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Pursuing Happiness: Teaching Scientific-Based Strategies for Subjective Well-Being in the ELA Classroom

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In recent years, a shadow of sadness has fallen on many of our students’ paths toward happiness. Heartbreakingly, many of them seem completely lost in the darkness. The idea that an enormous proportion of our students are currently struggling with social and emotional issues appears to be a self-evident truth, according to virtually every educator I know. Not surprisingly, recent data compiled by The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), discussed by Derek Thompson of The Atlantic, indicates that, from 2009 to 2021, the percentage of American high-school students who say they feel “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” increased from 26% to 44% (Thompson, 2022). This report indicates the largest portion of high-school student sadness ever recorded (Thompson 2022). While there are undoubtedly many factors affecting students’ engagement levels, the pervasiveness of mental health issues certainly has a significant effect. The negative impacts of depression, anxiety, and mood disorders on student engagement, achievement, and attendance are well documented in the relevant empirical literature (Humensky et al., 2010.; Gergans et al., 2013; Havik and Ingu, 2021).

A vast amount of evidence suggests that helping students and teachers increase their subjective well-being (SWB) may increase productivity in our schools. In a meta-analysis of 225 academic studies, researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener discovered that happy employees, on average, are 31% more productive, and creativity for these employees was three times higher than for unhappy employees (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Researchers also noted that in sales jobs, happy employees had 37% more sales (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This research suggests that learning, achievement, and student engagement might increase significantly if teachers and students learn strategies for better SWB.

Several years ago, Dr. Santos of Yale University created a course that teaches scientific-backed strategies for increasing SWB (Shimer, 2018). Dr. Santos’s new course, “Psychology and The Good Life,” quickly became the most popular course in Yale University’s 321-year-old history (Shimer, 2018). This popularity sparks a question: How can language arts teachers shine some light on the shadow of sadness and incorporate these strategies into our existing, often over-saturated curricula?

I have experimented with integrating SWB strategies into my reading and writing skills instruction for over a decade. Some of these scientifically backed strategies include the WOOP method for setting meaningful and attainable goals, writing about gratitude, understanding the complex relationship between money and happiness, valuing sleep and exercise, appreciating our deep need for in-person social interactions and meaningful relationships, the benefits of being in nature, and mediation. Below are several examples of writing, reading, and research tasks to seamlessly integrate these empirically studied SWB strategies into the ELA classroom.
WOOP Method for Writing Goals

The link between pursuing meaningful goals and increased SBW is well established in psychological studies (Klug & Maier, 2015; Pychyl, 2008). Psychologist Gabriele Oettingen first developed WOOP, a self-regulating method for setting goals that nearly all age groups can apply to virtually any personal goal (Oettingen et al., 2001). WOOP is an acronym for Wish, Outcome, Obstacles, and Plan. This method is rooted in a psychological principle called mental contrasting, which focuses on the contrast between the positive results of achieving one’s desired goals and the negative factors surrounding one’s obstacles (Oettingen et al., 2010).

In the wish statement, writers state a goal that is specific, measurable, and realistic but challenging. Setting a time limit for achieving the goal also helps establish a sense of urgency (e.g., one month). In the outcome statement, writers describe all of the benefits of achieving the goal, including the positive emotions they might experience. Then the writer needs to describe all the internal obstacles that might prevent them from achieving the goal. These internal obstacles are obstacles within the writer’s control, such as feelings of procrastination, temptations, or a loss of motivation. The last step in the WOOP writing process is to write a plan to defeat these obstacles in the form of an “if-then” statement (Oettingen et al., 2010). A student’s plan might sound like this, “If I am tempted to look at my phone, then I will put it on silent and remind myself of how good it will feel to get an A in English and begin to study.”

Writers need to write a minimum of four sentences for each goal (see Fig. 1).
Your Goals: WOOP

Name: Student Sample Date:__________

Directions: Choose two important goals that you can achieve by the end of the month. One of your goals needs to be directly related to school, the other can be more personal, as long as it is appropriate to write about in school. Follow the WOOP method below. Wish, Outcome, Obstacles, Plan.

School Goal:

Wish: By the end of this month, I will have an 80% or higher in all my classes.

Outcome: It would be a relief not to worry about failing anything. My parents would let me stay out later, which would be a lot of fun.

Obstacles: I might be tempted to binge watch Netflix instead of doing my math homework.

Plan: If I start to think about watching TV, then I will walk into a room with no TV and start my math homework.

Personal Goal:

Wish: By the end of this month, I will get at least 8 hours of sleep per night.

Outcome: I would be well rested throughout the day, be in a better mood, it would be easier to concentrate in class, and I would probably play better in basketball.

Obstacles: I might be tempted to go on Snapchat late at night instead of going to sleep.

Plan: If I start to think about going on Snapchat late at night, then I will think about all of the benefits of getting more sleep and tell myself that I will find time to go Snapchat tomorrow.

Fig. 1. “WOOP Goal Writing / Student Sample following Oettingen’s WOOP Method.” (Oettingen et al., 2010). from Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School.Class handout. 2021.
In 2013 a study of teachers asked their 5th graders to “Think about an important goal related to school work” (Duckworth et al., 2014). Then researchers measured GPA, school attendance, and school conduct. The teacher then taught the 5th graders the WOOP Method, and the results were inspiring. Each metric – GPA, attendance, and conduct – improved significantly overall for these 5th graders. Researchers also noted similar positive results when adults used the WOOP Method to help them achieve their goals for physical exercise (Stadler et al., 2009). With proper caution, teachers can then encourage students address more personal goals appropriate to write about in a school setting (i.e., organize my room, save an extra $50 this month, or work out five days a week).

When I first introduced WOOP goal writing to my students, some of them needed help crafting measurable Wish statements and Plan statements that could reasonably address their stated Obstacle. However, they quickly learned this writing process as they reflected on their monthly goal progress. Some reflection questions I assigned to students each month included: “On a scale of 0-100, to what extent did you achieve your goal? What strategies worked/did not work for you to progress with achieving this goal?” Periodically assigning WOOP goal writing tasks has been an invaluable way for me to stay up to date with my students’ current interests and thus has helped me to build better relationships with them. My students have written about increasing their Algebra grade by ten points, completing all homework assignments in Environmental Science class, breaking a personal record in track and field, getting along better with a sibling, or simply getting eight hours of sleep per night, as seen in Figure 1. Overall, my students have reacted enthusiastically to this assignment and have expressed appreciation for its immediate and practical application to their lives.

Gratitude

Over the past several decades, numerous studies have produced strong evidence that practicing gratitude can significantly improve one’s SWB, as documented by Summer Allen of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley (Allen, 2018). Seligman and colleagues (2005) found that SWB significantly increased up to 6 months after participants wrote a letter of gratitude to someone compared to their control group (Seligman et al., 2005). Teachers can use the same gratitude exercises from these studies to help reinforce literary techniques, critical thinking skills, writing structure/organization, and writing mechanics. I give students a simple template to follow for writing a letter of gratitude or composing a greeting card (see Fig. 2).
How to Write a Meaningful Thank You Letter / Greeting Card

Directions: Write a thank you letter and or format your letter into a greeting card of your design. Choose to write to someone you feel grateful towards but have not properly thanked. You can choose a family member, friend, neighbor, or faculty/staff member in your school (e.g., teacher, coach, custodian, cafeteria staff, security guard, counselor, nurse, etc.). You can email this letter, hand deliver it, or ask your teacher to deliver it to the recipient. The letter should be approximately 200-300 words long. Use the template below or research how to write a meaningful thank you letter/greeting card.

Template:

Dear (Person’s Name),

Introduction:
I am writing today to thank you for (briefly mention why you are thankful for this person).

or

Happy or Congratulations (state the special occasion you are celebrating with this person)!

Body:
I am grateful for (describe specific examples). This was important to me because (describe specific reasons, explain how this help made you feel.) Without your help, I would have (describe the difficulty you would have experienced without their help). I know that you (describe the specific efforts, extra work, time, energy, etc., they sacrificed to help you). I have learned from you that (briefly mention what you learned from them).
In the future, I’m looking forward to (briefly mention what types of interactions you hope to have with this person in the future).

Closing:
(Yours truly, Sincerely, Warm wishes, etc.)

sign or type your Full Name

Fig. 2. “Gratitude Letter Template.” From Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 202
My students are generally more engaged when given this real-life writing task compared to traditional expository assignments. Very often, as students begin writing these letters in class, their demeanor suddenly changes. Many of my students immediately seem calmer, less anxious and exhibit fewer task avoidance behaviors. After several years of incorporating gratitude letter writing into my instruction, students have shared many stories with me of how happy their loved ones were to receive their letters and how rewarding it was to give them this thoughtful gift.

Further, researchers Emmons and McCullough’s 2003 study on gratitude journaling revealed that simply by keeping a weekly gratitude journal for ten weeks, writing about five things to be grateful for, participants experienced significant increases in SWB compared to the control group (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). English teachers can use this exact method or modify the concept of gratitude journals in many ways. A quick and easy way to introduce gratitude writing to students is to challenge students to see who can write down a quick gratitude list in a set amount of time (see Fig 3.). During this brief activity, my students often discover that they have much to be thankful for in their lives.

**Figure 3**

**THE 3 MINUTE 30 THANKFUL CHALLENGE!**

**Directions:** As fast as you can (you will have only 3 minutes), write down 30 specific things, people, places, accomplishments, and opportunities you are thankful for. TIP: You can also think of ideas that you are thankful did NOT happen to you but could have (i.e., slipped on the ice and hurt your leg).

**RULE #1:** Each item must be SPECIFIC: Example: don’t write “food” → write “Godiva chocolate.”

**RULE #2:** You can only write down five items max within the same category. Example: XM car Radio, seat belts, heated car seats, Ford Mustangs, and Minivans, but you cannot write anything else related to automobiles after that.

Understanding Literature Through the Science of Happiness

English Language Arts teachers can choose from an array of SWB strategies to integrate into their literary instruction. Other science-supported strategies to improve SWB include being outdoors in nature, getting quality sleep, valuing social connection and interpersonal relationships, understanding the complex connections between money and happiness, and engaging in meditation and physical exercise (Haden, 2022; Killingsworth, 2020; Roberts & Duong, 2014). Figures 4, 5, and 6 are examples of how to teach these strategies while enriching students’ understanding of characterization, themes, plot, character motivation, and the impact of the setting of major literary works.

In Figure 5, among other SWB strategies, students will likely discover that sleep deprivation can easily trigger depression (Roberts et al., 2014).

In Figure 6, The Great Gatsby example, students are likely to find information rooted in Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues’ finding that emphasized the benefits of prosocial purchases (Dunn et al., 2014). Students might also find evidence from the Killingworth (2020) study, which concluded that happiness increases as one’s income rises well beyond the previously researched $75,000 limit.

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Fig. 4. “Character Relationships in Chinua Achebe’s novel Things Fall Apart.” Adam Piccoli, English I, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 2021.
Character Development in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*

**Directions:** Choose one of the following pairs of Research and Writing Tasks. Use lateral reading to help assess the credibility of the sources and authors you find. In the Writing Task, use evidence from the novel and your research to help support your claims. You are also encouraged to modify the existing research question or generate your own questions with teacher approval.

1. **Nature as a Restorative Force**
   - **Research Task:** What are the psychological benefits of being in nature and sunlight?
   - **Writing Task:** Write a paragraph analyzing how changes in the setting affect Dr. Victor Frankenstein.

2. **Psychological Effects of Isolation**
   - **Research Task:** How can social isolation affect our mental health?
   - **Writing Task:** Write a paragraph analyzing how isolation has affected Dr. Frankenstein’s physical and mental health.

3. **Sleep Deprivation**
   - **Research Task:** How does sleep deprivation impact mental health?
   - **Writing Task:** Write a paragraph analyzing how Dr. Frankenstein’s lack of sleep has affected his mental health.

Fig. 5. “Character Development in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein.*” from Adam Piccoli, English II, Pequannock Township High School. Class handout. 2021.
Figure 6

Money and Happiness in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*

**Directions:** Research all the questions below and then complete the writing task.

Research Task: What do the most recent scientific studies indicate are the limits to how much money can make us happy? How can we spend money in a way that maximizes our happiness? Feel free to generate your own research questions related to this topic. Use lateral reading to help assess the credibility of the sources and authors you find.

Writing Task: Choose a character from *The Great Gatsby* and write them a letter giving them some advice on how to be happier based on the scientific evidence you found about money and happiness. Use textual evidence from *The Great Gatsby* and your research to help convince the reader of your claims.

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My high school students often comment that assignments like these help make these stories more understandable and relatable. Consequently, I have noticed that their writing becomes more analytical as they use their SWB research to delve deeper into character motivation, conflicts, and themes. My students are typically highly engaged in these tasks because they see the relevant, real-life application of the writing skills (i.e., writing a letter of advice to a friend). Consequently, our class discussions are filled with more active participation as students refer to their research while making empathetic connections to the characters’ emotional states.

**Use SWB Strategies With Caution and Moderation**

Mauss and colleagues have found some evidence to suggest that in some situations, emphasizing happiness too much can paradoxically cause a person to be less happy (Mauss et al., 2011). If someone focuses too much on improving their well-being, they might start to miss out on the enjoyments that come from the pursuit of
happiness (Mauss et al., 2011). When introducing these ELA strategies for SWB to students, teachers should provide students with choice and offer these happiness-driven assignments among other more traditional research and writing tasks. Other psychological researchers found that the social pressure to be happy could decrease one’s SWB as well (Dejonckheere et al., 2022). Therefore, when conducting these SWB lessons, teachers must avoid creating a class climate with too much so-called toxic positivity. In another study, Ford and colleagues found that cultural differences can influence how people prefer to pursue happiness (Ford et al., 2015). Teachers are encouraged to modify the sample activities presented here according to the individual needs of their students. Some professional development instructing teachers how to utilize these strategies best might be well worth the time and effort.

The Torch of Education

The ELA strategies to promote subjective well-being presented here are a humble attempt to address the colossal problem of improving student engagement. Carefully implementing a few SWB strategies may help teachers and students enjoy school a little more and increase learning achievements across curriculums. These ideas might even facilitate redefining educators’ role within this rapidly technologically advancing world. Artificial Intelligence and other innovations are poised to change our world in ways we cannot imagine. However, despite the seething cauldron of mysterious technologies that promise to improve our lives, we still struggle to find purpose in life. We still struggle to find meaning in life’s tragedies as we stumble after happiness on a dimly lit road. If we can pass this small torch of knowledge to students, their shadowy path toward happiness may become a little brighter. In doing so, we might even brighten our path toward happiness as well.

Works Cited


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ADAM PICCOLI is a secondary special education teacher of ELA who teaches at Pequannock Township High School in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. He believes in teaching students practical applications of ELA skills. Along with teaching social-emotional learning, he is also interested in teaching students how to have productive disagreements and how to utilize artificial intelligence in the classroom.