

Thinking About Positive Psychology

Randy Ernst

Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Nebraska

Amy C. Fineburg

Homewood High School, Birmingham, Alabama

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Psychology has undergone meritorious changes through the years as the landscape of content in the discipline has evolved. The introductory psychology texts of the late 1970s did not include the cognitive perspective in the schools of thought section. Texts of the 1980s had little to say about cross-cultural issues. Behavior genetics and evolutionary psychology were rarely covered in textbooks until the mid to late 1990s. All of these areas have become or are fast becoming part of psychology’s canon.

The Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS) Executive Board has proactively addressed the needs of psychology teachers while dealing with the field’s evolution. Most teachers are aware of APA’s National Standards for the teaching of psychology in secondary schools (Maitland et al., 2000). Fewer are aware of the 30-page unit plan on cross-cultural psychology developed and distributed to TOPSS members (Ernst, Matsumoto, Freeman, & Weseley, 2000). The most recent unit plan published by TOPSS is on positive psychology (Fineburg, 2003).

The positive psychology movement got rolling with Martin E. P. Seligman’s 1998 American Psychological Association (APA) presidential address. Seligman spoke of how before 1940, psychology had three distinct missions: curing mental illness, making life more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent.

According to Seligman, psychology has lost track of its second and third missions. Seligman and many others have called for a return to the other “distinct missions” of psychology. Some of the topics addressed by positive psychologists resemble the topics humanistic psychologists discussed years ago. A difference between the two is the growing research literature on positive psychology, which according to Seligman will serve as positive psychology’s “protector and shield,” guarding against the unscientific self-help techniques that grew out of humanistic psychology’s promise. Just as behavior genetics, evolutionary, and cross-cultural psychology have become important discussion topics, the teaching of positive psychology in an introductory psychology class is important for a number of reasons.

Why Teach Positive Psychology?

Teaching about positive psychology can give students a solid foundation of research-based knowledge that encourages goodness, optimism, and fulfillment. Although teaching from the illness model of psychology may inspire students to help others, teaching positive psychology can give students the tools they need not only to facilitate the absence of illness but to encourage the presence of wellness in others as well as themselves. Seligman suggests

moving away from a preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life to building on positive qualities. He writes:

The field of positive psychology . . . is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6).

The goals of positive psychology mirror the goals of educators. Ask educators why they went into the field, and most will say something like “to make a difference in the lives of students.” Review the qualities Seligman mentions as the positive individual and group traits studied in positive psychology. Most effective teachers instill and inspire these strengths in students. Teaching students about the goals of positive psychology exposes them to the science of individual achievement and fulfillment, giving them insight into their own lives and making the lessons we teach in our courses more meaningful.

Positive psychology principles also give educators insight into the motivational problems inherent in the teaching process. It takes creativity, inspiration, and hard work to prepare lessons that will reach the attention, interest, and intellectual levels of each student. Positive psychology provides insight into some questions we should be asking about our lesson planning in addition to content and pedagogy:

- * How optimistic are our students about their abilities as learners?
- * What goals have our students set for this class? How realistic are their plans for achievement?
- * How do students’ comparisons of their achievement to others in the class affect their learning?
- * How can we make learning a flow experience for our students?

Addressing these questions may help maximize positive student experiences, and help students under our tutelage learn how to become better learners. As a by-product, we also address motivational issues that plague us, such as students’ apathy about learning, students’ preoccupation with getting certain grades, and students’ self-defeating beliefs about their own abilities as learners.

How to Teach Positive Psychology

Positive psychology can be taught from at least two pedagogical perspectives. For the time challenged, positive psychology concepts fit well into many different areas of psychology. Social psychology, neuroscience, development, health and wellness are just a sampling of the current content in introductory psychology into which positive psychology principles fit seamlessly. Do you teach about altruism and prosocial behavior? Go further and include the work of David Myers on happiness and Ed Diener on well being and satisfaction (Myers,

1993, Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Do you teach achievement motivation? Expand on that concept by discussing Rick Snyder's (2000) work on hope. Do you teach attribution theory? Explain how a person's explanatory style reveals their tendency toward optimism or pessimism. At least two textbooks (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2003; Myers, 2002) weave positive psychology into relevant topic areas.

Many Advanced Placement (AP) high school teachers have year-long courses. What do you teach students after the AP exam in May? How do you fill time during standardized testing week when the school's schedule is hectic? Teaching a stand-alone unit on positive psychology exposes students to a dynamic movement within psychology at those times when the regular course content would get lost in the distractions of a typical school year.

All students come to class challenging us to give them information that is useful, grand, and important to their lives. The study of human behavior is inherently relevant, interesting, and important. Sharing only the illness model of human behavior misses the other half of life, the half whose secrets for which most people are searching. By incorporating positive psychology into instruction either as a stand-alone unit or by infusing it throughout the course, we share the secrets of the good life and achieve our goals as educators.

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