discussion on this topic, this article is a reflective practice case study of my experiences teaching a happiness and wellbeing course in a university setting. I begin the case study with a definition of achievement, followed by reflections on my teaching practice, nestled within a critical review of previous studies on positive education and achievement. The concluding section draws together my insights and calls for a rethink about the meaning and purpose of achievement in the positive education literature and in an education for the future.

I bring in perspectives that are not immediately apparent in the literature, such as criticism of the meaning of achievement in positive psychology interventions, and the importance of tacit knowledge about emotional and social development based on teaching and life experience (Sanderson, 2003; Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2020). This case study is particularly useful for teachers who are thinking about implementing positive education in their curricula. Pre-service and in-service teachers working in cognate pedagogies, such as in social and emotional skills development, will also find this case study useful. In the United Kingdom, this includes 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education' in England, 'Health and Wellbeing' in Scotland and Wales, and 'Learning for Life and Work' in Northern Ireland secondary schools.

Defining achievement

Since positive education is concerned with personal qualities which foreground positivity and wellbeing, I draw upon the writings of Biesta (2009; 2010; 2015; 2020) concerning the purposes and virtues of education. The first purpose of education in Biesta's virtue-based conceptual framework is 'qualification', or the transmission of knowledge and skills to learners. It is familiar to most students and teachers in the form of exam scores and grade point average (GPA) in standardised testing at particular points in time. It typically equates to end-point attainment or performance and 'improvement' or 'progress' as a result of learning experiences (Guskey, 2012). 'Qualification' is also emphasised in positive education research as an outcome variable, typically measured at the completion of a positive psychology intervention. However, the premise of my discussion in this article is that end-point attainment or performance is not necessarily the same as achievement or learning (Watkins, 2003). For example, a student with a learning disability might make significant progress in their learning but might still not reach expected grades (Guskey, 2012). This narrow conceptualisation of achievement establishes a need to interrogate what we want students to accomplish.

'Subjectification', another purpose of education in Biesta's model, refers to the processes of being human with personal qualities such as autonomy, compassion, empathy, and empowerment, while 'socialisation', the third purpose, refers to their internalisation by learners as they become initiated into culture and society (Biesta, 2009; 2010; 2015; 2020).

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Biesta's framework is particularly useful for my discussion since my own teaching about happiness and wellbeing incorporates all three of these purposes, unlike the singling out of 'qualification' in the literature and in many university courses. Indeed, Biesta (2020) makes the point that qualification, subjectification, and socialisation are not necessarily separated, as education does not focus on only one dimension.

However, a challenge I have faced when teaching about happiness and wellbeing, and when reading the literature on positive education, is a disconnect between expectations to measure achievement in a traditional 'qualification' sense and the remit of positive education which is to nurture students' wellbeing through 'subjectification' and 'socialisation' in the classroom. The directive of my course, like positive education generally, is to bolster personal positive qualities, which resonates with the argument that one purpose of education is to continually develop the capacity for personal affective and moral growth—subjectification (Dewey, 1938; Biesta, 2015). Further, my course supports socialisation through its applied and social focus which engages students in a positivity initiative in the community, and through its call for action in dealing with human problems, developed through class activities based on social constructivist theories of learning. However, it is, ultimately, a university course with credit hours and marks that translate into a GPA calculation (i.e., qualification). This raises thorny questions for positive education, such as 'can a score or a grade be placed on intangible attributes such as personal growth?', or, put another way, 'can a figure be put on happiness?'. As a compromise, I grade student's participation in positive psychology interventions, but doing so raises additional challenges similar to those associated with constructivist practices in assessing social accomplishments and socially constructed learning (Alleman and Brophy, 1998; Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2010). Some students complete the activities as a means to an end (i.e., a grade) rather than as an authentic opportunity for emotional development. Obvious solutions I have considered—such as an ungraded course or extra-curricular activities—might not be accepted by a higher education system gripped by standardised testing and league tables and school effectiveness and improvement (Townsend, 2007). A substantial rethink is needed about the definition and purpose of achievement, not only in positive education but also in a twenty-first-century education.

Putting the 'education' into positive education

Another challenge is understanding the processes by which happiness and wellbeing can improve achievement. Although positivity is assumed to improve learning and academic success (Bernard and Walton, 2011), how it 'works' is largely unknown. Here I engage with learning theories to think about this topic, since teaching and learning should stem from established theoretical perspectives about how they are facilitated (Ertmer and Newby, 1993; Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008; Schunk, 2012). Unfortunately, the majority of studies on positive education are underpinned by positive psychology theories and not by learning theories. Also, the literature emphasises teaching (intervention delivery methods) rather than learning. It is unclear how learners actually learn positive education, and the one-size-fits-all cookbook approach of interventions ignores the individuality of learners, especially low achievers and non-typical learners (Muro *et al.* 2018).

Since learning theories are not explicitly mentioned in positive education studies, they have to be determined retrospectively by the reader. Most studies I have read seem to align with either behaviourism (Thorndike, 1911; Pavlov, 1927; Watson, 1930; Skinner, 1938; Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008), as they equate learning with changes in observable performance in knowledge and in skill acquisition, or with cognitive theories about mental processes, particularly motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Schunk, 2012). This is unfortunate since behaviourism offers a limited account of learning processes, and university students on my course require less behavioural control than children (Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008). Also, cognitivism is restricted to individual processes (Palinscar, 1998).

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In contrast, my course is anchored upon social constructivism, especially the Vygotskian account (Vygotsky, 1978; Palincsar, 1998), and upon critical constructivism (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970; Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008), and adult education theory (andragogy; Knowles, 1980; 1988; Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005). Behaviourism and cognitivism apply to some learning tasks. Constructivist and adult education approaches are particularly suited to the ages of my students, and to my collaborative and experiential class activities such as counting blessings, creating goals and action plans, cultivating flow, measuring and developing character strengths and resilience, encouraging acts of kindness, envisioning one's best self, expressing gratitude, and practising positive thinking and mindfulness (Froh *et al.*, 2008; Park and Peterson, 2008; Froh, Sefick and Emmons, 2009; Seligman *et al.* 2009; Klug and Maier, 2015). Since positive education is a new topic for my students, the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978; Palincsar, 1998) has been particularly useful for 'scaffolding' in the context of current knowledge, although large class sizes limit my assessment of individual progression through it. Social constructivist principles such as 'semiotics' (Vygotsky, 1978; Palincsar, 1998) have also been useful for thinking about the co-construction of knowledge in collaborative real-world learning activities.

Furthermore, I have used 'modelling' in social learning theory (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961). The increasing numbers of students experiencing anxiety and trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled me to convey a more cheerful and optimistic disposition during my teaching (Anderson, 2020; Morgan, 2020), in addition to showing an 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1959), since behaviour and values conveyed by teachers are important in socialisation (Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2015; Biesta, 2020).

Unfortunately, constructivist learning, in particular collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and problem-based learning, are seen as less effective in some countries (e.g., in the United Kingdom) where teaching approaches draw heavily on cognitivism, especially in primary and secondary teacher education programmes. This might reflect a political need to be seen to be 'raising standards', or a poor understanding on the part of teachers or policy-makers. Could this attitude hinder the agency of teachers to emphasise the kinds of constructivist learning involved in my happiness and wellbeing course?

Adapting constructivist learning to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging. Fortunately, web-based virtual learning management systems such as Blackboard Learn, and collaboration tools including breakout rooms, have been helpful. But can they replace the rich social nature of human relationships (Robinson and Rusznyak, 2020)? Can a learner develop emotionally and socially while sitting alone in front of a computer?

Positive education research methodology is predominantly quantitative, and it emphasises causality and instrumental (means-end) rationality in small-scale experiments and randomized controlled designs, based on objectivism and reductionism and the scientific method (Tejada-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020). This methodology that can be traced back to the classic behaviourist studies of twentieth-century experimental psychologists such as Thorndike (1911) and Pavlov (1927). Yet, it is important to appreciate the limitations of reducing education to a 'means' (teaching and learning) and an 'ends' (exam scores, wellbeing scores), and to causal attribution (i.e., an independent variable influencing change in a dependent variable), in experimental design. Biesta (2007) criticises this particular social construction of education for overlooking its noncausal and normative nature, such as the roles of symbolic interaction and internal resources and 'deep explanations' and 'value judgments' about educational desirability (Sanderson, 2003; Biesta, 2007). Biesta (2020) also makes the point that subjectification has to do with the learner as the subject of her or his own life, and not as an object of an intervention. In fact, most positive psychology interventions exclude subjectivity, and are short in

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duration, meaning that their personal and long-term impact is largely unknown even though happiness and achievement are personal and life-long processes (Chodkiewicz and Boyle, 2017; Slemp et al., 2017). Small-scale interventions also overlook the bigger picture of learning and the educational institution. Thus, it is not clear if research findings from positive psychology interventions generalise to the real world.

These arguments give pause for thought about the philosophical bias of teaching practice. Topics such as happiness and wellbeing likely influence learning and achievement through numerous and indirect routes including the application of life experience in the classroom, which are not immediately obvious or even measured in psychology research. I have found Biesta's (2015) three 'reference points' for teacher education useful for applying a more practical epistemology to my teaching to appreciate the noncausal nature of achievement (Sanderson, 2003; Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2015). This does not mean discounting psychological interventions and other types of evidence, but recognising their unjustified privileged status in current thinking.

Similarly, in positive psychology, intangible concepts such as happiness and wellbeing have also been defined and measured in standardised ways, and underpinned by means-end rationality. Accordingly, I have been applying principles of critical constructivism (Freire, 1970; Foucault, 1977; Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008) on my course to encourage students to think critically about the meanings of happiness and wellbeing, and to articulate counter-views with evidence and reasoning by considering cultural and global perspectives (Selin and Davey, 2012). A critical perspective has been particularly useful for interrogating Western academic concepts in the Middle Eastern culture in which I am teaching, and for acknowledging ontological relativism—that there are multiple, socially constructed realities about happiness and about achievement.

Assessment of achievement in positive education: Can a figure be put on happiness?

The literature's emphasis on behaviourist learning theory has important implications for understanding how learning and achievement have been judged (Wiggins, 1993; Brown and Knight, 1994). Achievement has been measured in most studies using test and exam scores completed at the end of an intervention or a period of study, also known as summative assessment. While summative assessment has advantages, such as summarising and evaluating end-point knowledge, planning subsequent teaching and learning, and providing accountability to students, parents, and senior leadership, its disadvantages include encouraging rote-learning and superficial learning and direct instruction teaching (Wiggins, 1993; Brown and Knight, 1994).

There is hardly any attention in the literature to assessing learning while positive education is in progress, that is, formative assessment or 'assessment for learning' (I use these two terms interchangeably, although some authors see a distinction, e.g., Swaffield, 2011). This is likely because on-going and ungraded assessment can be difficult to measure objectively in quantitative research, and also because formative assessment is associated more with social constructivist learning theories which are absent in the literature. Formative assessment has had numerous benefits for my course, such as appreciating achievement as a process of personal development rather than as an event, encouraging student-teacher interaction, helping learners to understand the quality of their work, and planning next steps in learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.* 2002; Gedy, 2010; Swaffield, 2011). I have also found formative assessment useful in my classes for supporting students with additional needs such as English as a Foreign Language, and for informing ongoing course development. It has enabled assessment criteria to be individually tailored and flexible and open-ended.

I have been trialling formative assessment informed by tacit knowledge about emotional and social development based on my teaching and life experience (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2013; Biesta,

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2015, 2020). As Sanderson (2003, p. 338) points out, “evaluation is not merely ‘technique’ involving robust objective analysis but rather more ‘craft’ activity involving reasoned judgement of various forms of knowledge and normative implications”. I am currently designing a learning journal in which learners can reflect qualitatively and subjectively on the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of their happiness and wellbeing and achievement, rather than on ‘how many’ or on ‘what is the strength of the relationship between variables x , y , and z ?’. It will focus more on subjectification and socialisation than on qualification, and its assessment criteria will be contingent on the individual rather than on the universal. I intend to co-own the journal by entering my feedback and observations, and by using it as a tool for informal discussion and for gathering feedback about my teaching. It will be tailored to each student’s individualised learning objectives and even to their own understandings of achievement (Cachia, Lynam and Stock 2018).

Conclusion

To conclude, it is instructive to return to the questions I asked in the Introduction: What is academic achievement? Can learning about happiness and wellbeing raise achievement? What does an education for the future look like? Currently, the literature does not provide satisfactory answers. I have discussed the importance of an alternative position about emotional and social development and social responsibility anchored on positive education, which can be defined and assessed by using flexible and individually contingent approaches.

More satisfactory answers to these questions require a substantial rethink about the definition and purpose of achievement in a more learner-driven discourse. Letting go of the obsession with grade-based or GPA-based assessment is imperative. However, my suggestions are a future vision and not an immediate reality. In the meantime, harmonizing a course designed to nurture subjectification and socialisation and qualitative assessment within an education system besotted with quantitative end-point attainment and league tables is easier said than done. It is a pity that the positive education literature does not recognise the limitations of its current approaches to understanding achievement and happiness and wellbeing.

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