

***Teaching Positive Psychology: Successes and Challenges in Implementing Two  
Introductory Short Courses at Waseda University, Japan***

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The Asian Conference on Education 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Diverging from the 'deficit' model prominent in much of 20th century psychology, positive psychology may be defined as the scientific study of positive human phenomena - including happiness, hope, and human potentials. Since its emergence in the 1990s, positive psychology has undergone a rapid proliferation in theory, research, and applications. Parallel with this, there has been an 'explosion' of taught positive psychology programmes, particularly at tertiary level. Several of these (e.g., at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of East London) are Master's degree programmes with more extensive curricula, while many others take the form of certificates, diplomas, or 'short' courses. This paper reviews the structure, content, and implementation of two 8-week short courses - titled 'Introduction to Positive Psychology: Theory and Research' and 'Introduction to Positive Psychology: Issues and Applications' - at Waseda University, Japan. Successes and challenges in the implementation of the courses are discussed.

**Keywords:** positive psychology, teaching, higher education, Japan, curriculum development, learning, culture

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## Positive psychology

Positive psychology may be broadly defined as the science of wellbeing – the psychological study of positive emotion (e.g., happiness, joy, contentment, pleasure), positive character (e.g., kindness, optimism, resilience, wisdom), and, to a lesser extent, positive institutions (e.g., family, schools, community, civic organisations). Sheldon and King (2001) describe positive psychology as “the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” and note that it “...revisits the ‘average person,’ with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving” (p. 216).

The inception of positive psychology in the late 1990s is commonly credited to Martin Seligman (e.g., Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), though it should be noted the discipline’s name, ontological and epistemological positions and subject matter are not new. Shapiro (2001), for example, points out that Abraham Maslow discusses a study of human strength and virtue in a chapter entitled ‘Toward a Positive Psychology’ in his book *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow, 1954). Positive psychology’s widespread adherence to empiricism also follows the traditions of mainstream 20th century psychology (e.g., Rowan, 2005). Furthermore, as several critics (e.g., Fernández-Ríos & Cornes, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2012, 2013; Lazarus, 2003) have noted, the study of wellbeing, happiness, strengths and virtues did not begin with positive psychology in the 2000s, but rather have been studied both empirically and otherwise in older disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and humanistic psychology.

Although many of the above criticisms are valid, some strengths of positive psychology should also be noted. For example, despite its tendency to put “old wine in new bottles” (Kristjánsson, 2012), positive psychology has produced a vast array of empirically grounded interventions which reliably decrease depressive symptoms and increase wellbeing, often for extended time periods (e.g., Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Waters, 2011). The discipline has also served to bring together the modest range of wellbeing research existing within mainstream psychology in the 20th century (e.g., that of Csikszentmihalyi, Diener, Ryff, etc.) and led to a strong expansion in the generation of research focused on the positive aspects of psychological phenomena (e.g. mental health versus mental illness, positive emotion versus negative emotion, human strengths versus weaknesses; Seligman et al., 2005). In the last 15 years, researchers in positive psychology have also embarked on investigations of relatively novel topics such as positive aspects of time perspective (e.g., Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004), ‘happiness economics,’ (e.g., Diener, Lucas, Schimmack & Helliwell, 2009; Layard, 2005; Veenhoven, 2008), and post-traumatic growth (e.g., Joseph & Linley, 2008). This work has complemented the large volume of psychological research which has focused on deficits and pathology during the 20th century.

## Teaching positive psychology

The foremost example of positive psychology teaching at higher education level is the Masters in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme, an MSc-level postgraduate course which introduces students to basic and advanced theory and research in positive psychology and in which students engage in furthering positive psychological knowledge through their own theoretical and research projects. The first MAPP programme was founded by James Pawelski at the University of Pennsylvania in 2005/6, where it is currently co-directed by Martin Seligman. Shortly after the founding of MAPP at Pennsylvania, a similar MAPP programme was created by Ilona Boniwell at the University of East London in 2006/7. Both the US and UK MAPP initiatives have grown in size and popularity since their inceptions, and consistently attract students from diverse demographic and occupational backgrounds, including from industries such as education, consulting, business, and the voluntary sector (e.g., Hefferon, 2012). Although the two programmes differ considerably in terms of their modes and methods of delivery, assessments, and teaching staff, students on both programmes tend to be highly engaged with the subject matter and frequently give positive evaluations of the courses as enabling openness to learning and self-transformation. A recent qualitative study of students on the MAPP programme at the University of East London found that their experiences were consistently positive, highlighting benefits such as close bonding among classmates, opportunities for personal reflection, a safe and meaningful learning environment, and a sense of having ‘come home’ (van Nieuwerburgh & Lech, 2015).

Since MAPP opened its doors on either side of the Atlantic, other positive psychology courses have emerged at universities in different parts of the world, including both undergraduate and postgraduate level courses. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne Nakamura run graduate-level programmes in positive developmental psychology and positive organisational psychology at Claremont Graduate University in California. Also in the US, Tal Ben-Shahar taught an undergraduate-level programme on positive psychology which famously became the most popular course in the history of the university (Russo-Netzer & Ben-Shahar, 2011). There is a Graduate Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology run by Anthony Grant at the University of Sydney and a suite of graduate-level positive psychology courses at the School of Positive Psychology in Singapore. City University in central London offers a 10-week short course of introductory positive psychology, run by Tim LeBon. Ilona Boniwell has recently launched a new Executive Certificate in Positive Leadership at the École Centrale in Paris. Finally, several new comprehensive MSc-level positive psychology programmes have been launched – including at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, Anglia Ruskin and Buckinghamshire New Universities in the UK, and the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Together, the growth in positive psychology courses at universities around the world signals that the popularity of the discipline is increasing, which will, in the future, contribute to more graduates applying its frameworks to diverse sectors, areas of industry, and teaching and research at doctoral level (Hefferon, 2012).

Positive psychology short courses at Waseda

Positive psychology has been a little slower to gain ground in Japan, though this has been changing with the increasing publication of positive psychological research from

within Japanese education, industry, and community contexts (e.g., Naito, Wangwan & Tani, 2005; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson, 2006; Shimazu, Schaufeli, Kosugi, et al., 2008) and through the activities of organisations such as the Japan Positive Psychology Association and the Japan Positive Education Association.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, there are currently no courses at tertiary level in Japan which offer instruction relating to positive psychology, meaning there appears to be a gap in positive psychology teaching in Japanese universities. In order to begin to remedy this, two positive psychology short courses were initiated at Waseda University in Tokyo during the spring semester of the 2015 academic year. The courses, running consecutively for eight weeks each, were titled *Introduction to Positive Psychology: Theory and Research* and *Introduction to Positive Psychology: Issues and Applications*. The former course was designed with the aim of introducing students to several of the major positive psychology topic, giving them opportunities to discuss both theory and examples of research in these areas. The latter had two aims: to introduce students to several of the applied fields of positive psychology and to challenge them to think critically about positive psychology as a discipline. A summary of the topics addressed in the courses appears in Table 1.

<i>Introduction to Positive Psychology: Theory and Research</i>	<i>Introduction to Positive Psychology: Issues and Applications</i>
Introduction	Introduction
Subjective wellbeing	Conceptual and historical issues
Psychological need fulfilment	Positive psychology in the workplace
Mental health	Positive psychology in education
Flow	Public policy for wellbeing
Character strengths	Diversity and social justice
Resilience and post-traumatic growth	Philosophical issues
Student presentation day	Student presentation day

Table 1. Course topics

Due to time and scheduling constraints, some selectivity was required in choosing the topics to be covered in both courses. In *Theory and Research*, for example, topics such as subjective wellbeing, mental health, flow, and character strengths were given priority over gratitude, hope, and mindfulness because it was felt that these topics have a longer history within (and prior to) positive psychology, have been more extensively researched, and may have more far-reaching influence in the various applied domains of positive psychology. In *Issues and Applications*, the workplace, schools, and public policy were selected due to their prominence as domains of applied positive psychology, while the key critical issues selected for coverage were conceptual and historical (for example, the degree to which positive psychology acknowledges, or fails to acknowledge, the influence of its predecessor disciplines),

diversity and social justice (for example, the degree to which positive psychology is or is not characterised by racist or classist underpinnings), and philosophical (ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions underpinning positive psychology).

In both courses, classes included a variety of different formats, generally consisting of lecture segments, individual, pair, and group activities, and class discussions. These were combined with one another rather than being used separately. For example, classes usually began with a lecture segment in which a topic would be introduced; this segment would then be interspersed throughout the class period with pair, group, and discussion activities to give students opportunities to 'break down,' question and critique each section of the lecture. This was encouraged through the use of both critical questions (e.g., "Can you identify three 'pros' and three 'cons' of applying positive psychology to educational settings?" in *Issues and Applications*) and reflective exercises (e.g., "How do you feel about your life satisfaction scale score? Do you think it accurately reflects you?" in *Theory and Research*). Some pair and group activities also involved creative tasks in which students were asked to design or draw original positive psychology initiatives (e.g., a 'wellbeing policy' for the local community in *Issues and Applications*).

Finally, assessments on the courses were each divided into three components. A written component required students to compose a 1500-word critical essay on one of two topics (their learning journey through the course or how they intended to apply the course to their future career for *Theory and Research*; classism or racism in positive psychology for *Issues and Applications*). This was aimed at encouraging students to read independently in the area of positive psychology and develop persuasive arguments on key positive psychology issues. A practical component required students to conduct a creative group assignment in which they independently researched and designed an original positive psychology project (with a 'mental health in Japan' theme in *Theory and Research* and a 'positive psychology interventions in the workplace' theme in *Issues and Applications*). Students then presented their projects to their classmates in the final class. This component was aimed at developing skills such as team work, critical and creative thinking, and public speaking and presenting. A class participation component assessed students on their participation within in-class activities, for example in terms of their contributions to class discussion, input in pair and group tasks, and effort given to learning exercises.

### The students

The courses were offered in affiliation with Waseda's Global Education Center, an interdisciplinary 'hub' department offering university-wide courses to students of any level and from any disciplinary background, including some from other universities. This meant that the courses attracted a diverse group of students. Total enrolment for *Theory and Research* was 24 students (four males and 20 females), consisting of undergraduates in their first to fifth year at Waseda, of whom five were of International status (three from South Korea; two from China), two were exchange students (from Singapore and Sweden), and those remaining were of domestic (Japanese) status.

For *Issues and Applications*, total enrolment was 18 (five males and 13 females), consisting of undergraduates in their first to fifth year at Waseda, of whom four were of International students (three from South Korea; one from China), two were exchange students (from Singapore and Sweden), and those remaining were of domestic (Japanese) status. Most (16) students enrolled on *Issues and Applications* were existing students who had been enrolled in *Theory and Research* in the previous quarter; two were new.

For both courses, students came from a variety of departments and faculties; many were based at Waseda's School of International Liberal Studies, whilst others came from social sciences, political science, education, English, psychology, and economics backgrounds.

### Successes in implementing the courses

The implementation of the courses was largely successful, as indicated by several factors including students' responses to the courses (both in person and through assessments) and their involvement with an ongoing evaluation of the courses. Some of these successes are summarised below.

*Informal feedback was positive.* Informal feedback solicited from students was largely positive. This included written feedback such as comments made on course evaluation forms distributed by the Global Education Center. These related mainly to the critical content of courses and the discussion-based methods used (such as "opportunities to ask questions" and "asking students' opinions"). In addition to written comments on evaluation forms, several students also made comments in person or communicated their feedback via email.

*Several students volunteered to be interviewed for an ongoing pilot study.* Following the implementation of *Issues and Applications*, a class-wide invitation was made to recruit participants in an interview-based pilot study evaluating students' experiences on the course. This resulted in several students volunteering to be interviewed about their experiences on the course, including their decision to apply to enrol on the courses, their expectations regarding the course content and delivery methods, and their impressions of their learning journeys. Interviews in this pilot study are ongoing and are undergoing analysis using a Thematic Analysis approach (Rombs, 2016, forthcoming).

*Quality of assessment submissions was generally high.* The vast majority (21 in *Theory and Research* and 15 in *Issues and Applications*) of students submitted work for assessment. Of the 24 students enrolled on *Theory and Research*, most (19) submitted work of a quality to meet the grading criteria and other standards publicised to students at the beginning of the course, thus achieving pass grades (three students achieved a C grade, 11 achieved a B grade, and five achieved an A grade). Of the 18 enrolled on *Issues and Applications*, most (13) also met pre-publicised criteria and standards, achieving pass grades (four achieved a C grade, four achieved a B grade, with the remaining five achieving an A grade).

*Students' participation increased over time.* Over the combined 16-week course implementation period, students' in-class participation increased in the areas of both pair and group activities and class discussions. This may have been associated with increased familiarity with course content and teaching methods.

*Retention was generally good.* Student retention rates were generally good for both courses. For *Theory and Research*, three students were consistently absent from class and did not submit work for assessment, with the remaining students both attending class (being absent no more than three times during the quarter) and submitting work for assessment. For *Issues and Applications*, three students were consistently absent from class and did not submit work for assessment, with the remaining students both attending class and submitting work for assessment.

## Challenges

Although students' response to the courses were generally positive, the courses also posed a number of challenges. These related mainly to discrepancies between teacher and student expectations of acceptable workloads and teaching methods, and constraints posed by language and the physical environment.

*Content quantity and workload.* On the course evaluation forms distributed to students by the Global Education Center at the end of each course, some students noted that they felt the workload assigned to them was too great in relation to the length or scope of the courses. These comments appeared to be associated with weekly homework or reading assignments rather than course assessments.

*Discrepancies in English language level.* English language proficiency (including spoken and written English) was generally sufficiently high for most students to engage with the content and requirements of the courses. However, two students (one South Korean International student, one domestic student) commented on several occasions during the courses that they frequently struggled to understand class activities or were concerned about preparing their assessment work in English. Of these, the domestic student solicited help from an English writing center at Waseda and was able to achieve a pass grade. The International student solicited additional teacher assistance during office hours, however subsequently made the decision not to continue attending the *Issues and Applications* course. Although the number of students struggling with English language requirements was low relative to the total enrolment size, discrepancies between required and actual English language level remain a challenge in the implementation of both courses for students who do have concerns within this area.

*Discrepancies between expected and actual teaching methods.* Many students (including domestic status students) enrolled on the courses had existing experience of overseas (especially Western/Socratic) teaching methods and were accustomed to the conversational, discussion-based teaching format used in classes. However, such teaching methods may have been more challenging for students accustomed to Asian/Confucian teaching formats in which focus is given to acquisition of essential knowledge rather than to questioning or critiquing such knowledge to create new knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

*Constraints posed by physical environment.* Constraints posed by the physical environment related mainly to the number and arrangement of desks and seats in the assigned classroom. Seating tended to be arranged in rows facing the blackboard or projector screen, with the number of seats and desks in the room making it impractical to rearrange seating into 'pods' or 'islands' to facilitate group work and greater student interaction.

## Conclusions

Although the teaching of positive psychology has successfully 'taken off' in many parts of the world, courses available in Japanese universities remain limited and there appears to be a need to expand positive psychology teaching in the region. Despite a number of cultural, environmental, and expectational challenges, the implementation of two positive psychology short courses at Waseda University in the 2015 academic year was successful and presented opportunities to gain insights into the learning needs of two diverse groups of students. The pilot study currently being implemented to evaluate the courses will be essential in understanding students' experiences of these courses in more detail and, vitally, from the perspective of students themselves. Findings yielded by the pilot study are planned to be used to inform the development of the courses for re-implementation in the 2016 academic year, during which they may also be re-evaluated with regard to student learning and experience.



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