



# Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

---

Volume 8 | Issue 3

Article 4

---

2011

## Teaching for Civic Engagement: Lesson Learned from Integrating Positive Psychology and Future Studies

Jeanie K. Allen

*Drury University*, [jallen@drury.edu](mailto:jallen@drury.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>

---

### Recommended Citation

Allen, Jeanie K., Teaching for Civic Engagement: Lesson Learned from Integrating Positive Psychology and Future Studies, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 8(3), 2011. Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol8/iss3/4>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# Teaching for Civic Engagement: Lesson Learned from Integrating Positive Psychology and Future Studies

## Abstract

Teaching for civic education holds promise for assisting colleges and universities that suggest the promotion of global citizenship in their mission statements. This paper presents the study of a course where readings and activities from the literature of positive psychology were integrated with studies about current global issues and potential future scenarios, with the goal of enhancing students' civic engagement. The hypothesis was that using activities designed to assist individuals in the development of hope, optimism, resilience, and other positive traits would encourage students to become more engaged in global issues. The analysis of students' reflective essays reveals insights into the student experience. These results, combined with literature on the current thinking about teaching for civic engagement, provides educators and policymakers with factors to consider in evaluating their own programs. In addition, two overarching questions emerged: Can a college class enhance civic engagement? and How does this fit within the purpose of a university education?

## Keywords

Civic engagement, positive psychology, future studies, global citizenship

## **Teaching for Civic Engagement: Lessons Learned from Integrating Positive Psychology and Futures Studies**

Historically, American colleges and universities served as institutions deemed, in part, to educate public servants (Cohen 1998). The curriculum was grounded in the liberal arts, educating students in such subjects as Greek, Latin and rhetoric. Over time, institutions of higher education have become far more associated with professional and pre-professional education, but many schools continue this early tradition by emphasising citizenship. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, numerous colleges and universities include global citizenship as part of their educational mission. Yet, the academic meaning of this phrase continues to vary among institutions and researchers.

Some institutions may cast the education of global citizens in terms of future studies. Others may define this concept as theoretical knowledge about different cultures, historical understandings of change or philosophical thought as applied to human nature. Regardless of the approach, most colleges and universities support some type of civic education through the general-education curriculum.

Currently, higher education is shifting the focus from civic education to civic engagement, suggesting that educators should now seek ways to connect action to academic learning about communities' needs (Musil 2003). Faculty may encourage positive action by requiring community service or research on real-world problems, but Cornish suggests that educators consider encouraging students to think of the future with "... concerned hope ... or hopeful concern..." (2004). Cornish's suggestion implies that perhaps educators need to consider teaching in ways that help students maintain hope and concern when they encounter the overwhelming negative evidence regarding global issues. In fact, it has been suggested that enhancing traits such as hope and concern "move(s) individuals toward better citizenship" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

At my current university, all students are required to take a capstone subject in general education that examines current global issues and potential future scenarios. In recent years, the faculty at this school began to notice that students in these subjects demonstrated significant pessimism, especially in light of the current economic instability. In one section of this class, I used the Four Corners exercise (Kardia & Sevig 2001) and asked my students to respond to the following question: As I learn more about global issues, I: a) feel overwhelmed and depressed; b) feel empowered to act; c) feel apathetic; or d) other. In this activity, students choose the response that best fits them, and then proceed to join the groups of students who had the same response (thus the name "Four Corners"). In their respective groups, they are asked to discuss why they chose that particular response. In this class of 24 students, 18 chose response "a", noting that it all seemed too much to process. Similar to Cornish's (2004) suggestions, I hypothesised that learning about hope, as well as other positive traits, might help students shift from feeling overwhelmed to feeling a sense of agency. Research, as well as suggested reflective exercises, can be found in the sub-discipline of positive psychology to encourage learners to understand and develop some of these very traits. With this in mind, I created an experimental class in which students integrated a study of specific topics found in the literature of positive psychology and recent findings on global issues and solutions. In this article, I discuss civic engagement, positive psychology, the design of this course, a discussion of the findings, lessons learned and conclusions and implications.

## Civic Engagement

In the last decade, civic engagement has received significant press from various agencies, including the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). In one vein, this emphasis on action helps to bridge students' academic and personal lives, which is key in deep learning. However, higher education also sees its mission as preparing students to participate as global citizens. The question remains, how can educators promote civic engagement?

Caryn McTighe Musil, currently Senior Vice President of AAC&U, proposed six "expressions of citizenship: exclusionary, oblivious, naïve, charitable, reciprocal and generative" (2003). Exclusionary models maintain rigid physical and intellectual borders. Educators, who remain sequestered in the walls of disciplinary canons and, even subtly, invoke judgements from their own socioeconomic status, promote this *exclusionary* experience. When campuses use one-shot community-service activities, such as those required during orientation, students tend to remain *oblivious* to the experience, finding little to no connection to their academic or personal lives. Occasionally, motivated learners will engage in a service project on their own or with a group, albeit with little to no background in the societal factors or historical events that have affected the community. They often create plans of action that are *naïve* to the reality of the population they have chosen to serve. These students often see solutions from their own vantage point, but fail to recognise that the culture and background of the group are at odds with the plan, and individuals are often offended or uncomfortable with the activities. This is often seen when undergraduates plan events for children, placing them in locations or environments where they are easily identified as the "other".

*Charitable* expressions often occur when students are asked to provide resources for populations in need. If this is accompanied by classroom learning that fosters an understanding of the ways in which society maintains social stratification, this approach can move students forward in their conceptual knowledge. However, without this background, such an approach often provides students with a view of serving others without grasping the need to empower others. In this same light, when students work with, and not for, a group of citizens, they are provided the potential to understand *reciprocal* relationships. If universities can move to long-term projects, engaging students directly with members of specific populations, and ask students to promote the group's solutions and projects, rather than the students' ideas, significant learning can occur (Musil 2003).

A peak experience for students occurs when they are enabled to engage in a systems approach to civic engagement (Musil 2003). This approach requires substantial planning and a different perspective on when and how learning happens. Faculty members have to be on board with a significant change from education occurring in the classroom or through texts, tests and lectures. In fact, this probably entails a complete campus shift in terms of daily structure; engagement of this nature cannot be implemented within the traditional schedule of 50- to 80-minute classes meeting only two or three days a week, but needs time and planning in order to be a *generative* experience.

There are numerous examples of civic-engagement programs in colleges and universities, each with detailed websites that promote student involvement. Assessment data exists to provide evidence that active learning strategies such as these deepen learning. However, as Lombardo (2010), a leader in the field of futures studies, states, "...it is the emotional-motivational-personal

core of an individual that must be energised if any of the cognitive techniques are going to take root” (p128), thus creating the intersection of positive psychology and civic engagement.

## Positive Psychology

Peterson (2006) describes positive psychology as “the scientific study of what goes right” (p4). It must be noted that positive psychologists are not in the business of determining the definition of the good life. Instead, these psychologists choose to research the traits and experiences that result in “...optimal human functioning” (Linley et al. 2006). These traits, often referred to as character strengths, include hope, happiness, optimism and persistence, just to name a few (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Lombardo (2007) argues that optimism and wisdom are the primary traits that need to be nurtured so that individuals feel empowered to act in positive ways. However, I would also argue that other traits are equally important, such as curiosity, initiative, persistence and resilience.

The overlap between civic engagement and positive psychology can be found in the literature on philanthropy (Hughes 2010). Philanthropy can be defined “...in its broadest sense as the voluntary contribution of time, talent, and money to promote the public good” (p497). This corresponds directly to the definition of civic engagement.

Hughes (2010) contends that we now operate in *Hyperculture*, with continual noise, sound bites and interruptions. No longer are people aligned with a physical community or a lifelong attachment to institutions and individuals. The definition of public space may now be more about cyber-connections than face-to-face meetings. This author suggests that Hyperculture also promotes productivity over relationships. He proposes that individuals, now more than ever, must learn to adapt to continual change, or, in the language of positive psychology, develop resilience. Resilience is often affiliated with adaptation to negative events, but this concept can also be stated as “sustaining pursuit of the positive” (Zautra et al. 2010). Hughes gives support to the idea that civic engagement builds resilience. Thus, it is clear that one way of viewing civic engagement is that it should be required to enhance and sustain resilience, or a positive orientation to life issues. However, as Musil (2003) indicates, there are many ways that students are asked to participate in community projects, with varying results. As she suggests, background information is necessary. It could be that studying the concept of resilience could also be needed.

Prominent positive-psychology scholars Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that resilience can be viewed as a conglomerate of character strengths. These include hope, persistence, social intelligence and creativity, to name a few. In addition, the traits of optimism and happiness bode well for resilience. In fact, it has been suggested that participation in activities designed to increase hope, happiness, optimism and other positive emotions are part of the key to resilience (Zautra et al. 2010). I hypothesised that engaging students in the study and application of these qualities, as well as studying worldwide issues, might empower them to realise that they could act and perhaps make a difference, rather than retreat from the knowledge of global problems. It is in this light that I created my subject.

## Participants

All students at my university, as part of the general-education requirements, must complete four interdisciplinary core subjects focused on global issues. This curriculum culminates in a required capstone subject of future studies. In this subject, students engage in understanding the problems

that face us as a civilisation and examine current thinking on solutions. This particular subject has been required since 1995.

Twenty-four students enrolled in my section of future studies in autumn 2010, 22 of whom were 21 or 22 years of age, and two in their early 30s. Twenty-one of the students were American citizens, while three students were international students, one each from China, Germany and Vietnam.

The class was equally divided between male and female students. Fourteen of the students were science or mathematics majors, while three were majoring in accounting, two in criminology, two in business, one in fine arts and two in communications.

### **Structure of the Subject**

Students attended this class twice a week for a 15-week semester, with each class period lasting 80 minutes. At the beginning of the semester, each student was assigned a global problem to research and present to the class. Examples included water shortages, overpopulation and the digital divide. In addition, the students were assigned chapters from *Futuring: The Exploration of the Future* (Cornish 2004). Every other class period was devoted to a discussion of a chapter from Peterson's (2006) *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. For each of the chapters in Peterson's text, students were asked to submit a two-page reflection on the reading. In addition, I asked them to engage in some type of activity related to the reading, and their reaction was included in their write-up. The assigned chapters included: Chapter 1: What is positive psychology?; Chapter 3: Pleasure and positive experience; Chapter 4: Happiness; Chapter 5: Positive thinking; Chapter 6: Character strengths; and Chapter 9: Wellness. Along with these chapters, students were assigned several activities. For Chapter 1, students were asked to write their legacy. Students also responded to the General Happiness Questionnaire, the VIA Survey of Character Strengths and the Optimism Test from the Authentic Happiness website (Seligman). All students were asked for permission to use quotes from their essays in research articles, and all gave informed consent.

### **Analysis of Qualitative Data**

Student essays were coded for themes. I approached this across all essays, rather than only a chapter-by-chapter approach. It must be noted that I did not use guided questions, but rather simply asked for students to respond to the chapter and the assigned exercise. Therefore, this constitutes an exploratory study, rather than a focused examination of specific topics. Once coded, five themes emerged: a) Is Psychology Positive?; b) Is Positive Psychology a Legitimate Field of Study?; c) Happiness, Pleasure, and Optimism; d) The College Experience; and e) American Life. I discuss these separately in the next section and conclude with a section noting student connections between positive psychology and civic engagement.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, I chose to select a few brief comments under each theme and discuss those in light of what I garnered from my analysis.

#### **Is Psychology Positive?**

“I never really thought of psychology as positive.”

“Psychology is about what makes us crazy.”

These two quotes summarise much of the data from student essays regarding the field of psychology. Peterson’s (2006) text spends several pages elaborating upon our tendency to move to the “negative”. It appears that our students apply this, creating a narrow vision of the field of psychology.

As we develop outcomes for the undergraduate psychology program, it would serve the discipline well to consider psychology across the curriculum. Students expressed the view that psychology mainly focuses on disorder and disease. Even in social psychology, students appeared fascinated by the bystander effect, especially when the example suggested that many people tended to ignore a situation that appeared to be life-threatening. Rarely do we hear students wanting to investigate the attitudes or personalities of those who went against the crowd and stepped in to help.

In addition, these students do not yet recognise that mental health should not be described as simply the state of having no discernible disorders or disease. Their comments support many claims, examined throughout the literature on positive psychology, that both medical and psychiatric findings focus on only diseases, or helping patients rid themselves of an illness or disorder.

“They do lots of experiments, but that is not real life.”

This quote is powerful. This could suggest that the research methodology in psychology is not well understood. Given that many of these students were science majors, I found this theme disturbing. In all fields, reductionism is practiced, but it seems that perhaps students accept this in the natural sciences, but reject the idea that studying isolated traits or behaviors provides valid results. Traditional-aged college students (that is, those aged around 18 to 22) are usually involved in forging their identity, and in Western culture, this implies individual uniqueness. In class discussions, most students suggested that each individual is so distinct that understanding behavior may not truly be possible.

### **Is Positive Psychology a Legitimate Field of Study?**

“Can we really get empirical data on positive things?”

These students expressed serious doubts as to whether research in the field of positive psychology could be scientifically valid. It must be noted that the majority of these students were majoring in biology and/or chemistry. For the most part, I doubt that many of these students had been exposed to the rigorous approach to research that is required in psychology. Rather than thinking of broad topics, such as happiness, as being reduced to traits that can be observed, measured and researched, they tended to focus on the concept as a whole. In other words, much of their writing included discussions on the subjectivity of the concepts. They wanted to believe that each person’s experience of emotions such as happiness, or optimism, is so distinct that no research could be more than anecdotal evidence. Gilbert (2006) observes this same tendency to believe that each of us is so unique that another’s experience cannot be similar enough to our own to consider it valid.

This quote also reflects upon the fact that students suggested that psychology experiments are distinct from "real life". Again, we are reminded that students may not recognise the rigorousness of research in psychology. They may not be exposed to the replications and standards that are imposed when experimenting in the lab.

"The author defends the field so much, there must be a problem."

Peterson (2006) provides pages of text to refute the criticisms of positive psychology as a field. Students appeared to regard this as an indicator of doubt in the validity of studies from positive psychology. Defense of the field of positive psychology, though valid for faculty and instructors, appeared to influence the students' reading of the text and primed them to be suspicious. As learners engage in this research for the first time, it might be more appropriate to present the research and discussion, and save this level of critique for more advanced students.

### **Happiness, Pleasure and Optimism**

"Too much happiness and optimism is dangerous. Disappointment is inevitable. Get ready for it."

"Physicians have to be realists, not optimists."

"People who are happy and optimistic are annoying."

Most students expressed the view that happiness, pleasure, and optimism can be detrimental and downright annoying. It seems that these students expected disappointments and were hesitant to allow themselves to be too positive. In the reading of the text, most students failed to grasp the idea of happiness as a sense of serenity, and optimism as the experience of knowing that life can and will go forward. However, in writing their legacy, almost every student spoke of "changing the world" and referenced the movie "Pay It Forward" (Lederer 2000), which is filled with acts of kindness and people doing what is right. This suggests a disconnection between students' actual hopes and optimism for the future and their openness to acknowledging that.

Several students felt that happiness and optimism were unrealistic. They also implied that pleasure is superficial and should not be valued too strongly. Most suggested that they sought to maintain a balance between these positive experiences and reality. Once again, the negative experiences seemed important and valid, while the more positive seemed random and unexpected. Numerous members of the class expressed that external events dictated their moods, and they did not believe that their reactions could be in their control. For example, in class one student made the comment, "Say you go out to breakfast and you have a bad meal. That puts you in a bad mood for the whole day."

The VIA Survey of Character Strengths is an inventory where students can discover their character strengths (Seligman 2006). The developers encourage participants to examine their current lives and consider whether they are working in ways that develop their strongest traits. Upon completing this questionnaire, the majority of these learners tended to focus on the lowest-rated traits. They described ways of improving what they considered to be weaknesses or limitations. Rather than focusing on examining their career goals and interests to develop their top strengths, they seemed to interpret the results as telling them areas that needed improvement.



When completing the Authentic Happiness Inventory Questionnaire (Seligman 2006), almost every student felt they answered the questions as they wanted things to be, rather than based upon actual experience. Most assumed that every respondent also responded in the same way. Thus, once again, they discounted the results.

“Positive psych seems to suggest if we are not happy, it is our fault. That is terrible.”

This comment should not be surprising. The ability to grasp that our reactions to events are usually not grounded in reality, but rather in our framing of the experience, requires maturity and experience that the average traditional-aged undergraduate usually does not possess. Kegan’s (1994) work on orders of consciousness applies to this ability. Kegan suggests that most traditional-aged undergraduates are subject to their relationships and cannot at this point understand that they create their own self and reality. In addition, it is quite difficult for these learners to reduce encompassing concepts to separate and measurable traits for research purposes. Thus, being exposed to the idea that they control their own reactions is quite foreign.

“I read all of this, but what can I do right now to fix things?”

This quote brings us full circle to civic engagement. Just as asking students to perform community service without a background in the history and societal factors at play results in little learning; similarly, providing students with the knowledge of global issues without a course of action may in fact produce the very state of feeling overwhelmed and helpless. Educators may in fact come from their own internal states and expect students to operate at the same level as more mature adults, thus having the ability to study the problems of the world from a reflective and abstract position. These undergraduates seemed to need concrete experiences to process deep learning of these concepts.

### **The College Experience**

“College teaches us to focus on the negative. We only study what is wrong; we are graded on what is wrong; all I am is a set of problems.”

“College never allows flow. They just keep us busy.”

“College life makes us unwell. We have too much drinking, too much stress, not enough sleep, terrible diets, and no time to exercise.”

This was, perhaps, the most telling section. Students described their experiences of college life as an emphasis on the negative. From stress to defects of character, each student noted that the majority of feedback that they get during college is interpreted as “what they do wrong, or need to improve”. Grades, critiques, feedback on presentations – all of these suggested to students that they needed continual improvement. Perhaps the research on the number of positive statements required to combat a negative statement needs to be shared across our campuses.

In addition, it appeared that outside of the classroom students filled their lives with what they considered very unhealthy choices. Physically they noted their overindulgence in alcohol and “unhealthy foods”, as well as little time for sleep and exercise. Again, the overtones from their comments reflected a need for improvement. As they read about wellness, most of these students began a list of the top four New Year’s resolutions: exercise more often, cut back on alcohol, make healthy food choices and learn to relax.

## **American Life**

“Capitalism and American life emphasize never really being happy. If we stay unhappy, we will continue to produce and consume. That is what America needs.”

“America forces us to stay on the hedonic treadmill. We...must set goals constantly...or we cannot be successful.”

Given that these students were mostly juniors and seniors, they had completed classes in a variety of disciplines. Their critique of American society suggested some disenchantment, as well as fear for their own future. Many of them noted that the American economic system creates the need for people to maintain unhappy mental lives. Most suggested that the consumer mentality, though unhealthy, must be preserved in order for our country to succeed. Several said they dealt with stress by impulsive buying, and they did feel that they must stay on the hedonic treadmill. Their view of the next stage in their lives suggested that they recognised that they would be immersed in a highly competitive workforce, and realised that they must set goals continuously and constantly work to achieve them. Few of them saw a way out of this conundrum.

In addition, the economic crisis loomed in their minds. They noted that “healthy” food is more expensive than less-healthy choices. They also worried about the continual rise of the cost of almost everything, from cars to food, and especially housing. These students also feared losing health insurance and acquiring significant debt.

“The media focuses on the negative ...but isn't that more academic?”

These students acknowledged the continual portrayal of the negative by all media sources, but also suggested that this approach seemed more “academic”. These comments tend to remind educators that critical thinking taught only as an exercise in skepticism and debate may actually prevent students from seeing challenges as opportunities. We may, in fact, produce graduates who, rather than concentrating on developing their strengths, walk into the world worrying whether they can measure up to expectations. Humility is a valued trait, but these comments seem to express some strong feelings of self-doubt. Experiences that build upon students' strengths and provide a sense of purpose, exactly what is hoped for in civic engagement, could help support these undergraduates as they face the open-endedness of entering the “real world”.

On a more positive note, the final comments from these students suggested that they appeared to become interested in the section on wellness from Peterson's (2006) text. They seemed genuinely surprised to consider mental health as a goal. Several commented on the statement that “normal is not necessarily healthy” (p. 236). As they concluded their remarks, they suggested that the traits of mentally healthy people should be taught to students during their first year of college.

## **Connections between Positive Psychology and Civic Engagement**

At the beginning of this subject, students were required to create a mission statement, using prompts that ask them to prioritise their value and strengths (FranklinCovey). As a final assignment, these learners returned to their mission statement and were asked to reflect on it, integrating the coursework from the future-studies and positive-psychology content. Not only did this provide students with closure, it allowed me to gather data about the subject about what

worked and what did not. I was especially interested in their thoughts about becoming involved in the global issues that we had studied for the previous 15 weeks.

The analysis of students' reflective essays on readings from positive psychology revealed an expectation of disappointment, a focus on the negative and a desire for concrete ways to fix problems. However, in this final essay students expressed a belief in a positive future.

“No one is ever going to look back on their death bed and say that I wished I worked more hours... no, they are going to say they wished they spent more time with family.”

The most prevalent comments showed that students wanted to maintain close relationships with their family, friends and, if relevant, significant other. Most spoke of having a family in the future, as well as the desire to spend significant quality time with their children. Some were intentionally planning a career path that would allow them flexibility to have those relationships. Several commented on the fact that their parents, especially their fathers, had been missing from much of their childhood experience. These learners wanted a different outcome.

“I want to be very successful, keeping in mind that I am also helping people, but let's not kid ourselves, I also want that paycheck.”

Personal accomplishments and success, largely defined in terms of a comfortable degree of wealth, were extremely important to these students in the near future. They spoke, again, of the materialism that governs lives in capitalist societies, describing a tension between wanting the comforts of an upper-middle-class lifestyle, while also hoping that this did not require them to have careers that consumed their lives. From their readings from positive psychology, most students expressed a desire to have a balance in their lives. They seemed to recognise that focusing solely on moving ahead and acquiring wealth would not lead to full and happy lives. However, as they spoke of their careers, many tied this directly to civic engagement.

“[I want to] integrate the career I love with my everyday life in a positive way. This has also been shown to generate the greatest amount of happiness.”

“To be able to go into work every day and have a chance to help or maybe even change somebody's life is amazing.”

The majority of students felt that they were choosing a career designed to help others. Many of these students were planning to enter medical school, physical-therapy school, research fields or education. They appeared to want their primary focus to be on providing assistance to those in need, and working to improve the lives of others. Many also hoped that they could become involved in organisations, such as Doctors without Borders, that used their professional skills in regions of the world where services are limited, if available at all. Several linked the readings from positive psychology to this desire, noting that research suggested that giving to others and working for the greater good seems to lead to happiness and better mental health. However, the question remains: did they reflect upon civic engagement?

“In all honesty, I know I will not go out and become a Gandhi. I now am much more aware of global issues, but I am not sure that I would ever sacrifice everything to fix things.”

“...the environmental issues...it will take a huge change and huge sacrifices that people do not want to make. I will try to make small changes in my own life, even though I do not think they will make a difference.”

“If every person makes a decision to try and reduce his or her negative impact, then the world will change.”

It appeared that some students took a dualist position in terms of civic engagement, suggesting that becoming active with regard to global issues requires individuals to completely immerse themselves in the process, often relinquishing physical comforts. Earlier in the semester, students watched *Battle in Seattle* (Townsend 2007), a fictional depiction of the protest against the annual meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999. Several students noted the participants in these protests appeared to have made this their “job”. All of the students said they did not feel that they were willing to sacrifice everything in order to become a change agent. Instead, they suggested that after they felt secure in their career, they would consider doing volunteer work or making financial contributions. Some of the students did suggest that they intended to make small changes, hoping that others would do the same. The majority indicated that they did feel that rather than pursuing a global issue, they would prefer to work in their own communities. Additionally, most of the students indicated that they felt the need to become more informed about global issues and make decisions about their participation based on research.

This age group, often referred to as *emerging adults*, tends to focus on finding satisfaction in three domains: relationships, work and identity (Arnett 2004). This was strongly emphasised in their final papers. It appeared that these learners struggled to recognise ways in which civic engagement could be interwoven into their lives, rather than treated as an aside to be considered after these other factors were resolved.

## Lessons Learned

Teaching positive psychology presents an interesting paradigm shift for the professor. As others have stated (Barker & Martin 2009), faculty members usually assume students should be “learning about,” but this sub-discipline requires instructors to engage students in “learning how to be”. In addition, reading material from positive psychology borders upon self-improvement and even therapy, creating dilemmas for the professor.

First, students reveal very personal events in their responses. This creates a tension. The professor cannot serve as therapist. At best, instructors may find the need to encourage students to visit with professionals. This also highlighted the need for confidentiality. In this subject, I made clear the requirement of not discussing our conversations in class out on the sidewalk. However, students may not recognise the full responsibility of such a requirement. The ethical considerations do create dissonance for the professor.

A second lesson was that discussion is difficult due to the personal nature of their reactions. One of the goals of this future studies subject is for students to process other points of view; thus, discussions and dialogue are fundamental to the class. However, I quickly realised that this mode of teaching was not appropriate. Thus, I shared some of my own insights, yet again blurring the distinction between my role as professor versus my personal life. I resolved this conflict by reminding myself that modeling is also a method of enhancing deep learning (Stocking, Bender, Cookman, Peterson & Votaw, as cited in Roettger et al. 2004).

In terms of cognitive development, I have to remind myself that many of my students are in limbo in their lives. The study of many of these traits is not an abstraction for them: it is the focus of their concerns about their future. This proved to be more difficult when it came time to mark. Barker and Martin (2009) addressed this same problem. Although a subtle, if not hidden, goal was the hope that students would find themselves becoming more comfortable with studying global issues, this could not be part of their grade. I did struggle to avoid judging students on their abilities to go beyond the surface in their reflections, but soon realised that this was an error on my part.

The last, but not least, lesson was that many students wanted suggestions and applications that would help them improve their lives. This was especially apparent in their responses to the chapter on wellness. In hindsight, the material should be supplemented with literature on appropriate goal-setting and action steps. However, several of these undergraduates wanted almost immediate solutions; this could be tied to the consumerist society that they discussed in their essays, but perhaps we all wish for more immediate change than is possible.

My strongest conclusion is that students need concrete applications when engaged in the study of global problems and positive psychology. Reducing subjects to text, tests and reflective essays deprives students of the potential gain from this type of subject.

## Conclusion and Future Implications

Upon reflection, I find myself returning to Musil's (2003) description of expressions of civic engagement. Because I am well acquainted with the sub-discipline of positive psychology, my requirement for students to read the literature and participate in reflective exercises may have appeared *exclusionary*, displaying my assumptions about the benefits of this approach. Although I had hoped students would connect these activities not just to their personal lives, but also to their academic lives, I suggest that I did not provide enough explanation as to why these are important, perhaps leaving my students *oblivious* to the experience. Without providing solid reasons for these exercises, I possibly created a *naïve* plan, making my students uncomfortable. Although I thought of this as *charitable*, giving students something that I thought they could use, I perhaps did not spend enough time working with them to discover their goals and solutions. In hindsight, I could have created a more *reciprocal* experience if I had organised this differently, by providing more background and concrete activities, such as a service project or work on a political issue. I had hoped for a *generative* experience, but neglected to place myself in their context. In my next construction of this subject, I plan to organise the class around a project, giving students adequate background surrounding the proposed activity, and allowing them to recognise their own reactions, letting their experiences drive the use of the literature and exercises from positive psychology.

One caveat: these results come from a very small, and not random, sample from a particular institution. This was not research aimed at a focused set of questions, but rather a look into the student experience. This exploratory research raises questions for higher-education institutions and educators. Two prominent questions emerge: a) Can a university class using positive psychology affect students' propensity toward civic participation or engagement? and b) What is the purpose of undergraduate education in colleges and universities in terms of global citizenship?

In most colleges and universities, a three-credit-hour subject meets for a total of 45 hours, barely more than an average working week. Outside of class, we tend to expect a minimum of 90 additional hours of study. In total, this does not even constitute a month of full-time employment. In addition, this is interspersed with four or five other classes, as well as extracurricular activities and often outside employment. Thus, the impact of any one subject is limited.

There is evidence to show that the use of activities designed to assist children in building character strengths, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school, shows promise for increasing student engagement in learning (Seligman et al. 2009). In addition, results from research on these programs suggest that hopelessness can be reduced. However, these are programs where specific classes are dedicated to using several of the positive psychology exercises throughout a semester or year. An extension of this model involves embedding positive psychology practices across the curriculum. Colleges and universities are not likely candidates for this approach, given the broad spectrum of disciplines and emphasis on content.

Russell and Slater (2011) provide a case study on student engagement, defining active citizenship as one component of this concept. They indicate that although citizenship is included in the mission statements of many colleges and universities, this concept is not well studied as part of the engagement literature. An examination of the constructs, or as the authors note, indicators, derived from this study suggest that research from positive psychology could enhance these topics. These indicators, such as "...working autonomously, ...feeling competent to achieve success, ...learning [in an] active and collaborative [manner] in and out of the classroom" (p1) fit nicely within the constructs of positive psychology, with its emphasis on building character strengths. Seligman (2011) furthers this conversation by redefining the overall concept as *flourishing*, noting that engagement and meaning are components of flourishing. He provides valid arguments and evidence that suggest that through using positive-psychology exercises, this can be taught. However, will it lead to civic engagement?

As indicated previously, for students to achieve learning from community projects, the activities must be well organised, so that students can engage *with* others, not just *for* others (Musil 2003). In addition, students need adequate information on the history and context of the group and/or issues involved. This provides learners with knowledge and a concrete experience for application. From my results, I suggest that the addition of readings and exercises from positive psychology would also be helpful. More research is needed on this approach, and I provide a suggested plan.

Many colleges and universities incorporate first-year seminars into their curriculum. It seems that these could be likely candidates for educating toward civic engagement. Some sections could include the use of exercises from positive psychology on building character strengths, such as hope, optimism and happiness. My students did see benefit in teaching these concepts early in the college curriculum. Institutions could create control sections and do comparative studies. One criticism of civic education has been that users of this approach do not intentionally address the background materials to include the complexity of issues such as race, gender and socioeconomic status (Ropers-Huilman & Palmer 2008). Therefore, these could and should include content from disciplines that could provide some of this knowledge, such as sociology, anthropology and economics, which should be similar in the control and experimental groups.

In addition, if institutions declare that their mission includes global and/or civic engagement, resources and information should be made part of the overall plan of the college or university. One concrete suggestion is that career centers provide students with examples of companies or organisations that work toward global and civic engagement. Regardless of major, students could

become informed about those groups that produce goods or services directly related to improving lives and solving global issues. I suggest that students are not well informed of the opportunities that do exist. However, my second question also comes into play.

Parents and students tend to view postsecondary education as career or job preparation. Formal academic goals usually involve content and skills such as critical thinking and oral and written communication, all with standards for grading and assessment. In some subjects, the content includes learning something about power and oppression in society and education, but students are usually assessed on mastery of the material rather than their actions and reactions. Teaching for civic engagement may appear contradictory to these more-accepted objectives. In this age of accountability, many ask for evidence that goals have been achieved. Barker and Martin (2009) discuss this difficulty in their article about teaching happiness. They indicate that teaching for purposes outside of assessable goals produces an inherent tension. As faculty members, we are required to grade students' work. Barker and Martin's remarks provide valuable advice: grades can be given for adequate mastery of the content, and for participation in and reflection upon the activities. However, grading students' long-term development need not be the purpose. Just as in therapeutic approaches, we hope that "clients", like students, develop their abilities to become self-sufficient individuals with intrinsic motivation. Some will accomplish this, while others will not. However, if colleges and universities continue to include global citizenship as part of their mission, more research is needed to enhance the teaching of civic engagement.

## References

- Arnett, JJ 2004, *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Barker, C & Martin, B 2009, 'Dilemmas in teaching happiness', *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, vol.6, pp1-14.
- Battle in Seattle* 2007, film, directed by Townsend, S, Redwood Palms Pictures, USA.
- Cohen, AM 1998, *The shaping of American higher education: Emergence and growth of the contemporary system*, Jossey Bass Publishers, San Francisco.
- Cornish, E 2004, *Futuring: The exploration of the future*, World Future Society, Bethesda, MD. FranklinCovey, *FranklinCovey mission statement builder*, accessed 15/05/2011, <http://www.franklincovey.com/msb/>.
- Gilbert, D 2006, *Stumbling on happiness*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Hughes, RA 2010, 'Health in a new key: Fostering resilience through philanthropy', in Reich, JW, Zautra, AJ & Hall, JS (eds), *Handbook of adult resilience*, The Guilford Press, New York.
- Kardia, D & Sevig, T 2001, 'Embracing the paradox: Dialogue that incorporates both individual and group activities', in Schoem, D & Hurtado, S (eds), *Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, community, and workplace*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

- Kegan, R 1994, *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Pay It Forward* 2000, film, directed by Lederer, M, Warner Brothers, USA.
- Linley, PA, Joseph, S, Harrington, S & Wood, AM 2006, 'Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future', *Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol.1, pp3-16.
- Lombardo, T 2007, 'The evolution and psychology of future consciousness', *Journal of Future Studies*, vol.12, pp1-24.
- Lombardo, T 2010, 'Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to futures education', *Journal of Future Studies*, vol.14, pp121-134.
- Musil, CM 2003, 'Educating for Citizenship', *Peer review: emerging trends and key debates in undergraduate education*, Ass. of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC.
- Peterson, C 2006, *A primer in positive psychology*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Peterson, C & Seligman, MEP 2004, *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*, American Psychological Association & University Press, Washington, DC & New York.
- Roettger, C, Roettger, LO & Walugembe, F 2004, 'Teaching: More than just learning', *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, vol. 4, pp119-133.
- Ropers-Huilman, B & Palmer, B 2008, 'Feminist and civic education: Bridging parallel approaches to teaching and learning', in Allen, JK, Dean, DR & Bracken, SJ (eds), *Most college students are women: Implications for teaching, learning, and policy*. Stylus Publishing, Stirling, VA.
- Russell, B & Slater, GRL 2011, 'Factors that encourage student engagement: Insights from a case study of "first time" students in a New Zealand university', *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, vol.8, pp1-15.
- Seligman, M (N.D.) *Authentic Happiness*, accessed 27/05/2011, <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/>.
- Seligman, MEP 2011, *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*, Free Press, New York.
- Seligman, MEP & Csikszentmihalyi, M 2000, 'Positive psychology: An introduction', *American Psychologist*, vol.55, pp5-14.
- Seligman, MEP., Ernst, RM, Gillham, J, Revich, K & Linkins, M 2009, 'Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions', *Oxford Review of Higher Education*, vol.35, pp293-311.
- Zautra, AJ, Hall, JS & Murray, KE 2010, 'Resilience: A new definition of health for people and communities', in Reich, JW, Zautra, AJ & Hall, JS (eds), *Handbook of adult resilience*, The Guilford Press, New York.