LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT: TWELVE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN AN OPEN COURSE IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Peter D. MacIntyre

Department of Psychology

Cape Breton University

Abstract

Positive psychology reflects the scientific study of what goes right in life. Its core concepts are ideally suited for experiential learning through small actions. In 2017, we created an open, online course in parallel to an existing course offered for credit. The open course allowed learners to take it for a certificate of participation or simply for curiosity (the 3-C model). This brief report will review learner responses to the weekly experiential learning activities that were based on published positive psychology interventions (PPIs). Results show that the experiential activities were evaluated positively, especially the "meaningful photos" and "discussion of love" activities, and none were identified as an activity that should be dropped from the course.

Keywords

positive psychology intervention, experiential learning, open online course

Positive psychology has been described succinctly as the scientific study of what goes right in life (Peterson, 2006). Although psychology as a whole deals with many forms of distress, the core concepts of positive psychology are ideally suited for growth-oriented experiential learning through small exercises, actions, or interventions (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). One of the strengths of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) is the emerging support from empirical evidence suggesting the efficacy of each activity. Unlike the clinical and counselling sides of psychology where advanced expertise is required to implement therapeutic treatments, the development of positive psychology has been relatively open and accessible to the public (Peterson, 2006). There have been large-scale studies of PPIs (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) and enough evidence to warrant a meta-analysis showing their efficacy (Sin & Lyubormirsky, 2009). Evidence supporting PPIs comes mostly from studies that use group-based statistics, which is common in evaluating interventions in psychology (Lazarus, 2003).

There is some concern in the literature, however, that group-based results do not necessarily translate into similar effects for specific individuals (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009), and it has been suggested that individual-level analysis of PPIs be undertaken (Woodworth, O'Brien-Malone, Diamond, & Schüz, 2016). This suggests that using PPIs to teach principles of positive psychology creates a need to evaluate the efficacy of PPIs on an individual level, a sensible proposition for at least two reasons. First, each learner is an individual whose configuration of personality traits, learning experiences, and personal context may uniquely alter the way a specific activity works in their lives – efficacy of PPIs cannot be assumed for any specific person. Second, the specific ways in which a PPI is enacted necessarily differs from person to person. For example, the activity "finding silver linings" encourages participants to identify positive outcomes from otherwise unfortunate events. The nature of those events, and the specific silver linings that can be identified, will differ from person to person. Teaching a course in Positive Psychology that incorporates PPIs as learning activities for individuals requires attention to how each of the learners is enacting and reacting to the PPI.

For several years, I have been teaching a third-year undergraduate online course in Positive Psychology at Cape Breton University. The course has been the subject of previous AAU Showcase reports (MacIntyre, 2013; MacIntyre & Brann-Barratt, 2014). In 2017, we introduced a parallel, open, online version of the course intended for the general public ("open" for short). Students taking the course for credit were required to read additional materials intended for a more specialist audience and to engage with additional required graded activities (e.g., a concept quiz, term paper, and a quasi-experimental self-improvement project). Each week, the open version of the course featured online videos (e.g., TED talks), several readings intended for a wide audience (e.g., from

Psychology Today or *Huffington Post*), instructor podcasts, and an empirically validated PPI. The sequence of topics was the same as used in the existing for-credit course (MacIntyre, 2012). The materials common between the open and the for-credit versions of the course were the instructor podcasts, videos of guest speakers, and the experiential PPIs. This brief report will focus on the open learners' reactions to the PPI exercises.

A total of 12 PPIs were presented, one per week, during the course. A closed Facebook group was used to post the materials and gather learners' responses. A pinned post was used to keep the current week's activity at the top of the Facebook page. Learners posted their reactions to the PPI of the week as comments to the pinned post.

The 12 activities were as follows:

1. *You at your best:* Students introduced themselves by describing "you at your best." They were asked to tell a story in which they felt pride and showed one of their core values.

2. *Random acts of compliments:* Students were asked to give a series of unexpected but genuine compliments to another person a minimum of five times during the span of one to two days. They were asked to write about their reaction to this assignment, drawing upon the theories of happiness.

3. *Learned optimism:* Students were provided with a list of positive emotions from the Modified Differential Emotions Scale (e.g. "Grateful": grateful, appreciative, or thankful), and were asked to allow themselves to be open to any one of the emotions from the list. In their post, they were asked: (a) to identify which emotion they targeted; (b) what they did to open up to experience that emotion; (c) was the emotion more complex than they might have thought at first (such as including positive and negative elements); and (d) to comment on whether they considered their experience to be consistent with the Broaden-and-Build Theory they had learned that week.

4. *Silver linings:* Students began by listing five things that make their life feel enjoyable, enriching, and/or worthwhile at the present moment. Next, they thought about the most recent time when something did not go their way, or when they felt frustrated, irritated, or upset, and wrote about it in a few sentences. Finally, they were asked to list three things that could help them to see the bright side of the situation.

5. *Using signature strengths:* Students were asked to identify their signature strengths (by taking the online Values in Action (VIA) survey of character strengths), and then find new ways to use them throughout the week.

6. *Meaningful photos:* Students spent the week taking photographs of things that made their lives feel meaningful or full of purpose. They could also share photos in the closed

Facebook group if they wished.

7. *Three good things:* Each day, for at least one week, students were asked to write down three things that went well for them that day and provide an explanation as to why.

8. *Fun versus philanthropy:* The first half of this week's activity was to choose an activity (such as watching a movie, playing sports, reading, relaxing, hanging out, etc.) and simply enjoy it. The second half involved performing an act of altruism or philanthropy. They were asked to give equal time to both activities, and then to compare the types of activities.

9. *Advocate for change:* Students were asked to "think globally but act locally" and advocate for change. The assignment involved students finding and reporting on a rule from an organization or institution that they think should be changed, and then actually advocating for that change in some way.

10. *Is love an emotion?:* Students watched videos of two very different speakers talk about love: Leo Buscaglia (KathyN, 2007) and Barbara Fredrickson (TedX Talks, 2014). They were then asked to discuss what they thought about love, and to comment on the ideas presented by the two speakers.

11. *Finding mini-grit:* After watching a video on "grit," students were asked to either find or create an occasion in which they could combine the three key elements of grit: 1. high standards; 2. warmth and empathy in relationships; and 3. perseverance. The occasion, however, did not have to be extremely long-lasting, but instead, something simple and brief – thus, "mini-grit."

12. *The awe walk and narrative:* Students completed readings on the "awe walk" and the "awe narrative." They were then asked to describe an awe-inspiring experience.

Each of the Facebook posts was read by the course instructor and a team of three teaching assistants to keep up with learners' reactions day-by-day. As a group, we were pleased with the level of engagement in the activities and the self-reflections offered by the open course learners. At the end of the course, we asked for feedback from the participants on the course materials, including the PPIs. The primary goal of asking for feedback was to determine activities that might be altered or dropped in a future offering of the open course.

Using Google Forms, a survey of student reactions was distributed via a link in the Facebook group for the course, posted after the final week was complete. Approximately 300 people joined the group during registration for the open course, but weekly participation varied and it is difficult to know how many participants remained at the end of the course. A total of 51 surveys were completed. The survey contained seven questions asking about respondent views on the major

elements of the course, its topics, and the experiential activities (PPIs). With respect to the PPIs, the possible responses and their codes were 1 = poor, 2 = just ok, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent. An additional option "did not do it" was offered for respondents who missed any of the weekly activities.

As the course progressed, there was a decline in the number of learners posting week-to-week. The trend also emerged in the number of people who indicated that they completed each activity (see Figure 1).

Turning to the evaluation of individual PPIs, all of the experiential activities were rated positively. All mean ratings fell between 3.9 and 4.3 out of 5, reflecting "very good" to "excellent" ratings (see Table 1). None of the PPIs stood out as being poor (see Appendix for detailed results). When asked to nominate their favourite PPI, nine respondents wrote that all activities were favoured. Among respondents naming a specific favourite activity, there was a clear preference for meaningful photos, followed by the discussion of love. When asked about their least favourite activity, one that might be dropped in a future course offering, 18 respondents left the question blank and another 18 wrote that no activities should be dropped. When specific activities were named, there was no clear dislike of an activity, with signature strengths, meaningful photos, and mini-grit each nominated twice.
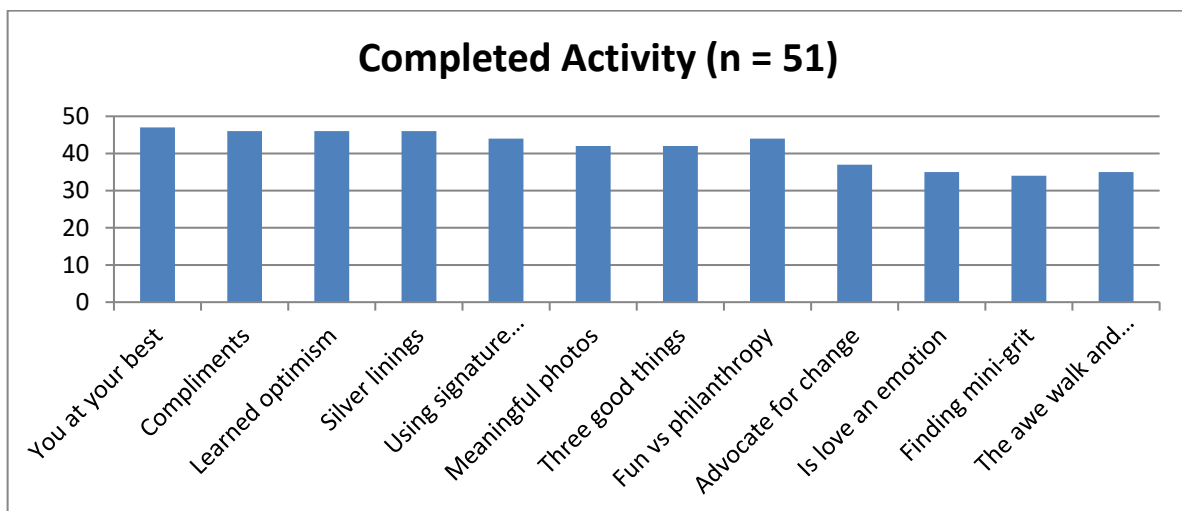

Figure 1: Number of participants completing each of the PPI activities.

Table 1: Summary of ratings of each PPI

Activity	Completed Activity (n=51)	Mean Rating (1=Poor, 5=Excellent)	Most Favourite* (keep)	Least Favourite* (drop)
1. You at your best	47	3.9	0	0
2. Random acts of compliments	46	4.2	3	0
3. Learned optimism	46	4.1	1	0
4. Silver linings	46	4.3	4	0
5. Using signature strengths	44	3.9	4	2
6. Meaningful photos	42	4.1	10	2
7. Three good things	42	4.1	1	1
8. Fun vs philanthropy	44	4.0	1	1
9. Advocate for change	37	4.1	2	1
10. Is love an emotion	35	4.3	6	0
11. Finding mini-grit	34	4.2	4	2
12. The awe walk and narrative	35	4.3	3	0
Keep All			**9**	-
Drop None			-	**18**

Note: * Respondents could name more than one activity

From an instructor perspective, learner feedback suggested that they enjoyed all of the PPI experiential activities, with no clear "duds" among the list. The preference for the meaningful photos exercise might be enhanced by the use of Facebook for course instruction. Facebook is designed for easily sharing photos, so it was an especially good fit for this PPI. The positive evaluation of the discussion of love might stem in part from the contrast between the passionate, narrative-oriented speaking style of Leo Buscaglia and the reserved, science-oriented style of Barbara Fredrickson.

Future offerings of the open course likely will follow the format adopted here. Learner feedback suggests that the PPIs generally were a positive experience. One learner offered the comment, "I really got so much out of the course and feel I actually had life changes because of some of the things I learned, understood and practiced." Using PPIs as part of an open course in Positive Psychology met the goal of creating opportunities for learners to engage with positive psychology concepts through experiential learning.

Acknowledgements

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Author

Peter D. MacIntyre. Professor of psychology at Cape Breton University. His research examines the psychology of communication processes, including studies of emotion and motivation. He has published several books, including co-editing "Positive Psychology in SLA" (2016, Multilingual Matters). peter_macintyre@cbu.ca

Appendix

Detailed feedback from participants on each activity (n = 51)